

Susquehanna University

# THE APPRENTICE WRITER



ELIZABETH DARDEN Groton, MA

Volume 23

\$3

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the twenty-third issue of The Apprentice Writer, which annually features the best writing and illustrations from the 5,000 entries we receive each year from secondary schools throughout the United States. Every September we send 11,000 copies printed free as a public service by The Daily Item in Sunbury, PA to over 3,500 schools.

Our growing program in Editing and Production is now giving our Writing Majors an opportunity to showcase what they have learned by working on one or more of the four magazines the Susquehanna University Writers Institute publishes each year. Susquehanna University's **Writers Institute** provides students with the opportunity to receive nationally recognized undergraduate training in all forms of creative writing through its **Writing Major**. Students work closely in fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, writing for children, editing and the technology of publishing with faculty who are widely-published authors. Small workshops and one-on-one instruction are central to the Writing Major, which is enriched by a variety of programs described on the back page. If you are interested in learning more about the Writing Major and programs related to writing sponsored by the Writers Institute, see the back page for a summary or go to [www.susqu.edu.writers](http://www.susqu.edu.writers) for details.

Send material to be considered for next year's Apprentice Writer to Gary Fincke, Writers Institute, Box GG, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA 17870. Please include your name and address on each page of your submission. The deadline is March 1, 2006.

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# MANOR HOUSE

LAUREL OLDACH

Towson, MD

A suburb in Maryland  
is really no place  
for such a British red-brick house  
with no eaves and a steep roof  
and a diamond-shaped window.  
But on this midsummer afternoon,  
with sideways sunlight  
illuminating the oak trees' bark,  
when the breeze ruffles  
the ivy growing up the walls,  
and thrown-open windows  
glisten in the light,  
it just might be.

Perhaps inside,  
tenant peasants are  
paying their rent in sheep,  
the children are playing draughts  
in the hallways  
as a dour clergyman sweeps by,  
ladies-in-waiting are  
stitching a tapestry  
and gossiping about Her Ladyship.  
Any moment now, a rustic maid  
warbling "Barbry Allen"  
will lean out the windows  
and dump the sparkling washwater  
onto the Honda in the driveway.



ELIZABETH DARDEN Groton, MA

## BUTTER

DANIELLE SMITH

Norwich, NY

You asked if you could kiss me,  
And I said, "Okay."  
I thought it would be like butter,  
My lips slippery salty,  
My body soft and melting into you,  
My mind weakening,  
So you could cut through it,  
Like a hot knife through butter.

But it was more like margarine  
Still good but not so sweet  
And I'm not sure, but I think it takes margarine a little longer to thaw  
When you bring it out of the freezer, because  
I didn't always melt  
When you slid your hands to my lower back

But you were faithfully on sale  
And I bought you  
Became accustomed to your flavor  
Spread you on my toast every morning  
And was content knowing that you would be there the next

Sometimes I would pretend that you were butter  
Make believe that it was as sugary sweet as I wanted it to be  
As milky messy as it could be

When we were done  
Who could complain though?  
Mama told me to buy what you could afford  
And you were so cheap and still sweet  
If not tangy

50 cents for a small packet of margarine  
Or an "I love you" followed by a kiss  
Or maybe 75 cents or a dollar  
And the kisses however sparse were missed  
I clipped coupons and regretted taking you for granted  
Saving pennies and wetting my lips with milk

Malnourished I walked out into a bluebonnet sky  
Where I met a Butterscotch ice-cream man  
Giving to me  
For free  
Just this once  
A Butterscotch ice-cream cone  
With a wink  
And I ate  
Gobbling  
Letting cream run down my chin  
And between my breasts

I walked home  
Floating, Gloating  
Wading in a memory  
And in the grocery store window  
Margarine was back on sale

## THE POSTMAN IS CROSSING THE PARK

MARTIN HOLT

Birmingham, AL

The postman is crossing the park

where it is dark outside, and the moon is frozen and the stars are  
frozen,  
haloed milky white.  
His face is white, except for a small black O where his mouth  
should be,  
and from his mouth, rasps of breath like exhaust.

He walks through the park to the apartments where his wife and  
children wait,  
where all the families huddle near space heaters against the  
walls.  
She waits with a bowl of soup, and now he's out of the cold and  
into the half-cold,  
walking up the stairs. Flakes of snow fall from his boots  
and make puddles on the concrete.  
He comes to his door and walks inside to the glow and warmth.

And now the park is empty,  
and now the stars are being drowned in the black rubber sky.  
It is all their little hearts can do just to stay afloat.



# THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

HANNAH KLINGER

Birmingham, AL

Once again it is Yizkor and the Yom Kippur is now half-over. Yom Kippur is considered the Super Bowl of Jewish holidays, The Day of Repentance, The day that Counts. Yizkor is the part that differs from the norm, taking place after the midday break when everyone goes home to nap off the morning's boredom. Yizkor is in remembrance of the Holocaust-one of our favorite subjects. I take a booklet personalized with the date and name of our synagogue. They are separate from the main prayer books, used only for Yiskor. This year the cover is maroon with a silver image of our holy arch, the focal point of the sanctuary where the torahs are kept. Some will take the booklets home as souvenirs.

No ancient Jewish patriarchs determined how to do this service, so the prayers are more evocative and open ended than the rest. We read responsively with the Rabbi and say prayers for individual lost loved ones, followed by a moment of reflection. The cantor-a tenor of sorts, responsible for making our prayers sound beautiful-concludes by singing in Hebrew while the Rabbi interjects with names of concentration camps. Yizkor is perhaps the most personal of the Yom Kippur services-the only time in a day devoted to apology when we do not ask forgiveness of Abraham, Isaac, Rachel and Leah, but of our mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. I day-dream through the service, explore my range of thoughts. My mother always cries.

My mother is not a typical Jew, if there is such a thing. Though she resents the term, she can be labeled as one of the "two-time Jews," attending services only twice a year-Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New year and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement-are our two major holidays, of

which there are many. On Rosh Hashanah we blow a shofar, a ram's horn signifying the ram sacrificed instead of Isaac. On Yom Kippur we fast and pray from sunup to sundown, ending with one final blast from the shofar. Excluding the arrangement of the services, much is left to interpretation. This year the threat of a hurricane allowed my mother and me to have an impromptu Rosh Hashanah at home. Going to temple two weeks later gave Yom Kippur a tone of severity. "This may be the one time we go to temple all year," my mother hinted to me, "make it count."

We could attend more often, I suppose. There is no real reason not to. But my mother has been busy. Not with work or hobbies, but with another spiritual mission. She meditates. This is not an alternative god or a way to cope with stress. Shambhala Buddhism-a branch of Tibetan Buddhism with new roots in the west-is a way of life, founded from numbers teachings that require years of study and practice. My life is punctuated with her various tools of study: a shrine in the attic, books with monks and deities on the covers, online forums and conference calls. I should clarify that she was raised Jewish like every generation before her. Judaism is a crucial part of her identity-demographic she is proud of. But after twenty-five years, Shambhala also defines her.

I am caught between both traditions. It is a double life I lead, a different face I wear when referring to either Shambhala or Judaism, depending on my current circle of friends. They are separate worlds to me-each with its own unique teachers, powerful texts, strange traditions, and a seemingly endless history. I find it difficult for them to coexist, convinced of this double life-one world being the secret I keep from the other. But I am terrible at keeping secrets. They have always blended, giving me scattered memories of each. Now the secret is out.

When I was ten I spent a week with my mother at the Shambhala Mountain Center, a campground in the Rockies of Colorado. There my friends and I whittled tree branches into archery bows, practiced calligraphy and Japanese

flower arranging, and took part in a ceremony where we sacrificed relics from childhood, thus becoming adults. I offered a corner of my blanket, others hairs off teddy bears. It was our Rites of Passage ceremony, though we didn't feel like adults. Likewise, at the age of thirteen I spent several weeks memorizing words of torah, writing speeches and planning parties. This was my Bat Mitzvah, a milestone of Jewish adulthood. Being the last of my friends to have one, I felt relieved to be considered officially mature. In a way I have become an adult twice.

\*

My mother, grandfather, and I took over the congregation from the balcony of the sanctuary. I scan the crowd for other wet faces like my mother's but find none. There is an expression of discomfort instead. The pews are uncomfortable, that drained feeling of running on empty is sinking in, and the subject matter is less than thrilling. But thankfully, we are near the end. The rabbi rattles off names of concentration camps in a rehearsed, somber tone. Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Krakow. My mother sits silently beside me with a wadded tissue in her hand. The service concludes and the doors open. Latecomers file in, pleased with their extra ten minutes of sleep, though the day is far from over.

When they are seated I notice my father at the front corner of the sanctuary, by the doors. Every Yom Kippur he takes a turn placing red number cards on a white easel whenever the Rabbi calls out a new page, so that everyone can follow. He is one of the page-turners. This year he has a well ordered system for the red digits, making his job as easy and graceful as possible. He says he doesn't like to do it. He never asks to do it. But every year, without fail, a senior member of the congregation will call and tell him what shift he is needed for.

According to my father, the distinction between the Jewish and Buddhist worlds is simple. Like my mother, he too was raised Jewish, the son of a cantor like one in front with the Rabbi. He taught Sunday school at our temple and still

tutors Hebrew when asked. The odd part is that he and my mother met at a meditation center in Lexington, Kentucky, where they both received their first instruction. But then my father became restless-tired of the heavy, throbbing silent meditation often brings. He returned to Judaism with full force, you might say. My mother obviously steered in the opposite direction. Naming this as a sign of their future divorce would be too each, though it did drive a rather large and permanent wedge between them. He gave up on something she would later devote the greater portion of her life to.

Looking down on him from the balcony, I like to believe there are aspects of being a page-turner he does like. My father loves being on task. He goes out of his way to prove to three hundred people nearly every fast asleep that he is capable of the job he was asked to do. Though a chair is offered to the page-turner when his services are not required, my father never sits. Standing all day when there is nothing inside his stomach, when every other day of the year he drinks coffee like it is water, is quite a challenge. But he insists on it. Later my sister will call from Vermont to say that a little birdie told her he drank Coke during the break. I say this not to prove that my father is weak, but to prove that he is human.

Humanity, humaneness, the art of being human. I play with this word while patiently listening to the voice. There is no reason not to. It is a sense of humanity that attracts me most to Shambhala Buddhism-besides the trips to Colorado, the strange guttural chanting of the monks I witness, and the celebrations. What I have learned through my first real level of study-apart from what my mother tried to explain-is that all humans are basically good. There is a single moment in each day when the world looks peaceful and you are peaceful in it, if only for an instant. I remember hearing this for the first time and committing it to memory. It was so different from the Ten Commandments or the Old Testament stories I had all but memorized in school.

I received my elementary educa-

tion at a private Jewish school in Mountain Brook, considered to be the upper crest of Birmingham society. There we prayed every morning-reciting the same Hebrew words so many times that they ceased to be words at all. I also took classes in Judaic studies, Israeli History, and the fundamentals of speaking and writing Hebrew. Being a community school, the faculty had to cater to different sects of Judaism as well as teach the basics. It became nearly impossible to please orthodox, conservative, and reform Jews with one curriculum so they taught in favor of those who were hardest to please-the orthodox.

As a conservative Jew with fewer restrictions and expectations, I found I was often discouraged from asking the difficult questions like, "What do these prayers really mean? Why would God let bad things happen? What's the point?" I had plenty of classmates on their way to rabbinical school to ask for me. Soon I lost interest, wanting instead to explore new opportunities like high school, writing, and Buddhism. I wanted to learn about another part of my identity-one my mother had introduced to me at such a young age-the teachings of mind and heart, karma and reincarnation. Now I find my questions are encouraged and the answers are full of possibility.

Considering this while seated in a synagogue, waist deep in prayer, I feel like I am being unfair. After all, I gave up on my teachers, not the other way around. Perhaps if I was more willing to hear their explanations and apply them I would not have moved so far away from Judaism. But then again I have more and more questions about Buddhism every day, and every day the answers take on a new meaning. I must remind myself-forcefully, if need be-that I do not need to choose. I can have them both. I pray to share a notion of something greater than me or my world. I meditate to remind myself that I am human and will never have all the answers. Now it seems as if having both could be a very healthy balance.

I am glad that Yom Kippur comes only once a year. There are other fasts of

course, but this is the Super Bowl. I wonder annually what the purpose of fasting is, a question I now feel obligated to ask. I guess it is another condition of repentance. But would it not be better to repent on a full stomach when our focus need not be elsewhere? Why do we not eat bread or any leavened products on Passover? A motherly voice in my head responds: when the Jews were leaving Egypt, their bread did not have time to rise, so it baked in the sun while they carried it on their backs. Then should we not eat an abundance of bread to celebrate their escape? Perhaps, but that is not the important part. It is the struggle that must be remembered, the journey. I converse with myself while waiting patiently for the holidays to be declared over. I can't help it. At this point in the fast, everything starts to look like bread.

Bread. Warm, yeasty bread stuffed into mouths by the fistful, practically melting on the tongue. I have had plenty of bad hallah-the infamous Jewish egg bread-but hunger makes everything taste better, so I crave it. I imagine grandmothers kneading rubbery white dough with callused palms, their floral print aprons dusted with flour. They sing old Yiddish rhymes from childhood or work in silence. I imagine mounds of chicken slow-cooked casseroles heaped onto my plate, the sweet scent of hallah in my hands.

Another image competes with this one. At the Shambhala Mountain Center we had a great feast to honor a visiting teacher or Buddhist holiday. Food was eaten in silence, passed through rows of cushions by servers who did the sort of dance with their dishes in an attempt to be graceful. The featured dish at every event was *torma*, a cake made from toasted barley, sake (strong rice wine), sugar, and rum soaked raisins. The taste is acquired, but presentation is more important than flavor. It is shaped like a twisted tower or a Russian onion dome, dyed red and painted with dots of butter. I remember roasting barley in giant pants, trying to withstand the strong smell and heat from the oven. I plunged my hands into a bowl of ice water, forming frozen balls of butter



to press into the cake's surface before my fingers went numb.

Despite the tangible differences between hallah and torma, they have much in common. Both are intended as food offerings. Both are divided into threes—the three piece braid of a hallah represents truth, peace, and justice. The three tiers of a torma represent the three elements involved in its preparation: foundation, body, and decoration—said to symbolize the qualities of body, speech, and mind. The more braids within the hallah, the more symbolism it holds. There is an image of arms intertwined to represent love, fat braids with twelve humps meant to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. The more decorative the torma—such as those engraved with lotus flowers—the more beautiful. But both traditions stress that it is the act of offering, the purity of the ingredients, the cleanliness of the work surface that matters—not the elaboration.

There are, of course, more important aspects to both Judaism and Buddhism, but food is, to me, among the most crucial. Cooking and feasting together, knowing what a heritage tasted like is perhaps the most simple and enjoyable part of both worlds. When that experience is offered to any higher entity, it must be well received. And again, on Yom Kippur. It is difficult to think about anything else.

\*

The sun has set and we are down to the last prayer of the holiday. The mood is tense. When the final shofar sounds, congregants will race to the dining hall for tuna and bagels or grab cookies and juice for the ride home. Our Rabbi, using his authority for creative interpretation, has lined the children up at the back of the sanctuary. Soon all lights will go out and children will parade towards the stage holding multicolored glow sticks. The rest of us will look on and hope we don't have to stand. But not yet.

The last prayer of any service is always Kiddush Shalem, a prayer for the ill and dying. Like most prayers, it is recited so often the words have lost all meaning. Women assemble coats and

purses, men remove head coverings and fold up long white talises. No one is really paying attention. Why must we recite it so many times if no one is really listening? I hear no imaginary answer. My father puts the red numbers away. My mother stopped crying hours ago.

One night, perhaps after discussing my grandfather's age or a friend's illness, I asked my mother what kind of funeral she would like. The topic was not difficult because of death, but because of her options. A Jewish funeral requires a burial within twenty-four hours. Cremation is discouraged as a body is holier when received as it was given—whole. Organ donation is controversial, though technically saving a life should be a good deed. A Buddha funeral is quite the opposite. Twenty-four hours to interment is like burying something partially alive, a spirit still preparing to leave. Once it has left, the body is useless and cremation follows. In Buddhism the spirit is all that matters—and perhaps what form it will take next. I asked my mother which she preferred. She did not hesitate. I wanted to ask where she wanted her ashes scattered or what body she hoped to inhabit next, but decided against it.

\*

The lights dim and children bounce in with their glow sticks light lightning bugs. The cantor begins a song and it is carried up by the crows. Just like every year, it amazes me that a large, random selection of people can sing in near perfect harmony. Several congregants disperse into the corners of the sanctuary with shofars brought from home—polished heirlooms otherwise displayed proudly on their mantelpieces. The final blast is long and loud. Well done. I forgive you. Happy holidays. Let's eat.

In the end it seems as if I have the best of both worlds. Being Jewish gives me a large family, a great deal of humor, and excellent food. Meditation gives me a chance to think. I have meditated through most of this service—not cleaning my mind, just observing it.

As for where God comes in, I have never doubted my beliefs. I believe I am

human and am basically good. I believe in faith as its own entity—in each other or in the abstract. God is the word we use to describe our notion of faith or what faith can do. My thoughts may wander during services. I may never attain my mother's discipline for Shambhala. Yet I have faith that I will be at Yizkor next year. I have faith that I will at least try to meditate. After all, it is the struggle that must be remembered, the journey.

## HUNGER PAINS

JESSICA KRISTOFFERSEN  
Lindenhurst, NY

John T. Mather hospital was not what one would call appealing. A small, uninviting treatment center stationed directly above a Blockbuster, it was definitely not the ideal location to spend your free time. It was a building full of rooms with dull, dingy white walls and offices with hard blue chairs that hurt your ass when you sat on them too long. Other patients' artwork of childish drawings with inspirational sayings filled the wall. "You can do it!" Yeah, right. I wanted to barf. But, luckily for me, this was my summer vacation spot for the second year in a row.

At Mather after I go through the entrance, they lock the door behind me. Four hours a day, three days a week, I am stuck in a room with a gang of social workers and other screw ups, talking about my past, my fears, my dreams, my family; every little aspect of my life.

Climbing the two flights of stairs and passing through an ice cold waiting room, I reached the door that read "Adolescent Out-Patient Eating Disorder Program," and rang the bell. Eating disorder is a scary phrase. It's a scary disease that takes control of you, crawls inside your head to the back of your brain and never comes out. It holds you hostage and never, ever lets you go. Even when you think you may have won, that you have possibly rid of it for good, it will always be there, waiting for you to fail.

I never considered myself as having an eating disorder. Looking into the

mirror and gazing at all 120 lbs of me on my 5'4" frame, is nothing glamorous or attractive. Actually, I find myself to be quite repulsive. An ugly, ignorant child who, over the course of one night, has grown to be the size of a small elephant. Of course after five years of obsessive dieting and two years of binging and purging, any doctor will argue that I do in fact have an eating disorder, but I will stand firm by my belief that that diagnosis is false. Besides, "De Nile" is just a river in Egypt, right?

Ringling the bell again, the receptionist buzzed me in and, annoyed at my impatience, glared at me as I passed her on my way down to another fun filled evening of therapy. There were three other girls in the program with me; Sharon, Alexis, and Missy.

Sharon was the newest addition to the group. She had just gotten out of the hospital, entering with a weight of a mere 89 pounds. The thought of another hospital sent chills down my spine. Sharon had been at a regular hospital with no program specializing in the care of eating disorders. Luckily for her, she never had to visit Cornell, New York Presbyterian Hospital, up in Westchester.

If I thought that Mather was hell, boy was I wrong. The eating disorder unit of Cornell was not a psych ward. However, it was in a psych hospital, so all its patients were treated as if they were mass murderers or suicidal maniacs. I remember my stay at Cornell quite well. It was a short one, only two weeks, but it was worse than being held captive at a prison run by Satan.

The front hall and waiting room where I was waiting to be interviewed was actually very cultivated and elegant. Victorian style furniture filled the spacious rooms which were lined with wall to wall bookcases, stuffed with an endless array of literature and medical books of every kind. My parents had to drag me into the car, kicking and screaming, and then as I sat there in the lobby waiting to endure my dreadful fate, I resented them. Once I realized my tantrums were going to do me no good, I gave up and anticipated being

interviewed by the head psychiatrist. After being poked, prodded and interrogated, the decision was finalized; I was to be admitted to Cornell without hesitation.

Two guards dressed in unsightly uniforms frisked me and carefully scrutinized my bag. They escorted me to Seven South, the wing that would become my home for the next few weeks, and led me inside. Seven South was where all the elegance and glamour of the lobby ended and the nightmare began. To the left, as you walk in, are the patients' rooms; to the right is the kitchen and dining area. At the end of the hall was a room with two congested couches side by side and an old busted TV set. This is where we spent the majority of our time. At least six hours of

the day was spent here where we would perform insignificant little chores, sleep, read, write, draw, anything to avoid trouble. If anyone so much as moved a chair or walked from one room to another too quickly, we would be accused of trying to exercise, which would ultimately earn you an extra few hundred calories at meal time. To the left of the TV room was the bathroom; to the right were other patients' rooms and, at the end of the hall, the showers. You could walk to the bathroom and turn the knob, but it would be locked. Not too far from the bathroom was a barren but spacious room where group therapy and activities were held.

At Cornell everything was punctual and on schedule. Every day the routine

## BASEMENT

KATIE SHEAFFER

Carlisle, PA

If you shake a jar of beans,  
the large ones - the great white northerns, the kidneys -  
rise to the surface,  
and the trifling beans - the lentils - are subducted  
beneath the superior mass of a lima.

The lentils of life are lying in my basement.

Decrepit chairs, paint cans empty save for a thick layer of sludge,  
deflated childhood, frazzle-spoked bicycles,  
the remnants of a tanked lawn enterprise -  
these have sifted down to a halfway house,  
between life and the dump,  
where I am supposed to forget that these veterans  
ever fought the wars of the present.  
But as I fulfill the requirements of life,  
shifting from room to room on the ground floor,  
my failed lives refuse to be ignored, calling from below.

Revisiting these relics, this trash,

is not pleasant, but necessary perhaps.

Odd swatches of carpet line the floor,  
leftovers from the overhaul of the living room, and  
cobwebs bind together cinder blocks and hula hoops,  
tackle boxes and slot tracks.

Eventually, cobwebs will wind all the evidence  
of my attempts at life into a  
mass of white threads,  
a cocoon almost,  
the genesis of my next life



would be the same. At 6:00 A.M. sharp, an old lady with a German accent would open the door to our rooms, turn on the blazing light, shine it straight into my eye, and yell, "Get up! Get up! Time to get up!" Groggily and still half asleep I would be forced to wake up and change into just a hospital gown. Dragging myself to the bathroom, I would grab my "hat," a large cup that everyone was mandated to pee in so the nurses could measure our output, and then I walked back down the hall to the showers where we would go to the bathroom. Then we would all go back down the hall to get weighed, but first I had to go to the bathroom in the hat and tell the German lady how much pee was in the cup. This was done before every weigh-in to make sure no one was water loading. When I stepped on the scale my weight showed up in kilograms, not pounds, and I panicked because I didn't know how to convert kilograms to pounds and I MUST know my weight because I am absolutely positive that everyone is deliberately trying to make me FAT. I throw a fit for about five minutes or so, demanding that they reveal my true weight, but they won't tell me. They never tell.

After weighing in I must go back down to the other bathroom to take a shower. The curtains to the shower are clear and I will be forced to stand there, cold and naked, while the German lady, who rudely woke me up and examined my pee, now watches me awkwardly scrub my skin and shampoo my hair. While I wait in line, I will have no choice but to watch the other girls' shower, their bones poking out through their skin, their emaciated bodies looking skeletal and wasted. As scary as their ghastly figures were; I envied them. I thrived for thinness; lived for it. I wanted so much to waste away, to disappear. All I wanted was bone, a lovely bag of bones.

After showers we could get dressed and go back to sleep for another 20 minutes or so, and then be ready at 7:30 for vitals. Even though we had no where to go and no one to impress, every patient would still dress in their cute little

outfits, meticulously put on makeup and fix their hair so it was just perfect. We were all perfectionists. If anything was out of place the entire day would be ruined and the world would fall off its axis.

Eight o'clock was breakfast and everyday at every meal there was at least one catastrophe or mishap, events I looked forward to because they were my sole source of entertainment. The dining room is where most of the drama occurred. Try making a room of anorexics eat a slice of pizza and you'll have a mutiny on your hands. We always have an excuse to get out of eating; "That's way too many calories, No normal person would EVER eat this much, I don't eat during breakfast, or lunch, or dinner, or when it rains." Someone always had something to whine about, because, of course, we just weren't hungry. We were never ordered to finish our entire meal, but if we did we almost always regretted it. The first time I ate a slice of cake for dessert, I went into a panic. I started crying uncontrollably, and refused to eat anything at the next two meals. If I didn't eat at all, they would tube me, which would be the worst punishment; it was the ultimate doom.

Besides commodes and meal time, there was nothing to really look forward to. Occasionally we would have group, communication skills, medication education, nutrition, art therapy, but other than that the entire day was a waste. Occasionally, family members would come to visit, but otherwise I was all alone, required to entertain myself.

The majority of the patients were adults, but the few adolescents, including myself, were forced to go to bed at 10:00 pm where I would lay in my bed and stare up at the ceiling, quietly doing sit ups and leg lifts. Countless nights my roommate and I would stay awake planning to escape. We never really intended to take action, but planned just for fun. One night we climbed up on top of the dresser and tried to remove one of the ceiling tiles, only to discover that each one was alarmed. We were caught and put on supervision for the next few days, but that didn't stop us from plotting new escapes in

the future.

Most of my stay at Cornell was a blur and, like most of my treatment plans, didn't have much effect on me. Although, one incident that occurred during my hospitalization did have a great impact on me.

One day before I was scheduled to be discharged, a new girl was admitted to the program. Apparently the guards were a little hasty with their search and she managed to sneak in a razor blade. During commodes, she hid in one of the stalls and cut herself. Another patient found her two hours later. She was okay, but put on suicide watch for the remainder of her stay. I was mortified. I didn't understand why she would choose to harm herself that way.

Nearly a year later, I understand her reason. Looking down at the scars on my arms, the endless permanent reminders of my pain, I understand how she felt. Her torment, her suffering, her unbearable feelings of self hatred, the sensation of a dull cold razor gliding against the skin, the streams of blood that flow to the floor, releasing all the worries, all the troubles, and all the emotions that remain buried inside.

Now I sit in a cramped office, sitting across from Meredith, my social worker. Today is my last day at Mather; I was finally getting discharged after nine long weeks.

"So, what are your plans for treatment once you get out of the program?" Meredith asks.

"What plans?"

"Well, you do plan to try to control your eating disorder, don't you?"

"Why? I'm not sick."

"Jess, you're kidding me, right? How can you even say you're not sick? You're very sick."

"Yea, okay. How?"

"How? You're either not eating or binging and purging everyday; you're throwing up blood; you're isolating yourself, you're cutting again and overdosing on laxatives. There are ketones in your urine; that means you're destroying your kidneys. And you can tell me you're not sick?"

Maybe she did have a point, but as

I sat there, listening to her ramble on about my misfortunes, I honestly didn't care. But really, what kind of person obsesses over gaining three pounds but honestly couldn't give two shits over the fact that she was dying? An anorexic, that's who.

"Fine, whatever, but I don't want to do anything; I can't do anything." I

## THE GIRLS OF GAZA

SHANI BOIANJIU

Phillips Exeter, NH

I am too nervous to look down where his hand is on my left knee. But I can't keep pressing my face against the cold car window looking at the waves of the Mediterranean forever. I stare at his 16mm rifle. The barrel is marked with two small X's. They represent the number of people the rifle has killed. I regret eating the coke-flavored lollypop he bought me in a gas station on his way back home from the war. I regret the war, I suddenly do. I can feel the sugar flowing through my veins and I can't help but giggle.

"So...are they pretty?" I ask and wrinkle my nose.

His mouth opens slightly, and although he does it slowly I bet that he is counting his teeth with his tongue. I remember when we were thirteen and he told me about his need to make sure all of his teeth were always with him. I reassured him that doesn't make him crazy, but a few seconds later when we sat on the school bench that overlooked the sand box, I had to admit to myself that his habit was not of the kind one shares.

"You think the girls from Gaza are gorgeous. You love them. You want to hug them." I tease him and try to sound like a baby. Everybody loves babies.

"There are no girls in Gaza," he says with a sour face, the same face he made in sixth-grade history class when I accidentally claimed the empire of Greece existed after the Roman Empire. I noticed that face when he sat behind me in class,

responded.

"Yes, you can. I want you to come and see me at my private practice-but in order for that to happen you have to be willing to do the work to get better."

"So?"

"So when your ready give me a call and I'll be there for you with open arms."

and now that it is just he and I in the car I can taste a zest of lemon in my mouth.

"Yes, there are girls in Gaza. I am not that stupid you know."

I know the girls in Gaza better than I know the village girls I have been walking to school with every day since I was four-years-old. The sun rises earlier than usual in Gaza. It lights the streets that are built of Jerusalem-stone, but it does not wake the region's girls up. They wake up hours before that, before the fairies are up to sprinkle dew on the green grass. They go out to the meadow, each holding a painful metal hairbrush. They sit in a row, one young girl behind the other, and begin braiding each other's shiny hair into cornrows and French braids. The girls with hair as straight as the hair on the tail of an Arabian horse just arrange their hair into pigtails. Afterwards, when the young girls look just perfect, they enter their white kitchens and put on aprons printed with the Eiffel tower or the Taj Mahal. They slave away to make my boyfriend a superb breakfast. One redheaded Gaza girl is an expert on making the most-refreshing watermelon juice in the Middle East. Another one practiced making him hard-boiled eggs so many times she knows the exact millisecond in which his eggs are ready. One of them, a tall girl named Fatima, doesn't want to ruin the shape of her Banana bread by sticking a toothpick in it, so she checks whether or not it is done by gently placing her index finger on the bread. If it takes less than 23 seconds for her finger to burn and her eyes to water she knows it's time to take her sweet offering out of the oven.

I have been seeing him with those girls ever since he went away to war a year ago. At night he is a king among

When the session was up she led me back down the dark hallway and out the door back into the free world. When I do decide to face my demons and get better, it will be a long haul, the longest and hardest fight of my life. But ultimately there is no way out, no plan for escape. I will never be free.

them. They make him a cozy campfire smelling of pine and dance in a circle around him, waving scarves of vivid purple and olive-green, until he retires to bed. I see them when I lie for hours sunbathing on the roof of my house, or after I have inhaled too much hair spray. He is so happy, they are so beautiful, and they truly love him. I indulge in jealousy as much as my own twisted mind allows me.

"If you are going to do just one nice thing for me this whole time that you are on vacation from the army, how about you draw me a picture of one of those Gaza girls. I won't be jealous or anything, I swear."

He rewards me with half a smile in return. I wish he would laugh the same way he laughed when we stole apples from the tree of a German widow of a nearby village.

His coarse hand grabs mine, and he looks at the back of it like a novice palm reader. He takes out a blue pen from the glove compartment and draws a circle on my hand, and then five straight lines for the body and limbs. The boy he drew on my flesh looks exactly like the boys I have seen on the road signs. He is looking for something else in the glove compartment, and I pray he is going to whip out a glowing marker to draw beautiful long curls on the boy. Instead it is a red pen, with which he adds a large X, right at the center of the pathetic figure's face.

"Girls in Gaza? I only have time to look at them if they have been designated as moving targets."

I look at his dirty military boots and miss him terribly. I know he made such a dramatic gesture because he wants me to grow up, but drama only reminds me of staring at a soap opera with my lit-



the sisters during lazy afternoons. His smell of gunpowder drifts away from me. One of his eyelashes has fallen off and is resting above his cheekbone. I wonder if he would have started crying that minute if it weren't for the time a football hit him in the stomach during recess and I laughed when I noticed tears rolling on his cheeks.

\*

Back home that night, my father is chain-smoking. The news is on T.V.; they are on every half an hour. "Four Israelis and six Palestinians were killed in clashes in Gaza today..." The camera shows a dirty street. Rotten cucumbers litter the bloody sidewalk. I bet for years

people have been spitting when they walked on this sidewalk. A thirty-year old veiled woman is screaming at the camera. She seems so desperate. I bet she didn't even brush her teeth this morning. The children crowd in the street, pushing one another with their elbows. Their elbows are so dirty. Everything is so dirty. I can only spot one little girl. Her hair has knots in it.

The news clip is two and half minutes long.

They didn't show the meadow.

I begin my pilgrimage towards Gaza the next morning. I pass through Mediterranean forest, but after Nazareth the desert begins; A northern girl can get

## SOMEONE WHO WHISPERS

TANYA BOWMAN

Lutherville, MD

You walk by  
with no evidence  
that you're there  
except when  
the hair on the back of  
your neck stands up.  
You leave a wet  
hand print on the counter  
as I am getting water.  
You do not move  
till I freak.  
My mom says it was  
from her, but a wet hand print  
only lasts for a few  
seconds. I have seen you  
once  
with your red flannel shirt  
and jeans.  
You were standing,  
looking outside the  
bay windows,  
as I was with a friend  
down the street.  
As we saw you,  
a shiver went  
down our spines.  
When we came  
back, we  
were afraid to go  
see who it was.  
We stayed in the kitchen  
with both doors shut.  
I say  
you look like  
my grandfather,  
that you are looking  
over my family.  
But maybe not,  
maybe you're someone  
I don't know,  
someone  
who whispers like a ghost.



lost easily in a southern landscape, but I am determined to visit those girls that live only a three-hour drive from my house, the girls who have my boy as their king.

I step on a cucumber on the sidewalk of their dirty village. An old man is sitting on a trashcan, spitting out sunflower seeds. The air smells like dirty socks. I notice then, at the corner of my eye, the girls of Gaza. They are silent. A flock of them stare at me with their unit circles faces. None of them blinks; they don't have eyes. They are made of blank sheets of paper, with big X shaped red scars right at the middle of their faces. They look just like he drew them.

"We don't even have hair. No hair. What girls don't have hair?" one of the girls, identical to all of the others, asks crying. Her sobbing sounds like the shredding of paper.

A green tank rolls into the nar-

row street. What if one of them has done something wrong? She would get shot right on the spot and never have hair of her own.

"And the scar...No guy would ever date a girl with a scar like this," another Gaza girl sighs.

"Do you all want to come sunbathing on the roof of my house? I am sure that with some strategic tanning the scars won't be as noticeable. It will be like a nice project for us to work on. And with some iron supplements maybe your hair will grow," I suggest.

The girls nod in approval. Perhaps they would have smiled too, if they had mouths. I hope I have enough lipstick in my room to paint them all cute cherry flavored mouths.

My new friends and I cross the holy land with our arms linked. On the roof, I put some patches on their scars to make sure only the rest of their faces

will turn red. The sun has been baking us in our bikinis for the last three hours. I will have to get some yogurt to soothe their burns or their paper white skin is bound to blister.

"Guys are real jerks, you know. They don't really see us." One of the girls is already beginning to chitchat like a true teenage girl, a huge bubble gum in her new lipstick mouth. She was willing to burn her own finger every single morning just for him to have the banana bread he deserved.

The sun penetrates my cheap plastic sunglasses, and I can't tell if the drop below my eye is sweat or a tear.

I look at the Gaza girls. Some of them have fallen into a calm sleep; they might be dreaming of shampoo and blow dryers. This roof is what the professional sniper cannot spot.

## LIGHT BULB MONOLOGUE

JD SCHNEIDER

Chatham, NJ

Harvest season: plucking  
corkscrew bases of ripe light bulbs  
from emerald stems,  
their filaments coated with loads  
of incandescent pollen.  
I test each delicate bulb  
with a light touch of my fingers,  
then if it is ready, I twist the  
head on its slow spiral  
until the stem lets go,  
wrap it in a soft towel  
and add it to the pile.

Next April, when the  
light bulbs bloom again,  
it will be so beautiful:  
Imagine the garden shadowy  
at dusk, and the light bulbs  
glowing green on the ground,  
like mellow botanic fireflies.

## FEATHERS

CAITLYN VALENTINO

Union Beach, NJ

anyone could say life is strange.  
i have never said it,  
but discovered the extent of the world's oddities  
one saturday night at the movie theater.  
the line for popcorn and chocolate wound so long  
my friends and i found ourselves pushed against the back wall  
next to the short tow of payphones.  
when one began to ring i reached to answer it and they laughed.  
the tight voice of a stranger told me,  
*we are what is happening. we won't stop happening.*  
i hung up quickly, eyes like empty buckets  
trying to sift through the words  
draining my thoughts until my audience grew curious.  
what did they say?  
nothing  
i lied.  
and the canary in my throat knotted her wings  
and slipped down further into me  
to drink from the pool in my chest.

# PALETTE FOR MORNING AND NIGHT: AN EPIC

SARAH CAMPBELL  
Birmingham, AL

## I. Caught

I stepped outside today  
and the leaves beneath me  
were like broken eggs,  
autumn unfolding.  
The yolk, milky celestial yellow, ran down my driveway  
into a floating prism of oil.

"Shells of light" I have called them before,  
diffusing like dye underneath a microscope.  
Perhaps then I meant what I am saying now:

I saw peels of color  
focused but airy,  
concentrated though  
feather-thin.

When I squinted,  
that lens opened its secrets: the dye, spreading  
and settling like shades of dust,  
tangled into knots of lightness and darkness.

*Quickly now.* The mitochondria is encompassed,  
the nucleus swollen  
like pregnancy

sits blankly under the great eye of light--  
wasted.

A web of painted hues  
suffocated the cell,

a dewy, humming center  
now beautiful and silent,  
now beautiful and vacant;

such is the spider that clutched its bite  
to the prey.

(And I felt the cell gasp;  
I watched the last, blurry panting  
slow to a gentle exhaust,  
a whisper,  
then, finally,  
a soft surrender to its chains).

## 2. COCOON

I have been pulled from cloud to ground  
like lightning,  
a buzzing shift  
channeled and falling. The earth I touch  
-a handprint, a moment-  
in my seconds of plummeting

rusts shackles,  
snaps iron jaws.

It smothers my feet into compliance,  
wrapping and tugging me to its cave-mouth.  
The floor of it is littered  
with leaves like skeletons,  
thin-winged vertebrae  
that shatter underneath me,  
a history of air and land compressed into a single bone.

A warning.

This was not a metamorphosis,  
and evolution drop by drop  
off a deciduous tree;  
this was slow creeping death  
unlocked vein by vein.

## 3. ON TELEVISION

the grandiose epic floats by me in their thirty minutes.  
Half an hour, and I've already swum  
with Odysseus or Gilgamesh

(not bronzed yet,  
still blood and strong arms and bricked heart  
slashing into crescents of waves.)

I watch the metallic sheen rise through streaming muscles  
to their skin's surface

as the minutes pass,  
as the hours clock in and out.

My eyes, even asleep, are worn filmy with bloodshot--  
I doze onto each channel, a lover crawling to her lair,  
to watch variations of transmitted heroes

strengthening or weakening  
as Sampson did, his brown curls rising and hanging  
like chimes

or dropping down fast into the earth. *Blinded.*

I am Delilah-  
I cut the channels long or shot  
to watch love, purified and cyclical,

evaporate and reform.

(I blink on and off,  
a satellite suspended between sofa and dream,  
rising sky and falling earth:  
streamlined, the ocean and I form one

back,  
one flattened line drifting across mountains and valleys of water.

I am upturned, newly opened to the sun,  
a water lily rooted to the sea.

Below me, the ocean lies stomach-down  
in its depths, holding its breath,  
and waits until its skin seeps murky blue expansion.

A sunken beating heart.

Above my vision, I hear the paddles being greased:

*Clear.* I roll through the jolt of waves, the aftershock of water,  
until the myth-men appear to guide me.  
Aglow in copper, boxed light,  
shining hands outstretched,  
they lead me through watery portals  
to my clean washed living room,  
to the lapping blue glow of the television screen.)

#### 4. FIREWORKS

Outside my window,  
the streetlight radiates  
like an artificially respiring moon.  
The amber, invasive light hooks itself  
into my house and wheezes its entry,  
a failed, descended planet tagged to a pole,  
an idol orb snared by the harvest moon.  
In the slits of light  
through the blinds,  
I am made striped,  
a prisoner. Sitting on my bed,  
I pause-  
not breathing,  
not thinking,  
my heart not rhythmic  
but thudding down its well  
like a sinking granular stone-  
until the shadows of chains at my feet shrink  
into daylight.

*Dawn breaking?*

No, that was stars cracking into glittery down-pour,  
beads rushing down from behind long-necked pines.  
That was a celebration of newness  
turning over on itself.  
The sky lies open like a textbook,  
a curled lotus dream,  
and light years blink on and off,  
history that will unravel age by age  
into the starched spine of a single clear night,  
I read the telephone ringing.  
It does: on the other threat of sound,

## CALL THE POLICE

BEN PAVIOUR

Charlottesville, VA

The drive up set the tone of the  
vacation-little white flakes ruthlessly  
devoured I-95. It was snowing, spring  
break be damned. When we arrived, I  
watched the city's general populace melt  
out of vandalized subway cars and then

retreat into the oblivion of dusk.

Thousands of miles to the south in  
Florida, sunbaked adolescents teetered  
about in inebriated glee. Philly, by com-  
parison, offered 20 MPH wind gusts and  
the pledge of unconditional fraternal kin-  
ship. I only had a sister and an insufficient  
anorak.

I still hadn't eaten a cheese steak  
(ironically, made by the locals with globs  
of the decidedly unauthentic Cheese  
Whiz) or seen Independence Hall. We had,

a drunken hang-up.  
I carry the cordless  
to my pillow, lonely,  
and ease it beside me to wait.

#### 5. OTHER POEMS

Aubade to the night muse:

Measuring words,  
I spoon her into the poem.  
Too much, and she shatters me,  
the dense foliage of her body  
sweeping my fragments into her;  
she lies across, encircles, and cuts through me,  
the simple knife of her tongue  
plunging to the end of my ear.  
To describe the closeness of two bodies  
is to find the space between  
to whisper jotted notes to the page:  
ink spills from her lips  
and blots the formation of syllables in my mouth;  
her legs string and-untangle my syntax,  
twisting sentences into clotted bed sheets.

The morning after, I find

*I am wet and shaking landscape*  
scrawled in her handwriting,  
nearly metric.

A gift,

and frantic,

I curl around her  
to leak another word  
(skillful incision),  
another sweetened sound.

But she evaporates through my pleading arms  
as quickly as she flew to me,  
and leaves me sitting,  
naked, shivering,  
at the computer for hours.

as a family, visited nearly every ethnic  
neighborhood-both a three block  
Chinatown and a Little Italy with lively  
Mexican hat vendors.

The neighborhood of the night was  
an entire continent-Africa as an urban  
strip. Joints like Ivory Coast Spirits and  
Chez Hassid faced lavish U of Penn hous-  
ing. Green and red neon glared merciless-  
ly; faded five-cents-a-minute calling card  
ads swung from exotically titled conven-  
ience stores. The streets were empty and



# WRITER'S BLOCK

CHRISTINE FRIEDLANDER

River Edge, NJ

I need to write a good poem:  
an awesome poem;  
an all-killer no-filler poem.

I need a thriller poem:  
a crotch-grabbing, media-stabbing poem;  
a Wacko Jacko in reverse that'll cry me a river poem.

I need a promise that'll deliver poem:  
results that'll make me shiver poem;  
a give her a Bond flick and never say die poem.

I need a get me a guy poem:  
a make me say hi poem;  
a kiss and make me cry poem.

I need a don't lie anymore poem:  
a don't want to be a bore poem;  
a personality that'll take the world by storm poem.

But do I really need a toot my own horn poem?  
another woman scorned poem?  
another stupid mistake that I must mourn poem?

There's no need for that kind of conformed poem:  
that kind of rhyming, stylized, highly-adorned poem;  
more the reason I need to break the mold.

calm-eerily so.

My parents chose a restaurant the guides called "original," my parents called "eccentric" or "quirky," and my sister called "funky." I recognized it instantly. It fit the persona of all my parent's favorite ethnic restaurants: dimly lit, large and varied beer selection, cheap, and truly authentic.

The waiters brought food exotic enough to make an interesting display, but not so alien as to turn away rapturous teenage, and placed it in the center of a whicker basket. We were instructed to use a crepe-like pancake to scoop up moist curried chicken and tenderly marinated beef. The meal proved to be a temporary success: it satisfied my voracious appetite, made me feel Thanksgiving-drowsy, and countered winter's vitriolic aftertaste. Riding Serotonin's hormonal high, I left the Ethiopian eatery content.

This is why what happened was so shocking.

This is why, when she cried out, "Someone-please-call the police!"-this is why I became comatose, became numb.

The sidewalk-cold, inert, trash-

strewn-became an icy stage, a drama unfolding in front of stores barricaded by chain fences and locks. The gutters drizzled urban grit. Some cars passed by, but their drivers were unaware or indifferent, sheltered as they were by heaps of metal and climate controlled environments. There were no pedestrians save my family.

No one heard, not when she cried for help. Not my parents, cozened by that distinctively American middle-class privilege. Not I, similarly naïve and pampered. "So this is the real world," was the unspoken consensus. I decided I'd write the bit where the unsuspecting youth confronts reality. This was my Holden-Caulfield moment, and who was I to ruin it?

They were roughly ten feet apart, she and the man, as we exited the restaurant. They talked, she shrieked-this young woman, gnarly, unchecked emotions blatantly protruding. She had corn rows and a raw demeanor.

He internally brewed- not brashly like the woman but in a quietly sinister manner. His shadow was as dark as his skin. His image swore street cool, his demeanor dangerous thug.

"Leave me alone! Get away, you piece of shit!"

"Come'on baby. Don't you go telling me what I gotsta do."

We walked past. I hesitated, stared, and kept going.

"Stop followin' me Ray. I don't gotta' take your bullshit no more."

"Shut up, bitch. Why you playing me?"

Traffic ebbed. We crossed the street. My pulse quickened. Later, the curse of hindsight would agitate my sleep. I kept walking.

Their voices began to fade.

"I said, back up! Get your sorry ass back with that slut. I ain't your garbage no more, Ray!"

"Say that one more time, see what happens."

She does.

We are near the car.

He steps closer to her.

"Someone-please-call the police!"

My dad slams the door and we leave.

## To Do:

KARI PUTTERMAN

Bethesda, MD

It was the first Saturday night that my number two pencil hovered aimlessly in the air. I sat at my familiar desk in a state of complete befuddlement; I had no idea what to write.

Flipping viciously through my guidebook, "How to Write a Valedictorian Speech", I let it fall open to the last page, which read in bolded capitol letters: "WHAT DID HIGH SCHOOL MEAN TO YOU? NOW, GET WRITING!"

And that's when I realized that I had nothing at all to write about because, for me, high school had been an elongated transition of four purely preparatory years of my life, which I had struggled through without gleaning a glitter of meaning or significance. What did high school mean to you? The question throbbled within my forehead. What did high school mean to you? Did I like high school, hate it? Well, I don't know. I spent high school preparing for college, so I don't know anything about high school and what it is like and if I would have enjoyed myself in high school or not.

They all thought that I was perfect and perfectly happy. So did I; rather, I thought that I was on my way there. But I wasn't. While they all went to the movies and to parties, laughed at inside jokes, dressed up for prom and homecoming and for spirit week, gossiped and laughed and went, really went, to high school, I peeled away my fingers in angst over my intangible future. I have the ugliest hands that I have ever seen. I have peeled my nails away to little stubs, which barely resemble nails any more. And when my nails are gone, I start in on my cuticles, viciously pick, pick, picking away at them until the tips of my fingers consist of eroded nails and a shabby crest of filmy, flapping chunks of dead skin. I have the ugliest hands that I have ever seen.

There. Already you can see that I'm not the perfect person whom they've assumed of me.

Maybe I'm ruining the whole story by telling you the ending, but it's not really about all of that, which came as a pretty big surprise to me, a painful surprise, so I'm skipping over the trouble for you by telling you right now that, no, I haven't always as perfect as they supposed.

I haven't always been like this either, though. Before freshman year, my Middle School Self, that Sophie, was different. She was maybe even happy. I remember that Sophie primarily by her writing. She loved to write, short stories mainly, sometimes poetry; in eighth grade she wrote a novella.

In eighth grade, my Middle School Self won the Glory Hills Middle English Award; Ms. Gillian, her eighth grade English teacher, even read an excerpt from a short story my Middle School Self had written aloud, and my Middle School Self had grinned and grinned. Maybe, she pondered wistfully, maybe she really *could* become the authoress she dreamed of someday becoming. She liked the sound of such a title - authoress - the ambiance of mystique, implied talent, and creativity surrounding the glamorous word.

In her diary that night, my Middle School Self recorded the day as one of the best of her life. For the rest of the day, people she didn't even know stopped her in the hall and congratulated her on her award. She thanked Ms. Gillian personally, and Ms. Gillian told my Middle School Self that she had really deserved it, and my Middle School Self could tell that Ms. Gillian had meant it. That entire day nothing else mattered to my Middle School Self except that she had won the Glory Hills English Award because that in itself was enough.

Freshman year was when that, and everything else for the matter, stopped being enough. It was the year when my hands first became ugly. It was when I realized that in four years I would be eighteen and going off to college. It was when I truly perceived the colossal number of colleges and universities scattered throughout the country and the extensive number of students applying to them each and every year, too many for the majority

of them to be accepted. It was when I began to think that I would never be accepted into one of these elite institutes. When I realized this, I began to think about it constantly, and when I thought about it, I peeled away my nails.

Freshman year was when I crouched in front of my book shelf, carefully slipping each novel, each volume of short stories, and each book of poems out of their arbitrary slots on my bookshelf by their tatty, well-read spines. I then proceeded to stack the books alphabetically in card-board boxes: my favorite, *Housekeeping*, the author whom I most wanted to emulate as I composed my novella; my mom's copy of *Gone with the Wind*, which I had spent all summer reading; the sundry collection of literary magazines I had haphazardly accumulated over the years, before long plane rides or while I was waiting for the a certain book to be returned to the library; an anthology of O.Henry award short stories, given to me by Ms. Gillian upon my winning the Glory Hills' English Award. The problem was that college guides take up so much room, as do practice SAT's. And curriculum guides; I almost forgot about them, but they're pretty fat, too. I just didn't have enough room for everything, so I figured, having not updated my novella for some time, that my college guides would be of more use to me anyways, and, scooting a clump of mismatched sneakers and a few fallen sweaters out of the way, I enclosed three cardboard boxes, brimming with years of collected books, inside of my closet.

"You're very driven, Sophie," was what Mr. Marsh, my college counselor, told me. Day after day, he told me. He always chortled excitedly to himself whenever we discussed SAT's, when I displayed over and over again how sumptuously I had prepared myself for them. They all sneered and whispered behind barring hands to one another when Mr. Marsh constantly referred to me throughout his lectures. Regardless of the topic of discourse, he used me as an example. The first time was when he announced to my sophomore class my list of my top ten col-

leges, "Sophie's Top Ten Schools".

Another lecture, he broadcasted my prolific Saturday nights spent brooding over SAT books. Often, he liked to commend the obvious fact that I was seated in the front row of the assembly room, a sure sign of a good student, he boasted.

They all whispered to one another behind barring hands, whispered about me, Mr. Marsh's pet, his favorite. They all thought that I enjoyed these constant references, but I didn't. Really. Mr. Marsh would consistently raise me to an idolatrous state of perfection before all of them, but, during those painfully elongated moments, I was only able to think, with an unexpected dash of nostalgia, of the moment when Ms. Gillian had announced my name during assembly, reading a bit of my writing aloud, the way everybody had congratulated me, the way I had straightened up in my seat, and beamed and beamed and beamed. Listening to Mr. Marsh, though, I repressed an instinctual cringe, forcing myself to sit up straight in my front row seat, and, looking down at my hands and nails, I picked and picked and picked.

Freshman year was when I stopped writing. Initially, I stopped because I had no time to write, studying so much. I told myself, I can write later, in college, I can evolve into an authoress later. I filed my novella away, feeling entirely disconnected from my Middle School Self. I wrote SAT essays, filling out practice SAT after practice SAT, making Mr. Marsh prouder and prouder as the minutes leaked by, as I bubbled in correct answer after correct answer on my official answer sheet. It's good to practice bubbling as well, I had read in one of my guides to getting into college because taking too long to bubble in your answers can cumulatively waste a lot of your time. So, by the time I actually took my SAT, I was an outstanding bubble-er.

In addition to practice SAT essays and bubbles, I wrote "A" essays for English and History, once an essay on covalent bonds for Chemistry, whatever was assigned. I could do that, write what was assigned, get "A"'s, but everything

else, my novella for instance, was ambiguous and nonnumeric, and so it scared me, scared me that nothing I wrote could ever be good enough. And when I saw Josh K Fisher at Cromwell Books all of that fear and mire and open possibility condensed into something solid.

Two weeks before I began ninth grade, I stopped in Cromwell Books, the small bookstore at the bottom floor of the mall specializing in its magazine selection and endless supply of best-sellers. There he was, Josh K Fisher; I still remember his name. He was sitting behind a plastic fold-up table covered in a polyester white table cloth, his legs crossed neatly at his ankles, his right foot bobbing up and down a little anxiously. His hands were folded on top of the table cloth, his fingers evenly interlocked, his hair was curly and it flopped over his eyes, his grasping, eagerly hopeful eyes. To his right was one novel, propped up on a light blue plastic stand and to his left another, similarly propped up.

A book signing, I realized excitedly and hurried to surreptitiously glance at the books' titles; snatching a peek, I concluded that I had heard of neither book.

"Hi," the curly-haired author greeted me dimly as I walked in, his voice hazy and fleeting; that was when I realized that not many people had heard of his books.

A woman strolled into Cromwell Books after me.

"Hi," the author piped up again, forlornly. The woman nodded politely. The author looked down at the polyester table cloth, defeated looking, and then his head quickly snapped up again, "Hey," he called out to the woman, his voice tender and faulty. The woman turned around slowly, uncertainly.

"Do you want to know what my books are about?" he asked simply, with a cowering sense of hope.

"Um, okay," the woman assented dubiously.

"Well, they're both novels," he began and I moved in closer, pretending to examine a book cover while listening in as the curly-haired author continued in a manner which guaranteed that he had

rehearsed this speech myriad times before. Inching closer in as I did, his ephemeral lilt still evaded my ear, and, missing his meticulous description of each novel, I saw only that the woman nodded politely at the conclusion of his dissertation, her lips forming a neat, solid line, and that she then turned away, stiffly, strutting over to the magazine section. The curly-haired author craned his neck around to watch her select a copy of *US Weekly* and bring it up to the cashier, his eyes wide and candid.

Slowly, he stood up and turned to the two men working the registers, "I'm going to go get some coffee," he announced dejectedly, "you guys want something?"

The two men shook their heads, one of them rung up the woman's magazine.

"Okay," the author muttered and then plodded outside, turning the corner and disappearing into the coffee shop.

He probably hates coffee, I thought, he just had to get away from that bookstore. I wondered what he was thinking about, awkwardly standing in line for coffee. Maybe he was picturing the white polyester table cloth, the way his books looked all propped up, with the sticker "AUTOGRAPHED COPY!" plastered onto the front cover, very official, he thought. Maybe he remembered how excited he had been before the signing, choosing out his favorite outfit, brushing back his curls so that they flopped over his eyes just so, mysteriously, like a real author, he thought, knowing how foolish he sounded. And now here he was, abandoning the fold-up table, his propped up books. He thought of the tight-lipped lady, savoring every line of her *Us Weekly*, then he thought of his books, he thought of them as his little fledglings, called them that to make his wife laugh even though the sobriquet clenched his heart with a twang of truth, thought of those two novels propped up back in the bookstore, just standing there.

"Oh my goodness, Sophie, no need to get all sentimental about it," my mom had said, banteringly, after I had relayed



the story of Josh K Fisher to her, "I mean at least he's published. He's probably home right now having a martini with his wife. He's saying, well not exactly how I expected it to turn out, but, hey, it was an experience. She's saying, honey, just remember, you're published. And he looks up at her and smiles, saying, I am, aren't I?"

But that wasn't enough, I had thought, furiously, nobody had come to his book signing. I thought of his crossed-over ankles and hopeful eyes. It all scared me because, one day, I pondered, that could be me. What if I'm an author, an authoress, and nobody reads my books?

But more than just fear eventually compelled me to stop writing, to throw myself instead into school essays and assignments, carefully contemplating each comma, checking and re-checking my MLA format, glancing at the rubric, back at my essay, rubric one more time, double-checking that I had included everything, measuring up the points. More than just fear coerced me to shiver at the harrowing bulk of my novella, an ignored admonition tucked away in a manila file folder, hidden in between another folder containing my college applications and a folder containing my AP Calculus tests from first semester. It was more than fear: it was because I stopped having anything to write about. Just nothing.

Instead, I wrote profusely and prolifically in my black-and-white composition book, filled with facts about colleges, hints for getting in, the black-and-white composition book that Mr. Marsh enjoyed to mention fondly, which contained the "Sophie's Top Ten Schools" list. As I received my ten acceptance letters, fat envelopes lodged in my mail box, I methodically put a green check mark beside the name of each school inside of my black-and-white composition book. When all ten schools were checked off, I placed the worn black-and-white composition book in my bookcase and drove myself to the drugstore and bought a new black-and-white composition book. I labeled the cover in Sharpie marker: "Sophie's Job Notebook".

So in a way I kept writing, rather, listing; regardless, that was how I managed to satiate my nagging, constant necessitate, a relentless influence of my Middle School Self: by creating my first and second black-and-white composition books and by devoting my Saturday nights to studying for the SAT, or, afterwards, to crafting my valedictorian speech. All of those carefully assembled lists, blank, orderly lists, "Sophie's Top Ten Schools", filled the yawning gap, which split open the day my Middle School Self withered, crumbling away, the day I stopped writing.

But right now, for the first time, my number two pencil hovers aimlessly in the air and I realize two things: first, I have the ugliest hands I have ever seen, and, second, I can think of absolutely nothing to write about!

And this is where I am now, wishing that I was a little more like my Middle School Self, a little less like my High School Self, wishing that I could trade all of the assemblies during which Mr. Marsh purred my name to hear Ms. Gillian read my writing aloud, but realizing that I have no writing for Ms. Gillian to read, just systematic lists; so I'm wishing that I could write again, but grasping that I have nothing to write about because, for the past four years, I haven't done anything. But I kind of wish that I had.

So maybe, I consider, somewhat tentatively, maybe I don't need to bring my second black-and-white composition book to college. Maybe forgetting to worry about my future job one sunny afternoon, maybe running out of time to study one Saturday night, maybe then I'll find my Middle School Self: find something to write about, finish my novella. So, maybe I don't need to write my valedictorian speech right this very moment, maybe I can drag out the three cardboard boxes enclosed within my closet, maybe I can write something that I actually want to write. So I box "Sophie's Job Notebook" inside of my closet and dig out the last notebook my Middle School Self had written in, scribbling across the top: "What ever happened to Josh K Fisher?"

## CORRUGATED CARDBOARD

SAMANTHA SHERMAN  
New York, NY

Picture me in beige. Flapping over my shoulders like a mis-hung toga. If I stand at the window long enough, the grass looks greener, and the birds seem less grating.

He was still asleep, so I undid my toga for his full-length mirror. I can't decide if his sheets feel like silk or corrugated cardboard, now resting in a clog around my ankles. I am not the porcelain statuette he took me for, but that is how he saw me.

Standing in front of the mirror, I replayed how the beige fell two or three times, just to see how I would feel each time I showed myself to something that talks more than it listens. This time I didn't drop my chin or fidget or wiggle my toes like I did last night when I could have said, "No, thank you," and had a bar of chocolate, but instead I dropped my chin and played with my fingers and wiggled my toes like I promised I would never do again. But I did it, I did it again, last night, and he took me for the little girl he saw me as, when throughout my innards and my gut I was growing taller in front of him while he was still fully clothed, almost admiring me; he raised my chin, and by default, my eyes as well. My stomach contracted when his hand rested on my waist because it was cold and foreign, and he didn't understand why.

He didn't understand why, when his was the only light left on and his room the only one yet unslept in, I felt like I was just walking in the door, like he was introducing me to his parents when I had never even seen his parents except in a family portrait hanging on his living room wall. He didn't understand why, when he was looking at my collar bone, I was hanging my coat in the front closet; or when he held my hand we were still eating carrots on his kitchen counter.

Standing in front of his mirror, his

blankets still rising and falling, mine resting on the floor, I felt like this was some rite of passage, some ritualistic program everyone must follow, a commencement into a new part of my brain that could stand, looking in the mirror, and either like what I see or see what needs to change, but not dip my chin and wiggle my fingers and crunch up my toes in the hooks of his carpet.

He didn't understand why I couldn't digest or bend my mind around something I could only live to tell half of. Why his morning after was my morning before, and why I remember the details of when he held my hand but not of much else.

I remember the color shirt he was wearing when he answered the door, and the lights in the hall, and the feeling of the

floor underneath my sneakers; it was white, and they were soft, and it felt like I was going to trip. His palms were soft, his knuckles rough, his shirt washed 100 times.

His kitchen floor was cold, so we sat on the counter. His counter wasn't as cold, and I could lean my back against the cabinets with only the knob occasionally digging into the middle of my back; he sat with his right leg in the sink. He touched the back of my hand with his left, and then grasped it. My toes played with the buttons on the dishwasher; he had a baby carrot in his mouth.

\*

Picture me in beige. Beige wrapped around my waist and shoulders like a modest toga. A toga that has fallen

to the floor because I let it, while he's still sleeping and the sun backlights my thighs and forearms. The expanding and deflating of my ribcage provides only an outline, for the sun was perfect then, perfect for a woman to drop her towel or a terry cloth robe that sometimes feels like corrugated cardboard and sometimes feels like fluff, and not shift or notice the stain on the ceiling because she is looking at herself in his full length mirror and seeing the mass of sheets at her ankles that she let fall because last night she got her pinky toe stuck in the carpet and dropped her chin and her eyes followed; but now the sun washes out my forearms and my thighs, and washes out the sheets as well.

## PAULINA

Paulina is the Barbie doll that Teta bought for me from America.

She has flowing blond hair and long legs.

She is the only one I can talk to.

She listens.

She is real.

## LEAVING HOME

Baba said that we must move back

to the United States of America.

He says that there are not enough jobs in Lebanon and that

we can no longer live on his meager

wages.

I almost drop the plates as

I am setting the table for breakfast.

I do not want to move away.

But I do not dare say anything to him.

Mama is more optimistic than I am.

Baba will work for Teta and Jido

at their restaurant in Boston.

Mama says that I can even be a waitress to earn spending money for myself.

## TURKISH COFFEE

Spoonfuls of midnight black sand.

Mix into boiling water.

Stir the bitter hot mass.

Pour the liquid darkness into a small empty cup.

The good china with the flowery design.

Leave a little at the bottom.

Turn the cup upside down.

Place it on a saucer.

Wait.

Flip the cup over to decipher the remains so you can tell your future.

PATRICIA LETAYF  
Salem, NH

# CONTACT

COURTNEY SENDER

Montvale, NJ

The night my sister got her braces off, bursting through the front door with upward movements of the lips far too exaggerated to pass for casual, was the first time in her twelve years that I realized her eyes were not the somber gray of mine. When our gazes met, I discovered that the elation I had anticipated—the pure delight of adolescent self-image recently improved—was dancing on the glassy surface of an emerald starburst, a glistening circle so stunningly green that I felt my own eyes blink in surprise. The contact was broken instantly, gone from the moment my short lashes grazed their lower lids, those green orbs trained upon an invisible focus just beyond my right shoulder. From that perspective, the angle of detachment to which I was so accustomed, I never would have known that they were anything but stony gray.

\*

My sister Marietta was buried on a cloudy day that matched her eyes, age eighteen, set like the stone at which she would stare eternally, on the day she had planned in the note as her funeral. I did not do her the final disrespect, so tempting, of a direct gaze in parting. I forced my eyes from her face to her shoulder, knowing that eye contact would have been agony for her, knowing that she would have wanted me there the same way she had been here: only halfway. And so I stood, keeping myself halfway, beside the tomb that would enfold my sister as I never could.

\*

When I was eight and Marietta was only five, our parents used to dress us in matching outfits to have our pictures taken together. These photo sessions would evolve into full-blown family portrait gatherings, and I used to love watching the frames go up around the house, finding new pictures that had not been present when I had gone to bed the night before, exclaiming over the poses the

camera had captured. There we were in our red flowered dresses, swinging together at the playground; then in green striped sunhats, playing dolls in the driveway; in lacy nightgowns, crawling into bed; with our family, my mother's arm around my waist, Marietta sprawled in the grass just beyond my father's touch. My own portrait, a second-grader staring into the camera, smiling at the photographer's exclusive attention; and Marietta's, a kindergarten looking to the left of the lens, her lips set in a thin line. There was one picture of us in pink polka-dotted bathing suits, my arms wrapping around a child who appeared anxious but not terrified, uneasy but not panicked. Only I knew that the flash had gone off before I made contact.

\*

"Why?" I finally asked, in the quiet hospital room that I would later recall as Marietta's First Attempt, "Why doesn't she look me in the eye? Why doesn't she let me touch her? Why does she never hug?"

My mother gazed at the whorls of her fingertips, avoiding my eyes so thoroughly that I realized, frightened, that she never so resembled Marietta as she did in that moment, not in all the countless times I had stared and studied, searching for clues in those old photographs. She spoke to me, but to her hands, and I thought: I should have known, all this time, that it could not be found in aggression, in force; I should have known, all this time, that I could unlock my sister only in avoidance.

"I have always suspected," my mother began, far less reluctantly than I had expected, "I have always wondered, but your father says no—he insists! 'She's too smart, he says; 'She's too happy, too active, too healthy, too normal.'"

She wore a bemused smile when her green eyes met my gray ones, and the resemblance of moments ago intensified. "She's too normal," my mother repeated. "She'd always been...too." Too what? I wondered. Too glaringly amiss, imperceptibly askew, deceptively typical? Perhaps, I thought traitorously, too terribly mishandled? But Marietta stirred, suddenly, and

my mother abandoned the story to rush to the bedside of her daughter, a girl who only looked away.

\*

Far too late, years after it had ceased to matter, my parents visited my apartment intending, at last, to explain to me my sister.

"She was too cold. Distant. Different." my father declared, loudly. It struck me that he ought to have been whispering. The pain that was his second child should have tightened around his voice and stolen it. But maybe this particular pain was unable to touch its victims; maybe it could terrorize only through what it did not do, and the threat of what it could. Too loudly again, my mother concluded, "I always believed that Marietta was different. I believe she had

## DODGING KNIGHTS

AVIVA GROSSMAN

Greenwich, CT

i have accidentally  
created a zen garden  
that reflects my  
calm rather than  
inducing it.  
translucent bottles  
of spring water, 1.5 litres  
empty,  
tower like chess pieces,  
six.

my space is theirs;  
there is no  
smooth surface  
on which to work.

or maybe there is;  
by day i manage,  
arranging and re-arranging  
recyclable knights and kings

but  
in my dream  
last night  
i was so parched  
it hurt to drink.



autism."

What a crescendo it should have been! What evil, blazing, vile words! What vocal loudness and dire implications-what intensity! But nothing was as it should have been, and the words fell flat, and they seemed so anticlimactic and so obvious that they were comical, and I would never be condemned to remember the torment on my mother's face as her first child, her normal daughter, was unable to suppress a smile. And in the moment that I looked away, the horror in my parents' eyes too much to bear, I felt that I could have been wearing the same clothes as my sister one last time.

## THE BOOK OF ANSWERS:

### A TRILOGY

SARAH CAMPBELL  
Birmingham, Alabama

1. The house I remember growing up in was built with an octagonal window. Long before myself or my parents, there was this house, this home, this certain window. My old house is an interesting example of architecture anyway-part of it covered by tan and red-streaked sandstone, the other sides coated with siding. A porch sinks into the horizontal line of the house and spreads a wide, panoramic window across the front. The pebbled path to the front door splits and dead-ends into a side trail leading to a protruding, hexagonal window. A nineteenth-century lamp-post stands in the front yard.

But this small eight-sided window was always my favorite of the house's oddities because of its location in a coat closet. This was completely magical to me, nonsensical. Imagine: I would stand surrounded by dusty wool in the early afternoon, feeling the muffled heat of Ohio winter coats and contemplate the possible reasons: a mistake, or an enchanted eye that watched me as I played outside, or maybe both.

Once, I spent the night at a friend's

## TRESPASSERS

NATALIE PANNO  
Larchmont, NY

When her mother died, she prowled around the big house and turned on all the lights to comfort herself, then made the same circuit through the rooms and turned them off, feeling silly. More electricity didn't mean that the house became warmer. It was just a waste of electricity. After all, it was just Greta and her father, and both of them were gone all day.

Right after the funeral, she would have been able to eat a casserole or perhaps a meatloaf that someone had given them, apologizing and asking if there was anything they could do. Greta was just grateful that someone was giving them food-she couldn't cook, and neither could her dad. Without those heavy ceramic pots, she would have starved in a week. Instead, she opened one up when she got home from school, and then her father finished it when he got home from work.

Greta rarely strayed from her room, where she did her homework. Her father mostly stayed in the kitchen, reading the newspaper, or dozed in front of the nightly news. Sometimes they crossed paths, on the stairs or in a hallway, trespassing robbers just finding out they weren't the only ones breaking into this house. She could sense his presence a few steps away, get ready for the encounter-freeze and look up, meet his eyes. A silence would descend, their bodies stuck and their minds stalled as if some malicious person had thrown sticks into the cogs. And he would blink once or twice, as if confused. Why wasn't he alone? Where were his reading glasses? She would nod slightly, a threadbare greeting, and he would return the favor, immensely relieved that he realized this pattern of acknowledgment.

"School was good today?"

"Yes."

"Good."

And then he would move to the kitchen to get another glass of milk, or down to the basement, and she would return to edgily switching on and off lights or to her room. Greta wondered what they were going to do once the pot roasts ran out.

house after she had gotten a Magic Eight Ball for Christmas. Colored like a number eight pool ball, the Magic Eight Ball is shaved flat at the bottom so the future can settle and be read in small, light blue triangles. You ask it a yes or no question, then close your eyes and shake it with all the desire you have for the answer you crave. Mine was this-I wanted to watch my future swim to the surface of a periwinkle triangle, demystified with a shake. I asked it the reason for the eight-sided window. The Eight Ball replied with all the vague answers it could. It replied: *Maybe, Ask again later, Impossible to tell, Very likely.*

2. After we finish the buffet at the local Chinese restaurant, I am the one in my family that remembers to gather four fortune cookies. They are stored in a peri-

winkle blue Tupperware bowl inside the waitress's station a hundred at a time. We eat there so often-Sunday regulars after church-that no employee objects or pauses to consider that I am plunging my hands into the forbidden, into somewhere I am really not supposed to be.

The first writing workshop teacher I ever had-a tall, gangly, intimidating man-opened the class with the predictions of his fortune cookie. Several years before, he was dining out with his girlfriend at a nice Chinese restaurant she had suggested. They had just gotten back together for the third time, and in ten months she would be his wife, a year later a divorcee. After the meal, the waiter brought them two fortune cookies. While my teacher stood up to pay, she cracked hers open and began weeping at the writ-

ing in her hand. "What's wrong?" he asked. Sobbing, she held out the slip of paper and pressed it into his fingers. It said, *He loves you as much as he can, but that is not very much.* She ran from the restaurant and left him for three days.

He tells this story to us, laughing, because fortune cookies aren't unkind. They are recycled proverbs printed on recycled paper, the pithy sayings you roll your eyes at but save, just in case. Like my workshop teacher, who acknowledged its accuracy by carrying it with him everywhere in his wallet.

But I save my forecasts to savor the moment I will find my own shocking fortune cookie. Last Sunday, driving home from the buffet, I discovered this gem: *Promote literacy. Buy a box of fortune cookies today.*

3. I place no stock in tea leaves or horo-

scopes, slightly more in palms, and the most, since last year, in the Book of Answers. This is a book filled with sundry-detailed answers-no questions, no text, just one-liners of solutions. Even answers like "maybe" it elaborates into filling two hundred pages...*Perhaps the thirtieth of September*, I flipped to once, or *Your baby will inform you*. It was like God had taken his prophecies and prayer answers and laid them onto the page, a Bible in its purest state.

This book of answers was owned by its own messiah, a beautiful, regal senior. She was quiet and mysterious, unconventional elegance. She painted her nails colors like hunter green and wore brooches. She was astounding. She read the Book of Answers during her classes-she answered questions about Beowulf's name symbolism with *The person to your left will know*, or, when asked for an

example of flat tax, she responded, *You will hear it in the ocean*. She wrote down predictions in the blanks of tests, even composed essays-her thesis a line of prediction-according to that book.

(Teachers must have taken her aside, said, "I know you're a smart girl. Why are you doing this? You're failing." She would have nodded and still used the book to explain herself.)

And I watched her everyday struggle to interpret the answers. I watched her use them as warnings, as metaphor, as a person assured of privileged information. Once last semester, bored, she asked me if I had any questions for her book. Sheepishly, I wondered out loud if she would graduate. She flicked open the book. It replied, *What is impossible becomes possible*. She did.



PRESTON PARK Groton, MA

## MISTER SUNDAY

DIANA CHIEN

Holmdel, NJ

He blew in on an October wind,  
Pale and dry as an old, old leaf-  
His lips bled when he smiled.

Cracked soft smile, long soft hands,  
except for the thimble-tips  
where he used to play the harp.

He fumbled dust into being when he touched  
breathed memories like peppermint:  
a quiet, lazy scent like moth's wings.

His were the soft seasons,  
For the harsh summer sun crumbled his eyes:  
and the winter, she bled his mouth  
to a crooked paper cut.

# MANDRA DEVI

JENNA BRAGER

Reisterstown, MD

"At least 258 die in ensuing mayhem during Hindu hillside procession." -*The Baltimore Sun*, Wednesday, Jan. 26, 2005

"The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to salvation is hard." -*Katha-Upanishshad*

"There were bodies and bodies, all lined up," shouts the man behind the microphone, "Imtiaz Jaleel, reporting for New Delhi TV" his brown face and graying sideburns dripping with the heat of the fire that rages behind him.

There are two hundred steps on the path to salvation, littered with shattered bangles, splintered bones.

With every step soaked in libations for the funeral pyres, burning

with the scent of coconut.

Bruised, blackened,

the weak, the women, the children, are the first to fall.

So it has been, and always will be.

The moon pilgrims wail sacrifices to Kalubai;

a silver-masked face: wide-eyed,

impassive, shrouded in smoke

like the veils of a Persian bride.

How quickly do revelries devolve into riots?

We watch this on the evening news,  
My sister impervious, unable to believe  
that human beings could merely keep going,  
despite the cries beneath their bare feet.

"Stomp your feet," my mother says.

"And pretend that if you stop,  
you will be the one on the ground."

Offerings of flowers and sweets  
lie abandoned on the hilltop paths,  
narrow as a razor's edge.

The only way to go is forward,  
wave of worshippers  
bowling over souls,

crushing carrion,  
wall of flesh like a wall of water,

a tsunami wave of men.

The sky floods with fire,

the ground is damp with tears,

yards of green silk, their shrouds

under a sacred shade of ancient trees.

In an abandoned temple,

vermilion powder streaks stainless steel.

Wet with coconut milk,

it resembles blood staining the blade of a knife.

The cries on the television screen

are punctuated by the steady rhythm

of my sister's pounding feet.

## TIES: THIS THING OF OURS

PAUL CAPOBIANCO

Phillips Exeter, NH

Paul Capobianco II had a silk bathrobe that wasn't as ratty looking as his father's. He would always regret choosing luxury over comfort. He should have killed someone once in 1888 but he didn't because he didn't like to "mix blood and silk" and he was wearing his bathrobe at the time. That's something his grandfather, Iniziale Capobianco, would say: "Don't mix your blood and your silk." Iniziale was the first Bianco to become a Capobianco, one of the few Northern Italian mafia families. That was in the summer of 1832 and over a century later, Paul Capobianco IV would be running a

doll factory in Brooklyn, New York while his Irish wife, Joan, gave birth to a chemical engineer. The II only remembered what his grandfather had said about silk and blood because he liked the sound of it. If Iniziale had a silk bathrobe, he would have killed whoever needed to be killed; he changed the family name to *Capobianco* for a reason. Iniziale wasn't even thinking of bathrobes when he talked about silk and blood. Iniziale wore a comfortable bathrobe with burnt-wheat-colored, vertical stripes. His son, the first Paul Capobianco, would continue the trend his father set, and in the same bathrobe. One hundred years later, Vincent Gigante, a mob boss in Greenwich Village, and Paul Capobianco V, the chemical engineer in Brooklyn, would wear a similar bathrobe. The bathrobe trend started when Iniziale wore it by mistake to a mob meeting in his parlor after

getting too much sleep. Someone objected and someone else killed the someone who objected. Iniziale wore the bathrobe to his mob meetings from then on as a symbol of what people were willing to do for him. His son had a slightly different reason. Paul Capobianco I said, "Business is easier in a bathrobe. Obviously I know my arm from my ass if I don't need to get all dressed up to prove it. If you make a big fuss about it, you get shot in the face by someone in their bathrobe. That's like getting shot in the face by a clown. Clowns are all fun and games until you piss 'em off. Most important, though, is how comfortable the thing is."

Between 1969 and 1990, Vincent Gigante booked himself into mental institutions twenty-two times to avoid the Feds. When he was not institutionalized, Gigante sauntered through Greenwich Village, New York, in a bathrobe and slip-



pers, mumbling. If the Feds approached him, he dropped to his knees and prayed. Throughout the 1970s, Gigante was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia by several psychiatrists. In the 1970s, Gigante's mob status also moved up to Capo of the Genovese family.

"What I mean is, I don't *like* to shoot people in the face, but it's not so bad in my bathrobe. I don't feel like it's really happening, 'cause who *does* that?" Paul Capobianco I liked to talk about shooting people in the face. He was also under the impression that he was very philosophical, and sometimes he was. He paused before adding, "Things happen too much *to* people. A bathrobe lets it happen near people. There's gotta be some science to that." In 1987, the chemical engineer, Paul Capobianco V, would insist that his newborn son have the same name that Iniziale Capobianco started when he named his son Paul Capobianco. Paul Capobianco VI would wear his father's vertically striped bathrobe as if it was his own. The VI got his own bathrobe when he went to a boarding school in New Hampshire, where it became as much of a signature in Browning House as it was over a century earlier in Northern Italy. In April of 2003, while Paul Capobianco VI made tea in his black bathrobe, silk pajama pants and slippers, Gigante pleaded guilty to faking his mental illness. In 1997, at sixty-nine years old, Gigante was convicted of forty-one different racketeering and conspiracy charges, and was sentenced to prison for twelve years. As the microwave beeped that the VI's tea was ready, Gigante received an additional three years to his sentence.

All of the Paul Capobiancos are described as "family men." In the years 1996 to December of 2003, Christopher Dunslow wrote the most comprehensive and biased study of the Italian mafia, *La Costra Nostra: This Thing of Ours*. He was disappointed that the Capobiancos did not have a mafia history in America. Dunslow had always wanted to be a Mafioso, a "man of honor" in crime, but instead he kept a neat lawn in upstate New York. He liked mafia stories and detested

all the "rats" that had betrayed their mafia families. He felt that walking away from a life in the mafia was like walking away from your family. For Paul Capobianco III it was just that. His father had been killed in his silk bathrobe by Dominic Strollo who would later run the whole Northern Italian mafia into the ground. Paul Capobianco III had come to America in 1896 and that was it. No more crime for the Capobiancos. There was a Bobby Capobianco, brother to Paul Capobianco IV, who stole household items from his neighborhood and then waited some years before selling the stuff back. Bobby even stole from his brother's doll factory. That

## HOTEL TO MOTEL; CITY LIGHT TO PLUM TREES

CHAD VAN NORTWICK  
WOODBRIDGE, VA

This time of year,  
when the leaves turn to fire and plum.  
I am forever reminded of chlorine  
and juke-box-diners.  
You sat next to me on the bus.  
We spoke of music and religion.  
You played with my hair,  
and it sent intimidation down my spine.  
Your jet-black hair...  
You told me your muse was nature,  
and I believed you because the bus,  
it smelled of Lysol and cigarettes.  
We met on a bus,  
and forgot the destination.

It was December,  
and the burning leaves...  
They, still befriended my nostrils.  
The cold cement that formed my porch...  
it soaked straight through my jeans.  
You refused to come inside  
because you said if you did  
you would never leave.  
It was there that we kissed.  
after four months of waiting  
our curiosity was ignited.  
To people like us,  
Ecstasy was the drug of choice.

was why Paul Capobianco VI, who made tea in his black bathrobe, never met Uncle Bobby, who was always referred to with dismissive smiles. Dunslow wrote in his book, "It is surprising that with a name like Capobianco, the Capobianco family was not simply fated into a life of crime in America." Dunslow ends the brief section on the Capobianco family with that sentence.

Dunslow's section on Vincent Gigante is much longer. Looking over the beginning of the section, Dunslow read aloud to himself, "There was ample evidence that Gigante was a devoted family man who loved his children and took

Te amo. Te amo.  
Ich liebe dich.  
The lights are screaming in Times Square.  
This is the land of liberty.  
This was the city of opportunity.  
It's humorous what we remember  
and what we choose to forget.  
"Salacious" was the word of the evening.  
The scent of your perfume...  
it outweighed the smog.  
And through the blinding lights  
and past the soaring building tops,  
we were able to seek out a solitary star,  
and force it to shoot across the night sky.

We wanted to find Christ,  
but neither of us believed in him.  
The air was dark and the light was musty.  
It was hard to believe God would reside  
in a place like that.  
We took pictures of the architecture  
because that was our hobby.  
And we gazed at the cathedral ceiling  
because our dream in life  
was to capture beauty.  
You ran your fingers across stonewalls  
like water dripping down chandeliers.  
There were whispering spirits in that room...  
a few landed in your hair.

measures so that they would have a better life, one not involving crime." Dunslow changed the sentence to read, "and took measures so that they would have a life not involved in crime." Dunslow told himself it was more concise and moved on to giddily recount stories of how Gigante would foil the Feds. Dunslow smiled as he wrote, "In another legendary instance, FBI agents armed with subpoenas found Gigante standing naked in the shower of his bathroom, holding an umbrella over his head to keep him dry." The day Iniziale showed up to his mob meeting in a bathrobe after getting too much sleep was exactly sixty years before his grandson was shot in the bathtub. Paul Capobianco II was singing along with *Don Giovanni* on the record player as he did every morning. *Chi l'anima mi lacera? / Chi m'agita le viscere?* Dominic Strollo and the soldiers with him sang along after shooting the II seventeen times through the bath curtain. *Che strazio, ohimè, che smania! / Che inferno, che terrore!* The gunmen laughed as the tub shattered and cherry-tinged water spread across the floor. One slipped and broke an arm. The II has never stopped laughing from his grave.

After terrorists attacked the Twin Towers in New York on September 11th 2001, Gigante called his son. Over the phone, Gigante expressed genuine concern that children may have died. The phone was tapped, and the conversation was later used as evidence that Gigante's insanity was a charade. This forced his confession in 2003. Dunslow wrote with bitterness, "The tape shows that Gigante was concerned that innocent children might have been murdered, and one of his sons confirmed that there were children on the planes that were hijacked and crashed. Gigante reacted to this horrific news by stating he would pray for the children. Through this portrayal of goodness, Gigante stepped from his insanity façade, and with the tape as evidence, confessed in two years to a fantastic career of acting."

"That guy's a weirdo," Paul Capobianco IV said over dinner one night

of Gigante.

"You're a weirdo," his wife responded. "At least *he's* acting."

"Maybe I *am* acting," replied the IV, content to have found a come-back.

"You ain't smart enough for that. You may look like 'im, but Peter Faulk you're not." The IV's son and grandson laughed. They loved eating dinner with the bantering couple that represented a second generation of Capobianco legitimacy. It was even better when Pep, the older brother of the IV, was there with them because he was the sort of character who called Roosevelt in guttural Brooklyn-cadence, "that crippled bastard." This would be Paul Capobianco VI's last dinner at a local restaurant with his family before going to the boarding school in New Hampshire where he made tea in Browning House and waited for the microwave to beep. He came to call the black bathrobe, silk pajama pants and slippers his "Browning Lounge Attire."

Paul Capobianco VI had a certain way of collecting money from people while he was at the boarding school in New Hampshire. If a person did not pay him back for over two weeks, the VI called him. The VI knew how to play the saxophone. He had a recording of him playing both *The Godfather* love and death theme that he had sent with his boarding school application. Setting the receiver by his speakers as the death theme from *The Godfather* played, the VI would pay a visit to the person who owed him money. "I'm getting this weird prank phone call," the person who owed money would say. "I know," the VI would respond, trying not to smile, "you owe me money." A dorm-mate, Nathan Riggs, was so amused he paid the VI and invited him to sit down and share his dinner. Over pizza Riggs said, "Only you, Paul. Any other kid and I don't think it would work." Three weeks later, Browning House's former dorm-head, Dan Morrissey, stood outside Paul Capobianco VI's door and watched as he swiveled around in his chair, his black bathrobe catching a bit of current. "You know Paulie," Dan said, "I never thought you would keep up with the

silk pants and bathrobe. I thought you would end up wearing jeans and a t-shirt like everyone else. But not you. You're still in your silk pants and bathrobe. It's a good thing, Paulie; it's like how you wear your sports jackets, keep your shirt tucked in and bother to match and such so you look all debonair; it's class." Paul Capobianco VI leaned back in his chair and said, "It's real comfortable." The two smiled at each other. As Dan closed the door he added, "You belong in a bathrobe, Paulie, you really do."

## MISCHA

OLGA RUKOVETS

Tenafly, NJ

Your cigarette-brand shirts  
mocked my floral skirts and your old  
man's limp made  
my legs ache and shake

beneath me. I felt my lips  
purse, my posture  
crumble; and I had shamed your  
ailment with my broad hips.

Doctors lied and we renounced  
unnecessary tests in spite;  
they didn't get the last name right-  
couldn't care enough.

But I cared too much and you  
wouldn't let me. White coats  
draped over Grandma's anecdotes;  
no one laughed now-not even you.

Your lungs betrayed you, me;  
and you left them hidden  
between state lines, and me forbidden  
to leave and be

grown. Age hated you,  
and so I waged war. I fought every step  
I took,  
every step you couldn't take,  
and I wouldn't let age hate me, too.

## INSIDE

DIANA McCUE

Groton, MA

For a while, she didn't leave the house.  
After a week or so, she had beige behind the eyes,  
And she spent the day waiting for the early evening light  
To fill the room with definition,  
To save her from the overwhelming pixilation.  
It hurt her to watch snow melt on the grass  
And yes, she missed the air.  
But she could see the sharpness of things-  
Pine trees, richness of dirt-  
From the window. It was safer to watch the edges  
From blankets and carpet.

For a long time she would live  
And then she would die  
And they would give her ashes to the raw winds.

## COME BACK, LITTLE GIRL

GABY FALCO

Fanwood, NJ

Her small frog legs kick inside of me;  
they want out  
but I know what's best,  
she belongs in me.

Wherever she ends up down in my caverns,  
she ends up.  
Preferably I'd like her spine against my heart-  
it could do with a backbone.  
When I swallowed her,  
her little fingers slipping down  
the walls of my throat like sea anemones,  
her voice falling into me  
heavy and dense as a glass bead,  
I could see the cavalcade of gods  
marching towards me over the hill.  
They held iron bars across their  
 chests and looked at me saying,  
No, no, you mustn't do that.

So I turned and ran, fled like a fugitive.  
I felt swelled as a mother  
and I tried to wrap the night around me.  
It wasn't easy reclaiming you-  
I had to peel back my skin three layers  
and file down my bones to fine dust,  
stepping from my ruins like a discarded  
gown.

It's like all those stories;  
the mother always has to sacrifice  
something, everything  
for her child.  
So why did I have to enter that museum of  
lost children  
like a thief in my black gloves,  
guilt balled up tight as a knot somewhere?  
Come back, little girl,  
I said calling you to me.

Forget the pain, they say.  
But I am stronger than that;  
now I will carry you with me.  
I stare down at the top of her head,  
her brown hair shines  
and she pushes up her glasses,  
she looks down.  
She always looked down.  
She still wears her underpants high as her  
waist.  
I unfold her arms, her eyes.  
I loosen the bolts in her knees.  
She billows open like an umbrella.  
I say, where have you been?  
I say, come home, I don't want to  
forget you.  
They always said, don't forget  
where you came from.

## BLADES

KATHERINE BERNOT

Union, NJ

The plastic fan in my window  
Hums louder than the crickets-  
But the girls love their creature comforts.

The fan in our kitchen  
had three lights  
-one never worked  
and it made a rusty clank  
so after ten years we replaced it  
and now the room's too bright.

My brother and I dared each other,  
then double dared,  
to touch the blades on Grandma B's whirring blue fan  
and we laughed 'til I broke my pinkie.

Once, when I thought no one was watching  
I stood in front of the fan in the bathroom  
and let my (then) blonde hair fly as I made my movie star  
and wished for bigger lips.

Now a lazy ceiling fan overhead  
casts yawning shadows over my bed  
in its rhythmic pattern which I've adopted as my own  
tapping my foot to the mechanical sound  
until I switch it off at night  
and sweat.



# TRIPTYCH

KATIE SAUVAIN

Rochester, NY

## I. Hades

I looked up from the slow parade of souls  
to watch her grow in an unchanging spring.

She was all blush,  
all shower of petals and enthralled beginnings,  
all skinned knees and grass stains, my  
dancing girl.

Now my crown hangs heavy on her brow.  
She walks like the dead  
in pale, measured steps.

## II. Persephone

On my throne, I am as useless  
as a flower in a vase.

The days crowd still and close,  
silent as the dark god,  
heavy as his arms around my waist.

There is nothing to do but count shadows.  
I watch the river pass  
and crush pomegranate seeds between my  
teeth.

## III. Demeter

I have forgotten the green spark in the  
heart of the seed,  
the miraculous division of leaves.

The blankness of forgetting falls over the  
fields.  
Men call to me: "Goddess! The grain!"  
and weep as they count their children's  
ribs.

Yes, it had something to do with a child...  
A name hangs on my lips,  
but the syllables have slipped through a  
crack in the earth.

# MERMAID

AMY LEE

Roslyn, NY

Ocean lover, sea witch, wandering sage-when did  
you swim to the land to stop breathing? Last Monday I  
saw you by the dock, slipping in and out of the foam,  
looking as undistinguished as the lowest carp. Your  
scales don't gleam the way they used to. When was the  
last time you changed your weeded garb and looked for  
shell-shapes in the bay?

I dipped down my feet in the water. I dipped my  
hands into the surf and looked for sea glass. I looked for  
you by the horizon but you didn't come.

Today I will sing for you through the water. I  
have blown a great horn into the coral reef, into the sea-  
horses and the starfish, into the dark water and the cold.  
I will let you hear a human sound, a joyous sound,  
despair.

And then, will you reconsider? Will you sit your-  
self among the broken bottles and rusted swords and tell  
me then you want to breathe?

# EVERY DAY'S THE SAME

MARIEL BOYARSKY

New City, NY

It is dark, but not quiet. Window curtains hang,  
only hang, and an alarm will not quiet  
itself. I rise, I push it silent, stumble on a mess,  
grope for light. It floods the room like too  
much water. Once, it was otherwise.

Noon, and I eat alone. Grape Nuts  
crack between my teeth like guns.  
I flick yesterday's crumbs across  
the table. On my way out there is fog  
on the windshield and I smack a mailbox. Once,

it was otherwise. The bed is cold, mean. Tomorrow  
hand son windows; a sticky cereal bow, and unmade  
bed. I wish it were otherwise.

# 26 LETTERS, A LYRIC ESSAY

SHAINA STROM

Meridianville, Alabama

Recently I have questioned reaching for my pen. I have wondered the importance of thinking poetry versus writing poetry - if the need for a cleverly written phrase to be documented is necessary, or if I could be satisfied having instinctively created the poetic thought itself. This theory that I have experimented with has left me squirming in restaurant chairs, sleeplessly fighting the pillow and covers at night, doubled over desks in exhaustion during the day.

Someone once tried to explain to me how everything is in existence but does not always have the means to prove it so. He said, like radio waves. They are always in the air, but someone has to turn on the radio to confirm their existence. Words float around me like so.

I was in a bookstore once when I met a homeless woman who was only 23 years old. She was reading *Dante's Inferno*. We exchanged titles of favorite books. We started talking about writing.

She said: "I write poems sometimes, but I throw them away. The ones that are really good I just *know*, I *know* them, word by word. And if I forget them, then they weren't worth knowing you know?"

To be aware that I am living a moment that I will look back on and write about is like suddenly realizing god is behind the bookshelf in front of you.

I can't remember a time that there haven't been pens in all of my pockets.

When it comes down to it, I only have 26 letters to rearrange for the rest of my life. I try to explain this to my friends. They misunderstand and say, you can do anything you want if writing doesn't work

out. I say, theoretically, but I would never be able to sleep.

I recently wrote a letter to my elementary teacher - Mr. Hopper - who wanted prayer to be in school. I told him about my writing, about my art, how I couldn't walk through a parking lot without connecting to something and wanting to write about it. I said that art is more than a lifestyle. Art is a belief system, a permanent state of mind. Art, in that aspect, is religion, and making art is prayer - the attempt to connect to the higher power. I told him that art creates and gives people abilities to create as well. A chance to play god. A chance to see how hard it is to create. How that makes me respect god and art more than any moment of silence ever would.

He hasn't written me back.

I am walking through a parking lot.  
I am walking through a parking lot to go grocery shopping.

I have just woken up and I have just eaten breakfast, just stepped in and out of my car.

I am carrying a root beer bottle that I sip from

The chilled wind runs over my chilled hand that holds the sweating brown bottle. The rim of my root beer bottle catches the breeze and makes sound.

I want to write about it. I want to write about how it reminds me of how I need to write, of how that sound will haunt me as I walk up and down the aisles of fruit, the stands of cardboard boxes containing preservatives.

My English teacher once asked the class, if God did not exist, what would stand in the place of God?

Several moments passed. A baby inside her was kicking.

Poetry, she said, only poetry could stand in the place of God.

I have never been one to wake from sleep with the need to write. I have been one to not fall asleep because of the need to write, but those are two very different forces.

I connect to something first. That is how my poetry is created. I make eye contact with the subject of my work as I am going through daily habits, and the subject follows me around for days until I find a place for it. These poems used to end up on crumpled Starbucks napkins or between pages in a textbook, but now a subject stays tucked in my memory, waiting to meet paper.

When I was eleven, I couldn't imagine writing about anything other than vampires. Because I tried. I distinctly remember lying in bed and trying to imagine writing about anything other than vampires. I couldn't. Nothing seemed interesting.

Now, I can't imagine not writing. I have tried to not write. But everything seems interesting.

I search rows of bound pages looking for that one book that will have a conversation with me. Books, sometimes, are too self-involved. I want a book that will shake hands with me, tell me where it has been the past few years. I want to write that book.

How someone sees the world affects how they write about the world. This is obvious, I know, but I mean literally. When I wear my glasses there is a halo on every street light and street lamp and break light and depth perception gets the best of me. When I wear contacts everything is defined and separate from the things around it. I prefer to write after a rainy evening of wearing my glasses.

**MOST OF MY POEMS NEVER MAKE IT TO THE PAGE.**

I sit beside the avenue with friends while they talk and flick their ash and I think of reincarnation. The panoramic view of downtown glows with colored stringed lights and street lamps and street lights turning from red, green, yellow. Red, green, yellow. Mist sets in. Jagged glares of light grow.

This moment of burning bulbs will follow me until I find a place for it. This poem will sit like an old man at an empty bench, looking down the road for his bush that hasn't come in years.

#### A CRITIQUE

"Ain't it the truth? Something striking that never makes it to the page—someone just sits there and makes poems up in their head... just idiosyncrasies that writers catch, and they sit and stew for awhile in our brains until we forget about them."

"This poem has a lot to do with where poems come from. It's a comment on poetry—an ars poetica. Sort of. Not really. Wait, nevermind. I don't know."

"It's a loaded gun, you know, saying *reincarnation* in a poem and not bringing it up again. I mean, like in fiction - you can't briefly say a character has a gun and then not bring it up again."

\*

I've been helping out a younger writer this year. She inspires herself by watching Jack the Ripper films or listening to dark music. I don't understand this process, but I don't think that there is a specific place where everyone's poems come from, so I don't interfere.

\*

Becoming a writer is like growing into an oversized shirt.

\*

I sit by the avenue and listen to my friends talk and flick their ash. There's a girl sitting outside the coffee shop and she

looks like an older version of a girl I know already.

*What if that's all a soul mate really is. Older and younger variations of the same soul. Maybe that's what reincarnation is.*

My poem isn't about reincarnation. It is a poem about a poem that was meant to deal with reincarnation, but is now sitting on some bench like an old man.

That's what I meant the poem to be. But even I just figured that out now.

My poetry is, without fail, just a reincarnation of the same idea. Maybe the same concept applies to the reincarnation of people.

\*

I write a specific house into every setting that needs a house. It is always the same house. It is always the house from my summers. It is the house I know best, the house that I walk through every time I am reminisce. Dirty, 5-year old handprints on the walls, creaky floors, tired couches. But let us think of the exterior. A graveled driveway spilling onto the road like salt, a second floor over the garage, a small porch to our left, two windows. I have written what has happened here. I know this place, I have endless ways to describe the inside and the outside.

I know that no matter how much I write about the exterior of this house, the reader will jump to his or her own assumptions. I have grown to accept this - that every reader will have his or her own take on my settings.

\*

Let us think of white space, of the importance of white space, the aesthetic of white space. Let us think of how white space allows us to appreciate what is actually on the page. The invitation it carries. Let us compare ink blots to oil spills and white space to passing time, ideas to old men and empty benches to memories.

\*

In terms of writing, of 26 letters, of God, of sleepless nights, of conversations and interpretations, let us put our pens to paper and watch words come out in ink blots/oil spills. Words are there, they're just too close together for a reader to tell.

\*

I believe in black coffee, in one warm coat, in tea candles, plain potatoes, no makeup, and cell phones under pillows when I'm at home. I believe in recognizing but not basing a level of enjoyment on symbolism in art. I believe in articulation. I believe in turntables, in old Volkswagon beetles, in the color black to hide coffee stains - I believe in wine without ice, in fine-tipped pens, in kissing my mother goodnight, in windows without blinds, in wax coating fingertips, in vinyl, in black picture frames, in letting people go, in leaving things unspoken, in middle-touching embraces, in riding with strangers, in having my back to the wall. I believe in rearranging 26 letters for the rest of my life.

## PACKING THE SUITCASE

KATIE SAUVAIN

Rochester, NY

One day's worth of clothes is enough.  
After that I'll wear your sweaters.  
I like the way your shape  
slopes off my shoulders,  
hangs halfway down my thighs.

I'll bring one sheet of paper,  
and when it's full  
I'll write my poems on your skin:  
mixed metaphors along the collarbone,  
caesura on the smile of your lips.

When we live this way, we blend.  
You embrace the me inside you;  
when I kiss you I receive my words  
reversed.



## PANTOUM FOR BEING HALFWAY DOWN THE BLOCK AT DUSK

NOAH LAWRENCE  
Brookline, MA

I let my mind graze.

Listening to city streets' whispered phrase  
as cars blow, like leaves,

I let my mind wander for days.

City streets whisper a phrase.

The sky shuts its eyes.

I let my mind wander for days.

I'm halfway down the block at dusk.

The sky shuts red and silver eyes.

The pavement I walk on seems thin,  
halfway down the block at dusk,  
street signs and headlights in a haze.

This pavement I walk on is thin,

and it has been the only place where I've been.

Street signs, headlights in a haze,  
these cars all have someplace to go.

The only place where I've been:

halfway down the block at dusk.

These cars, each has someplace to go.

My shoes are tied just for show.

Halfway down the block at dusk,

airplanes hang, like fireflies.

My shoes are tied just for show

in the only light left up in this world.

Airplanes like fireflies

all need to land. The air's too thin up in the skies,  
the only light left up in this world  
streetlights, skylines, sun's last blaze,

and the need to land, the air too thin up in the skies.

I let my mind graze

streetlights, skylines, and the sun's last blaze.

I let my mind wander for days.

Sometimes I let my mind graze.

Sometimes I let my mind wander for days.

Of all the places I've been

I've been down the block at dusk, halfway.

## SUMMER SOLSTICE (A SESTINA)

AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX  
Charlottesville, VA

i watch you from the kitchen, alighting on your fantastical hair  
streaked crimson, like an Indian bride's veiled hand,  
slipping above your eyes as you lift a midsummer leaf  
and deftly slip it through your fingers to the waiting dark.  
you embrace the glamour of the summer  
heedlessly, reach past me for a chunk of chocolate.

sauntering off with your stolen piece of chocolate,  
you kneel by the tranquil dog and ruffle her hair.  
moving your hips as if you're the sort to summer  
in Naples, you walk and toss the air from hand to hand.  
i open the door to the impending dark  
and search through humming porchlight for the leaf.

throwing one leg across the table's mismatched extra leaf,  
you stretch languidly and gnaw your chocolate  
as i scabble through the leafy dark  
and return indoors, wet leaves kissing my hair.  
you take one, thread it through your hand-  
it collapses like the days of summer.

leaves on the floor, filling us with the scent of summer.  
from the table, you glance at me and begin to leaf  
through sheet music, held in one agile hand.  
the dog, with her eyes of chocolate  
nuzzles your foot as i rescue the last leaf from my hair.  
you move slowly to the door and close it on the dark.

making coffee, i remember that you love yours dark.  
we have trapped it in the room, summer-  
lingering in the damp curls of my hair.  
you untwist your legs, lift up one leaf  
of music, smell the coffee as if it were hot chocolate.  
coolly, its wintry breath drifts past your hand.

together, we glance up at the clock's bright hand.  
it's moved past the witching hour's glassy dark-  
you smile and wrap my fingers round the forgotten chocolate.  
blowing past the window, the velvety grass of summer  
catches up and tosses a copper leaf,  
the burgundy-streaked shade of your hair.

i eat the chocolate in our room full of summer.  
at hand, air slips through the open window, charcoaled dark,  
filling the room as i pick up a leaf and creep it through your hair.

## BUS

MAX WEIDMAN

Mercersburg, PA

The sun skirts the horizon and  
Paints the trees peach and violet  
as the muscled, mechanical horse  
rumbles and glides on its hoofs,  
carrying untold luggage  
across the way and  
closer with every second to  
some redemption.

The beast holds the road  
As if between fingers,  
curving and bending this way  
and that like it were  
some tattered ribbon,  
creasing folds and frayed loops  
scattered across the grass.

For a parlor party trick the road  
hollows out a little gap  
in the flesh of my gut  
as it rolls out and careens  
up and down and  
as I reach the trough and swallow-  
the road lifts again,  
rearing internal discomfort like  
a lion's head

Finale time and now,  
with fingers outstretched, the  
macadam ties a little string  
on my finger and another  
around my heart so that  
it can always know where I am  
and  
love me and  
so that  
I'll never forget that.



JEREMY EPSTEIN Baltimore, MD

## FLIES IN THE SPRING

JACOB ALBERT

New York, NY

Lilies float by on gossamer wings,  
And until I see that they are  
Bright insects pushed by the breeze of spring  
And through the air,  
I tell myself:  
It is a miracle that such flowers can fly.

Where have all of the flowers gone,  
So that I must invent them, flying in the wind?  
And why do insects shine so, today?

The green and white of delight,  
The primitive, exuberant colors of spring,  
Today I find them in the silken wings  
Of crawlers, critters, creatures of the earth and air.

The flowers hide in the shadows of humpbacked trees:  
The dark and pristine shade that smells of vines  
And crumbling walls, covering  
Them like a blanket of snow.  
Instead of spending a season under ice,  
The flowers of spring choose to hide from  
Hungry eyes,  
Preferring to show themselves  
Only when mosquitoes and flies  
Decide, too.

## BALCONY 9400

JENNIFER MALAT

Pheonix, MD

Eighteen stories down, the sheen of  
the afternoon's collision still glistens on  
the asphalt, small metallic pieces  
reflecting rainbows into  
puddles of saltwater.  
The ocean mirrors the moon's  
dim glow and the headlights  
of holiday traffic back  
into the neon lights advertising  
half-price ribs and cheap drinks.  
As we curl in plastic beach chairs,  
the talk drifts like smoke from the  
cigarette resting on the railing below.  
:We're back where we began,"

you say, "Girls and boys  
comparing views on  
love and other teenage angst."  
I laugh and we watch  
the beach towels billow in the  
night breeze,  
gently obscuring the remains  
of blue van that had  
gone through the red light  
on Highway 1.

# CHOKING CHIPMUNK

BETSY FRANZ

Summit NJ

Jessica watched Jodie Lodge glare down at her locker combination like a hawk. Jodie was wearing her absurd fire engine red parka, which reached down to her knees and was bordered with reflecting tape. A yellow bicycle helmet hung in one hand.

Jessica pressed the skip on her Discman and carefully avoided Jodie's presence. Jodie Lodge was extraordinarily ugly in profile. Staring at her too long could give a person a headache. Her nose was too big for the rest of her face, her lips were obnoxiously small. And when she opened her mouth...God.

"Jefferson wanted ... ah ... um ... a more ... um ... um ... an economy focusing ... focused on farming, something...uh...um...something American? Not ... um ... uh ... not based off Europe's economy ... the ... the ... the commercial economy, and Hamilton wanted..." Usually Jessica's eyes were intensely focused on the air in front of the blackboard during class. The longer Jodie spoke, the more tired Jessica's eyes became; they started drifting languidly to catch Sara's gaze, and the two of them couldn't help but start giggling. Sara's eyes had a hysterical light in them.

Jessica had liked playing with Jodie in kindergarten. They would steal each other's crayons and once worked together to paint an Indian vest, made from a ShopRite bag. The vest was somewhere in Jessica's basement, where she and Jodie had once played with Jessica's hermit crabs. On that day, they had opened some of Jessica's Christmas presents early, then wandered upstairs where Jessica had pointed out a floor that was being redone with varnish. At the time, she just knew that she wasn't supposed to walk on it for a few weeks. But Jodie had had an obsession with sliding on the floors in her socks, and had tried to get past Jessica to the special floor. Jessica had slapped Jodie away until she had retreated

down the stairs, crying. She cried through the rest of the afternoon while their mommies chatted over coffee in the kitchen.

All through grade school, Jodie would look at Jessica expectantly until Jessica reached over and messed up whatever creation Jodie had been working on. Jodie would never fail to start wailing for attention. They had lost interest in each other in middle and high school.

She focused in on the air in front of the wall as Jodie put a textbook in her backpack, shuffled down the hallway, paused to buy a candy bar from a vending machine and tore the bar from the slot before she left the building.

Soon after, Jessica's Discman started to pause on its own. She tapped it and shook it; it started and stopped again. Eventually she squeezed it into her purse.

\*

Jessica passed under a Mimosa tree on the way to school the next day. She tripped over a piece of sidewalk that was about half an inch higher than it should have been. She tripped because she was reaching up to grab a stalk of tiny leaves that had not entirely opened from closing the night before. She stumbled, and her Discman started skipping.

She stopped and rubbed her toe, then wiped the mud off of her hand. Falling wasn't funny when there was no one around to appreciate it.

Her friend Ashley walked up the steps that morning and tripped, catching herself with one hand on Jessica's forearm and almost taking her down too. Sara, her other friend, chortled until Ashley tried to right herself and took a second nose dive onto the concrete. They all shrieked as Jessica helped Ashley up. They were still giggling as they strode past the science classrooms.

"Don't they have anything better to laugh about?" Mr. Gottlieb muttered to Ms. Broderick.

"Look at this!" Ashley yelled, grinning, displaying the little red pricks that had materialized on her forearms.

Mr. Gottlieb liked to tell little stories about gravity and sound waves and light, which all tended to end with the

phrase "I guess you had to be there." A question on water as a medium for radio waves inspired a story about two construction workers who had gone out in the middle of a lake to fix a fountain, and had been attacked by two swans.

"So this guy stands up in the boat...stands up, has his two by four in his hand, and the swan's coming back towards him like a missile...and by now an entire crowd is watching on the side of the lake...and he takes a swing at the swan but completely misses him...falls straight into the lake."

Jessica had been grinning at this point, because no one else was grinning.

"I'm not joking here!" Mr. Gottlieb confirmed. "And he starts splashing around, going 'I can't swim!' And this old guy next to me is laughing, yelling 'Why'd they send him out on lake if he couldn't swim!'"

"Was the swan okay?" someone in the back of the class asked.

"The swan was fine!" he said, getting his first snicker out of the class. "Ah well, I guess you had to be there."

"I guess you had to be there," Jessica mocked after school as she climbed into the backseat of Ashley's car with Sara.

"My side doesn't have a seat belt," Sara said dryly as Ashley forced the stick shift into reverse.

"Yeah...uh...that's a problem," Ashley said, giving Sara a pitying look. "Hold on," she said, and pressed lightly on the gas. The car revved up suddenly and slammed back across the parking lot.

"DAMMIT!" screamed Sara as her torso crashed against the driver's seat.

Jessica saw Sara's head contact with the headrest and cringed for her. "Sara? Sara?"

"I'm fine," Sara said, turning to Jessica with her eyes crossed. "What?" She watched Jessica's horrified look for a split second before starting to laugh.

"You *bitch!*" Jessica screamed and punched Sara in the arm. They both screamed again as the car lurched forward, past a row of Sedans. Sara stabilized herself with her legs pressed against



the driver's seat and a death grip on the plastic seat cushion that was absorbing their body warmth.

They were driving up a hill when the chipmunk frantically sprinted across the road, its legs moving absurdly fast.

Ashley yelled and tried to steer around it, Sara screamed again as the car shifted slightly out of the right lane. Then they all twisted around to look out through the rear windshield after the car had halted and Sara fell back into her seat. The chipmunk had become a barely visible inanimate lump on the middle of the road.

"Oh... *Jesus*," Ashley said, deadpanned. Jessica couldn't help but grin at her tone of voice. Sara had seen her and grinned too. Her face had been twisted in the strangest way; Jessica had grinned a little more. Later, after traffic behind them had caused them to park in a stranger's driveway, they couldn't help but laugh. Sara did her dying chipmunk impression: her eyebrows curled so they touched the top of her nose, her two front teeth stuck out and she twisted her wrists frantically.

\*

When the assembly was called the next day, Jessica was sure that it was going to be a public address about the dangers of driving stick shift and that in the parking lot it was necessary to drive 5 mph or less...

"What is it?" everyone was asking Maria, sitting in the next row down, who seemed to know what the assembly was about. Maria was shaking her head and glancing around to see who was watching her.

"You'll find out," she said. "You'll find out."

"You think someone saw the chipmunk?" Sara said, talking loudly, in a way that would soon become annoying. The principal, the vice principal and the school counselor walked into the middle of the gym, standing on the red intertwined letters PB in the center of the basketball court.

Jessica heard herself click her tongue. "What's this look like?" she asked, thinking back to the 9/11 assembly. Sara and Ashley didn't hear her; Sara was mak-

ing a face that would be immortalized in the yearbook as "dead chipmunk."

As Jessica waddled down the bleachers twenty minutes later, moving behind several breathing reeking masses, she scanned the students for a flash of fire engine red. She found a girl in a high blond ponytail in a red sweater, a tall nasal girl with a red baby tee, and a Chicago Bulls fan.

"What the hell," she said to Sara and Ashley, who didn't hear her. She leaned in to them and said it again: "Guys, what the hell just happened?"

"I have no clue," Sara said skeptically.

"Do you believe it?" Ashley asked.

Jessica shook her head. "No." She knew because she had seen Jodie the day before yesterday. She had seen Jodie's parka and helmet. She had been wearing a helmet as she rode her bike, she didn't die.

"She choked," people were saying. "She choked on her own spit." The eventual consensus was that Jodie choked on the spit that she kept in her cheeks for when she started to talk in class, and had to stop and swallow.

"Did you see Carol crying?" Ashley asked.

"Yeah."

Jessica was still looking around and almost seeing Jodie. Her presence was tangible, even though, in Jessica's mind, she had barely been alive enough in the first place to die.

Carol speed-walked down the bleachers with a friend on either elbow; a path managed to clear for her. Jessica watched as they made a rapid path across the court to the locker rooms. Her tears seemed very expected. The only real expression Jessica saw was Sara's, who, at that moment, made a death joke under her breath, the light coming into her eyes.

## WHAT THE COLLEGE BOARD DIDN'T THINK OF (OR JUST THOUGHT IT WAS FUNNY)

HANNAH LINCOLN

Hingham, MA

A. I glance over the scantron, the matrix of little bubbles etched fully and darkly with my #2 pencil. Not a single smudge outside the light blue circle. What test am I taking? The Plan Test? What Plan? I'm in tenth grade; I don't know what I'm going to do with my life, and I doubt a piece of paper and a computer can tell me that, either, no matter how much of a winning team they are. *Answer the following questions to the best of your ability.* How will you know if I have? *Fill in A for "Yes," B for "No," and C for "Not Sure."* Easy Enough. 1. *Are you interested in writing?* It's not like I have a choice. I fill in A, mainly because I see no benefit to saying no, and "no sure" makes me sound flaky. I've been told this test "doesn't count," but that's BS. Everything counts. Why else would I be spending my Saturday morning in school? 18. *Do you like watching for forest fires?* What the hell kind of a question is that? I think back to my PAST flashcards (yes, I did study them in 10th grade), and how one advised to "read between the lines," on standardized tests, find out what they're really saying. If that was the case, then B, I don't want to be a park ranger. They make five grand a year, according to my dad - not enough to raise a family. Sometimes I think that all the scantrons I've ever filled out should be filed away instead of graded. Then, after graduation, the College Board should take all our scantrons and run them through a computer, creating one master plan for each graduate. The results will be like a code for every college. *BCDAAEC...* will go to Harvard, while *AEDAAEC...* will attend

Cal Tech, and so on and so forth. After all, computers have good judgment. Very good judgment.

B. My parents are the kind who give their kids a Word Box for their fourth birthday. They'll whip out a flashcard with the word "THE" written in big bubbly handwriting, as if our toddler eyes were blind. We'll mutter syllables and muffled sounds and wait to hear the "almost...yes, that's it..." And then blurt out "I don't know!" and burst into frustrated tears. They start earlier every year. Just last Christmas my three-year-old cousin got "Hooked on Phonics for a First Grader." If my aunt and uncle had any idea what a proportion meant (I.e. don't give a three-year-old a seven-year-old's homework), maybe they wouldn't have to start "educating" their kid so early.

C. In ninth grade gym, Alix Parker pulled a Mr. Bubbles shirt over her half-naked top as we changed out of our sweaty gym clothes. "Nice shirt," Carolyn commented. "Thanks," she smoothed out the wrinkles on the foamy sponge, "Mary Whitmore was wearing a shirt like this the other day, and I wanted to ask what she was doing, 'cuz this shirt's not supposed to be for people like her." People like her. Wanna-be is what she meant. According to Alix, Mr. Bubbles shirts are only suitable for so-called "punks" to wear. Otherwise, you're trying too hard. I want to tell her that a punk is, by definition, someone who is accepting of all types of people, punk or prep. It's why they dress differently and act spontaneously -to prove that they can be themselves and it's OK. I want to tell her she's no where near being a punk, and to stop posing. Too bad that's not on the SAT's.

D. "It's a slow wedding process," my dad explains over spaghetti, "they weed out the dumb kids and move them down a level and call it 'upper standard' so they aren't discouraged. The smart kids stay in the advanced track, and those are the people who are going to go to college. You know what that's like, you got moved

down a level in math this year. Now any chance you had for an Ivy League school is out the door." Weeding. Kind of like what I do every spring and summer. I dare not calculate how many hours (or better yet, weeks) I've spent on my hands and knees, pulling up the "unacceptable plants" so that the beautiful Kentucky Blue Grass can grow and my mom's withering flowers have a chance at life - kind of like how I don't have a chance at an Ivy League. It started at age five, when we first moved into a house with half-an-acre of crabgrass (a type of weed that looks like grass only with slightly thicker and coarser blades) and several gardens. My arms and legs were pudgy and soft back then. Now they're tough as chain mail and tan as potatoes. "Get 'em by the roots, otherwise they'll grow back," my dad advises. When the wheelbarrow's full, my three siblings and I do rock-paper-scissors to see who has to take care of it. My oldest sister loses, but since I'm the smallest they make me cart it across the street to the woods behind Derby Academy, to dump the weeds down a hill and let them decompose and never be seen again.

27. The \_\_\_\_\_ teacher gave candy to the students who had studied \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. *benevolent* : *proudly*
- b. *magnanimous* : *ardently*
- c. *vehement* : *plaintively*
- d. *effluent* : *coarsely*
- e. *judicious* : *vivaciously*

E. What's this section called, Reading and Writing? Well reading implies that I am analyzing and interpreting a passage, writing implies that I am answering a question in a well-thought-out response. What a magnanimous teacher and her ardent students have to do with that, I'm not so sure. I wish they collected the answer booklets, because I wrote the SAT board a little note next to this question. Oh no, I've messed up my pacing and wasted thirty seconds. Better keep going.

A. It took Thomas Edison ninety-seven tries before he perfected the light bulb.

That's what I told my physics teacher as she impatiently held out her hand for me to I gave her my exam. I told her I needed more time, that I could finish, and that I just had to get an A so that my final average would be a B-, not a dreaded C+.

"Well if you knew the material better, you wouldn't be taking so long," she said, briskly drawing my paper away. I still had to answer the question about the dimensions of a bubble, but it didn't matter. I didn't know it anyway. I made sure, a few days later to disconnect her lights so that she would have to teach in the dark. That's what life would be like, if Thomas Edison had been her student.

B. It's the SAT II retakes, fall of my senior year. I thought I'd be done with these long ago, but apparently a 730 on American History is "no good." I pause at question 9, *What is your ethnicity?* I am tempted to put *C. Pacific Islander* instead of *F. White*. It's as if the word is a curse, and they had to say "white" instead of "Caucasian," because they knew they could get away with it. I go to an all-black church in Boston, where the singing is vivacious and the sermons are hours long. Maybe I should add that as a side note - that even though my skin pigmentation is lighter than a "minority's," I've stood in a circle holding hands with seventy-five black people in the religiously decorated gym of an elementary school, which is more than some Pacific Islanders i know can say.

C. The summer I turned twelve, my favorite thing to do (and still one of them), was jump in the pool at night with the underwater light on. Along with my best friend Kayt, I would press goggles to my eyes, look down, and jump backwards off the diving board. A swarm of electric-blue bubbles would pelt my goggles and blind my vision, so that all I could see were dozens of little spheres of air. For an instant I would become a column of bubbles, the epicenter of an underwater volcanic explosion. They tickled my skin and then drifted peaceably toward the surface where their short lives were snuffed out. I would jump in again and again until I

shivered uncontrollably and my lips turned blue. The thousands of bubbles were just too much fun.

D. The answer to #32 was either B or C, but other than that I had no idea. I scribbled in circle C, so that the last four answers spelled out *ACDC*, my brother's favorite band. There's bound to be something lucky in that. Number 32 was just as hard. I picked C again - it was a common answer. Not so for 33, because then there were just too many C's. I wonder which school's code was all C's on this test. Maybe NYU... that wouldn't be so bad, that's where Mary Kate and Ashley go. What am I talking about? NYU's a great school, which surely had some complex motley of letters, and why am I wasting my time thinking of an essay for the contest that the sign on the bulletin board's advertising? I could be on #45 by now, half-way to Styanford.

## GAIL

CHIARA DI LELLO

New York, NY

Fall is a good time to start things. There's something in the air that makes me want to get outside and do something, to let that not unkind chill steal into my fingers and spark me awake. Come autumn, everyone starts into a run with winter on their heels, with swirls of leaves whispering after them, "hurry..hurry."

I've grown to love New York City's Central Park over the years. I belong there, far more than I ever did in Greenwich Village, where you either exhale hash smoke or twentieth century philosophy, or the East Village with its brewing proletariat revolutions. Central Park is still genuine New York, without that sense of living on the edge of a cliff. I've had enough of living in free fall. Maybe that's because I've finally learned about gravity.

I'm thirty-four years old, which makes my father sixty-eight. It's an odd sort of symmetry I stand at this particular point in my life, looking as if into a mir-

ror, with the unsettling ability to see what is next to come. My father sits weighing my life against his, trying in his solidarity to reassure himself that his years were better spent.

My father is like a revisionist history text. No matter how many doors get slammed in his face, how many shouting fights in which he backed down first, he still remembers himself as the victor. He has always carried himself with a dignity and quiet supremacy that one would think has never been challenged. It's an effective guise. It's impossible to look at him and imagine he ever suffered from the mortal ills of indignity, embarrassment, or fallibility. Publicly, that is my father's obsession: the appearance of grace. And, true to himself, just as with everything else in his life, he is aging with grace. I can't help but think, though, that I pity him now more than ever. I pity the fact that he doesn't have my mother anymore. I can just imagine them strolling through the park together, not doing anything as truly "old" as feeling the pigeons-but maybe walking a dog. My mother could have convinced my father to get a dog. I've always wanted to own a nice, solid, slightly shaggy dog, with a human name like George or Steve. It's easier to converse with them that way. We'd take walks in Central Park and have lengthy discourses, some on human topics, some canine.

Nowadays my favorite spot in the park is on the west side, just inside the eighty first street entrance. It's right across from the American Museum of Natural History. There's a playground there that I always pass by, whether walking or biking. Sometimes I'll sit on a bench across the path from it and listen to the creaking swings, screaming children, the raucous laughter of nannies and mothers sitting on the benches. Despite the mixed tones of the memories I associate with it, the playground remains in my mind as a truly pleasant, almost mystical place. It's got character, and it's held on to the charm that so many of my childhood memories have lost. That, I bet, is all thanks to Gail.

Gail is the essence of possibility, the idea that something *could* be. She's the

"why not" that so many people never think to explore. She's the rhythm of skipping-sometimes easygoing and regular, sometimes faltering and full of the scudding of rubber heels against the sidewalk. Sometimes, Gail is downright odd. Others, she is simply beautiful. She also tends to make me wax poetic, which is one of the particular reasons why I love my dear little sister.

Autumns, in particular, make me think of Gail. Thoughts of her go with me throughout the city, following me like the yellow and red leaves that swirl around my ankles in the gusts. The season lets me act more like her, and think more like her. I feel younger, less weary, less complicated. Which means, really, that I've come full circle.

Ten years ago, I graduated from college. Boston University, class of 2004. The official reception was pleasant and perfunctory, with a single glass of champagne to last through all of the toasts. All the guys kept their ties on, just to put on the good show. It hadn't really set in yet: we had stepped off of the mainland. There was no more formula to follow. We were all far too relieved to entertain those thoughts, or the trepidation that came with them. Instead we were in awe of the grand hall, we made off color jokes about the professors in the myriad portraits-and, of course, stuffed ourselves with every edible in sight. Dinner was delicious; my best friend Greg, in his gusto, managed to get a large glob of sauce on his shirt, and was the laughing stock of our table.

Throughout the meal, despite Greg's antics, I found myself thinking about seeing my family earlier that day. I thought of my father and bristled. He had brought out his new girlfriend along to the graduation whom I'd never heard about before, let alone met. She was a thirty something named Julianne, and was more than enough reason for me avoid speaking with them for too long. I wondered why my father had suddenly taken the road of dating young. I couldn't see what in the world he could possibly want with a woman who, half the time, responded to my explanations of my



courses and student life with blank eyes and breathy, monosyllabic acknowledgements. I had succeeded in avoiding their company by taking a walk with Gail.

I still found myself amused and somewhat perplexed by seeing my little sister earlier that day. I was the most taken aback when she greeted me as "Uncle," and insisted upon using the name for the entire day. I supposed it was an understandable term, given our age difference of eighteen years. At first, regarded me with the characteristic reticence of a five year old in a new environment. She clung tightly to handfuls of her sea-green skirt and start widely at everything with her blue eyes. She found her bearings quickly, however, and began skipping ahead of me across the lawns.

We climbed the stairs to the history building, and I hefted open the tall, thick wooden door. Inside, the polished main stair curved up and to the right. Gail ran to the foot of the stairs to look up into the yellow light of the upper floors, then whipped her head in either direction to examine the hallways.

"Uncle, where is the bathroom?" I pointed to the right. "Good." She took off at a jog, letting one hand skim over the wall panels, doorways, and bulletin boards.

"Right here, Gail. She had passed the door marked "Women," her attention focused instead on the end of the hall. In the middle, mounted halfway up the wall, was a reproduction of a 19th century painting. It depicted a man and a woman running down a forest path, away from a storm. The woman wore a dress of gauzy white fabric that served both to show off the painter's skill at rendering transparent substances, and also to display her nymph-like nude body. She held a cloak above her head to fend off the first drops of rain. Gail had stopped in the center of the hallway and was staring up at the painting.

"Isn't it pretty?" I stood behind, my hands in my pockets. She didn't answer, but her small frame seemed to radiate intense concentration. I smiled to myself, nothing that she almost resembled a com-

puter hard drive, processing away. The gears were turning. The hum of the fluorescent lights echoed in the strange, but not uncomfortable silence as she continued to take in the painting.

"She knows. She's afraid," said Gail quietly.

"Yeah. The storm's coming, and she doesn't want to get wet." Gail shook her head.

"She's afraid of *them*. They're chasing her, and she knows." Gail nodded sagely. Then her face broke into a grin and she ran to the bathroom door. After she had disappeared inside, I stared up at the woman, the whites of her eyes showing. I had looked at that painting for the better part of four years, but for the first time I saw that Gail was right. There was something much deeper and stronger in her eyes than I had noticed before, far more than just a desire to escape the rain. The forest behind her wasn't just dark to contrast her pale face—there was something sinister in the boughs over her head, and a sliver of fear behind her eyes.

"Finished, Uncle." Gail emerged from the bathroom and we joined hands again for the walk back across the quad.

The next morning Greg and I woke up early to clean, pack, and say our good-byes. By midday, despite forgotten items, false starts, and a good amount of heaving and shoving to get everything to fit in the back seat, we were on our way. Greg promptly put on his favorite mix CD and tapped the steering wheel in time with the guitars. We talked about New York City in the summertime. Greg wanted to check out Jones Beach and free concerts in Central Park. I vowed to make him take a look at the various museums, which had held a certain appeal for me from an early age. The only one that truly seemed to spark Greg's interest was the Museum of Sex, a relatively recent addition that I hadn't yet explored.

"Where does your dad live? Didn't he move since you started school?"

"No, he has the old house. That's in Manhattan, on Central Park West. My mom bought an apartment on the east side." I said, with only a little bitterness in

my voice, "Her settlement from the divorce was gigantic."

"Wow, you mean the east side of the river?" I laughed.

"No, the east side of Central Park, Greg. You're gonna have to keep quiet for a little while, I think, just so people don't realize right away that you're from the back country."

"Hey, I resent that!" he said in mock indignation. He launched into a thick southern accent. "Just because we go out every Saturday back home to shoot them squirrels and them injuns don't mean we ain't civilized." I'd never been to his hometown, somewhere in Connecticut, but he'd described it to me as small, narrow-minded, and far too much green for his taste. Greg peered over the steering wheel to check an exit sign, speaking with half his attention on me. "But seriously, man, I felt like that place uncivilized. That's where people don't do anything on Saturday nights but blow brain cells on whatever foreign substance they can get their hands on. And when they got their driver's licenses...god, it was a holy terror."

"Such disdain coming from Bun's biggest party man?"

"But you know me, I don't get carted away in ambulances after vodka chugging contests. People didn't know me because I got completely smashed and went streaking through the quad with a pink feather boa around my neck." I raised my eyebrows at him. He took his eyes of the road long enough to meet mine and burst out laughing. "I mean it, Eddie. Most of the kids from my town went to community college, or straight to busing tables. College meant I finally had room to think, and make friends who, for the most part," here he shot me a look, "aren't idiots"/

I feigned nonchalance. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I finally found some friends who for the most part, aren't dorks."

"Now what happened to keeping my inner dork a secret? You promised you'd never tell!" I just smiled and stared out ahead of the car, thinking of the trump

# TOGETHER

Kai Larson

Charlottesville, VA

Me in my pea coat  
Lapels turned up around my neck  
Walls like a fortress around my face  
Bricks pass beneath our feet  
They are moving  
We are standing still  
Among the first erratic flakes  
Tripping around corners in the sky and  
Twisting towards us like  
Stars falling  
I leap to catch one on the tip of my nose  
And you watch  
With your hand in your pockets  
And that smile on your face  
The cold bites too hard  
For our hands to risk sliding out  
Of the pocket caves and clasp together  
Too cold to form a connection  
Holding close  
As though one of us might go  
Covered in silence and snowflakes.

card I held.

"Oh, don't worry, I won't tell anyone about you reading Guy de Maupassant in French the day I met you in the library."

"Jeez, Ed, how do you remember this stuff?" That was four years ago, and you remember what I was reading."

"Are you kidding?" I countered, "I've had to stop talking about the stuff I remember from high school art class. It freaks people out too much." Greg shook his head, squinting at me before turning back to the road.

"Idiot," he muttered through a smirk.

We pulled up in front of my father's building on 80th street just about at dinnertime. Greg stared across the busy two-lane street at the Natural History Museum. The sidewalks were crowded with streams of people in shorts and sunglasses. Greg took it all in with the air of a conqueror, and also, that of a kid in a candy store. It was not like his attitude

whenever he entered a party.

I didn't feel any apprehension about being home until I knocked on the apartment door, when I was suddenly filled with fervent hope that Julianne was not inside my house. My dad had acted so differently at graduation, in a way that grated my nerves more than a little, and I had a feeling that it was for Julianne's benefit.

My wish was not to be. The door swung open to reveal good old Jula, a glass of seltzer in her hand. This time, she was wearing a short pink skort (at least, I hoped it was a skort) and a tank top that showed off her salon tan to less than desirable effect. She'd had her roots done since I last saw her, making her bruited skin darker than her bleached and highlighted coif.

"Hiii!" She drew out her vowels, suddenly making me feel like a five year old of questionable intelligence, being talked down to by a consternating but indulgent adult. Julianne stuck out of her hand, a silver chain linked bracelet with a heart shaped charm dangling from it. I shook her hand.

"Hi, Julianne. Uh.... is my father home?" She made me reluctant to step past her, but before I could test my welcome by moving further into the house, I heard the pad of footsteps on the wood floors and Gail came barging into the foyer.

"Hello-hello, hello-hello, hello-lo-lo-lo-lo!" Her words followed a tune that I didn't recognize, and she matched her syllables to the rhythm of her skipping, making a triumphant landing in front of Julianne with the last "lo! Oh, it's you Uncle!" Gail smiled and waved us into the living room. I put down my suitcase, and moved toward the brown leather couch here Gail had taken a seat. I stopped, however, when Julianne cleared her throat.

"Can I get you anything Ed, or...?" she stared expectantly at Greg. I longed to reply in the same high, stretched and condescending tone she used on me.

Gail stood up on the couch, bouncing from one foot to the other. "Uncle,

Uncle, come see your room! She clambered over the armrest of the couch and scampered toward the back of the apartment, pausing in the doorway to the living room. "Come, Uncle! Do you forget where your room is?"

I smiled and shouldered my bags once again. Jula took her opportunity to disappear towards the kitchen, her heels clacking harshly against the floor.

We proceeded down the hallway, and Gail opened the first door on the left to show Greg the guest room. It had been a game room of sorts when I was little. Now it was equipped with a sofa bed, the second best television in the house, and the bookshelves. All my other childhood things had been thrown away or sold. Yet the toys I assumed a little girl like Gail might own-dolls, coloring books, dress up clothing-hadn't taken their places. In fact, I realized, what I'd seen of the house so far hardly showed any evidence of my sister's existence. Gail seemed like a visitor, with her suitcases perpetually half packed in a room that wasn't hers. She had no possessions, no imprint in the house. It made sense, in a way; her personality didn't seem to belong either.

I continued down the hall and straight into my room. It was a strange feeling, to enter a place that was so familiar, yet now so sporadically inhabited that it seemed foreign. My room would have, by necessity, piles of books on either end of the desk, clothing pretty much all over an unmade bed. This room was clean, organized and completely static. The pale blue walls were bare of my favorite poster and prints, which had followed me to B.U> when I installed myself in my first dorm room. The metal frame twin bed was covered with a dark blue fleece blanket and a symmetrical arrangement of pillows that I would never have thought to both with. Dust motes floated in the sunlight in front of the window. I sighed.

The next morning Greg slept through our seven o'clock alarm in an amazing show of obstinance followed by physical resistance. Laughing at his determination to sleep, I went to the kitchen and hoped that I might bait him out of bed

with food. Gail sat at the kitchen and hoped that I might bait him out of bed with food. Gail sat the kitchen table, her knees tucked under her in the high backed chair, munching a green apple.

"Good morning Uncle," she said between bits.

"Good morning, Gail," I replied, reaching for the fridge. "How long have you been up? It's been very quiet."

"I have to be quiet, so Daddy can sleep. But I like being awake before it gets too noisy and they're all scared away for the daytime."

I was about to ask who gets scared away, but my father entered the kitchen, fully dressed and carrying his briefcase. "Hello Ed, Gail."

"Morning, dad." Gail waved, chewing away.

"I'm meeting Julianne for a nice breakfast near the office," he said quickly. "I'll see you tonight, Gail." He moved into the foyer to retrieve his jacket from the closet, then the door closed and he was gone. Standing at the fridge door, the orange juice carton in my hand, I looked at Gail, who appeared entirely nonplused at her father's truncated entrance and exit.

"Would you like some juice, Gail?" She shook her head.

"Can I have some toast, please?"

"Sure." I set down the carton and opened the fridge again in search of toast supplies. "I like mine with peanut butter. How about you?"

"Apple jelly." She turned her apple a few degrees to expose an unbitten spot, holding it in both hands.

"Apples must be your favorite." She nodded. Just then Greg, having apparently decided that if sleep could not be had, food would do, came padding into the kitchen, his eyes half open. He yawned and stretched, moving to sit down opposite Gail at the table.

"Good morning to you too, Greggie. So, what do you like on your toast?"

"Mmmmmmmmm." He put his head down on the table. Gail reached over and patted the crowns of his head, probably getting some apple juice in his hair.

"So, Gail when does school start?" I had promised my father I would take Gail to school.

"Nine o'clock," she said, clacking her consonants.

"Well, we'll have to leave soon." Greg groaned in protest. "Dude, its okay, you can stay here if you want." I laughed at his sigh of relief.

"We left the building with a good half hour to spare, and only a very short walk to school, so I offered to take Gail over to the museum steps. As we walked she wove her way in and out of the benches and trees, sometimes stopping right next to one of the trunks and looking up at the foliage. Then she put an ear to the trunk, paused for a few seconds, smiled gleefully and skipped off toward the next tree. I wandered what game it was she was playing, but she didn't offer any explanation. We jogged up the museum steps and came to a stop in front of the large bronze statue of a man on a horse. I began to circle it in search of a plaque to read."

"Hey there!" I quickly looked to see who had spoken, and whom they had addressed. The voice was raspy with old age and possibly smoking, with an accent I couldn't place.

"Hi!" I heard Gail reply. I moved to the far side of the statue. Sitting against the stone pedestal was an old man in a

ratty coat and ripped, stained jeans. He wore a gray ski cap on his head that mostly obscured his frizzy dark hair. He probably wasn't more than fifty, but the skin under his eyes drooped into deep bags that made his eyes difficult to see, blending together chocolate colored checks with irises of the same color. A sheet was spread out in front of him with figurines on it. I looked closer and saw that they were all made of silver wire. He held a spool of it in his hands as he smiled toothily at Gail.

"So, what can I make for you today? Anything in mind?"

"That's okay, Nathaniel. What are you making?"

He held up the spool of wire, that had already been woven into the likeness of a plumed tail and two hooped hind legs. "Probably another horse. I'll try not to make it as spindly as the last one."

I cleared my throat and put an arm around Gail's shoulders. "Excuse me, but, who are you?" As far I could see, Nathaniel had spent the night at the foot of the statue, and I couldn't imagine how Gail had come to be on first name basis with a bum.

"The first name's Nathaniel, god took the last one." He held out his hand and I tentatively bent down a little and shook it.

"Nathaniel. Nice to meet you. I'm

## HOW TO CLOSE YOUR EYES

DIANA SHEN  
Astoria, NY

i slipped out of this tight skin this morning and walked across the street where my neighbor had burned old war mementos on his lawn, secrets dissolved in air like ash. his grass felt cool under my feet; we were looking at the same green death, and then our eyes met. my mother screamed from inside and glass was dropped but neither of us could move, because it was the beautiful kind of morning where you heard crickets and didn't mind since they were singing for you and the hollow place inside you. so i let my neighbor's dog cleanse me with his saliva. the sun will suck me dry, i thought, and i waited.



Ed, Gail's brother." Gail, as if remembering my presence, offered some explanation of her acquaintance

"Nathaniel works all over the city, he makes pretty things for everyone." She sat on the edge of his blanket and began patting the nose a completed foot long likeness of a seated cat. She inclined her head toward the work in progress in her friend's hands.

"That tail doesn't look like a horse tail, Nathaniel." Gail stood and moved closer, squatting in front of this strange, dirty wisp of a man.

"Is that so?" Nathaniel smiled at Gail. "Then tell me, my little Gail, what should it be?" They locked eyes and Gail gave a conspiratorial smile.

"I think it should be a unicorn. Or a centaur." She rocked back on her heels, expectantly. But Nathaniel didn't reply, he continued twisting the wire.

"Where do you live, Nathaniel?" He smiled slightly at me, his eyes opening as if he would speak to me with them instead of his mouth. I saw the yellowed whites of his eyes.

"I," he said, pausing as if for theatrical effect, "live in New York City. The whole city." Abruptly he returned to his spool and half created creature. He continued twisting, bending, shaping like an ancient idea of a god making man from mud. But Nathaniel was a maker of animals, and he worked in a far finer material than the bygone creators.

I peered at his pieces: some horses in various poses, a cat, a bird with its wings outstretched, and several creatures that seemed to mix the semblance of one animal with the essence of a natural element. A bird melted into tongues and plumes of flame, a rearing horse melted its powerful flanks into a river tide. I looked at Nathaniel's eyes again, watching his work, and marveled at the thoughts I seemed to see spinning behind the dark irises. Gail was playing with a scrap piece of wire, but had only succeeded at semi-circle of sorts.

His gaze had shifted to me. I met his eyes, still unsure what to make of him. Nathaniel sighed. "All right, time to get

going. Day's already on its merry way."

"Where are you going today?" asked Gail as she watched him pack his figurines into boxes and bags, rolling up his sheet full of silver creatures.

"Anywhere," he said with a smile that seemed somewhat sad. "But I'll see you soon."

"Yes, Nathaniel, soon."

"Good. And you remember, now-" Gail nodded excitedly. I stood by, immobilized by the mystery and gravity of their exchange. Yet I was completely outside it, the morning light creating a yellow gold sphere around my sister and her strange mentor, dividing, separating, yet making all the resulting spheres chime with an ethereal harmony. My ears were ringing.

Nathaniel hefted up his bag and his sheet, straightened his cap with a free hand, and started down the museum steps. Gail watched him go. When he reached the sidewalk he turned and waved. Gail waved back, then started down the steps herself.

"Come, Uncle! Are we late for school?" I checked my watch.

"Not quite. Let's go, we'll make it in time." I reached for her hand again and we descended the steps.

We went to see Nathaniel in the mornings. Eventually, I didn't even bother to see that Greg opened an eye before we left. Gail and I sometimes made breakfasts of apples, cereal, or scrambled eggs, or bought juice and bagels at a nearby coffee shop. Over the course of just a few days I saw Nathaniel complete a figure of a rearing stallion, saw him carefully construct the mane and tail to balance out the kicking forelegs and tossing head. He never answered my questions about his background or his life directly, though he seemed much more welcome to Gail's simple inquiries after his next project of his choice of pose or subject. She asked him one morning why he didn't sculpt figures of humans.

"People don't want their spirits put into things. They don't want them out in the open. Sometimes they act like they don't even have one, as if they could be all that skin and blood and not a thing

inside."

"I have a spirit," said Gail defiantly.

"I know, honey. I know because you let it show." He smiled at me, and for a moment we shared a knowing glance, each of us aware of just how much spirit Gail had. I was quickly learning of the excitement and intrigue Gail's company brought me, as well as her quirks and her defining attributes, but this all seemed, to Nathaniel, to be a knowledge as old as that of his art.

"Nathaniel, how long have you known Gail? And how did you meet?" He smiled at me, which relieved me. I had asked the question fearing he would take offense.

"Feels like always, doesn't it, Gail?" She nodded quietly, still thinking about spirits. "Nah, Gail and me, I'd say we met last September. Right before she started school."

"How long have you been here? In New York, I mean." This time Nathaniel sighed.

"Feels like always."

In the beginning of June no one had yet bought the rearing stallion figure, so I asked Nathaniel how much he wanted for it.

"I usually make them special, this one I made just because business was slow. What do you want me to make you? I'll charge you twenty-five."

"Is that the rate you give everyone?" I raised my eyebrows at him. "Nathaniel...how do you eat?" I regretted my question as soon as I asked it. I was in awe of how he could be so humbled about such beautiful pieces. I had never before broached the subject of his poverty or homelessness. He only bristled a little.

"God provides, and I eat." He shrugged. "But you know how it is, sometimes there's a little less provided." He paused for a moment to work a twist into his current project. "I've got enough. Don't you start looking at me like that, boy."

This was the first time he'd ever talked down to me, even mildly, so I resolved to steer clear of the subject. But before I could say anything to shift back to a more comfortable topic, Nathaniel

continued to speak.

"I may not have a home, but I've got a church. It's uptown, real small congregation. They give me food or a night's bed when I'm in a pinch. Real good people, I tell you what." He smiled almost wistfully at his hands, ever twisting and shaping, gently but confidently, guiding his creation into being, "Oh, that's all the home I need."

About halfway through June, during Gail's last week of school, I returned home to find Greg sitting at the kitchen table and looking morose. We'd been out late at a club the night before, so I figured his long looks were just fatigue and possibility a hangover. He sat staring at his glass of orange juice, his elbows on the table, his shoulders slumped.

"Hey, sleeping beauty. Want me to get you some Advil? You look like hell." He turned as if I had startled him out a daydream.

"What? No, I'm not hung over."

"Oh? Then why the face?"

"I called my mom when I got up, just to say hello."

"She must have been glad to hear from you. Although I do hope you left out that blonde from last night."

He laughed weakly. "Yeah, she's not too happy with me right now. My mom, not the blonde." He rubbed his eyes, then ran a hand through his hair. "I told her how your dad is letting me stay, and she got really mad."

"Why? Does she want you to come home?"

"No," he said with a sigh. "She just doesn't want me to stay here." He looked at me dolefully. "I'm just sitting on my ass, she says, living off of you and your dad." I was silent. He knew I didn't mind, that it didn't matter to my dad. This was about him, not me.

"I know I'm welcome and all, but I should really start looking for a job," he said bitterly.

"I'll help you," I said quickly.

"Don't worry about it. If that's what you want, you'll be on a payroll before July."

Speculation about Greg's employment possibilities became the choice topic

of our idle conversations. We'd walk over to Broadway to pick up some groceries, all the while debating over whether it would be worth it to be a supermarket cashier. We'd get coffee in the afternoon and consider the perks of making lattes and cappuccinos all day. Yet through it all Greg was depressed and sometimes angry. He grated under the prospect of a desk job, or some mindless task that would, as he put it, deep fry his brain and put it through a shredder without one chance for him to use it. I didn't blame him for wanting to make money off of something he enjoyed or was good at, but I too began to feel discouraged when our efforts continued to be fruitless.

One afternoon, we took the train to Union Square and walked down to St. Mark's Place. I wanted to take Greg to a few of the used CD stores along that one crazy, bohemian, punked out block, and give him a chance to experience the famous Belgian fries restaurant, Pommes Frites, on Second Avenue. We opted for food first.

Pommes Frites, which I usually just called the Fry Place, was a tiny storefront no more than fifteen feet wide or so. The inside extended back in a long, narrow eating area with low lighting and lots of thick, dark wooden tables and chairs. A chalkboard behind the counter listed about three dozen different toppings for the fries. The fries themselves bubbled to crispy golden brown in several deep fryers along the wall. All the basics were available for free-ketchup, mayonnaise, vinegar- but an extra couple of bucks allowed customs to sample garlic mayonnaise, peanut sauce, honey mustard, salsa, and another two dozen toppings with their fries. Greg gaped at the blackboard while I ordered for us.

"I'll have a large cone with three sauces. Greg, what's your fancy?"

"Good god, I'm supposed to choose?"

"Well, then let's go with Dijon mustard, sun dried tomato mayonnaise, and-

"Oh! Jalapeno sauce!" He grinned. "I'm all over the hot and spicy." We

moved to the back and waited for our order. There was no air conditioning, just a weary fan humming and rattling in one corner. The air was heavy, but not uncomfortably so, and scented with the aroma of the fries and spices. We sat down and made quick work of the fries.

"Yeah, that's it," Greg said, chewing and staring toward the front of the store. "I'd work here, definitely." He smiled. "And I'd eat fries for lunch every single day."

"That is, of course, until you get a massive heart attack."

"Yeah, there's that..." he said with a laugh. "Okay, so do you want to go for a run tomorrow?" He looked at the now almost empty cone. "A very long run?" I laughed.

Greg paused a moment, then sighed. "Man, I'm picky. Too picky." He took another few fries and swirled them thoughtfully in the mayonnaise. "I say it would be great to work here, and I mean it, but then I can't stop saying to myself, 'yuck, you'd be covered in grease and sweat all day'. I need to suck it up."

"But once you find something that really fits, you'll enjoy all aspects of it, and you can stick with it. It'll stress you out, sure, but in good ways, and in challenging ways. That guy behind the counter is probably a student, and a sharp one, too, but I don't think he gets much nourishment out of that work." I realized my double entendre and added, "Except the calories."

"You're probably right. So what I need to think of are the things that make me feel...fulfilled, I guess." A smile came to his face. "Like hanging out on the roof the way we used to." I smiled back at him.

"Yeah, there's nothing like a midnight philosophy discussion, or debating some juniors about politics or music. And then, of course, writing them all into my column in the campus paper the next day. That was half the fun of it."

"Greg! Why don't you get a job at a newspaper?" I was shocked that the idea hadn't occurred to one of us weeks ago. "Everyone loved your column. Do some opinions writing."



"For just who, exactly? You think I'm gonna show up at the Times and start writing that high and mighty textbook voice crap?" Greg didn't have the patience for long pieces that didn't make their point until three columns and a page-turn had been whiled away on analysis that you didn't get the first time around anyway. His column was always quick and punchy, with big loud opening sentences and take-no-prisoners arguments.

"Yeah, the Times are too wimpy for you." I smirked at him. "And probably too smart."

"Just because my name is Professor McSmartyFace with five PhDs in being a pompous schmuck doesn't mean I can't write for a stuffy leftist newspaper."

"Why not write for a non-stuffy leftist newspaper instead?" He raised an eyebrow. I smirked. "Ever heard of the *Village Voice*?"

\*

Later that week Greg finally made an early riser of himself in order to make it to his nine thirty interview. I took the train with him to Astor Place and saw him into the building at Cooper Square, then took off to kill an hour or so in the neighborhood. I stopped for a coffee and stood looking out across Astor Place as I swirled the cup to dissolve the sugar in it. Starbucks was full of its morning hordes, and the train station exits belched up crowds in sunglasses and summer wear. A few East Village residents reclined in the middle of the square, in the shade of the large black Cube standing on one of its points. I sipped my coffee. It was delicious, but entirely in opposition to the humidity and strong sunlight, so I began to search for an air conditioned spot to spend my time. I decided on Barnes and Noble bookstore, and started across the street.

I looked at the used book rack, scanning at first. I knew that among the books that were in terrible shape, the ones that deserved to be thrown away, and the ones that none but the most esoteric would ever enjoy, were some gems of second hand literature. I loved old books, and still do. It remains one of my hobbies, in a

way, to amass old books. I love the leather or canvass covers, gilt lettering, and yellow, pungent smelling pages.

I crouched down behind one of the carts stuffed full of books, my coffee resting on the floor so I could explore with both hands. I found an illustrated edition of *Through the Looking Glass*, filled with blue ink prints with practically art nouveau embellishments. Near it was a volume of excerpted Russian poetry, its red cover torn and pages missing. The books made me feel giddy, the smell of the pages permeated my skin and my thoughts. My pulse skidded along, sped up by the caffeine and seemingly tripping over itself. I thought of the second half of senior year, back at school, when I'd worked my way all the way to the back of the library stacks in search of information for my thesis. I had majored in art history, and wrote my thesis on the transition from Romantic art to Impressionism. Several times, in the low light and dusty air of the stacks, I had fallen asleep on a tome of full page illustrations and tiny type, waking with the sun coming through the windows, stopping everything and outlining it in black, or opening my eyes into the figure of a fisherman in a river of stippled dots. Then it was hardest to leave the library, back into hallways where the lightning was soulless and not dramatic, the colors were monochrome and without texture. Now, in Barnes and Noble, everything had jumped back into three dimensions of being. I smiled giddily and decided to head upstairs.

I found the rows of art books, the tall, thick volumes that covered an entire era, entire oeuvre, glorified by glossy pages and stately head covers. I found a book of Manet, and sat down like a child with a comic book, my legs crossed, the volume covering the whole of my lap. I leaned back on the shelves and looked down adoringly on pictures of boats in a river, or picnickers in a glade dappled with sunlight. I looked into the eyes of his masterpiece Olympia, her defiant gaze provoking questions in me as always. To Manet, even whores had inner philosophical discourses, had principles, goals, and

honor. I thought of the rows and rows of shelves that I had passed, full of technology magazines, books on fitness, self improvement, and being successful. I scowled at the thought of all the cheap paperbacks, each with the same plot, the same ending that was all fanfare but no substance, no reality. I looked at Olympia. She wasn't idealized like the romance of those fictional dreams, she wasn't mechanized, living according to a diet or a twelve step plan. She existed, a truly three dimensional psyche. She brought together the cerebral and the sexual, and molded them into a fuller existence than anyone I knew could achieve. I admired her, I felt a need to be near her. My thoughts filled with nineteenth century ideas, I turned the page. I thought of opened windows, summer breezes, sunlit days on the river bank, bowls of ripe fruit, garden chairs, cheekbones and lips in light and shadow, pale skin next to mahogany hair, a blur of color and weight, yet weightlessness, and wandering thoughts in the form of brush strokes an entire life's philosophy on one piece of canvas. I turned more pages, met more eyes, then closed the book. I was thinking of Gail. She was like on the girls in Manet's painting of a balcony. I flipped back through the book to stare at that particular painting. The seated girl looked intensely off the balcony, lost in thought or observation. The darkness of the room behind her blended with her hair, and her strong, almost elfin features suggested a toughness with a bit of magic in it. She declines almost coyly to look at the artist. I smiled, thinking of the resemblance the girl bore to my little sister. Only one detail was amiss: the blue, sparking eyes.

Bitterly I thought of my father, like the man just inside the balcony door, looking down sternly in unfinished colors and outlines, not a real entity, just a passing spirit of remonstrance. He was like the critics who tore apart Manet's two girls, calling them unfinished and unprofessional, mocking his bright contrasting colors and his girl with dreams in her eyes. It was so unfair. I felt frustration and anger rising in me, so I put away thoughts of my father. I wondered idly what it would be



like to paint a portrait of Gail. Any picture of her would have to be in the Impressionist style, there was no doubt about it; she certainly wouldn't sit still long enough to allow every detail to be captured. But that was her charm and her nature: she spoke and acted plainly, but the bigger meanings were suggested, revealed fleetingly and then spirited away again. I peered at the girl on the balcony, trying to discern her meaning, and in a way it reawakened my artist's hands and eyes. I now imagined myself sketching Gail, seeing the play of the light, color, and shadow that made up her strange little self.

I checked my watch and saw that nearly an hour had passed. I put the book away, picked up my coffee cup, and walked back to the escalators. For the first time since the end of school I found myself wanting to sketch again, to try to capture the emotions around me, to explore things. Back out on the sidewalk, I looked up and saw Constable's clouds. The facades of the buildings had been touched by Monet, reflecting the sun in dashes and swipes. The traffic, the very quality of the air would have fascinated Morisot or Cezanne. I could hardly believe the details that I was suddenly seeing, and I grinned, feeling slightly ridiculous.

I reached Cooper Square, and saw Greg standing outside the door of the building. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey man, what's gotten you so goofy?"

"Nothing. It's just really nice out, don't you think? How was the interview?"

"Alright, I think," he said with a smile, "I think she likes me."

"She? Do tell." I could see Greg getting into his mode—I was about to get a full account of whatever girl it was who had made such an impression.

"Her name's Irianna," he said, seemingly stealing my goofy grin. "Isn't that a gorgeous name?" We began walking uptown, Greg's description spilling out excitedly into the brightness of the whole day.

That night I went home still thinking in Manet color, my thoughts swirling like paint under a brush, an agitated, flighty hand flicking them together into new hues. In my room, I looked through my shelves until I found an old sketchbook with some blank pages in the back. I turned to fresh page and retrieved a mechanical pencil from my desk drawer. I laughed inwardly at my unprofessional supplies, but I felt serious nonetheless, with a masterpiece of my mind.

I sat in the middle of the floor with my legs crossed on the carpet and the book in my lap. I began, awkwardly, to sketch an outline. I wasn't sure enough of myself to do a model of circles, ovals and lines, but gradually I began to see just beyond the movements of my pencil. As I outline a shoulder, a bit too generously for a female build, I saw how the elbow would be bent. As I drew that angle, I foresaw the position of the fingers. The curve of the back suggested the position of the legs, which practically filled themselves in: knees together, ankles crossed.

I paused and tapped my eraser idly against the pad. I had drawn a seated figure, vaguely outlined, as yet without a head. The torso was strangely rectangular, and the arms and shoulders were crisscrossed with lines, each competing to show the proper outline and curve of the muscles. The feet were turned awkwardly, and I had seemingly drawn a sixth finger on the left hand. But strangest of all, I had drawn a completely asexual figure, despite my envisioning a female when I put a pencil to paper. I halfheartedly began to fill in the chest, but my lines were too dark, and too straight. I sighed and erased my attempts at a breast, then extended the neck and began the head.

The chin came out squarish, the forehead ridiculously high. Abandoning all hope of making the lines look natural, I drew razor sharp cheekbones and almond shaped eyes. I laughed at the almost alien-like result. I drew hair falling to the shoulders on either side, giving the tresses only a little curl at the ends. It was a harsh head of hair, hair that defied breezes and raindrops, deviating from its stick straight

path only briefly, right before its encounter with a collarbone. Over a pair of arched eyebrows I drew disorganized bangs, then filled in the eyes.

The hair now made it clear that looking out at me was the figure of a girl, looking as if clothed in a body stocking. The hair looked wet, thinned and straightened by the weight of a recent shower. Feeling somewhat disappointed, I put the pad down on the floor in front of me. The previous minutes of sketching, erasing, quick, jagged hand motions and only the tiniest thoughts, seemed so far away. It was as if I had fallen asleep for five minutes and this strange girl had arrived in the interim. I met her eyes and felt lost.

Just then, Greg came in, fresh from a post-run shower, his towel still around his neck.

"Hey, what're you up to?" He rubbed his hair vigorously with the towel.

"Nothing, just fooling around." I showed him the sketch. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked it over.

"Wow..who is she?" He chuckled. "She's a weird one."

"I know. I wasn't really worried about making things look right. It was more about...shaping her."

"Don't get me wrong, I like her. She's really intense, especially those eyes." he nodded and handed the book back to me. "She's got a lot of personality." Greg started toweling his hair again. I looked back down at the girl, and instead of feeling lost, I felt proud. She wasn't perfect, but she was spirited. She had personality, and something behind the eyes, even if I was too out of practice to articulate it. But I hesitated to start drawing again. I was too unsure; I didn't know how to bring my graphite sprite into three dimensions. She remained enigmatic, one step outside the human sphere, but I wanted her to be flesh and blood. I sighed in frustration. This wasn't going to come by itself.

"This is ridiculous," I said quietly. "She doesn't even look real."

"Don't worry about it, Ed. It takes practice"

"Yeah, practice I haven't had in

forever."

"Well, why don't you take some classes? Sign up somewhere, anywhere."

"I don't know how many places would use a live model."

Greg laughed. "Of course.. I can't do without the live model."

It turned out there were far more classes than I had thought that would provide a live model, a private setting, and a reasonable fee. I chose a group that sounded like it was small and more casual, and within the next week I was on the train headed downtown to Chelsea. The classes were in the evening, so I had eaten dinner at home with Greg and Gail, and left the two to their own devices-with Greg promising not to leave the house. My father hadn't phoned to say where he had gone.

I got off of the train at twenty-eighth street, quickly getting my bearings and walking south. It was still somewhat light out, and the sky was just beginning to take on a dusty blue color toward the east. The sounds of the street seemed magnified in the warm air, and I smiled to think of the sunset painting that an impressionist might feel compelled to start painting, right at that minutes, in the middle of the sidewalk.

## AWASH

SARAH YEUNG

Piscataway, NJ

There is a dent in the soap the shape of her thumb  
She steps inside the frosted case  
Like one emerging from underground  
The silver trimming, glass, and white tiles  
Shiny and glaring from the sun on the ceiling  
Her toes rest on the tiles like stubby slabs of meat  
She slides the door closed behind her  
She turns a shining knob  
She knows the water comes cold at first  
And she stands waiting  
While the water runs pink into the silver drain  
When the steam floats around her, clean and hot  
She spreads her legs and puts one knee on the wall  
And reaches for the soap

Consulting a slip of paper in my pocket, I turned right and began to look for the building. It was small, gray, four story walk up with cement steps out front. I climbed up and rang the buzzer number I had written down. The person at the other end didn't speak. I heard a crackle of static and the door buzzed as it unlocked.

The apartment door, also painted gray, opened to reveal a woman of about forty-five, smiling broadly behind scarlet lips and thick, cat-eye glasses. She waved me in, and a bracelet of tiny bells on her left hand jingled softly, mixing with the clicks and clanks of various other glass and metal beads in tangled strands on her thin, sun-darkened wrist.

"Come in, come in," she said in a low, slightly raspy voice. "You're new, yes?"

"Yeah," I said, slightly nervous. I extended my hand. "I'm Ed."

"Nice to meet you," she said, and offered me a noiseless right hand, conspicuously free of bracelets. "I'm Lila." Her voice was rich despite its rasp.

"Welcome." We moved further into the small apartment. The door opened directly into the living room, which was painted a bright, rich red with a white ceiling. The walls were hung with framed weavings with geometric patterns, as well as some prints that looked Indian. On either side, narrow hallways extended further in to the apartment. Lilac led me down one and into a stark white room. Five sets of eyes looked up at us out of a haze of quiet talk and cigarette smoke. An assortment of chairs was arranged in a half circle around an antique chaise-lounge that was placed in front of a pair of high, curtained windows. Only about half the chairs were occupied.

Just as I sat down, Lila stepped in front of the chaise and smiled at the small group, which was enough of a gesture to get everyone's attention. "I believe it is time to begin." She nodded

toward the other side of the circle. I followed her gaze and saw a woman stand up whom I hadn't noticed before, which was absurd, as she was wearing a scarlet robe and nothing else. In bare feet she crossed the wooden floor to the chaise. Facing the windows, she slowly lowered the robe from her shoulders, rolling one and the other with catlike smoothness. She tested the air like a bathe testing the water with the tip of one foot. Then, the robe was off. She laid it over the back of the chair, its folds reflecting the soft light of the room. I took a rushed breath. The room was lit by lamps with paper shades, and the soft light blurred the woman's skin, fading shadows gracefully into the highlighted points on her shoulder blades, the small of her back, her elbows. Her hair was long and deep brown, falling in waves to her shoulders. From where I sat I could see her face as well, in darkened profile. Her nose made a straight, strong line, her lips were full and pouted in concentration as she turned to sit on the chaise. She stretched her legs out. One slightly bent. I sighed in spite of myself as my eyes followed the line of her leg up to the curling tuft of public hair. I watched her arrange her arms, one laid flat on the edge of the chair, the other curled on her stomach, which rose in a small curve, but was taught and smooth. I registered the sound of pencils beginning to race across paper, and I realized I hadn't even taken out my sketch book yet. The sound of my backpack unzipping was the loudest in the room, and I blushed in embarrassment. But I quickly found a blank page, crossed my ankle over my knee and set the book down. I wondered where to begin. She was still now, but I looked up again and felt blood surge to see her eyes trained on me. A slight smile was on her lips, as if she were amused to see my turmoil under gaze. I would have laughed at my juvenile reaction to her, had she not been so entrancing. I bit my lip and started at my sketchbook for a few moments. I glanced sidelong at the man next to me, who had begun with the stomach and the curve of one hip. But he was in another world altogether. She and I were in a sphere all our

own, solely for out locked eyes. I wondered if I should smile back at her, but dismissed the idea. The smile was part of the pose, of course. Determined not to be distracted, I focused on her feet and began to draw.

The hour wore on. Out of the corner of my eye I continued to register the small movements of pencils, erasers, heads tilting to look at her, then back down to paper. I hearded whooshes of smoky exhalations. The room grew progressively more hazy, and I realized that I was the only person, aside from Lila and her, who wasn't smoking. I had sketched the better part of the legs, and had managed to sketch in the apex through a private blush that I tried to hide. She was still looking at me with her dark brown eyes, here amused, knowing, Renaissance eyes. I slid my eyes downward and leaned overly close to my paper. I moved my pencil deliberately slowly, perfecting a shadow. I took a deep breathe, marveling at the degree to which she was affecting me. I looked up at her again and began eyeing the lines of her torso, the muscles and curves around her bellybutton and breasts. I thought of my halfhearted sketch back in my room. She was so real. And then, seeing her hand placed on her stomach, curled like benign dragon guarding a mysterious, lovely treasure, my eyes whipped back to meet hers, still unmoving, still sparkling, and I saw for a moment the same regard that Olympia gave all those who came to look on her. "Look on me all you want. I only give you what I please." I smiled at her then, forgetting my shame of the past hour. It seemed, I thought matter of factly, that I was not the only one intrigued. I seemed to spark her interest as much as she did mine.

There wasn't much time left in the class. Within a short while, the silence was cut by Lila starting in her chair. She looked around at her small party as if she, and those around her, had all been woken from the same dream. Her eyes blinked slowly. "I believe that's all the time we have for tonight." She stuck her pencil firmly into her wispy bun for safekeeping

and folded her sketchbook shut. "Same time next week. Please don't forget to leave your fees in the front room." I watched her smile and dip her chin toward the model. Finally, her eyes moved from me, and she slowly began to rise from the chaise. First her fingers clenched, an ankle pointed, she let her lips part and her neck released, her head slowly sinking to one side. The small motions spread up her limbs. She looked like a statue coming to life, leaving behind her Olympia incarnation, and taking away that soul-seeing gaze. I once again realized the indecency of staring at her, and hurried to pack up my things. I zipped up my bag as I began walking toward the door. Lila stood nearby, looking at the young girl's sketch and pointing to it. I opened my mouth to say goodbye.

"Excuse me," I heard from behind me. I turned to see her, the model, standing in front of me. "Would you mind showing me your sketch tonight?" She spoke quietly, but her voice was smooth and sweet, as if she were singing a song even in regular conversation. Spellbound, I opened my backpack once more and drew out my sketchbook. She waited, smiling. I handed her the open page without a word. She took it and held it out in front of her.

"Oh, that's a shame," she said, looking more amused than genuinely disappointed, "you didn't get to the face. I was hoping to see what the eyes looked like." I wasn't sure what sort of reply to give, but she didn't seem to require one. Instead, she pulled a pencil from a pocket in her robe and began to market a corner of the paper. She handed it back to me, her eyes on mine. "See you." She pulled her robe tighter around her and started toward the door with quick, deliberate steps. Lila looked up and waved as the scarlet-clad girl passed through the doorway.

"Goodbye, dear, I'll see you next week!" They waved to each other, and I watched her enter a small room just off the narrow hallway I had come through with the hostess, shutting the door behind her. I, too, left quickly, and not until I was

on the landing outside of Lila's apartment did I look at what she had written on the sketchbook.

*Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pantheon, tomorrow, noon.* I snapped the book shut. Not "shade more," not "use a lighter pencil," not "good start"-I resisted the urge to gape at nothing in particular. Realizing how awkward it would be if someone else were to leave the apartment and find me still on the landing, I hurried down the stairs and out into the air, which had cooled into a comfortable summer evening.

I felt as if I should debate whether or not to go this strange rendezvous, but it didn't seem necessary. I was going to go. How could I not? I thought of her eyes, and rejoiced to realize that they had been fixed on me for a reason. My heart raced. She had cast a spell, sitting there in the golden light, and now I was set to do her bidding. I thought of the bustle of the museum. We would be two of those people, wandering aimlessly and stumbling blindly, until twelve o'clock. Then, she

## UNSTUFFED

SONJA STREICHERT  
Norwich, NY

One honey gold eye swings  
From a white washed thread  
Like the gray ghost  
Of a fallen petal,  
While the other melds  
With yielding tickle me pink flesh.  
Through a break in the hem  
Seeps the yellow stuffing,  
Carrots fed  
Through a mouth that never existed.  
Missing is the pink nose  
Of sweet hard candy  
That hid the hollow depression  
Behind it,  
And the ears that once  
Draped the shoulders  
Now lie deaf  
On the floor  
As the bare feet of children  
Run through cool grass  
On a hot August night  
Chasing fireflies.



and I would pick ourselves out of that nondescript crowd, and would reach out toward one another like two points of light, fusing like sparks and birthing a tiny flame.

Before I had even reached the train station my mind spun with scenarios. What would she wear, unable to walk freely in her bare skin? What would she say, standing there by the model Pantheon in the basement of the museum? Was she an artist? What in the world was her name? She had done nothing but sit in front of me for an hour, and she already amazed me. I longed to know more about her. As I walked I looked into the eye of every stranger I passed, as if to set down their faces in memory so I would remember them at a later introduction. And now, with the note in my sketchbook, I saw them not just as faces. They were personalities, voices, mannerisms, all waiting to be discovered.

The sidewalk became more shadowy as I reached the Museum block. I stared at the bluish light of the planetarium, and the shadows spiked with orange highlights from the streetlights on the roof of the museum buildings. There was no moon, and the sky was still only half dark, a dusky indigo that an artist's palette would dream of capturing.

The taxis and buses raced along toward the park, honking their horns. Elbows hung out of windows opened all the way to let in the evening's less harsh temperature. A child wailed over a dropped ice cream. I closed my eyes momentarily as I walked, then stared up again at the sky. Summer nights were noisy, I remembered, not like the relative peace of campus, punctuated only by the occasional shouts of laughter of small groups of students returning to a dorm or conversing on the lawn. All the small noises gradually drove the silence of Lila's apartment out of my head, and I was left feeling dazed, as if I heard and saw things around me, but reacted to them from behind a gauzy cloud. My thoughts retreated to a point high above me, mixing with the colors of the dusk. *Tomorrow*, I thought. *Tomorrow*.

## JESUS AT THE BUS STOP

Lilah Crews-Pless  
Rochester, NY

I saw her once, some time ago  
Her shadow falling on the snow  
Pop cans hugged by plastic in her hand  
Pink slippers on her withered feet  
Scrapping, flapping, falling, chafed and beat  
Sliding as she walks the street  
She's the woman from the bus stop

Whispers follow where she goes:

"Her smell."  
"Her hair."  
"Her shoes."  
"Her clothes."

Her shadow in the others hides  
Obscured by cars and dogs and grime

Till  
None could see her  
None but me  
But I could see her saving me  
Deep with in her brown rimmed eyes  
I could see and recognize  
Just who she was  
Why she was on the streets, and  
Sacrificed

Sunset, on the busy street, she lives her life and walks the street  
With light behind her, deep and red  
She's going home  
She's off to bed  
She's gonna sleep, it's time to go  
She's the woman from the bus stop.

## READING RIGHT

### TO LEFT

MELISSA HOCHMAN

Shrewsbury, NJ

from four till six  
I was Levinsky's.  
homeroom meant tzedakah:  
dumping plastic jars  
with Hebrew letters  
spelling out charity.  
good will.  
giving back.  
I had 5 cents in mine.  
Levinsky frowned,  
clearly disappointed  
at my lack of mitzvah  
and caring for others in need.

10 minutes later  
and down 15 steps  
lay the field trip destination:  
the library.  
no kicking  
no food  
no gum  
no talking.

the dark brown table  
was desecrated with  
revealing pictures  
and words not written  
in the Torah.  
we had no body of Christ  
but we did have gum  
stuck to the bottom of chairs  
and desks.  
Gum smacked onto desks. Tzedakah.  
giving what's yours to others.

my fingers ran  
up  
and down  
the call numbers,  
my feet wandering through  
aisle after aisle.  
The "H" section  
was particularly long.  
"H" for Holocaust.  
"H" for "Hurry up and pick something."

my eyes landed on a skinny book  
with no call number,  
no ID.  
from the title  
i got the impression  
the book was about  
those other people.  
the other 6 or so  
million  
killed  
who were not Jewish.  
quite possibly not even  
anti-Semitic  
I was taken aback.  
in our eyes,  
we are always innocent.  
I was taken aback.  
we were not the only ones?

## MOTHER

RENÉE FLEDDERMAN

Newtown Square, PA

You are my mystery,  
My deep, dark secret that presses up against the back corner of my closet.

You have the murkiest,  
The filthiest eyes,

And my wandering cannot escape them,  
For they never close or rest,

In the rooms of every house I walk,  
And sleeping on the pillows where I sleep.

I run from them as from death,  
And the quickness of time,  
Which wraps around my breath and tightens,  
Which holds my hands  
And grips them, suffocating, until my fingers burn white.

## TUCSON

JULIA COFF

Doylestown, PA

The sky over Tucson is blushing at dusk  
and I am thinking of you.

Pursed pink flowers,  
like wet lips in the dark of your apart-  
ment,  
beside strings of dried red chiles,  
against the blue adobe  
pulsing in the soft air of the desert night  
that kisses my neck.

The dry grit of pebbles and sand  
like the five o'clock shadow of your jaw,  
the tongue of water from the fountain  
caressing me like yours did  
miles ago.

I could never live here.  
I can blossom in this desert only for now,  
waiting for a rain that I know will never  
come.

## VILLANELLE FOR 2:10 A.M.

NOAH LAWRENCE  
Brookline, MA

It's almost quiet. The fan persists to purr.  
In 2:10 a.m.'s hooded black and blue,  
shadows hang; the fan spins; there's this girl.

You're so accustomed to the background whir  
that you hear silence as the sounds accrue.  
It's almost quiet. The fan persists to purr.

You say your mind's bone dry and no thought scurries  
at the back door or rattles the roof.  
Shadows hang; the fan spins; there's this girl,

whose eyes stare at you like headlights to stir  
the filthy black that drapes and smears your room.  
It's almost quiet. The fan persists to purr,

sticking in you as if it were a burr,  
your task to feel, your mind's to misconstrue.  
Shadows hang; the fan spins; there's this girl.

Your mind's emptiness is a lie you're used to.  
You feel the sides of the bed close in on you.  
It's almost quiet. The fan persists to purr.  
Shadows hang. The fan spins. There's this girl.

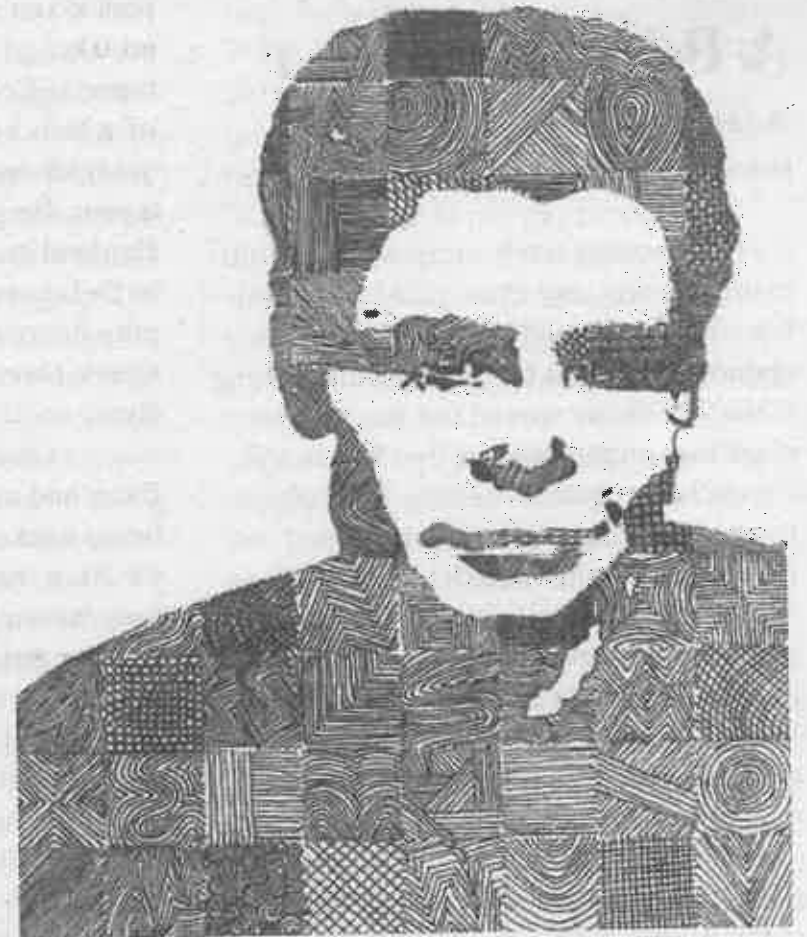
## FIRE AT SUNRISE- AUGUST 18, 1936

ANNE SANDO  
Milton, MA

*'We will never forget this crime, nor forgive it. Never.'*  
-Pablo Neruda, on the death of Federico Garcia Lorca

There is a poet under the Alhambra.  
Shallow he is buried and his slit in the ground  
Is an ulcerous wound, and he is seeping out.  
You cannot kill him Franco.  
You set fire to the plains of Granada,  
Broke the barriers of the North, slipping into Madrid,  
And shot from the Mediterranean all of its salt.  
But the flame you sparked has not yet extinguished,  
Moss strides up the barrel of the Arch of Triumph  
And somewhere underground, pus reacts with your pure water  
And returns to me, living, every single last grain of salt.  
I challenge you Franco, father-faced,  
to make me forget him -  
you armed  
with your kind, convincing face.

SIERRA SIMEON WAPPINGERS FALL, NY



## CAPE COD, JULY 1991

CLAIRE WHIPPLE  
Convent Station, NJ

I stand hopeless,  
my older brother inside husking corn,  
me, motionless staring up into the cloudless sky.  
The wind is whipping my salty Hyannis hair  
into my peeling face, where only the corners of my eyes  
aren't burnt from squinting.  
Four years old and already crow's feet.

My grandfather caught a squid yesterday  
and the pink, pulsing baby dinosaur, wiggling and newly hatched  
was executed in front of my eyes. It baked.  
Sizzled and decayed in the Massachusetts sun,  
hung like a convict on the clothesline, flapped in the wind.

But now, as dinner is made and beach towels toss in the dryer,  
sweltering showers pummel scalded backs, blistering cheeks,  
beer and television and cheese and crackers inside.  
The clothesline behind the shed has come undone,  
and the desiccated creature hangs-flies through the air  
like a monster's kite. Its tentacles flap like strips  
of dried seaweed, kelp slapping the side of the house yellow, brown.  
It was taken-hidden from my sight, but Oh! I saw!  
Dehydrated and cooked. Overtired and cranky.  
Such and awesome display of grotesque magic,  
horrible beautiful, kite is unforgettable.



## A POOLSIDE CHAT

A. HOOPER

Newark, DE

Because work - any work - is ultimately boring, my eyes gazed out of my big window instead of on the notebook opened before me on the my little writing table. The scene spread out beyond the glass was picturesque, if one has an eye for clichéd suburban beauty. Perfectly mowed and edged lawns surrounded upper-middle-class, earth toned houses. Elaborate landscapes besieged sparkly pools and innocent swing sets. Every once in awhile, I see bread-hatted neighbor laboriously pull an intruding weed from a prized flower-bed of easily grown petunias or impatiens.

The neighbors were nice enough; the nicety made up for the lack of excitement. To my left is an elderly black couple who mostly keep to themselves, except to point out on random occasions that our dog is in their well-groomed yard. To my right are John and Cheryl, who are polite yet very high-strung. Their twenty-some year old son is slightly more amusing, as he is mostly nocturnal, can quote Vonnegut, and is obsessed with "The Evil Dead." In the back, through my window, I can see two more yards. One belongs to a family with young children running around. The father is an agricultural professor at the nearby University, and his backyard vegetable garden is the envy of gardeners of the neighborhood. They don't make very much noise and they keep to themselves.

The people that interest me the most, however, live in the other yard, where I can easily spy on them daily. The mother is an elementary teacher at a special education school. She is pleasant enough, with a thin build, cheerful face and black hair. She is always simply dressed. I believe her name is Sue. Her husband is a police officer, to which his alpha-male strut attests. I've never spoken to him, mostly because of the way he

walks (with his blonde curly-haired chest puffed out, and his twenty-year old beer gut sucked in) annoys me. I believe his name is Connor. They have two sons, one of which I don't know a thing about. The younger one is around twenty, give or take a year. He goes to a University in New England and works at a plant nursery here in Delaware during the summer. He must play many sports, because he rivals the Greek David in body. I know his name is Ryan.

On this day of unproductiveness, Ryan and a girl were sitting by the pool in beige wicker lawn chairs. It was around 10:30 in the morning and since Ryan was only wearing Looney Tunes pajama pants, and the girl was wearing a large University tee shirt, it was safe to deduct that the girl had spent the night. Ryan looked a bit ruffled; his hair tufted on top of his head and his eyes still stuck together with sleep. He lounged and sprawled in the wicker chair, displaying his golden body as confident boys his age are apt to do.

The girl was dirty-blonde and looked about eighteen or nineteen. She had a tiny nose of which I was already jealous and plain eyes un-circled by make-up. Her hair was bunched into a pouf at the back of her head as most girls do when they don't want to deal with their unruly manes. Her position in the chair changed constantly: sometimes her tanned and smooth legs crossed and jiggled; sometimes she brought them up to her chest; and sometimes she sat straight up, Indian style in the wicker chair. She was smoking absurdly long cigarettes - 1200's I suppose - and strangely, I could see delicate tendons and knuckles in her hands though she was so young.

They were talking; sometimes slowly with long pauses, and sometimes quickly, almost argumentative. Because their conversation seemed much more interesting than my work, I slid open my window. The breeze carried the lovers' voices into my room and into my eager ears.

"I dunno, Ryan. I dunno," I caught the girl saying as she jiggled. She puffed

on the cigarette.

"Well," Ryan began, with his hands in a prayer position, the tips gently grazing his forehead. "It's your body, and you can do what you want with it. I can't make this decision for you. But I'll support you. You know that. I'll always support you, Ashley."

Ashley took another deep inhale off the cigarette and closed her eyes. Ryan continued.

"And, you know, if money's a prob, I can help." He sat up and looked directly at her. "Er, uh, and if you, uh, don't wanna do it, I'll, uh, help, too. I'd never leave you."

"I know." Ashley's face looked worn and she winced oh-so slightly. Ryan kept going.

"It's just that I thought I'd finish school and get a decent job and *then* we'd start a family, you know? I mean, if you wanted to. But I'll change my plans for you - for us. I'd do that for us, Ash. I love you, baby."

Ashley finished her cigarette and flicked the butt behind their heads. She reached to light another one and Ryan caught her hand and gently stroked it. Her lip trembled.

"I'm just not sure right now. It's a big thing to do. I love you, too, really, I do. And I want to finish school, too. I'm afraid."

"Whatever you want, Babe, I'll be there." Then they both abruptly stood up and walked through the sliding glass door.

Two weeks later, I saw them again through my helpful window. It was a cool evening, and everyone wore sweaters as they sat on the patio by the pool. Ryan's parents, another middle-aged couple, and our two lovers were all in a semi-circle. Ryan and Ashley held hands and sipped iced-tea. They were laughing.

## CORE

JULIA COFF

Doylestown, PA

In California's Big Basin State Park, there is a Redwood tree which burned for fourteen months without dying. Redwoods are known for their durability, for their sheer capability for survival. Fire, disease, infestation, in the face of it all the Redwoods remain unperturbed and resolute. They know their mission: to grow slowly and patiently, to continue and thrive. Not even the fundamental element of hell could stop them from this purpose.

I walk ploddingly to the Burning Trees, the flames now long-extinguished and long-forgotten, except, that is, by the tree itself, its trunk is hollow now, a chimney that runs from top to bottom, and its bark has split to reveal the inner sanctum that was once its core. I am strangely among my own here, somehow akin to the leviathan forms that have stood for thousands of years, despite my contrasting ephemerality, my embarrassing mobility. At the tree I slip between the rigid folds of sweet, dank, wood and shuffle deeper into the cavern, maneuvering my small frame further into the somehow inviting darkness.

I suddenly remember the artificial darkness of a land of midnight sun and breathe out slowly, waiting. For a message, for a sign, for a... spark.

The fire had destroyed the surrounding flora for miles around, the weaker, less determined shrubs disintegrating in the flames; the Burning Tree just stood and burned. For fourteen months, it simmered and seared, its heartwood converting to soot and char and floating away on the strangely soft current of the wind. And when it was all over, the park rangers and biologists returned to find that it still lived; it still grew. It grew empty, a vertical tunnel, the sky stealing in through the now gaping maw at the top, but it grew nonetheless.

\*

On July 7, 2003, I awoke to a cool Alaska morning with a heart convinced that I would backpack the Talkeetna Mountains the next day and a stomach convinced that I would not. At the ER the nurses accepted the plastic bag of vomit I handed them, catalogued my information, and speculated that I had caught a local flu. "All the way from Pennsylvania?" They'd said, wonder-eyed, "Well, aren't you a long way from home." As the day progressed, my stomach continued to distend while the doctors spoke evasively of chronic illness and repeated that "nothing is certain without more tests." When the rubber tube slid down the back of my throat as I struggled and gagged, when my parents received the phone call and, panicked, caught the next flight to Anchorage, I knew I wouldn't be in the Talkeetnas the next day.

There were long nights in that hospital. While the sun glowed eerily from behind the sterile blinds of my room, I watched the clock tick and waited for the next minute, which would be a minute closer to the time that someone I knew would stand by my bedside. I am not proud of what I was that first night, and I do not like to remember the fear, not so much of mortality, but of simply facing the unknown in solitude, that made me awake crying out for someone, anyone. I do not like to remember the cold metal of cat-scans, the systematic pricks of blood-drawing needles, the raw soreness that lingered in my throat from the plastic tube which pumped the contents of my stomach and the emptiness of my core and the dryness of my mouth after days without food or water. It is a nightmare that I do not care to repeat. But I do, when it comes to me, because it is mine for reasons that I have yet to fully understand.

The doctors diagnosed me with a motility disorder, gastroparesis that keeps the nerves in my stomach from functioning properly and contracting to expel its contents. There are medications, but they only work for some people some of the time, and I am not one of those people most of the time. When it hits, I have to severely restrict my diet; for a while I eat

nothing, then maybe clear liquids, and then for a time, nothing but carbohydrates. When I am healthy I eat as if I were about to travel the desert for forty years and might never find the land of milk and honey, because I know that my next Starving Time is not too far off.

My weight fluctuates; when I am sick I shed pounds to anorexic proportions, and then, when I recover, I must stuff myself to regain mass. I am no consistent number; I have a "sick" weight and a "healthy" weight, and whenever I can I must put on extra so that the next recovery will not be as difficult. Food is simply an agent of survival now, nothing more and nothing less.

As long as I stay within range of medical care, it is not fatal. I still have my life, my body, and for this I am thankful. But it is a coarse kind of gratitude; I live for the backcountry, for the mountains and the midnight sun, for the serenity of wild seclusion. These words are no longer realities for me. They remain fleeting images, catalogued away somewhere along with my memories of those first nights in the hospital; both are simply too painful to expose to light on a regular basis. The disorder wasn't enough to kill me, but it was just enough to keep me from really living.

Walking through the cool air of the Central-California dusk I am reminded of the smell of Alaska, and I recall the sensation of watching a dream, a dream of returning home with the alpine tundra of a northern land reflecting in the depths of my eyes, as it slipped through my fingers.

I am still burning, from the inside out. The flesh of my heartwood is methodically disintegrating, my malfunctioning core turning to dust to be carried off by the next soft gust. But I am still living. I will burn for as long as it takes, existing as the periphery of myself and somehow managing to grow and thrive. Because that is my purpose. Because there are ways in which I am meant to live that I have yet to understand. Because I am a five foot tall leviathan. Because not even the fundamental element of hell will keep me from something I know is greater than myself.

## VICTIM ON A BICYCLE, WAITING TO CROSS A DC STREET

BRITTANY TROEN

Woodbridge, VA

there is too much wind to be alive here.

there is too much asphalt, black pavement,  
the night gliding beneath the wheels, and the wooden bridges  
that freeze before the trails, with their heavy  
holes and uneven planks.

I grip the handlebars, just  
a little bit tighter.

my knuckles, too, as white as the  
sidewalk, the hill of the fingers,  
the distant blood crawling faintly,  
like ants on a fallen victim.

who is dying here?  
I am.

but not from the trucks, ambulances,  
eighteen-wheelers that speed by  
voraciously, headlights winking greedily  
and fenders generally grinning  
as night falls, and I, too, could  
fall into the thunderous night,  
the bicycle disappearing, its spokes  
saluting a star's goodbye, watching like  
a nearby soldier, trained yet helpless  
as the four-wheeled enemies never  
slow down and the eyes, like  
national anthems, can only witness the battle--

but I did not die from this.  
I am still hunched over the bicycle,  
balanced uneasily on unsuited shoes,  
and even when the cars have passed,  
I stay here, on safety's side,  
and I will still be here  
when the hearse comes for me, soon.

## THE LAST SHOT

EMILY MADISON HILDNER

New York, NY

So I read a little Hemingway last  
night. He's got those nice short sentences.  
I like them. Here's one: "The first draft of  
anything is shit."

Well that got my wheels turning.  
Because man, he sure has my writing  
nailed. I'm working on the 5th draft of  
this, and I realize: 1st draft? Hell, the 5th  
draft of anything is shit. Well at least the  
5th draft of anything I write.

But then what do you expect, I'm  
an amateur. But Hemingway was a pro.  
And he was talking about pros wasn't he?  
He meant that the first draft of anything a  
*pro* writes sucks. And I doubt he was say-  
ing the second draft would be all that hot  
either. So one can only imagine how many  
drafts he might say an amateur has to  
write before it's any good. I mean, if it  
takes great writers like Hemingway - and  
Mark Twain, to pick another author at ran-  
dom - more than a couple drafts to do the  
job, let's ask ourselves what this means for  
the rest of us poor slobs.

Take 11th graders, who don't know  
what they're doing, don't know how to do  
it, and whatever it is they are doing, they  
haven't been doing for very long. And fill  
in the blank: The first \_\_\_\_ number of  
drafts of anything by 11th graders is shit.  
The first two drafts? Three? Fifteen? I  
don't know. Pick a number.

But whatever it is, I know this; my  
acting teacher tells me that actors have to  
read a script at least fifteen times. Now  
we're talking about reading something,  
something already written. Imagine, then,  
how long it would take to write it in the  
first place. So let me circle back to the  
amateur/professional stuff. I've heard it  
said that the difference between amateurs  
and professionals is that amateurs like  
everything they write. But, professionals  
hardly like anything they write. They  
write, tear up, rewrite, and tear up again,



until it's perfect.

So you know what this makes me think? Writing is hard.

I've been thinking writing's like a hundred-yard dash, when really it's a marathon. And in this marathon it's all you can do to get your sorry ass over the finish line.

Take a look at this. Here's an earlier draft:

Teachers have always told me to write, just write. Three words may have put my mind at ease in those 3 am, caffeine-high nights I've spent writing and wondering why it is taking me so damn long. These three words are, "writing is hard." Writing is hard, that's all I needed to hear; writing is hard. Seems so simple right? And you're probably thinking, well, yeah, how'd you not figure that one out? Well I'll tell you. On the one hand, my school instills an appreciation for excellence. On the other hand, the school never talks about excellence explicitly. It has remained on the down-low in my years of experience. Sure, teachers expect that students are writing more than one draft of

an essay, editing their paper before handing it in and wracking their brains trying to figure out what to say, but this expectation is never mentioned. And let's be honest, when four hours of chemistry homework is waiting for you, how likely is it that after spending two hours on an essay that's "good enough," students are going to keep re-writing, keep editing, to get their essay "perfect?"

Now what are we to make of that? Is this good enough? Should I have stopped there? How do I know?

One thing I think is good about it is that I was writing with an audience in mind. See, I'm starting to figure out that that's one of the keys to writing like a professional: Know your audience.

How can we be expected to find our own voice and grow as writers if we don't know who we're writing for, and for that matter, why we're writing? Are we writing for emotional or intellectual satisfaction? If so, for whom? Yourself, to persuade, to entertain, to communicate? Are we writing for the teacher? Writing to get a grade? Writing to sound smart and

sophisticated?

So who is my audience? You, the girls in my class. You, my teacher, you are my audience.

There must be a ton of other stuff to learn about what makes writing professional, and I sure hope to learn it because I can't wait to move out of the amateur ranks. But for now, this will do:

A. Professional writers relentlessly pursue excellence and perfection.

B. Professional writers know their audience and speak right to them.

The way I see it, my audience deserves no less than A -- excellence and perfection --, they'll feel whether I've delivered that or not, and if I've done B - if I'm really speaking right to them - they'll know whether what I say is real or fake.

The good news? I'm hoping that if I do A and B, I can follow up Hemingway's line with:

The final draft of anything has a shot at being great.

## FOXHUNT

SUNNY ZHU

Newtown, PA

all my wishful thinking comes undone  
from the words that spill from his lips sometimes,  
red lipstick and combat boots  
but you know I'd rather be dancing with you.

I'm playing French maid to a storyteller  
divine, with his mouth on mine;  
my black lingerie & ocean pearls,  
no match for his devil lure.  
oh honey you look so good  
smiling lazy in your brown t-shirt.

he smells like saltwater chlorine  
lingering in my bed sheets,  
staining winter's romance against porcelain skin;  
star spun milky way, I live my life in blueprints-  
so speak softly to my darling,  
I am a lady vixen.

# WIDOW'S WALK

LESLIE STONEBRAKER

Manchester, NH

There is sand in my sneakers. I push the grains around with my toes and stare at the blank flat-screen of my computer. I absently pick up my mug of hot chocolate, but it has gone cold. As I think back on the day, I can't understand the feelings churning through me. I remember feeling lost and needy, devoid of any past. I wanted my dad to open up, to tell me about his childhood, but he had remained as impassive as the ocean when disturbed by a thrown stone. The magnitude of my earlier emotions makes me wonder if the whole trip only happened in my imagination. Everyone has gone on with their lives: Mom is trying to sleep, Sandy is sending instant messages to her friends, and Dad is at the store buying dinner fixings. Only I am still stuck in Newburyport. I know I should shake the sand out of my shoes, pound the sole against the wall and watch it trickle out the heel. But I can't bring myself to move.

\*

It's Sunday morning, the last day of winter vacation. The family is sprawled around the granite kitchen counter, in varying degrees of attentiveness as we work out a plan for the day. Someone suggests a visit to the Andy Warhol Exhibit, but that falls through because the drive to western Vermont is too far. I look over my mom's shoulder at the crossword she's working on. Into the quiet, my dad asks, "Have you guys seen my house?" My sister says something sassy about mosquitoes and my grandmother's grave, near a baby sister's flat tombstone in a small field next to my father's earliest home. But Mom seems to understand.

"No, they haven't been." And so it is decided.

After an hour of preparation, the four of us bundle into the van and head towards Newburyport. Dad tries to explain some historical features of the town, but he is staring at the road passing beneath the wheels, and I can't hear him over the

van's internal rumblings. My father has only two volumes: introspectively quiet or projected so as to border on yelling. He only uses the latter when teaching or trying to be the life of a party. I wonder sometimes at the things I must miss when he is speaking too quietly for me to hear. I make him repeat the lecture on Newburyport even though Sandy is playing Wheel of Fortune and doesn't care. It's simple. Dad lived there from third grade through high school with his stepmother Estelle. There are some cool captains' houses up on the sole hill in the town built around the 1700s. My father is never forthcoming with information about his past. Mom and I can't decide whether it is because he has forgotten it, or doesn't want us to know for some reason or another.

My struggle to relate to my father is fraught with contradictions. He is a quiet, commanding presence, and doesn't usually offer an opinion. But he makes his suffering clear if he dislikes the activity that we are doing. He is fiercely independent, but is hurt if others don't need him. He hides his emotions, then doesn't understand when we tease him about never laughing. He wasn't present for most of my childhood, gone on business trips or passionately working, so I distanced myself from him. But he coached my basketball team and taught me to ski. I cannot relate to my father and yet I have developed a need for a paternal figure. Even as I push him away, I yearn for the comforting hug of a dad when I'm hurt. I am also independent and stoic. Without the aid of a connection forged in youth, my father and I struggle to find common ground.

The drive to Newburyport is quiet. I lean back into the worn leather captain-style seat of the van and stare out the tinted side window. As the minutes pass, the landscape gradually changes. The stunted snow banks of early winter in New Hampshire shrink slowly into browning grass. Evergreens are replaced with birches-slashes of white against the naked arms of oak trees. We leave the highway, exit 55. Houses begin to dot the scene, seeming to have carved out sections of the for-

est for a small dwelling place, like struggling settlers on a forbidding land. Everything is worn. Surfaces, trees ... all I see has been scoured by the elements. Even the people we pass on the back roads seem affected. They have a hunted look, one of being beaten continuously but always returning to the arena.

I'm hungry. As we enter the narrow streets of Newburyport, I point out several promising restaurants. Most of the shops are a dull gray or blue, polished to a flaking finish by weather and time. Once, I see a badly painted purple door, the kind of shade named Roaring Violet in a Crayola crayon box. But Dad won't stop, can't stop, and directs Mom to take a "one mile detour."

The van climbs the hill, shuddering. It really isn't much; the slow incline is barely noticeable until suddenly the whole town is laid at our feet beyond the tree-tops. Dad locates various old houses supposedly inhabited by captains. The hill was the ritzy place to live when Newburyport was a bustling trade city and its sheltered harbor the destination for many rich ships. Now Newburyport is a broken city, and Dad reveals that the harbor is only eighteen feet deep. As boats got bigger and technology improved, the neck of the harbor became too small and the water too shallow. The city was gradually removed from the major trade routes. There are no boats in the water now, and the small beach rimming the harbor is littered with foam and shards of rock and ice. We pass a marina, its parking lot full of shrink-wrapped pleasure boats. I recognize a few Sea Rays and even a small yacht. A knot forms in the bottom of my gut. I am vaguely sad over the decline of this shore-side city.

But I am a sucker for old houses, and the feeling soon passes as I stare at the ancient architecture flying by my window. Curling white trim adorns a gray house, as a diamond necklace upon a plain girl. One roof slopes so much I fear it will fall under the weight of icicles dripping from its eaves. Each house has hidden nooks and odd angles, but all seem stately. The history of an old house is a tangible

thing. The chipped paint and rundown porches all tell a story. I guess I love old houses because so much of my past is lost, and they are physical memories that cannot easily be erased.

I want to walk this street: the engine of the van is carrying me too quickly past each residence. It is obvious that some have been redone over the years. But a few houses, faded glimpses between the freshly varnished born-again remodels, shamelessly celebrate their rich history. These two-story relics with cracked paint and faded doorjambs seem entities separate from the landscape, just bearing the Christmas lights that should have been taken down days ago. I am awed by their endurance, their patience.

The teacher in Dad comes to the rescue when I'm curious about the railings topping the roofs of many of the older houses. Nicknamed "widow's walks," these small rooftop structures were per-

sonal lookout towers for the wives of captains. The anxious wife could go up onto her roof and watch for her husband's ship. They were called widow's walks, according to my dad, because that was where many wives awaited a seafaring mate that did not return. I imagine the life these women led, left alone for months with only the small hope provided by a promise of homecoming. I see months passing without a white sail blocking the sky of the harbor. I imagine a funeral held for a man still alive halfway around the world, a young bride who knew he hadn't died told to move on. I see myself in each of the stories I make up. A violent shiver runs down my spine. I blame it on the cold. Staring up at the rooftops, I am struck by a desire to ascend to one of those lookouts and stare out to the ocean.

Dad tells Mom to pull over at a nondescript house. It's quaint in its way, but it has obviously been redone to suit

the times. Its white trim shines and the blue paint is much too loud for the surrounding bare trees and demure town. I am unimpressed. Dad says quietly, "This was my house." We stare, all except for Sandy. I poke her hard in the side. He breathes, "They've kept it up really well." Dad isn't talking to anyone. Nobody answers. The remark seems to have slipped from between his lips, and he looks as though he wants to retract it from the air. Sandy goes back to her game.

Mom is the first to notice that the structure is topped by an enclosed widow's walk. "Could you go up there?" My dad doesn't understand the question at first, but then answers a noncommittal yes. I imagine a small version of my formidable father, dared by his mischievous brothers to climb to the roof. I am instantly jealous. Dad wonders aloud if we should ask the current occupants for a tour. I veto the suggestion. My stomach has rumbled again and I am supremely uncomfortable in those sorts of situations. I don't like infringing on those I don't know, and I hate the familiarity some strangers will address me with.

We lunch at a touristy grill that Dad doesn't remember. It juts out onto the harbor, supported by cement stilts. I resent its intrusion on the water. I imagine what it must look like from the harbor: an awkward box standing precariously on stick legs, wading in the shallows. I wonder how the shoreline would have looked to real sailors before buildings like this one marred the beach.

The electric fire behind my seat does nothing to make the open double-story room seem cozier. Lunch doesn't satisfy me, I want something sweet to counter the bitter taste in my mouth. We leave the car in the parking lot, and Dad leads us down a few streets. I make the whole family go into several awful galleries. As I open the door to a third, they lose patience with me and wait in a soda shop my dad remembers as looking different. After everyone is quite chilled by the frosty January air, Dad decides to take us to Plum Island.

The highway to Plum Island is a

## BIRTHDAY

ABIGAIL PADIEN-HAVENS

Medway, MA

I've always liked cracking eggs.  
The rap of calcium on stainless steel.  
The plopping yellow.  
The mucus dripping clear,  
nose blown on a mother's sleeve.

I've always liked cracking eggs.  
But today the metal lipped mixing bowl's echo was off  
when I tapped egg number three,  
(Large, Brown, Grade A).  
It didn't slip down and float above the creamed butter.  
It didn't break at all.  
I had to peel apart the gentle fissure with my nails.

Inside I saw a chicken,  
wrapped tight under foggy film that kept it warm  
until the supermarket's refrigerated rows.  
It was folded up in three,  
eyelids shut black, elephantine in its pinprick head,  
pink skin poking frostbitten through its matted would-be wings.

In high school my biology teacher told the class  
that girls get all their eggs when they're still eggs themselves.  
We carry them with us our whole lives  
until one by one they expire and slip away.



two-lane straight arrow through salt-water marshes. The flat terrain has only three clusters of houses and stretches, uninterrupted, to the horizon. I am struck by the immensity of this place, the gravity of its presence, the history of its slow existence. A few birds litter the marsh, but flap awkwardly away as we approach. The water is stagnate, but unfrozen, and only a few patches of muddy ice choke the sea-grass. The island seems to be isolated from everything. With only this one road leading back to civilization, and sandwiched between vast marshes and endless ocean, the island secluded, and almost inaccessible. I decide that it is unaffected by the happenings of the world, a calm harbor in the stormy currents of an overseas war. I love the place from the first view of its windswept houses.

Dad has always hated the ocean. He hates the pool as well, and the only body of water I have ever seen him appreciate is Lake Winnepesaukee. But as we arrive in the beach parking lot, he whispers to himself, "I used to come here as a boy." Without words, the family leaves the van's shelter and heads out to the beach. For once, Sandy grasps a bit of the memories that Dad must be wading through, and does not interrupt the silence. The four of us drift apart slowly, but we are washed by some tide in the same direction. The grassy dunes crowd the water, and there is perhaps ten feet between them and the surf. During storms, the ocean crashes against the dunes themselves, and I can see the effects of a history of erosion.

Erosion, just the like the slow disappearance of my father's history. My mother's family is a dense Jewish mass, a crowd at a country club pool where tuxedoed waiters serve vodka martinis. I have so many people to hear stories from, and so many are willing to talk, that from a young age there was no shortage of legends about the Rabbs and Winikers. But of the Stonebrakers, I know close to nothing. These relatives are dispersed over the globe, and each holds their personal silence. The Stonebrakers are older. As time passes, there are less and less who could possibly tell me anything of the

past. I have asked my dad about his childhood: his mother's death followed by his father's passing after a remarriage, his stepmother's parenting. Every time I question his past, Dad assumes the air of a teacher who doesn't know the answer, or thinks the question is stupid, and brushes by my inquisitiveness. So I have no anecdotes to relate to future generations. I don't know the last Stonebraker that did.

I follow behind my dad. I want to know what this place means for him, I want to see the boy he was. I want to know how he became a man that constantly worries about calories, his next exercise opportunity, hotel reservations, flight arrival times and always, always money. He thinks that his family was poor during his childhood. I don't know if I believe him. But he won't talk about it.

Dad is walking on the water-hardened sand close to the tide. His weak knees must not tolerate the loose sand well, and I see him wobble on thin ankles. He is courting the dark water. With each surge, the cold ocean comes close to his sandy Adidas. But every time he flows away from the incoming tide, ebbing in time with the ocean. His shoulders are heavy with more than the wind, and he does not seem to notice the short-legged dogs rolling in the sand beside him. I can feel the gravity of his memories.

I shoulder into the wind and head towards a rock wave-breaker. Impulsively, I climb onto the boulders. The breaker has been pounded to pieces by the sea, and I have to hop from one rock to another over rivulets of foam and current. The surf is a dull roar in the base of my skull. As I stare at the rolling waves falling over each other like so many children, I can understand why artists try to capture the ocean in their work. The ancient power before me is overwhelming. My narrow mind cannot understand it; my eyes cannot hold it all. My hood has blown off, and my dirty hair whips about me. My cheeks are wind-bitten and numb, and my nose has started to run. Sandy and Mom turned back towards the car a long time ago; I can see their retreating backs huddled together in the cold.

I don't want to leave. I know when I step from the rocks I will lose the moment. I sense that once I exit this beach, these feelings will only be something I can recall later, an image I can summon up in my mind but never repeat. A jar of sand and collected shells can be touched, but won't recreate the beach. I know, as I stare at the choppy ocean, that if I return, Newburyport won't be the same. I look down at the dirty foam and driftwood surging around me in the tide. The thought occurs to me that this beach is perfect. Even with the dirt and trash and aching cold, in this moment, this beach is flawless.

Dad has started to walk back. I watch him for a while, a single form next to the vastness of the ocean. He is huddled into his Gortex jacket against the backwind. His jeans are too short and his gym socks show above his worn sneakers. He stumbles in the sand. I almost see a small boy next to him, frolicking in the foam and chasing the tide, full of innocence and belief in the world. I almost see the boy he was, before time and death crossed his smooth face with worry wrinkles. But the surf comes on, and the wave that came before is washed away. I follow the path of a dog running towards the dunes.

I watch my feet step in the deep tracks of my father's size fourteen sneakers. Everything about him is bigger than me, from his extra six inches to his more disproportionately elongated legs. I try to hop from one step to the other, but his stride is too long. I cannot jump the distance. To the left of my father's prints are the marks of many paws and leashes trailing in the sand. To the right are the beaten waves, ceaselessly covering the same ground. I stoop for a moment and pick up a shell. Its surface is cracked with ridges, and it has almost broken in the middle. But the inside is a pearly, reflective white, and within it I see clouds being blown across the sky.

Dad is waiting for me at the path to the parking lot. "I guess you need a dog for these things, eh?" He laughs, but I don't get it. He realizes, and continues: "I mean, you bring your dog down here and

meet other people with dogs ...." He trails off. I know the correct response, and give a half-hearted chuckle. He awkwardly throws his arm around my shoulder. The weight on my frame is both a physical irony and a warm comfort. I bitterly smile at the toes of my sneakers. Even he can sense the gulf between us.

During the drive home, Sandy plays Wheel of Fortune. I fall asleep gradually, listening to the manicured laughs of the Click and Clack Brothers.

\*

Hours later, I am still standing on the lichen-covered rocks, feeling the surf pound at my mind, watching my dad walk away. I can hear the garage door opening now; Dad's staple dinner of sour cream based beef soup with frozen vegetables will be ready within the hour. Mom has finally fallen asleep, and Sandy is quietly typing meaningless messages, LOL. But I am stuck in a past I never had. I am caught in a phase where the only way I can understand my present is to understand my origins. I want to see pieces of myself in my father, to know that we have a bond beyond my birth certificate. But I am lost in this world of existential half-musings. I cannot make headway against the powerful tide of Newburyport, known to drag a strong man out to sea. Maybe Dad *can't* remember his childhood. Maybe I did imagine the memories I wanted to know were flooding the air at that beach. It's just like me to get stuck on something so single-mindedly. Whoever my Dad was before his brothers drifted apart and his mom died, that person is gone now, or altered beyond recognition. Like the breaker I stood on, that boy has been worn away, grain-by-grain, minerals dissolving slowly into the relentless ocean.

Still, I cling to episodes like this trip to the beach. I savor these moments of recollection, for each is a shaded window into my father's silent past.

So, in a way, I am a captain's daughter. I imagine myself standing alone, solemnly waiting on a widow's walk, staring out to sea, searching for the ship that holds the boy that became my father.

## STAR SPANGLED TRAVESTY

PAUL CAPOBIANCO

Phillips Exeter, NH

I hope this guy suffered for his art  
as much as I am

The painting is called The White On Rice  
It is a white canvas  
Not speckled egg-shell-white  
nor smeared flame-white  
Just-white  
At best, it is rice-white  
To make out meaning or worth  
would be like squeezing blood from a stone

Outside  
the gallery, a baseball game  
is about to begin:

*As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses*

A play I have been reading  
and the singing outside  
fuse and interpose  
through me  
like ash

"honour-all the traditional sophistries for waging wars of expansion and self interest"

*Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam*

"presented to the people in the guise of rational argument"

*In full glory reflected now shines on the stream:*

"set to patriotic hymns"

My blood bristles  
The stone  
bleeds



# SKY BLUE EYESHADOW

CLAIRE OGBURN

Baltimore, MD

I sit on the dusty shoulder next to the cigarette butts and empty beer cans. In front of me the mountains dip into a valley, like a mouth puckered in surprise. Sitting here, on the shoulder, I watch lots of cars go by, hugging the mountains until their taillights disappear behind the first bend. Watching them, they seem to go so fast, like they've got too much speed to ever stop. Maybe if I had just been going fast enough I wouldn't have had to stop here. Or maybe if I just stuck out my thumb I could get in one of those fast cars and just go so that someone else would have to watch my taillights disappear into the mountain.

Sometimes I think about what would happen if one of those cars overshoot the turn and just went twisting over the guardrail, flying out into the valley like a dying bird. IT would crash through the trees without a sound and then nobody would remember. I squint into the evening, but still all I can make out is the tops of the trees in that valley, nothing else. I know I've been sitting here too long, my mother is probably worried. As I stand the wind begins to pick up. It blows my brown hair back towards that house, my house now, I guess. My shoe hits a puddle as I run, spraying dirty water up the backs of my legs like racing stripes. Now the row of identical houses rises up on the other side of the field, their bare backs brazed against the wind. My house is right in the middle, but you wouldn't be able to tell which one it is. All the houses look the same, gray siding and no trees. They're supposed to plant some soon, right when they pave over the dirt construction road to the houses. I doubt that will ever happen.

It begins to rain just as the screen door slams. My mother is stirring a pot of stewed tomatoes and the steam has curled the blond hair around her face. IT has also

made her already rouged cheeks even rosier, but there is nothing she can do to hide the dull look in her eyes. Not even Maybelline sky blue can help. She puckers her pink lips. "I could have sworn it was supposed to hold off until dinner."

"Well it didn't." I sit down at the kitchen table, my head on my arms. She has left her Campari and soda sitting there. I twirl the glass, the ice cubes clinking along with the feeble jingle of my mom's bracelet. She wears that bracelet everyday. It's real gold, she'll tell you that herself. She probably wouldn't tell you that my dad gave it to her, but he did. IT was the last thing he gave her, and as far as I know the only thing. She used to say he gave her me, too. She doesn't anymore though.

"What were you doing?" my mother asks me with her back turned. The crystal glass has caught the kitchen light and forms prisms of color on her shirt.

"Nothing," I say defensively. "Is dinner almost ready?" I can see her shoulders clench under the tight blue cotton of her shirt. I know she is wishing she had finished her cocktail.

"Yes, can you set the table?"

My mother doesn't turn around, but stares over the stove. Outside, the rain pounds on the already soaked field and muddy rivulets slide down the gentle slope outside our back door. I stand up to get the silverware and slide past the narrow space between my mother and the kitchen table. At the same time she pulls the pasta pot off the stove to drain the water. The electric burners flare orange and the low ceiling is illuminated by their neon color. My mother swings her hip into me as she turns, her stilettos scratching on the linoleum. She gasps and holds the steaming pot out in front of her. We both watch the foaming water splatter on the floor. The kitchen is silent, but she looks at me, waiting. I look back at her, listening to the hum of the electric lights, staring under her masacaraed lashes into those dull eyes now illuminated in the orange glow. I wait as long as I can, the silence spreading between us, agitated like the boiling pasta water. "Sorry." I say, the

kind of sorry that doesn't mean what it's supposed to. It's the kind of sorry that's said just because it's expected. It's the kind of sorry my mother has been hearing a lot lately. She doesn't respond, but I can see her shoulders tending again, and this time her jaw clenches also.

Dinner is silent. The floorboards don't creak and the house doesn't shift on its foundation the way our old house used to. In Virginia, our house had musty corners and watermarks on the ceiling. IT groaned when summer turned to fall and the heavy doors stick in their shrunken frames. We had a wood stove in the kitchen that whistled softly when you threw on more logs and the paint was chipping off the stairs' carved banister.

We had left there in August, quickly and at night. I can almost hear my mother's sandals tapping on the pavement outside our house. I had looked out my window and seen her standing next to the running station wagon. Her sculpted nails drummed on the hot red metal and she nervously patted her perm. I saw her through the cherry tree in our front yard. She wanted to escape that tree and our house and our town and her memories that were permanently wound around them each. She was leaving and I had to come too because there was no one else. Bob had left in July, also suddenly and at night. HE was also running away, running away from my mother and our lives. I don't know why he left, there wasn't a note, or a phone call, or a goodbye.

The first time I had seen Bob he was sitting at our old kitchen table, the early afternoon sun brightening his gray hair. HE was eating a bowl of cereal and he had folded the newspaper so the edges crinkled and bent under his large hands. HE shoveled his spoon, loaded with frosted flakes, into his mouth, drops of milk collecting on his mustache. HE shifted his massive weight towards me and I heard his spoon slink into our good china bowl. "Heya, Kiddo," he said, wiping his hand on his jeans and offering it to me.

"Hi," I answered, ignoring his hand and opening the fridge. I was not



entirely surprised to find a strange man in the kitchen. My mother's boyfriends had varied over the years, but they were all almost always making themselves at home. My mother came into the sunlit room; the large bay windows projecting slats of light on the tiled floor. She stood behind Bob, rubbing his shoulders. Her small, thin frame seemed fragile next to his hulking one. "Courtney, have you met Bob? I met him at the Piggly Wiggly a few weeks ago. He offered to carry my groceries to the car." She bent close to Bob's face and brushed her long hair away from her eyes. She had been wearing it straight then. He grunted, still chewing his cereal.

Bob had moved in with us a few months later. He left the television on with the volume turned up, he never did his dishes, and he hardly spoke to me. I remember sitting in the family room last January. It was the end of the football season and the first playoff game was on the TV. Bob sat on the sagging couch, his arm propped on the armrest, a beer in hand. He had shifted the armrest cover, and it hung lopsided off the edge of the couch. His maroon wool sweater blended with the flowery print of the cushions, as if he had become a part of the sofa. I sat at the other end, alone. My mother had left to buy dinner. Bob was completely engrossed in the game. He didn't yell, or cheer, but he stared so intently at the screen I thought he might never look away. I felt smaller than usual, as if the distance between us on the couch was more than its actual length. Bob never looked at me, or acknowledged me and so I too stared at the players on the screen, at the ball lifting over the winter sky, and at the black and white striped on the referee's shirt.

But Bob seemed to make my mother happy. HE bought her roses and candy, and he took her to the movies. My mother would stand at the sink, humming Aretha Franklin, while she clipped the ends off of Bob's roses. She put the flowers everywhere around our house, and for once the dank perfumes of its age were masked by the sweet sharpness of the red roses. She watered the flowers every day

feeling their petals and clipping away the dead leaves. When the petals began to fall, and collected in wrinkled, velvet piles under the hall table by her dresser and in the bathrooms, she swept them up and pressed them into the dictionary in the living room. The candy lay on our kitchen table, displayed so that the world would know my mother was loved.

I used to listen for Bob and my mother to come home as I lay in bed. The house would creak softly and the radiator thumped when the heat came on. I would hear the car doors close, and my mother's shoes on the walkway, and the door squeak open, but I didn't usually hear them talk. The water would run in the bathroom, and someone would cough, but that was it. I lay still under my comforter, so I could hear everything, but I would see the light shining through the crack under my door go off and then there would be silence. I never saw Bob in the mornings, but I often saw my mother, her hand rounded around a mug of tea, arranging the boxes of chocolate on the table.

I never liked Bob, but I didn't think he would leave in the middle of the night. My mother stayed in bed for a week. The grease crept up the roots of her hair, and the wrinkles around her mouth were stark without a coat of lipstick. Piles of tissues crowded her bed, like balls of dirty snow, and the summer light shined on smudged water glasses. The mess scared me, and my mother's wailing at the night scared me more. It would start softly, another addition to the noises of our house, and grow until I could hear each individual change of pitch, each nuance of sound. It ran through our house like a flood, until she threw a pillow over her face and drowned the wail. By the fourth day the wild look in my mother's eyes had fled, and was replaced by a hard shell I couldn't see through. I began to wonder if Bob had done something more than just disappear. My mother would not leave her room, she would not look out the window and if I mentioned somewhere in town I had been, her eyes closed and leaked with tears. But it was summer, and I could not

stay in the house with my mother forever. I left in the morning and didn't come home until dinner. I didn't want to, and I didn't think I could. I spent as little time as possible with my mother, wandering around the house when I was home, remembering what I had forgotten of the contours of each room. I remembered the past because what was happening now was complicated and overwhelming.

One day I pushed open the front door and the sound of the vacuum startled me. My mother was standing in heels and tight jeans in the living room, jabbing the vacuum cleaner into the rug. Her blond hair framed her face in tight curls, and her lips were once again painted in electric pink. The gold bracelet flashed at her wrist as she switched off the cleaner. The noise subsided in the room, but it was still ringing in my ears. "Where have you been?" she snapped. She stood with the one nail polished foot in front of the other, her hands on her hips. She asked me as if I were late for something, as if she had been keeping track of me. I didn't know what to say. I felt like asking her the same thing. I felt like asking her so many things, but I didn't know how to begin. I didn't know what had happened to my mother, I didn't know what was happening to her now. She continued, "I have had no idea where you were all day. You can't do that, Courtney. I am your mother and I have to know where you are."

For the rest of the month my mother called real estate agents and moving companies and packed our belongings into neatly labeled boxes. My mother was distant. I felt as if she was standing on a mountain, and I was beneath. She couldn't talk to me, she could only watch, and if she did speak, it seemed as if her words took twice as long to reach me. She painted her nails, and had her hair done, and spent time in front of the mirror with makeup brushes and small pots of blue powder and waxy tubes of pink lipstick. But she never explained. We moved and she never looked back. I tried to, but I felt ripped from the ground and yanked and pulled and tugged until I submitted.

In the morning, my alarm rings out against the day that is still dark. The window in my room faces out towards the open field, and beyond that, the mountain road. I can see the dim glow of the fog lights in the distance and the mist that hands over the valley like a funeral shroud. I look up into the sky. The trees at the far edge of the field seem desperate. Their bare branches reach up into the vast stretch of gray, harsh lines of brown against the clouds. In my room, the electric overhead light blares against white walls. My mother said we can paint them yellow, like my old room, but there hasn't been time yet. Or she hasn't made time. The radio forecasts yet another rainy day and I grabbed my windbreaker from the post on the back of the door. Those posts had been there when we moved in, as had the beige wall-to-wall carpet. My brass bed seems huge and foreign in the sterile room. My clothes hang in the closet, and my comforter is lying on the bed. The left corner is flung back, the blue underside resting against the stars and moons dotting the top, the way it is every morning, the way it has been since I was seven. But the room is not mine. It seems a joke, as if someone had placed my things in this room to see if I would notice. I noticed. Afraid the radio will wake my mother, I reach out to turn the knob. I pause. I could turn the volume up, the commercial for car insurance blasting through our two-bedroom house. The sharp clean sound would pound through my mother's door, shaking her from under a head of pink rollers and face firming cream. My hand grows sweaty on the dial and I grab it tightly. I look at my own bitten nails, and picture hers, perfectly shellacked. My stomach flips in pain and longing and anticipation and greed and I rotate my hand sideways on the dial so I can turn it up faster. My hand is there, on the dial, and the rain is falling and there are no other noises. I look at myself in the mirror over my dresser. I see my eyes and they look dull, like my mother's. I turn the dial to the left and the salesman's voice clicks off.

## APPALACHIA

CHARLIE RIGGS

Milton, MA

About the mountains themselves, there wasn't much to say. They were there. He didn't mind it when they built the colliery. He would have leveled the whole damn forest if it meant work, and thought only of hands: of the grit and coal dust kneaded into their folds until they swelled, and the way the axe handle chafed his palms each time he felled a cedar tree.

It comforted him to watch his blisters heal; to see the color shift from pink, to white, to brown. When the ones on his palms had misted over with calluses, he took up a banjo and went to work on his fingertips. Tug and press of gilded nylon, shock of day, inadequacy of day, inadequacy of nylon. A briny rivulet of sweat sliding the length of a banjo string, and resting on it he beveled certainty of the bridge.

You can only do so much without chemicals. Maybe that's why he was still stuck in this hellhole, wheezing and coughing up splotches of dark phlegm. He was crust on legs, even his entrails were corroded. But he loved those damn hands of his: how pitilessly they hardened the eye, how quietly they insisted, and against what unseen dexterity they toiled.

Hands making soap, hands working the spigot, hands pressed against a wedge of ash and pork tallow. He needed to know what lung was left. He would work from the outside in; would scour those hands, scour them clean and ruddy and smooth; would balk at his own pinkness and hide his precious hands in his pant pockets because nothing felt right.

## NIGHT LIT, NUMBER 8

GENEVIEVE GREER

Milton, MA

Softly snowflakes sift down to the roadbed  
plummeting white to wet blackness  
swished off windshields by wipers

Fogged bus windows show the silhouette  
a sole girl inside  
spilling white light on our passing faces

Our eyes follow cars with snakes of snow  
dark shapes shadow the shimmering bus  
tails trailing behind tires

# You Can Count On Me

HANNAH MARKLEY

Mercersburg, PA

She touched her forehead to the window as the scenery sped by. All the familiarities hardly registered as the car traveled silently up the Hutch through the city towards Scarsdale. Her knees were pulled tightly towards her chest in a fetal position, the way she used to ride when she was a kid-- eleven years old where her only accessories were a baseball cap and training bra, before the days of thongs and cigarettes.

Her brother glanced at her, trying to keep one eye on the road, illuminated by the headlights. The North Eastern fall had left the roads littered with golden leaves and they leapt up around the car as they made their way north. The night looked so cold he could taste it, though he had turned down the heat thirty minutes out of the City. But his mouth still felt dry and scratchy and his skin was still cracked from the dry air. He cleared his throat.

"How're you feeling?" Still in his early twenties, he wasn't sure what you were supposed to say. She looked up at him, ashy grey eyes reflecting the light from the passing cars. She didn't say anything, just looked down towards the floor. It occurred to him that in spite of her sunken face and brittle body, she would be so pretty, if she ever smiled.

She looked hollow. Empty. Her body was so small and thin that it looked like it could break any second, like the strong winter wind would blow her away with the leaves. It wasn't the way he remembered her, the little sister that had always had those chubby cheeks and bright smile. The girl curled up next to him wasn't even a brittle imitation.

"Does mom know?" He knew this probably wasn't the right thing to say but at least he would be prepared for whatever family shouting match waited at the end of the road.

"About him or the baby."

"Either."

"Neither. She still thinks I'm dating the boy next door and I'm going to marry a Rabbi." She smirked, pulling a cigarette from behind her ear and jamming it in between her chapped, bleeding lips.

"Don't smoke in *my* fucking car," he protested. "Jesus." He yanked the cigarette out of her mouth, holding the steering wheel with his left hand, trying not to swerve over the little white lines or veer off into the woods.

"You sound like dad." She glared at him, annoyed at how right he probably was.

"You shouldn't smoke anyway, turns your lungs to shit," he shifted uncomfortably glancing at the rearview mirror, checking over his shoulder to make sure no one was there.

"Do I look like I care if my lungs are shit?" She rolled her eyes but didn't reach for another cigarette.

"So does he know-about the baby?" He was gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. He cleared his throat again. The itching wouldn't stop.

"No. I didn't tell him." Her sarcasm was spent and her voice seemed far off and tired. It was so soft it almost hurt him to listen, pulling something in the pit of his stomach out from under him.

"That's why you called me." She turned and looked at him and with a sad little smile, barely hinted at.

He swallowed the scratchy bits down again, feeling obligated to change the subject before one of them lost their voices.

"Hey, you remember the day after Thanksgiving how mom would always make us both turkey and stuffing sandwiches for breakfast?"

"Images of you and dad fighting for the left over cranberry sauce come to mind." She smiled a little, pulling her forehead away from the window's cool, reassuring surface. The car's silence was penetrating in the way all awkward silences are. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and she bit her lip, glancing sideways every few seconds.

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Munching on her lower lip, she deliberated over whether or not to say

something. She wasn't sure what it was her brother wanted her to say. She wasn't stupid. She knew she had shattered all his images of her. She knew that he'd learned more things about his little sister in one day than any brother should have to.

"I never really liked Thanksgiving that much." She broke the silence cautiously, in her soft voice, no trace of irony. "All anybody ever did on Thanksgiving was eat. To tell you the truth Christmas wasn't ever that great either. I guess my favorite part of holidays is always the time leading up to them. You know the anticipation. Those random days in December where mom would decide it was time to get the tree and then we'd spend the rest of the night decorating it. Just me and her going through every old ornament and finding just the right place for it. Do they even get a tree anymore?" She smirked.

"Probably not." He looked back at his sister, raising an eyebrow. "Did you get either of them anything this year? I mean it's been a while since you've bothered to come home, but I thought you might?"

"Yeah, I did bring them something. Probably won't like it but, hey, that's the way it goes, right?"

"It's the thought that counts. Unless you got me a present which in that case it better kick ass." He grinned at her, glad to find a place in the conversation to lighten the mood. It didn't feel like conversations used to feel with her, but at least it felt comfortable. He watched her carefully studying her bare toes propped up against the dashboard. He was about to tell her to put her feet down, that she was "getting the car dirty," but thought better of it.

She laughed a little at the thought of buying her brother a present, something she had never been any good at, and shifted in her seat, moving her body closer to him and resting her head against his shoulder. "It's not how it used to be, but at least it's comfortable." She thought to herself.

"You know I really loved him. This wasn't just one of my stupid things." she lifted her hands, tracing pictures of her words with her fingers, her voice gaining momentum. "The



first time I saw him..." She trailed off, looking out into the dark.

"I know." He wasn't really sure what to say to her or what he was affirming but it sounded like the thing that a big brother was supposed to say.

"We met at a coffee shop. We were waiting for espressos and you know how I hate to wait." She smiled, scratching her neck self-conscious of the awkward presence of her body; the way her knees didn't quite fit the shape of the seat, brushing her brother's elbow periodically.

"No wonder you fell for him. Your only criterion for a mate is coffee drinker. You drink too much anyway."

"You drink too much too."

"Yeah, but that's different. Alcohol doesn't stunt your growth." He paused and considered her. "What did he say when he found out how old you were?"

She cleared her throat and turned her head away uncomfortably. The lights that dotted the down town area of Scarsdale danced in the dark night and reds, greens, and golds of Christmas decorations illuminated the faces of families sitting in the local diner and finishing up last minute shopping.

She stared out the window at them, still resting her head on her brother's puffy down coat, as tears welled in her eyes. "You know I was four weeks along? I told the doctor I wasn't going to have it," She grimaced, "The bastard still told me it was a girl." She tried to swallow back tears that had been a long time coming, but they ran down her cheeks glistening brilliantly in the twinkling Christmas lights. "And all I could think the whole time was 'Oh God, what are mom and dad going to say?' You know it just pisses the hell out of me because I still can't stand the idea of letting them down." Her voice cracked as she buried her face in her brother's coat. He lifted his arm and placed it on her shoulder.

He pulled into the driveway of their childhood home. Putting the car in park and turning off the engine, he

looked at his little sister. "Listen to me. It doesn't matter whether *they* think you messed up or whatever." He touched her chin, giving it a tap and wiping the tears from her cheeks, "Besides, no matter what, you can count on me to tell you when you fuck up."

## 99.9%

KRISTINA JACKSON

Baltimore, MD

It wasn't even like I thought it would actually happen. In fact, I knew it could never happen. I knew that it would never be possible for someone like me. But, despite every thought in my head, I had to do it.

It was early at night, too early. I didn't even take a shower before I went. I threw on old jeans and a ragged t-shirt, but then remembered I needed to look old. I changed into a tight, low-cut shirt and put on tons of eyeliner.

*I already look like I'm twelve.  
What are they going to think?*

I left my house in a rush. I told my mom that I was going to dinner with Mel, and then we were going to hang out at John's. I wished so bad that I wasn't lying; that I wasn't going on a search and destroy mission with myself-against me. As I got in my car and turned on the ignition, I began to panic.

*What if I forget how to drive?  
How will I even get there? God, you're such an idiot. It's just a car you've been driving for two years! I threw into great and sped off down my narrow one-way street.*

*Okay, slow down, you're going to need time anyway. I pulled up next to a car at a red light, and saw an old woman in the back seat.*

*Why is she in the back? Aren't old people supposed to get shot gun?  
What the hell are you talking about!  
Focus on driving.*

Slowly I pulled into the parking lot at McDonalds, just as I planned. The drive-thru seemed busy, and I needed to walk around anyway. I parked, walked

in, and stood in line behind three people. Four and a half hours later, the woman asked me, "What do you want?" and I told her, "medium diet coke." Finally I got my soda and headed back to my car. I sat down and felt like maybe I was wrong. Maybe this could happen to me, and maybe my life is going to change forever. I took a gulp of my soda and drove toward the highway.

As I pulled on the ramp, I realized that my car was abnormally quiet. Listening to me slurp my drink was so annoying that I quickly rolled down all of the windows and turned the radio on real loud. Death metal was extremely comforting in my confusing drive of loneliness.

*I wonder what everyone will think. I wonder if they will even care. I don't even know if I will care. How much will it cost? Oh god...How much will Everything cost?*

I finished my soda much later than I planned, so I decided I needed to drive around for another half hour. As I continued to drive up the highway, I changed radio stations incessantly and tried to keep my left foot from shaking. I didn't know whether it was from cold or nervousness, but it was shaking, and I couldn't stop. I saw a bumper sticker that said "Free me."

*What the hell do they need to be freed from? I'm the one almost shaking to death trying to drive steady after I've forgotten how to drive. I need to be freed from myself. What would they think if I told them where I was going? I wonder if they would be so selfish with their freedom then.*

I turned onto Hickory Road and drove down the windy, turning path faster than I've ever gone before. The turns were very sharp, and it was getting too dark to see.

*Slow down. But why. What if you died? So what. That would make it all so much easier. Easier for him. Easier for your parents. Horrible future...no future?*

A little red Civic stopped me from flying over a bridge and made me slow down. I decided I didn't like this road so much anymore, but I continued down it anyway, trying to forget about everything.

At 7:26 I decided it was about time. I needed to get to Wal-Mart, the super-store that held the rest of my life in its grasp. I pulled in the parking lot and tried to stay calm. I had to pee like hell, and now I was shaking worse. I walked down the huge parking lot in uneasy, antsy steps behind a young boy, a young mother, and a young grandmother.

*They are going to see me. They are going to look at me and know exactly what I'm doing and what I'm here for. But I guess they would know anyway. They probably went through the same thing. It's just that they are them and I'm me and this doesn't happen to the "me's" in the world, it happens to the "them's." They should've expected it.*

The doors slid open, and an old man welcomed me with a smile face sticker...just what I needed. I figured it would be best to get it, pay, and go. That way, I wouldn't run into anyone else I knew. I walked down the aisles quickly and bit my fingernails. I was nervous. My face was bright red. I couldn't breathe right. And then, I saw them. They were right next to the tampons, under the condoms.

*How ironic. How amazingly ironic. Now what kind? I don't even know if I missed a whole week yet. First response. That's the one with the stupid pretty woman on the commercial that says the stupidest phrase ever "it can detect five days earlier than your missed period...because there is such a thing as being a little pregnant." God...it is not possible, you're pregnant or you're not, and I'm not so why am I even here.*

I grabbed the pink box and walked as fast as I could to pay. I tried to hide the box to my side so none could see, but everyone saw. Everyone knew what I was doing and did and will do. My bright red face didn't exactly make me ambiguous either. I couldn't even say it was for a friend.

The woman at the counter acted like it was nothing. It was just like chips, or toilet paper, or an ugly green shirt that any other normal person would buy. She told me to "Have a nice day" and I said, "Right." I ran to the bathroom.

There was no one in there, and I was extremely glad. They wouldn't hear the wrapper. By now, I had to pee so bad that I knew it would have to work, I opened the package and didn't even read the directions because I read them all online two days ago.

*Okay. It's done. It's over. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm not like them. I'm not a statistic. Just wait three minutes for sure. I'm fine.*

I slowly dropped my eyes to look at the detector in my hand, shaking profusely. One little pink line. Not two, not a plus. There was only one.

*See. I knew it.*

## FIREWORKS

SHAINA STROM

Meridianville, AL

It was when heat peeled cheap paint from dry wood that cued the sale of fireworks. When heat waves appeared above the road when it rained, when lean corn stalks released fireflies, I became aware of the approach of summer. It was a shack down the street from my house that supplied my small town with crisp fireworks. Brushing bodies crowded the small space, breathing in the smell of cardboard and fire, sun-wracked hands lifting the assorted packages of explosives in wonder. I hadn't been to the firework shack since I was three and had spent my few dollars on sparklers.

At seven, I watched for the signs of summer. My father's tackle box would be moved to the porch step, the kitchen windows would be left cracked at night-things that a calendar couldn't mark. I sat on the porch and watched the field of corn across the street shift at every yawning breeze. Before the sun even started to set, the stars became visible, resembling flakes of snow caught in the pale sky, and as the sky started to dark-

en, the stars would grow yellow. I watched as the slender green plants with golden crowns gave birth to lightning bugs, watched as they weaved between the bent leaves of corn, between old mailboxes, between the chain-link fence around my house and settled in crab apple trees.

My mother's cat leapt to the porch railing, eyeing me, as if I had caused the sky to bruise, for the stars to fall from their carved holes, grow wings and fly amongst her whiskers. She was pregnant, plump with kittens that stretched her skin white beneath her fur. We had fought for the porch swing every spring and summer, knowing that it could not be comfortably shared between our growing bodies. But now, all I wanted was to catch fireflies.

I grabbed the empty jam jar that I kept on the railing, and I chased the glowing lights, even when rain started to dust my yard. I could never grasp the winged lights between my fingers, hold them in my palm, the feeling of something rapid beating against my skin made me question whether it was their sacred hearts or if they were still trying to fly. In these evenings, summers were born, on the sidelines of these deep country roads that ran like veins throughout Alabama. In these evenings of warm rains and fireflies caught between their slumber and flight, I became aware of the approach of summer.

Rain causes a thin layer of pus to form over scraped knees. It causes a lot of things, but this is how I kept time. It took an hour for my skin to become damp and chilled during summer rains, and almost another hour to have a yellow coat covering what was once raw and red. At this time, when I had caught more raindrops in my jam jar than fireflies, when my hair became stringy and clung to my cheeks, I began to listen for the crunching of gravel. My father's truck was a muddy, rusty red that resembled dirt, and it came home an hour after sunset, carrying him like an infant that wouldn't do anything else otherwise.

This evening, the truck is parked on the side of the road, leaning toward the house because of the downward slope of the ditch. I stopped when I noticed it, noticed my father sitting inside it, opening the passenger window to flick his cigarette into the road. He looked over his shoulder and grinned at me.

He walked toward me, jumping the chain-link fence with only a slight stumble. He reached into his pocket and put a roman candle into my hand. He lit the fuse.

"Hold it. Not too tight. Aim for over the cornfield. Don't hit my truck or your mom's van, got it?"

I felt the familiar bulge of sparkling colors ripple out of the cardboard tube in my hand and shoot into the air, bouncing off corn when gravity took effect. I wanted to write my name in the air with it, and I imagined the air holding the letters I would form with the roman candle longer than the falling embers from a sparkler would. Fourth of July went on for two glorious months.

Even in the drizzle, amongst the thick humidity, I could smell the sweet scent of my father's cigarettes pouring into the thin air around him. I turned my eyes to him when the roman candle lay dead in my hand, a stronger smoke wisping from the tip of it. He stared at where the sparks had fallen alongside the raindrops for a few seconds more than usual, his hand on my back, his bottom lip collecting rain.

"Kristi, Ray, inside!" I heard my mother from the porch, yelling as if the rain created a wall she had to yell through so we could hear her. I stood with my back to her, not wanting to move from the warmth of my father's hand. "Even the cat knows better."

My father turned around and moved his hand to my shoulder. We walked back to the house slowly, as if his feet were unsure of the ground beneath him.

"Ray, couldn't you have cleaned out the garage today? It's getting ridiculous in there, soon I won't be able to

even get to the washer and dryer." My mother opened the screen door for us to walk through. My sister sat on the couch inside watching cartoons. She jumped up and ran to him, her hand slipping into his.

"Hey Lauren Kate," he said, picking her up. She was round in all features, and we had the same blue-green marble eyes. My mother moved into the kitchen, patting my wet head.

"Kristi Lee, change your clothes, you're going to get sick," my mother said, "and take your sister with you. I need to talk to daddy for a second."

Dad set her down and I took her hand. I was only an inch or two taller than her, only a year older, but I was still her big sister.

"Maybe we can get ice cream after dinner," she said as we walked up the stairs. Our handprints stained both sides of the walls of the stairway and even with our mother's attempts to cover them up with paint, they were quickly renewed.

We shared a room, identical beds with a matching dresser that listed what article of clothing was in what drawer with an index card. We never followed the index cards. Instead, I changed into something too warm for summer. Now, it was summer. The fireflies had emerged; the first flame had been shot into the air.

I could hear the repetitive buzzing of the black fireflies caught between the blinds and the window. I looked outside. The sun had completely melted along the horizon, and between the moon and the fireflies, the front yard was a tangled, intertwining mess of shadows.

The hum of the black flies beating on my window made my blinking frequent and slower. I curled on my bed, and closed my eyes to Lauren Kate peeking out of the cracked door of our room, down the hall, down the stairs, to our parents, who in hushed voices discussed something that sleep didn't allow me to hear.

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The morning came quickly. The

room was warm from sunlight coming through the window, warm from the sleepy exhale from the mouths of unbrushed teeth. Lauren was awake on her bed, waiting for me to wake up.

"Kristi..." she said, testing to see if my eyes had opened and that I was awake. "Kristi..."

"Yeah, Lauren?" I said, my voice slurring.

"The cereal is too high," she said, whispering. "I can't reach it. Can you get it for me?"

"Why can't you get daddy to get it for you?"

She paused. "Daddy's door is locked. Mommy's gone to work, I think."

I got up. Her voice was small and helpless, and if I didn't help her she would climb. I touched the knob to my father's door. Its stiffness was familiar, we had become accustomed to not bothering him when he locked his door, when he stuffed our mother's good towels in the space between the door and the floor. I turned away, and walked down to the kitchen, Lauren following behind me.

The cabinet doors had been opened, the insides used as stepping stools. I looked at her. She shrugged, open-mouthed. I reached for the cereal, having to step inside the cabinet as well. I threw it down to her, noticing the cigarette in the frying pan.

She set a bowl on the floor and poured the dry cereal to the rim. Sitting there, she ate the breakfast with her fingers, examining the linoleum floor.

"Kristi, Lauren!" I heard the screen door slam. My mother's heels clicked on the wood entryway. She walked into the kitchen and slid off her shoes. "I got off early today. Has Diamond been fed yet? Where's your father? I told him to clean that goddamn garage out today."

She smiled at us and looked at the kitchen. The open cabinet doors, the dirty footprints inside them, the cereal on the floor, the sink full of dishes. Her crisp suit seemed to sag at the weight of work waiting for her.

"He's upstairs," Lauren said. "He



might be sleeping."

She went through the living room, up the stairs and down the dark hall. There, Lauren and I listened as she tried the doorknob, as she saw the tendrils of her good towels peeking out from under the door. The house fell silent and I could hear her palm against the door, her forehead's gentle touch to the wood. She walked down the stairs, as unsuccessful as we had been, and looked at us. She had let her hair down and ran her fingers through it. Her eyes were sad as she sat on her haunches and peered closely at us.

"Do you two want some ice cream?" she asked. "I do."

"Really?"

She walked to the couch and threw us clothes that she had folded the night before. We changed in the living room, stuffing our feet into the shoes and running out to her minivan.

"I call the front seat!" Lauren said.

My mother walked behind us. She got in and wrapped her hands around the steering wheel, pulling out of the driveway, she prepared the radio for the long drive down Butter and Eggs Street, the turn onto Charity Lane, the escape out of the mouth of the south and left onto 231-421.

The Dairy Queen was connected to a gas station, and my mother often mumbled about it being a hybrid of what the south was made out of. She got out of the car, forgetting to give us money for ice cream.

"Mom--" I started to say, but she closed the door. Patience was something we had been raised to endure. We waited.

I watched her as she pulled a cigarette from her suit pocket and brought it to her lips. She walked to the blue payphone and touched the cord. The silver buttons were rusted and dirt encrusted. She tapped the numbers and pinched her lip lightly.

I waited.

She pulled a piece of hair behind her and smiled as she started talking.

The cord curled around her finger like a fuse waiting to be lit.

"Kristi, Dairy Queen is closed, see?" Lauren said. A closed sign stuck to the glass door. Lauren turned and looked at our mother.

We waited.

We watched as she absentmindedly ran her cigarette through her hair, as she took turns twisting the telephone cord and breathing drags of her cigarette.

A car backfired on 231-431. A rusty red truck U-turned, going over the median. Our father pulled into the gas station, and we waited. He got out of the car and looked at her, and then we walked over to the van. He opened both doors, keeping his eyes on our mother.

"Go ahead and get in my truck, girls, this place is closed," he said.

"I just wanted to get out for a second," my mother said. She looked at him. "I just had to make a phone call. You can't keep smoking in our bedroom. Not while the kids are home. You're not ready to be what a father should be. You can't drive them in this condition, Ray. Ray. Ray! Listen!"

Lauren and I sat next to each other, our elbows in each other's laps. My father slid in next to us. His eyes were blank, tired, and red. He backed up and let his tires squeal as we left the closed store.

We went back. Back down and into the mouth of our childhood, back down Charity Lane, past the firework shack and down Butter and Eggs Street. We paused in the driveway, the pregnant pause like the suspense between lighting a fuse and waiting for the colors to erupt in the sky.

"Open the garage, Kristi." I slid out of the car, the hot day immediately absorbed by my shoulders. I ran to the garage door and heaved it upon my shoulders, throwing it above my head, letting the machine take control of the rest. He got out of the car. "Take all of this to the back and pile it up, girls." He handed Lauren the broken shovel. We did so: we dragged the broken, forgotten things through the grass, to the middle of

the empty acre behind our house.

He pulled out dry wood and scrap wood and the engines that he had promised to fix. He pulled out beer cans and old bed frames and bookshelves that were homes to spiders. He pulled out broken rakes and split shovels and plastic baggies that he paused with, looking through them, expecting to see something that wasn't there. We had accumulated a small, abandoned, broken country in our garage.

My father laced the mountain of garbage that we piled in the back yard with gasoline from a bright red canister. The ground was still damp from the rain, and it was starting to drizzle again. I looked up at the empty sky and wondered where it was coming from.

He lit a match, throwing it into a small puddle that had collected in the dent of a beer can. It started slowly, and then, flames reached their tongues out toward us, and we stepped away. I looked down and realized I had put my hand protectively over Lauren's poked-out belly. I looked up to my father. He rolled a cigarette with one hand, the other hand protecting the paper from the rain.

I wanted to ask him what happened earlier. I wanted to ask if half the things in the fire would even burn. Raindrops fell in my eyes, and I blinked away from him.

"Don't stand too close," he said after fifteen minutes of watching the fire. Black smoke thrust itself towards the sky, and soon, it felt like it was night again. The sky above me had turned black and I wondered if the lightning bugs were fooled, if they were waking from their sleep in the crab apple trees, looking into the distance and preparing their paper wings for flight.

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# WRITERS INSTITUTE

AT SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

**The Visiting Writers Series:** Seven writers visit campus each year (One of them for a week-long residency). Recent visitors have been Tobias Wolff, Andrea Dubus III, Li Young Lee, Billy Collins, Sharon Olds, Robert Boswell, Jayne Anne Phillips, Louise Gluck, Eavan Boland, Richard Bausch, Dagoberto Gilb, Ted Conover, and Tom Perrotta.

**The Susquehanna Review, Essay, and RiverCraft:** Three distinct magazines are edited and produced by students—a national magazine featuring work from undergraduate writers from across the country, a nonfiction magazine, and a magazine of fiction and poetry from Susquehanna student writers.

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In addition, the Writers Institute sponsors **Writing-in-Action Day**, which brings 200 high school seniors to campus for workshops in all genres of writing. Each summer, the Institute offers the one-week **Advanced Writers Workshop for High School Students**. Participants live on campus and concentrate on fiction, poetry, or creative nonfiction, working closely with published writers.

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If you would like to know more about any of the programs for high school students or receive information about the Writing Major at Susquehanna, see our website at [www.susqu.edu/writers](http://www.susqu.edu/writers) or contact Dr. Gary Fincke, Director, by e-mail at [gfincke@susqu.edu](mailto:gfincke@susqu.edu) or by telephone at 570-372-4164.



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