

SPRING 2007

Apogee



The Literary Journal of
HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY

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"Vicissitude Ballad"
FIRST PLACE
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

You dress yourself up,
That we all do:
Khakis for the polo lovers
Silk and heels, ragged shirts for others.
We do like we want.
What else is there?

There's bad news.

Give me the good news.

I don't want to hear about the end
About there's no hope
About no solution but
Kill off the bad ones.
We all are
 Stealers
 Cheaters
 Liars
 Beaters.

I don't want like there's nothing we can do
But hope for the best.

Give me the good news.

"He Could Remember"**FIRST PLACE****High Point University Fiction****Phoenix Literary Festival 2006**

My grandparents would always come over on Tuesday nights for London broil, green beans, corn, and fruit salad. My grandmother had a list of questions and statements she used to ask me every time she came. When you get old and your brain starts to decay, thoughts come like occasional heartbeats of a dying turtle. Turtles' hearts and brains often function on and off for up to twelve hours after death. She would be totally flat-lined, staring off into the distance, then turn to me and say, "How old are you?" Blip! We would sit on the sun porch and rehash what I was studying in school and how tall I was. My grandfather would sit and watch his wife slipping between present and truant until she made a mistake while telling a story about her past. My grandfather would pipe in and gently say, "You lived in Georgia and Florida, and the cat's name is Alice." My grandmother became so tired of being wrong she stuck to the things she was sure of, the questions that were the safest. When I asked her about her past, she didn't even try to answer anymore. "I don't remember." And then "Why did you cut off all that beautiful hair?" Blip! I don't suppose my grandfather ever got tired of re-explaining her past because he did all the time. He would tell her about when she was young and how her father was mayor of a small town just outside Gainesville, Georgia. Each sentence had a lonely pause aligning new details about her two-story house that her father built himself, and the tire-swing in the front yard. The faces of her past were always changing, being reborn. Every day became a reverse groundhog day, totally new and foreign. Her tiny fists grasped her pant legs as she leaned forward to listen, unblinking. Her zygomaticus and obicularis oris contracted slightly under her caked makeup in a smile-squint. When he was finished she would flop back on the couch with a sigh and say, "That was beautiful, Sam." She would turn to me and say, "You look just like your grandfather," and then, "Did you know my father was the mayor?" Double blip! I would slouch in my chair and try to imagine what it would be like if everyone's mind were like this, how there would be no provable debt, no revenge, no second dates. How every relationship would be whittled down to quick sex before you forgot what you were doing. People would walk around with volumes of notes, reference guides to their lives, storing memories in file cabinets

to rediscover later, trying to write down each moment like sappy, happy romance novels or war movies where they were the true heroes. Through a mouthful of corn, my grandmother asks me, "Bond, how is that girlfriend of yours?" Blip! And for once I don't want to say, "I don't have one." I want to tell her that she is running for president next term and that we are thinking of starting a family together once I graduate, with white picket fences and a timeshare in Florida. But instead I say, "She's dead." Mom jabs me with a fork under the table. My grandmother looks like she is about to cry and grabs my hand and says, "I am so sorry. She was such a nice girl." And then, "How did she die, if you don't mind my asking?" I pause for effect, stammering, "No, it's ok. I can talk about it now." I pause again, forcing an emotional sniff. I stare at the ceiling, then at the corn, and settle on the candle in the middle of the table. Clinching my jaw, I force another sniffle and say, "She was torn in half by a shark while surfing in Australia with some friends of the family. It was really quite a blood bath, or so I'm told." Mom switched to her serrated steak knife and gave me a harder jab. My grandfather made one of those smiles where your lips point down but the corners point up, dimples flaring cheeks fluffed up with a chance of a blush. My grandmother's mouth is still open when my dad pipes in, "Hey mom, guess what? I PLAYED GOLF TODAY!"

This is the way the story plays out in court. Sometime around noon on the thirteenth of January my grandfather is taking a bath. Also around noon my grandmother is in that same bathroom fanning her curlers with a Conair ion shine 4050. My dad is in the kitchen on the first floor of my grandparents' new house, prepping the Albanian nurse on the medication schedule for granddad's back pain. The next part of the story is described through my father's senses. "I heard a sound like the touching of live jumping cables coming from upstairs. I yelled 'MOM, DAD' from the bottom of the stairs with no response. The cracking sound continued, so I ran as fast as I could up the stairs to the bathroom where I found my mother sitting on the floor rocking back and forth. I screamed something like 'oh my god' and ran for the plug connected to the hair dryer. I was screaming a lot at this point and ran over to my dad. His eyelids his arms his legs were all still twitching. I checked his pulse and couldn't find it. After I pulled him from the tub, I yelled at my mother, 'why would you do such a thing?' All she said was, 'he could remember.'"

Lauren
Gorman

"vapor Dove above the Chaos"
FIRST PLACE
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

and when the Apocalypse comes you'll breathe
through a net of fine lace,
tulle and barbed wire. you'll speak
through your ears: words that went
in no way and out the other; you'll hear
with tongues panting for redemption
hope and the smoke
to clear from your nostrils,
your hair, your eyeballs, your tears
mix with silt, and rain
coal down your cheeks to
pool on your chin and never drip,
drop, bless the wounded streets,
scarred by scuff marks and pox marks, and Mark's marks,
and John and jane doe,
so pull up a lawn chair and call in sick to vocation
to your Boss nailed by the beams
he carpentered himself
suicidal sacrifice; he'll see no sun
day?—there is no son
day; it's yet to have risen

"regret #17 from abigail's diary"

SECOND PLACE

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

now that i'm found
i don't miss the sex
that made me feel
wooden, hollow,
and rotten
after we lay concealed
in the hay that stank
gloriously of our sweat
and your horse's manure,

or your hands
that churned me hot
till i became melted butter
to grease your trickery
while you panted
"i love you" in steamy,
bland-tasting monotone

nor wearing
myself into a frenzy
with a bundle of promises
i never tied together
that broke easily,
like sticks gathered for firewood,
when your twitching mouth
softened my resolve.

i miss fancying that,
had i told you my heart,
warm but fragmented,
was breaking like the morning rays
over your untended fields
each time i watched you,
reddened in the sunrise,
creep back to your wife,
you would have changed.

"Morning Latte"
SECOND PLACE
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

All he asked was for company
In turn I gave a half hour of groans
In our usual Starbucks on Avery.

The cold December was too much for me
But Darren didn't mind the complaints of my bones
All he asked for was company.

He offered to face the long line for free
With a chuckle like band of baritones
In our usual Starbucks on Avery.

The line moved enough for me to see
That he paid for my latte and a plate of scones
All he asked was for company!

When he returned to the table he fell on one knee
And I melted like August ice cream
In our usual Starbucks on Avery.

A cry escaped me with surprise and glee
As he said, "Quick! Call Doctor Jones!"
All he asked for was company
In our usual Starbucks on Avery.

"Premature Maturity"
SECOND PLACE
High Point University Fiction
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

"What is it?"

"It's an egg case," replied my mom. "I found it outside on a branch and thought you kids would like to see it."

I picked up the snippet of red twig and scrutinized it closely. Enveloping the twig was a solid, but foamy-looking yellow pouch. My little sister poked it curiously.

"Careful," said Mom, gingerly taking it from our hands. "It's very delicate. Inside there are hundreds of eggs, and you wouldn't want to crush them."

"What's inside the eggs?" I asked.

"Baby praying mantises. It'll hatch in the spring. Maybe we can watch when it does."

I frowned impatiently. It was January.

"But for now, I thought it would be neat to show your class. I'm sure the other kids will be very interested."

The minivan halted.

"Here you are," she said as she handed me the egg case. "Now hurry, school starts soon."

I walked quickly toward the brick building. I could hear my sister behind me, skipping along in her carefree manner. She paused occasionally to exhale loudly. I recalled the days I would watch my plume of hot breath dissolve in the crisp winter air and think it amusing. I would place a lollipop stick between my two fingers and exhale to give the impression that I was smoking. But I don't do that anymore. Sixth graders were too mature to be fascinated by water vapor.

A cold breeze began to blow, and I slowed my harried march. I loved the way that the wind would whip my hair around my face, even at the cost of having unkempt hair the rest of the day. When I was my sister's age I would stop and close my eyes and pretend I was Disney's Pocahontas, singing as the wind-spirits danced with my long, raven locks.

I reached the school far too soon. I sighed as the wind continued its dance outside without me. I arrived in class two minutes before the bell rang, and handed the egg case to my teacher.

"Oh, my!" she said in an overly enthusiastic voice, the way a person should speak to a third grader, not a sixth grader. It seemed that she had taught in elementary school for far too long, forgetting her pupils' level of maturity, and talking to every student in the same fascinated tone. "Is this an egg case?"

"Yes, for praying mantises," I replied in my most intelligent-sounding voice, hoping that my knowledge would restore my dignity.

"It won't hatch, will it?"

Her flickering blue eyes belied her enthralled voice.

"Not until spring," I said with undisguised annoyance.

"Oh," she said, this time sounding disappointed, but looking relieved. The bell rang and students scattered to their desks arranged in clusters of four. The teacher set the twig on the table beside the other miscellaneous nature objects that students had brought in: seashells, snakeskin, the exoskeleton of a cicada, etcetera.

"Good morning, class," said the teacher. In old cliché movies, students would reply, "Good morning, Mrs. So-and-so," but this was real life, and in real life students paid no heed to good-mornings and good-afternoons. Pausing briefly in case anybody felt inspired to respond, which nobody did, the teacher said that our class would begin "Growing and Being" that morning.

"We're growing a bean?" said a comedian.

"Growing and Being," continued the teacher, ignoring the comment, "is where you are taught about the birds and the bees."

We stared back in confusion at this outdated phrase. The teacher sighed and changed her tone to one of seriousness that she reserved exclusively for adults.

"It's sex-ed."

Forty torturous minutes later, filled with foreign terms like "menstruation," we were finally given relief and excused for recess. The air was not as chill as it had been earlier, but the cool breeze continued to whisk about playfully. Phantom marionettes with invisible strings made the shriveled leaves about our ankles dance a graceful waltz, and the swings join into a cheerful can-can. The schoolyard was filled with

children of all ages. The first graders hung from the jungle gym while the second graders played tag. Third graders whisked down the slide, and the fourth graders swung. Fifth-grade girls sat in circles making crowns and bracelets from weeds. The sixth-grade boys played kickball, but we girls were not interested in the dirt and sweat that accompanied the sport, so we would all stand in a large circle and talk. Or rather, three girls would talk while everybody else listened, nodded, and laughed along.

I sighed inwardly, wishing that I could play. I couldn't help but watch the kids on the playground. My sister was on the opposite side of the field. She and her friends were twirling with the wind, pretending to be either ballerinas or tornados, it seemed. If I were to start twirling there and then, I would have been socially rejected by my peers. I was beginning to become very depressed. Why couldn't I spin in circles? Why couldn't I waltz with the leaves, or do the can-can with the swings? Why do adults say one thing when they feel another? Why doesn't Disney create musicals anymore? Why can't my breath fascinate me? Why can't I retain my childhood innocence, never grow up?

The bell rang. I ran to the classroom.

I was the first inside, and the first to witness the magic spell that a warm room could cast upon a foamy mass on a stick: hundreds of baby praying mantises, with tiny but long, slim bodies, and protruding eyes. The students arriving behind me shrunk away from the room as they saw the mantises. My teacher let out a horrified gasp and fled to the office. But I bent to the floor and gently scooped up a baby, allowing it to perch on my fingertip. Its big black eyes seemed to stare at me.

I said to it, to them all: "I'm sorry."

"That Girl"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

Feeling the ice rock, shift, begin to move away,
hearing the cracking splintering echoing
her silent screams. Losing faith in love,
seeing everything end too fast,
wondering if there will be an "ever after."
My heart hears the cry of that girl.

Slumped on the floor, cold tiles reaching
to touch her frozen heart,
eyes glued to green lines, tracking life,
saying goodbye, hearing nothing.
My heart aches for that girl.

Four words spoken into the dark,
night hiding her face, eyes close
against the truth. In the space of a minute,
she's become the girl
whose best friend isn't what he seems.
I can't imagine being that girl.

Stretching, standing tall,
arms opening wide, she bared her heart,
showing silver scars with a laugh,
shadows in her eyes, but smiling.
I wish I were that girl.

Walking the sidewalk,
stopping. Looking back,
seeing myself in the SUV's dark window.
I am that girl.

"Mississippi Mud"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

Houses were only half seen
The other halves were buried in red and brown
While trailers blended in with debris
And Mississippi mud was up to our knees

Rooms looked like toy chests
Flipped upside down, shaken around
Water still lived in the refrigerator
From eight months ago

FEMA workers were nowhere to be found

Vinyl Elvis records wee fossils in dirt
Life magazines stuck to the coffee table
We picked up our shovels, we were able
To push Katrina back to her Gulf home

Watermarks were there, so were we
The owner offered a thank-you each day
We cleaned the mess out, a frame
Was left, and a new start

Mississippi mud didn't hold us down

Michael
Peddycord

"Mama is a Court Room"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

Mama is a lawyer
With her "I object" and her "Stay!"
Her efforts to protect me
Are realized every day.

My mama is a jury
When she listens to my case.
She often shows me mercy,
Like the time I broke her vase.

My mama is a judge
With her slyly shielded looks.
A poker face fooling even me
When begging off the hook.

My mama is a law clerk,
A most important post.
I often wonder why her worth
Is overlooked the most.

"From the Depths"
HONORABLE MENTION
High Point University Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

From the depths of my memory
you rise from the dust
like a phoenix.

It's just like you.

Can't ever seem to get far enough away to forget.
You won't let me be.

And I'm sure you're enjoying every minute, aren't you?
Tickled that you actually mean this much.
But this time, it's gonna be different.
I refuse to be a party to this self-torture.

No more will I pause that extra half-second at the sight of
your name on my phone;
The name I used to call you when only we could hear it.
No.
No more will I put my future on hold for my past.
You are my past.

I close my eyes, enjoying the last bit of my cigarette.
Exhaling, I throw it on the ground as, once again,
you turn to ash.

"Lasagna"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

In candlelight we gather,
lasagna filling plates
in jumbled piles
so lovingly prepared by my father,
his hands guided by my grandmother
and her grandmother before,
my first mouthful blissful,
the textures crossing my tongue rough and smooth
till I turn to see my grandfather
who can barely control his trembling hands
as they lift food helter skelter to his trembling lips,
food flecking his unshaven face.

The lasagna tastes less good.

He pauses in his eating to tell a story,
voice choking on gravel;
it's a story he's told before,
one that I love;
I know every word he'll say
but somewhere in the midst of it
he gets lost
and winds down into bewildered silence.

I shovel a piece of lasagna into my mouth
to keep from crying;
it tastes gritty
and I can't swallow—
helpless,
I must feel like he does,
caught in the middle
with no way out.

Carrie
Fergusson

"Queen"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

Between the blackouts and freak-outs
stood the windmills.
Around them flowers spun in the nightglow.

Between the odious beings—
cardboard cutouts—
she sat on a throne while grass blades whispered.

She twirled a necklace
around her finger
and soaked up night.

White light sped one way,
red light another,
but there was no noise.
The dark sky remained whole.

Rebekah
Payne

"Two Fingers Crossed Behind My Back,
Scouts Honor"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

This is my vice versa a
verse that couldn't make me look
much worse
much less, it's a verse that should be
followed by a curse
gasp
eyes wild, breath quiver
pull the covers tight raking with shivers
teeth ch-ch-chatter frantically
I've found my panic key
through this terror, beaming
is me
this nightmare to me was dreaming
and vice versa
behind these eyes lurks a
Monster
with perfect posture
it just likes a little
pain, change, horror, honesty.

It's funny how it went with the other hated things
honesty.

"Scarce Scars"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

Condemned by the shadows of no one's mistakes,
Hermetically confined by which even time had no break.

Selection.

Isolation.

Mortification.

Words which had no meaning,
No internal state of being.
Now with blank stares and little justification,
We strive to remember your soul's classification.
Scarce Scars don't hide the past.
A state of vigilant terror struck your hearts;
As if confronted by your worst premonitions while being torn apart.

Transporting.

Sacrificing.

Annihilating.

Words which had no meaning
Gradually became more demeaning.
Being tormented day in and out was enough concentration in your life,
While the world's indifference sat back and watched your strife.
Scarce Scars don't hide the past.
Manacled your thoughts was the will of a treacherous fate;
As if mankind had just damned your last dates.

Tormented.

Dehumanized.

Eliminated.

Words which had no meaning,
Yet, no one saw this genocidal cleaning.
Plaintively we watched lorries stroll on through,
Not seeing the poignant pieces of the clues.
Scarce Scars don't hide the past.
Futures now shifted,
Pains have not been lifted.
And as the world forgets and diminishes,
These special lives come to their finishes.
Scarce Scars don't hide the past.

Indifference does.

Danny
Criscenzo

"Turtle"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

I once knew a turtle who was bored of his home,
he was tired of always seeing the same old dome.
Try as he might, he couldn't change one bit,
he even tried a new furniture arrangement.
He painted it red, pink, white, green, and blue
but in the end there was naught he could do.
He hung up posters of his favorite band
but alas, his home was still boring and bland.
He pinned to the wall different colored laces,
for crying out loud he was on Trading Spaces!
He put in a window so there'd be a view.
Everything in his home was brand-spanking new!
All these things didn't help, not at all,
his house had less flair than a bathroom stall.
Was it to be that this turtle was doomed
to spend the rest of his life in a boring dull room?
That would be silly, and even if it's rude,
this turtle shrugged off his shell and lived in the nude!

"Labors Lost"

HONORABLE MENTION

High School Poetry

Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

A solitary crow breaks through the clouds
And brings a bit of blackness to the white.
She catches sight of one untended field
And then she dives to fill her empty belly.
With hard and frigid earth beneath her feet,
She scans the patch with things to stuff her beak.
Alas, her quest, it seems, is all in vain,
For everything is covered with the frost.
And then she casts a glance at something else:
An imitation of a scowling man.
His boneless body sags upon a pole,
And straw, like blood, spills forth onto the ground.
His worn and seedy clothes are wet with snow.
Eight weeks ago he would have been a fright,
But now his looming simply goes ignored—
Except by one black bird that takes to wing.
Although she hungers still, her mind is full.
She thinks, "That creature is as sad as I,
To waste fall's efforts on a winter's day."

Emily
Martin

"Noses"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

your nose screams:

"eastern European"; ancient and wise
in all its majesty

or just—

sarcastic and miserable
pointing down where it's intended

and mine:

kitten-like, small,
well rounded

but hidden behind a veil
of golden bangs that hang,

limply

you approach me, sullen and meek

(as if I don't see it coming)—

I pretend not to notice,

I smile my nose into a wrinkled mess,
a flirt of uncomfört

Yes, his:

more precise
his clever nose quietly intruding
in my uncomfortable condition
in the shape of a question mark,

darling.

"History of the Word"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

The tide, gently stretching in the softspoken breeze,
wraps itself around him, suspending his thoughts,
carefully prepared like a sermon
only his subject is far more sacred
And as stares into the rich, dark earth, far deeper
than the sparkling blue field beyond.

He stammers, his laughter caught in his throat
by the amber that he himself jumped into headfirst.
He struggles, thrashes to call out,
tries to somehow weave a tapestry to show her
the ink-stained history of the tide within him,
tries to drift on the river tracing past
the dappled memories of dreams
cradling snowbound fires,
tries to show her what the edged river was
before weighty words encumbered it.
But all he can do, his whirring mind slowing to a stop,
is look up at the sun reflected in her waters
and dream of the whisper of the word.

"Pere Lachaise"
HONORABLE MENTION
High School Poetry
Phoenix Literary Festival 2006

I pay 2 euro at the gates off of *Menilmontant*
In the civil district of town,
To walk along the rows of cobble stone
And pray for the bodies below ground.
The sky is a gray pastel, rainy and cold,
And seems to set the scene.
I walk along *Avenue Transversale*
And kick pebbles to avoid the melancholy of the air.
A mother draped in copper weeps,
As her hand grips the bend of a tombstone.
A boreal breeze blows through,
Through the barren trees—
A stone mausoleum littered with ashes,
Withered flowers and love inscriptions.
I drop a blossom and a lit cigarette,
And watch it burn to its end.

"Never Whole"

the machine was here
digging tearing things out of the earth
this is a big hole where once stood a tree
now just a hole with piles of earth
surrounding looking like mountains.
"It takes a hole to make a mountain"
true
the dirt once in the ground now sits on
top of the ground a hole where once there was earth
a mountain where once there was nothing
like a purge of the mind
piling words onto the paper once just white
these thoughts leave the brain never to return
in the same shape combination and rhythm.
they are left to be a mountain
thoughts left on the page forever to stay there
where people will climb and conquer
deciphering meaning
the hole filled the mountains removed
dirt rearranged and pushed into the place from which dirt came
no grass on top now
the dirt fits but is different
dirt from other places will be used
parallel from other areas placed in this hole
new thoughts coming from new days and observations
new reactions learned
new obstacles faced
thoughts removed piled high
things learned filling in
always changing always
returning
a man may change his mind
as dirt moves is moved
everything taught
as something solid to fill
a hole from which a mountain is built
but never permanent always a hole being dug
life like a machine digs holes fills holes
leaving the mind
never whole

"He Led by Example"

As a boy, I have fond memories of my father working at his business on Sunday mornings. My dad owned a grocery store and butcher shop located in the center of an ethnic, middle class neighborhood in northern New England. Many of the French-Canadian neighbors spoke French to each other when they came to do their grocery shopping. I remember those relaxing Sunday mornings at dad's store. I particularly remember the cold, crisp mornings of autumn. My dad's customers stopped by after attending Sunday morning Mass with their families. They dressed in their best Sunday attire and came in to buy a newspaper and various items for their family breakfast.

My father worked very hard supporting his family with this business, but he truly enjoyed his job. I admire his optimistic and positive outlook on life. He knew all his customers by their first names and greeted each one of them when they walked through the front door of his store. They would ask, "Mike, how are you?" My dad always had the same reply, "I'm terrific!" As a kid, I not only admired my dad's strong work ethic, but his fantastic positive attitude. He led by example.

As a young boy, I loved going to work with my dad. The fact that he had an incredible candy counter certainly swayed my decision. I performed various tasks. I re-stocked shelves with groceries, I cleaned the floors, washed windows, bagged lettuce, etc. However, I most enjoyed filling grocery orders and helping to deliver them. You see, my father knew all his customers. He appreciated them very much. He always went the extra mile for them. He took their grocery orders over the phone and then delivered them for free. He even let his patrons buy their groceries on credit. He kept a record of their purchases, and when his customers received their paycheck, they settled their bills. My dad loved his customers. He even had a sign over the front door that stated, "Through this door pass the best customers in the world."

When I started high school, my dad decided to make me a part-time employee. I would sometimes work after school and every Saturday. My dad's strong work ethic did not immediately pass on to me. As a

teenager, other interests interfered with my dependability. On Saturdays, I often left for lunch and never returned. My father had to fire me many times, but I always managed to convince him to rehire me. My dad's dedication and passion for his job has had a profound impact on me as I have grown older.

Even today, at seventy-nine years of age, he continues to go to his office every day. He sold his prosperous business in the early eighties when the large grocery store chains came into existence. But he found another career in real estate and has been selling ever since. I don't think he will ever retire. Although he has worked hard his whole life, my sisters and I saw his love for us through his dedication and commitment to his profession. He knew that he could provide his children with the best of everything if he worked tirelessly.

"The Hero of Dawn"

Frightened by the ghosts of a haunted night
I fled their taunting sight
Hurried to bed reciting Psalms
Burying my face in sleep's sweet palms
Laid me down to pleasant dreams
Of flowery meadows by gentle streams.
Nothing compares to the cool oblivion
Of the drift to a higher dominion
Stepping up the starry stairs
To behold celestial shores,
Countless cherubs with glowing glances
Buxom seraphs in empyrean dances
Chorus in accord and endless praise
To One I transposed my mortal gaze.
His burnished right hand held a golden scepter
That He stretched to rebuke some great impostor.
Like the feathers of a bird attempting flight
My eyelids fluttered to the morning light.
The ghosts are gone with the darkness of night!
My heart jitterbugged as if it found her knight.
The voice of an angel bade me rise
To greet the day in her radiant guise
And stride in the strength of her rising sun.
Courage emerged from the womb of dawn
Courage has come with the birth of morn
Hero of dawn.

"What 9-11 Means to Me"

That morning started like any other.

At 4:30 I picked up sixty Meadville *Tribunes* in two bundles at a twenty-four-hour steak and eggs joint, The Palace. About as cheerful as the tired drunks who pushed past me, I restocked the paper machine in the entrance before going next door to Elby's Big Boy, not yet open, where chained to one of the Big Boy's chubby fiberglass legs was a second machine. I sat on the curb to count papers, my fingers knowing the drill, my bleary gaze drifting across the four lanes of Route 322 to what was then the Sandalini's-Dutch Pantry-Starlite Motel strip. Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three—

Something moved over there, under the streetlights.

A low mist was snaking around the left corner of the motel. It grew bolder, started to rush in thick, piling in front of the lobby window, pushing on, passing outside the rooms to the right. Fire? Should I run back to the Palace and have them call 911? It spread to the wing of the motel, which trapped it, and it quickly rose to the door tops. So much of it, there should've been windows bursting, a roar, flames, but there was only silence. I watched it twist, form an expanding slow-turning fog tornado. It reached the motel roof, swelled in my direction.

Whoa.

No lights came on. No guests came out. No cars went by. I jumped up, racked the papers, eased close the lid, dropped my canvas bag over my shoulders. Being fourteen and more asleep than awake and not the mentally fit and physically capable eighteen-year-old I am today, I backed up between the restaurants and got out of there. I turned, my hands muffling the ton of change in my pockets, and took off into the neighborhood behind the businesses along my side of 322.

Had it seen me?

During my paperboy days, I'd witnessed the most bizarre kinds of weather—frost that turned lawns to frozen shag, silent blizzards, crack-of-dawn lightning that nuked house-fronts white. The whole world asleep except for you, you on your feet but you could be dreaming, you tend to shrug it off with "Huh, that's strange." But I hadn't ever seen fog like that before. No, sir. Much thicker than most, it'd snuffed out the neon vacancy sign.

Still, I had a job to do, much as I hated it by then—my so-called friends getting up five minutes before the bus when I had to get my weary rear end out of bed hours earlier to make the bucks to cover all our sad rears at the movies. I had

responsibilities they knew nothing about. Mr. Burk would ask about current events, and I would rattle off the day's headlines, and Scott and Brian and Gumper would call me "papergirl." I called them leeches and knew that till they slaved as I slaved, every day, plus collecting on Sunday, they would be the biggest bunch of jerks the world has ever seen.

So I set out for my portion of Mercer Pike, a two-lane blacktop that continued up Kennedy Hill and into the township where rural delivery and orange roadside Tribune boxes took over. The main stop on Mercer was J&J, a meatpacking plant, the big reason I started in the dark, those graveyarders wanting to kick back with Sports after cutting up the last sides of beef. Outside the glass office doors, I stacked five papers. Inside, the foreman snoozed with his boots on the desk, hardhat pulled down, hands folded on his bloodstained apron. I turned to see what might be following. Nothing under the security lights of the gravel lot, nothing on my trail in the dew between the houses across the road. Maybe I'd imagined it. The doors began to unlock behind me, and I launched back into my rounds. I didn't care to be sociable at that hour.

Must've been truck exhaust. The refrigerated ones would idle all night, their drivers asleep inside the motel.

After making a few more deliveries, I started to feel better, the stone porches on the older houses next to J & J looking safe and solid. I aimed for the Irwins, as far as I went on Mercer, a patch of woods and a short bridge away, their house a kind of payoff for completing the most deserted part of the route, without giving in to your lonely thoughts and fears. Only rarely did a car come along. My sneakers crunching on the berm grew louder as I passed under the trees. Actually, it wasn't a long hike, but that morning the distance seemed to stretch. Truck exhaust doesn't build one-story tornadoes. I edged onto the blacktop, resettled the bag to ease the drag on my shoulders. And I hadn't heard a diesel.

Something squeaked and scurried into a tangle of pricker bushes. No houses along here, no drunks, no meat cutters, it would overtake me and no one would know. Damn bag! Dump it! Run!

I stepped onto the one-lane steel bridge. Fog would rise through the grating like in a gas chamber. I stopped breathing—I sprinted. Leaping back onto the road, I slipped, catching myself before I hit face-first, but scraping my palms. Papers spilled from the pouches, inserts slip out. As I stuffed them back into the bag, more fell.

Leave them!

Tribunes under my arms and chin, the change in my pockets weighing me down, I scrambled the last twenty yards.

Running up the Irwins' front porch steps, shedding papers right and left, I turned to face the fog. But the bridge, woods were peaceful. Still I watched, breathing hard. I thought of old Mr. and Mrs. Irwin sleeping inside. They always invited me in for pop when I came to collect, had done so for all the

paperboys. He'd farmed the land around there before there were houses, and in their "parlor" they had shaded lamps and mantel clocks, photos of men in uniform. They had a nice porch, too. Sure now the coast was clear, I sat on the top step to catch my breath, patting a column, plump with years of white paint. Funny how the dumbest stuff scares the hell out of you. Picking up the papers, I rearranged them in my bag, leaving one in the door.

There was never really any question of forgetting the Irwins' paper. My mentor, acne-attack Dale Lasher, would've delivered it, as would've the boy who'd trained Dale, back like forty-thousand generations of neighborhood paperboys. Yeah, we were just no-account adolescents, but we felt this sense of duty. We had a tradition to uphold.

On the return trip, I nudged a pebble through the bridge grating, heard it plop in the shallow creek below, an easy summer dare to lie still in the water as a car clanked above.

In the woods birds were twittering. Shiny white and blue J & J trucks rumbled off with their hauls of hamburger patties. Everything was right again. After wrapping up the few houses facing the plant, I cut through a backyard to Elk.

When I was really little and bedtime came early, I was still allowed to stay up and watch the whole of *The Ten Commandments*, my favorite plague that eerie Technicolor green mist. Had I been replaying that part in my half-asleep head? Or, further back, long before being a paperboy, before it was the Starlite Motel, my father had awakened me in the middle of the night. Lifting me to the garage window, he'd asked, "Do you see? Do you see?" And I saw—above the neighborhood treetops—billowing grey smoke, tinged yellow at the base, red and blue flashes across the upper part. The David Mead Inn was burning. He'd put me back to bed but went himself for a closer look. That morning he'd described white-sheeted bodies wheeled from rooms the flames never touched.

Don't worry, I do eventually answer the question.

The rest of my route consisted of Elk, Charles, and Shaw, thirty-six ranches and split-levels on three parallel streets that ended in a wooded ravine. A lot of Italians lived on Elk, which meant immense backyard gardens, lawns eradicated of shade, wide expanses in which to catch a few Zs. I slipped into autopilot, folding the paper, flipping it up inside the storm door and shutting it before it escaped—all in a single motion, the hallmark of our trade.

I finished Elk and started down Charles, the route half over. I wove between the Big Wheels and Sit-n-Spins on the concrete slab of the Culver's carport. I hopped the flowerbed along the Bloom's driveway. At the last house on the left, the Benedict's, I dodged the bull's-eye doorknob with yet another expert toss. Charles was on my home turf and, along with Shaw, was the scene of much bike riding and army playing and vine swinging in the ravine when I was a kid, and when I was older, stuff like scamming *Hustler* and the old man's peppermint schnapps. I started across the street.

It had circled to my left.

Stopped in my tracks, I watched it rise around the hemlocks along the rim of the ravine. Ridiculous. Blinking didn't make it go away. Swatting my face with a newspaper didn't help. I marched toward it, to dare it down, but stopped after a few steps. It rolled over my sneakers and I braced for a chill. It reached the holes in my jeans and I felt a gentle blowing on my kneecaps.

"Uhhnn!" I groaned, grabbing my throat, reeling. This is your worst? I did a jig, and it puffed from under my feet, powdery first snow. I could be such a goober then.

Traveling up Charles, the fog filled the ditches, made periscopes of the mailboxes, flowed across lawns, around minivans, below windows with a firefighter helmet decal in the corner. A flood. An ocean. The rest of the route I would have to walk through it, and it was rising. I shivered, relief gone once again. Stepping high, knees slapping the paperbag, coins ringing, I woke the Fawners' German shepherd inside the garage. She lept at the window, slobbering on it, scratching the door inside. What did she sense that I didn't? Lights came on. My goofy step attracted too much attention. I'd have to hunker down and plow through.

Was it pollution? Some days we could smell the fatty, malty Dad's Dog Food factory and hear the clank of the massive presses at Channel Lock. And I had to consider the possibility of a ruptured tanker, the rail yard also within a mile. Meadville was and is something of a transportation hub, the county seat, where all the farmers and Amish do their marketing, though even by that time the rest of us were already getting out.

So did I then wake my customers, get them to evacuate? No, I never rang the bell or knocked at that hour because that would've killed them for sure. And anyway the fog didn't seem to be intruding into the houses, a danger to just those of us suckers outdoors working in it.

Carne, Style, Dividio, I kept wading. In the vacant lot next to the Dividios', fog marooned the piles of dirt and stacks of sheathing, filled the cinderblock foundation of the house being built. Unable to see below the waist, I could easily fall in—or be pulled under. Mustn't panic and skip an address, have Mrs. Lindenberger calling again, my father standing next to my bed.

Near the top if Charles, the sky lightening, I could see the leading edge of the fog, now elbow deep, and knew I could get ahead of it. Like some kindergarten I marched to all-we-have-to-fear-is-fog-itself and all-we-have-to-fog-is-fear-itself. I broke free as I cut diagonally to Shaw, my street, the final circuit starting at the Browns, middle on the left, and finishing at my house next door. Looking back I saw the fog gush through the floodgates the houses on Charles formed. It would swamp me again.

I hit the Browns, headed up to the Selvatos, Fintons—halfway to the next door before the paper hit bottom inside the last. My stride could've easily carried me to Canada. Across to Boyd, Perricone, Grossman, back across to Shorey,

our other next-door neighbor, where the fog surrounded the aboveground pool, leaving its blue tarp an eye in the cloud.

I saw our lighted kitchen door, but fog tumbled out from between the houses, cutting me off, and I teetered into the Shoreys' shrubs. I went under, scrambled to get up and lost, the bush an all-too-forgiving recliner. I was buried. Once I took the stuff into my lungs? Could I make it without breathing? Except I *was*. I thought of the Pharaoh's son, my dying sight these crystal droplets clinging to green needles, magnified in their closeness. Shutting my eyes, I felt the fog on my face, light as a sheet of newsprint, smelling of evergreen and damp earth. I could've slept. But that thought propelled me to lurch forward, surface, bound the side yard. I burst into the house, storm door slamming behind me.

The next morning I'd cut the twine on the bundles (really, the biggest hazard of the job), expecting a neighbor to have died, but the only obit was for some resident at Mead Manor across town. Could've been a weather inversion, I thought, trapped ozone or something.

A year after that I gave up delivering papers, fifteen too old to be a paperboy, as neighborhood tradition dictated. I could bus tables now. I turned the route over to a kid who'd seemed trustworthy, though he changed the drop site and kept mailman hours, starting the route in daylight. And this morning, awake before my family because old habits die hard, because fall break is almost over and in a few months my enlistment starts (like I told you), I saw something that made me think of those days and that might be related. I stood at the window and watched a woman drive up in an old Caprice and toss out a plastic-bagged *USA TODAY*, where it landed on the driveway with a splat. This is what 9-11 means to me. No quick open and shut, no flutter of the falling paper.

“Ahab Heart”

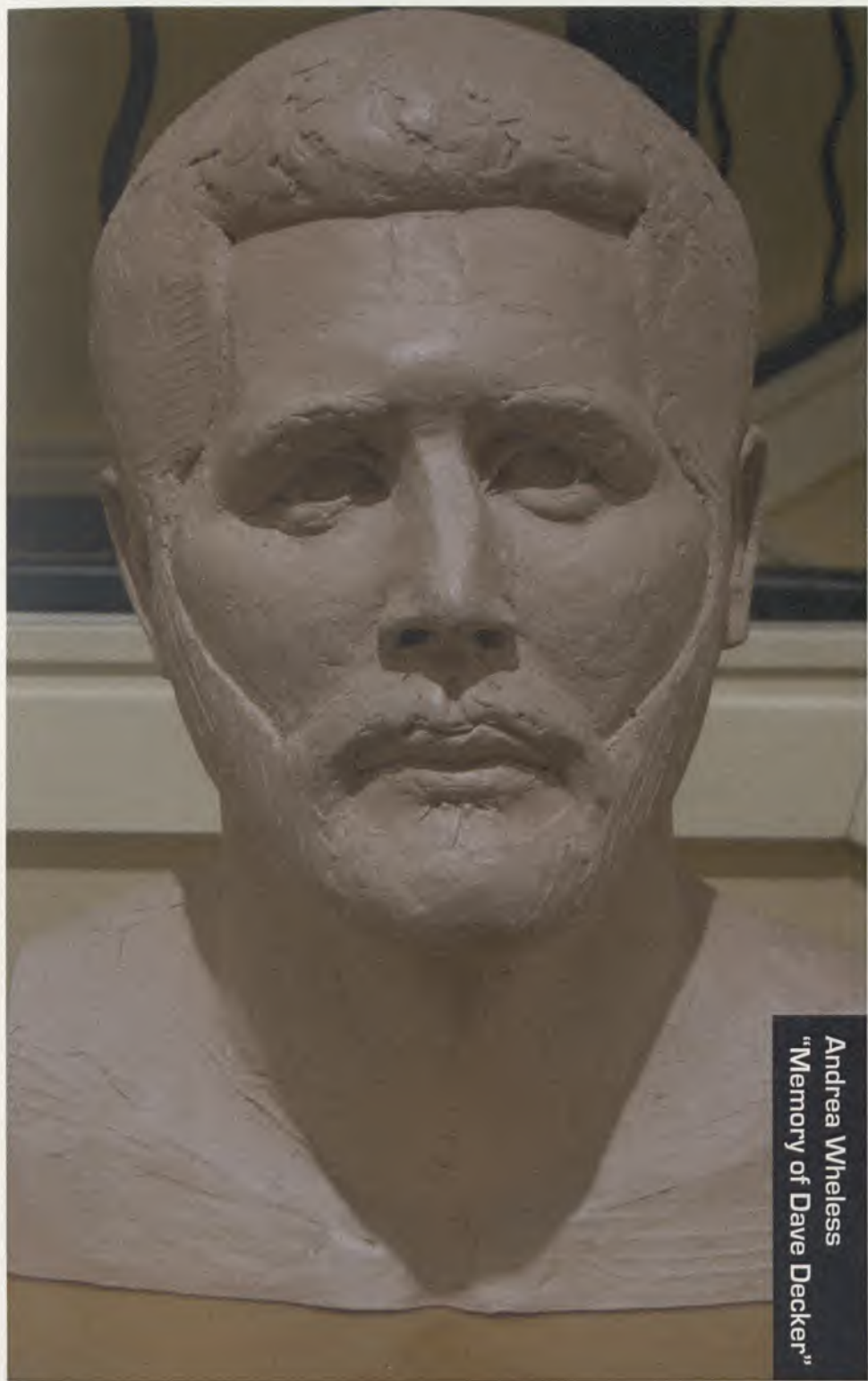
Go on, let freedom-lust blind you
to the moment's consequence—
let fly the liberty of your fist,
though it break a world in two.

Of course genesis frightens you,
such life-and-death roaring outward
across deserts ancient of days,
ancient of injury,

And intimidates you,
having never thought to fill
to overflowing exhausted wilds
with hopes and hopes.

The exuberant renowned
seem more lavish with their bounties,
but they perceived futures no more
exactly. They sacrificed no more.

Be warned: tethered curs will bark,
encastled phantoms shriek
as you surge by, a rocket mad
to tear a space for plenitude.



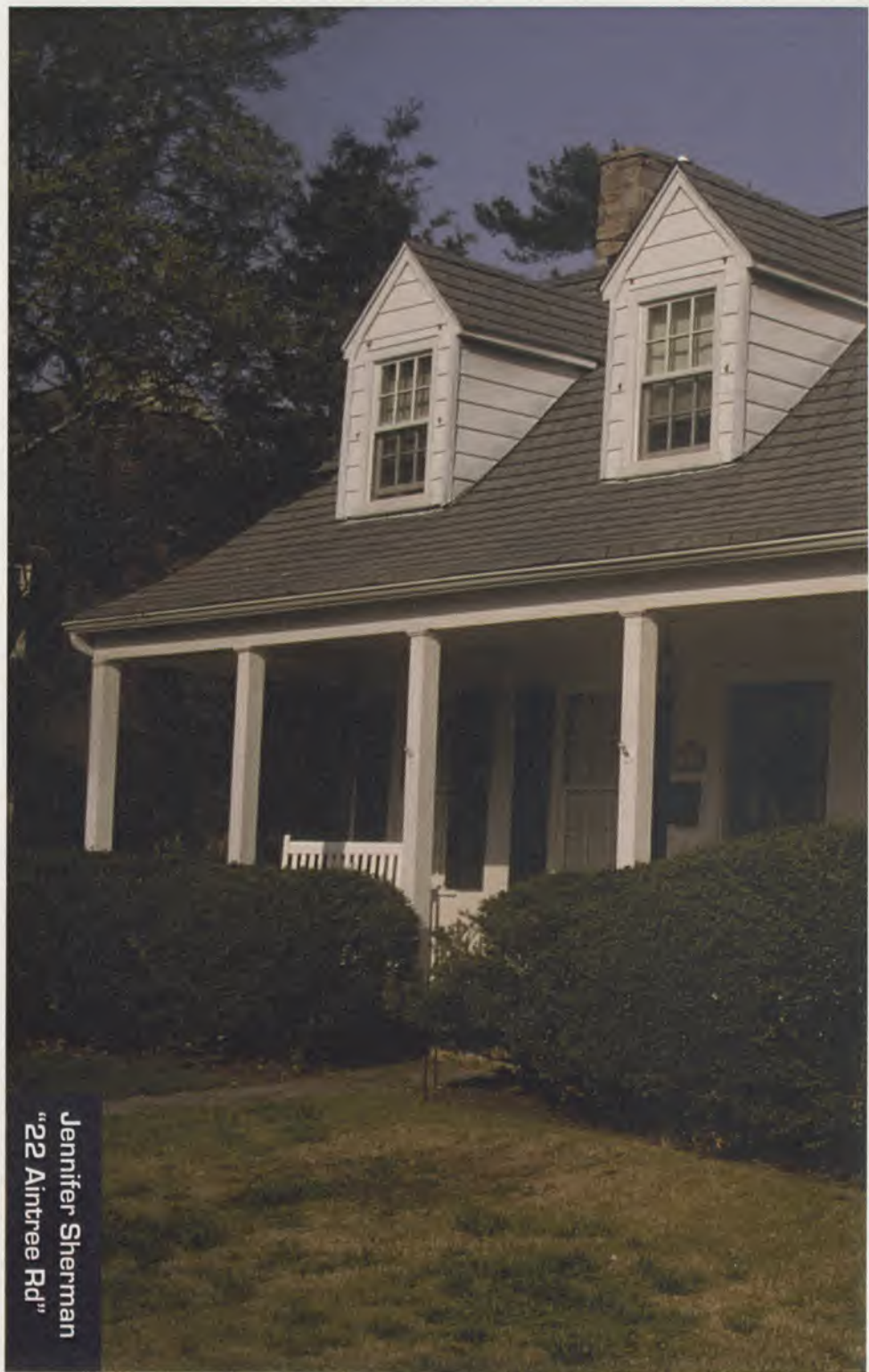
Andrea Wheless
"Memory of Dave Decker"



Ashley Porter
"Untitled"



Andrea Wheless
"Black is White"



Jennifer Sherman
"22 Aintree Rd"



Judy Isaksen
"Soulful Gratitude"



Scott Raynor
"Studio with a Window"



Ashley Porter
"Isaiah 55:12"



Andrea Wheless
"Mandelas"

"The Snack Man Confronts Himself"

It starts like a heist picture:
Glassy 6 a.m. business route
Into a strange burg
Iggy Pop shouting "Lust for Life"
From the cassette player
Duck-taped to the dashboard.
Anything could happen:
At the 7-11 for coffee to go,
You meet a vixen with speed,
A diagram of a sleepy bank,
Two Glockes.
Dope=sex; guns=money
Nifty Neo-Noir jackpot;
Death on the run in blasts of glory.
But the rain becomes exploding beebees
White lines and wild spirits running
Windshield turning white
Frayed wipers squeal, defroster's faulty
You can't see
You've never rolled the truck
That would be a novelty
Provide the shaking-up you need.
Bitch, you're not Iggy Pop
Lacking a woman around your neck
Crystal meth, cobras on your biceps;
Your father said
Son, all your meat is in your head
But he was mistaken
There's nothing there
You're just a big bone shell
Hauling greasy husks and fried bladders
Inside a rusting steel shell
Late for life.

"Twice Uncovered"

Dealing with the death of your parents was not something Mathieu Charette prepared himself for. At twenty-two years old, he thought there would be thirty years left with them in his life. Now, however, he was left with a family estate filled with the memories and ghosts of younger days.

He had spent five days in the hospital, watching his parents go comatose and then slowly slip away for good. Each day he had eaten his lunch underneath the large oak tree near the parking deck and watched as figures clad in green, blue, and white moved about like ant colonies through their tunnels. Meanwhile, his mother and father had lain in their beds like cadavers in an autopsy room. Mathieu remained a stagnant individual somehow divided from the world around him. On the final morning of his parents' struggle, the doctors came and sat down beside him with sullen expressions. Before they could finish their opening statement, Mathieu had simply nodded and walked out.

Mathieu spent the funeral process surrounded by cousins, aunts, and uncles, and family friends. It was an odd feeling to sit in the midst of your family, with both of your parents in caskets behind you, and try to act human. In his opinion, funerals were ceremonies of drudgery and depression. One walked amongst the remnants of a life, or lives, passed as if in a sick dream. He had been lost in thought and people had taken it as shock. The truth was that he was groping desperately for reality in the face of death and mourning. Surely, this was just a dream, he had thought.

Next came the days of doubt in which he would come home from his morning jog and expect his mother to be there with a glass of ice water for him. Of course the house had been as empty as his heart felt, but for a fleeting moment he had hope. Their death seemed so dreamlike that he even consulted an old Psychology book to see what Freud had to say about dreams in which loved ones die, but it was too vague, and a little creepy, for Mathieu. He ascertained that either he had wished for them to die at some point in his childhood or he had always secretly wished for them to die. Neither the former nor the latter were true. He loved his parents and would never wish fate on them.

Mathieu loved his parents and they had loved him. After two days in the empty mansion he left to stay with Sandra.

The Charette Mansion was tucked away in the woods of western Maryland. Mathieu was now the only remaining Charette in the United States. The rest of the family was still in Quebec, driving around with license plates that proclaimed *Je me souviens*, meaning I remember. This had been one of his mother's favorite expressions. When Mathieu was nine years old his father moved the family

from a small home in Montreal to do research for a chemical company. The move had ruined Mathieu's life at first. He had had a huge fit when they first told him they were moving, but they had moved and he had gotten over it, eventually. His father climbed the rungs of the corporate ladder and took over one of the company's subsidiaries. Mathieu had never completely understood what his father did even when Sebastian Charette would spend hours at the dinner table describing his latest projects. Mathieu and his mother had just nodded enthusiastically.

His friend Sandra lived in Washington, DC, and welcomed him as long as he wished. Truthfully, she never wanted him to leave, but this wasn't the time to bring up the subject of their relationship.

On a cold Saturday morning, he stepped out onto the patio of her apartment on Virginia Avenue and surveyed the Watergate. He stood with a steaming cup of coffee in the brisk morning breeze of January. A gust of wind whipped by him and whispered something in his ear, clearly and steadily. Mathieu shot his head around to the patio door expecting to see Sandra standing there, but the glass door was closed. In that moment he knew it was time to go home.

Leaving Sandra was always difficult, but they made dinner plans for that evening at the mansion. He spent the entire drive home debating whether he had really heard his mother's words in the wind or not. The wind had carried something to his ear that sounded strangely like *Je me souviens*.

The house was a monstrosity in the middle of skeletal trees. He stepped into the foyer and the door closing behind him echoed throughout the rooms and corridors. It was silent, too silent, and it already had the acrid smell of a house filled with mahogany and left alone for too long.

As he walked down the corridor to the kitchen, every picture seemed to leer at him and tug at his emotions. Just before the turn for the kitchen a single black and white photograph reached out and grabbed his eyes.

He froze in his tracks and stared deeply into the photograph.

It was a picture from their house in Montreal, a simple one-story home with a shed in the back and a white fence on either side. This was one of the only pictures they owned that captured all three of them together in front of the old house. Mathieu had passed this picture hundreds, no thousands, of times and never remembered seeing it like this. His mother and father stood behind him with dark emotionless faces. A chill traveled the length of his spine and he glanced at neighboring photos. The chill left his spine and went straight for his head when he realized that his parents had the same downcast expression in every photo on the wall.

The world around him turned fuzzy and he fell to the ground with a hard thump. For the first time in perhaps his whole life, tears poured down his cheeks and splattered on the floor along with drops of blood from his nose.

Sandra and Mathieu sat out on the third level terrace, enjoying the crisp

evening air and the cry of the wind through the woods. She was the one person Mathieu felt comfortable enough to open up with. In return, he was the one guy she could actually imagine marrying, but he was not aware of this. Mathieu was young, wealthy, and enjoying his easy life and she wanted to give him that time. He probably had suspicion of her intentions, but so far it was never a topic of discussion. Some days she had felt that her heart would explode if they spent another day as friends, but friends they remained.

"It's an odd feeling, you know?" he said, breaking the silence. "And it hurts that there was no closure on the cause of death. They still suspect poison as it happened to the both of them just after a meal, but they couldn't find any trace."

"I can't even begin to imagine, Mathieu."

He smiled politely and turned to regard the house.

"It's much too big now," he said. "But I think I'll manage."

"Just remember that you're always welcome at my place. It's not as glamorous, but you'll always have a friend to talk to."

"I know, and I really appreciate it Sandra. Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Do you remember how my mother would say *Je me souviens*?"

"Absolutely. That and *incroyable* seemed to be on the tip of her tongue all the time." They laughed. "It's a good thing I chose French in school instead of Spanish."

"Okay, here's my actual question. What is it that you remember?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"Like, from your childhood," he clarified. "What is it that you remember when you think of your childhood?"

"Oh, I see," she said. "I remember, well, I remember fighting with my brothers and sisters. You see, I'm not an only child like yourself. My parents blessed me with five other siblings. We would fight over everything, the bathroom, the toys, the food, everything. It really made things better as we got older because we can always reminisce about all of our childish bickering."

She let out a long sigh and then turned to him.

"So what is it that you remember?" she asked.

"Me," he started. "I remember my time capsule."

For the second time, she looked at him quizzically.

"I had forgotten about it until this morning. In my fourth year of schooling we all learned about making time capsules. My parents couldn't believe how excited I was about time capsules when I got home that night and allowed me to dig up a small section of the yard. Now, it's been so long I don't even remember what's

in it, or if it's still in the ground for that matter. All I know is that I cannot stop thinking about it."

He paused for a moment contemplating whether or not he wanted to show her his discovery from earlier that morning or not. Then: "Can I show you something inside?"

"Sure," she said.

They walked through the house to the wall outside the kitchen. The feelings and images from his previous experience began to flash in his mind. The gloomy expressions, the nausea, the tears, the blood, it all made his stomach turn, but for Sandra he would have to hold it together. As they approached the wall, Mathieu in front and Sandra in tow, he noticed a new oddity, and froze in place.

"Oh my God, Mathieu! Your nose is bleeding!"

She stepped into his fall to catch him, and sent them both sprawling to the hardwood with a thump-thump. He was out cold as she held him in her arms and used her jacket to stop the blood. Above them, photos full of smiling faces looked down on them, even the old black and white of the house in Montreal.

Sandra cleaned him up and managed to get him on the couch in the master living room. He drifted back into reality around three in the morning and startled her from a shallow sleep on the neighboring chair.

"Are you there?" he mumbled without opening his eyes.

"Yes, Mathieu, I'm right here beside you. Are you feeling better?"

"I need...need..."

She held his hand to the side of her face.

"I need to go home and dig."

"Excuse me? Mathieu, please just rest. You're scaring me with all this stuff about the time capsule."

"It's okay," he said through a strained whisper. "It's something I have to do."

Sandra didn't like this one bit, but she knew Mathieu well enough to know that he would do whatever he had decided.

The plane ride from Dulles had seemed short due to the volume of thoughts swimming around in his head. He passed through customs at Trudeau, greeted with his native language, and then took a taxi to the Canadian Tire in his old neighborhood. Now, it was nine o'clock in the evening and dark as he stood facing the house. It was exactly the same as in the photograph. There was a car in the driveway, but all of the lights were out inside the house. He moved toward the backyard and decided to take his chances being seen.

As he walked by the left side of the house he realized that he probably looked like quite the intruder, sneaking around the side of a house wielding a spade. The memory of burying the jar came back to him in vivid detail, causing him to

stop at the only discolored post in the fence work.

"From this post I walk ten more posts and then take four steps to the right," he said under his breath, and then proceeded to do just that.

This brought him just behind the shed his father built. Without further hesitation, Mathieu looked in all directions, realized that he was safely hidden from neighbors, and speared the spade from Canadian Tire into the ground. After digging a foot deep and three wide, he stopped and tossed the spade aside absently. Glinting in the moonlight was the glass jar.

The first thing he noticed after brushing the earth off was that a folded piece of graph paper had been added. The hockey playing cards, toy soldiers, and colored pencils he remembered, but the graph paper looked out of place, foreign. Suddenly, he understood the urgency that pulled him back home to dig.

As he slid the paper out of the jar his head began to swim and his knees locked. Before unfolding it, he wiped his upper lip but there wasn't any blood this time. The same chill he felt when the wind whispered his mother's words into his ear tore across the backyard and he dropped the jar to the ground. Mathieu stooped to the ground.

On the outside flap of the folded paper was a date. Mathieu knew immediately that this was the date they had left Montreal behind and moved to Maryland. It was the day he remembered resenting his parents. The paper unfolded and he caught the faint scent of his mother's perfume. Inside, in the perfect penmanship his mother was blessed with, was a single sentence.

You should always be careful what you wish for, Mathieu

"The Sacred Feminine"

At dusk, a barred owl swoops across the road,
sacrificing herself in release
of past pain, abuses of purity.

She lies bloodless on the double yellow lines—
soon picked up, with sobbing grasp,
wrapped in a towel,
and gently carried home.

Between two oaks, in clayed January earth,
she is buried. A new moon arcs over her grave,
softly acknowledging the gift
held in her death.

She takes with her the horrors
caused by male unconsciousness, honoring
the sacred feminine that remains, in spite of man,
innocent, shining, untouched.

“Lonely Hunter”

I want to reach through the wall of the kitchen
Into the other world
And leave this book for you
Like a slice of lemon meringue pie
On a thick shiny plate
I know what you ate
It would make you salivate
It would make your juices run
It would bring you back to life
Until the end
While I raced for another one.

"The Red"

I contemplated dreaming as I lay awake in bed,
But the thought of someday waking swiftly flooded to a head,
To a mouth, to a river, to a delta driven forth,
To a gleaming blue and green, to blooming waters with no shore.
So I contemplated swimming, diving deep into the hue
Of molten black and glowing red, of strangled embers and of dew.
But if a rampant wave of charging waters led a bold assault
To pound its fists upon my back and grind my bones to coral salt,
Could I rearrange my pieces, douse the light and disappear,
Could I bubble through the black, would I be bold enough to hear
Beneath the brine, the breath that brightened, singing words and
 worlds of red,
An inky mouth that speaks in ruby streams or sings in tears
 instead.
And if the bubbles burst and oily clouds of speech are all I find,
Would an underwater squall of tongues and teeth be far behind?
Will it let me know the truth, or will it tell me, "Never mind."
"Just sleep, my child, sleep, and hold steadfast to what you find."

"The Elevator"

I grew up on an elevator that never made complete stops. I spent most of my life traveling up and down, yet going nowhere. My parents' jobs took us to different floors, but the scenes behind the open doors rarely differed.

I remember the first floor well. My grandmother's living room had an early hush about it. Barely disturbing the stillness, my mom and dad hurried to rid me of my coat and settle me on the chilly downstairs sofa. My footed pajamas still carried the warmth of my own bed as my mom tucked Grandma's afghan around me. I whispered goodbye to the backs of my parents' heads as they left for work, and I settled into the cool cushions in the dim room.

Not long later the house rustled to life. Grandma's cooking beckoned my grandpa and me from where we slept, and we ate together. Then Grandma turned to the dishes and Grandpa headed out to the barn, with me tagging along behind. Lunch came and went, but on the really lucky days my cousins came over to play with me. All too soon they'd go home again, and I'd find myself at my grandmother's table, with dinner eaten and more dishes to wash. Shortly after we completed the last chore, Grandma brought out my footed pajamas again and settled me into the chilly sofa. As I dozed, a "ding" echoed vaguely through the room. Sometimes I registered a whiff of my mother's lilac perfume as she carried me out and the elevator doors closed behind me.

We visited that floor, or one like it, for several years. Always I came in and out in my pajamas. Always I longed to see more of my mom and dad than the backs of their heads. As I grew, though, they allowed me to visit them at work from time to time.

On one such afternoon I hurried, knowing that my mother's cubicle could change locations at any moment. I didn't want to miss the brief glance I'd have of her in action there.

Watching her fingers move would rival watching a caffeinated infantry. If I squinted hard enough, I could almost see them salute her after she gave them their orders. In double time they raced each other across her computer keyboard. With the "click clack tap" as background music, I took in her world, trying to gather clues to what made my mother tick. The gray cloth walls had neat rows of basic office supplies, manuals, and photographs of her loved ones. She had perfect stacks of post-it notes and file folders and lots of blue pens within easy reach.

Stepping aside as she walked importantly back and forth, my eyes followed her and my ears tuned in as she answered her boss, "Yes sir, I'll take care of that." Then she walked importantly back to her desk to look over the work she had done. After ensuring that she had it "just so," she carefully capped each pen and tucked her computer in to sleep, not forgetting its dust cover. Finally, she came to herself and remembered me there. Smiling, she said, "Ready?" and we shuffled back into the elevator together.

Visiting my father's work differed drastically from visiting Mom's. The elevator did not like to stop on that floor, and it creaked and groaned its protest all the way. Dad did not choose his work. Dad's job chose him. As with my mom, the location changed regularly, but the scenery almost always stayed the same. He called it "work truck." Like the elevator, the work truck creaked and groaned as he made demands on it. Its scent, a dubious mixture of gasoline and perspiration, often baked in the long afternoon sun.

The pace of my father's job slowed considerably compared with my mother's. He drove me casually back and forth from job to job. Stopping in traffic, starting back reluctantly, he ambled through his day seemingly without purpose.

I never clearly understood the objective of Dad's job, but I gathered that it induced sighing. I also identified it as the bank where he deposited his energy and withdrew lethargy in its place. He spent most of his time there, so when we returned to the elevator, I stepped back in without him.

A few years later my mother's elevator ride came to a complete stop. Two years after hers, my father's elevator suddenly stopped as well. Neither one would ride the moving box again.

On my own, I continued to ride the elevator up and down. I found it so familiar that elevator music scored my dreams. The "ding" of the doors could jolt my feet unsteadily like a ringing bell to Pavlov's dogs. My stops resembled cubicles more than work trucks, but like my father, the jobs chose me.

That has changed. I have pushed the button to a new floor. When the doors slide open, I do not see the cubicles and work trucks of my youth. Instead, I see books and classrooms, and they invite me to stay. I pull up a chair and sit, leaving the moving box behind me and with the job of my choosing up ahead.

“Little School Marm”

Since the age of eleven, I have always considered myself a leader and a teacher to my three younger sisters. They looked to me for the right answers. It did not matter if it involved a homework problem or asking permission from Mom if they could stay up an extra hour on a school night. As the oldest, I took pride in everything I taught them. To them I knew all, and answered the call of big sister, teacher, confidant, and second mom.

Every summer, I assumed the role of teacher. On the first day of class, I introduced myself and asked my sisters, the students, to introduce themselves to the class. I requested they take out their pencils for a pop quiz. I can still see the expressions on their small round faces. Looking back, I laugh because the two-year-old, identical twins, Bridgette and Jessica, did not understand the concept of taking a quiz. They could not even write unless you count scribbling on a piece of paper writing. My nine-year-old sister Brandy thought it unfair that she never got chosen as the teacher. I explained, “When I speak, you will be quiet. I am warning you that back-talking is unacceptable.” Brandy refused to listen, which resulted in getting her name written on the chalkboard. This frustrated her, and the twins laughed hysterically. I immediately turned my attention to Bridgette and Jessica, stating, “Ladies, if you do not stop laughing, your name will also be written on the chalkboard.” They fell silent. At times, I allowed Brandy to take the role of the teacher’s assistant. She took pride in this pretend role. When I gave back the quizzes, they each received a big smiley-face with a sticker. In an old shoebox, I had saved stickers, highlighters, crayons, and magic markers, so I could easily locate all my supplies. They all received an “A,” no matter the subject, because I did not want to hurt their self-esteem. I remember getting my first “B” on a spelling paper, and it broke my heart. I wanted to prevent such heartache for them. I wanted to share with them everything that I had learned up to this point. I encouraged them to excel in everything they set their minds to. In a sense, this made me their second mom. I remember Mom telling me that “practice makes perfect,” and my teachers often repeated the same phrase that I passed along to my younger sisters. I had a big binder that contained school papers from the previous year that I used as my guide in teaching the lesson for the day. I walked around and offered my assistance. I helped the twins write their names on a piece of paper, or I had them color a picture. Challenged with keeping their attention, we would sing songs and dance around.

Reminiscing with my sisters about our pretend school adventures plays a key role in the lives we live now. As the mother of an eight-year-old son, I teach him daily about patience and to practice, practice, practice. I say to him, “Luc,

you can do it. Don't give up. You are super smart and I am so proud of you!" Brandy currently attends High Point University. She plans to obtain

her bachelor's degree in Accounting. We share this experience together as adults. We have different majors, but we do make it a point to see each other before class and say "Hi." Bridgette and Jessica completed high school in 2004. Jessica excelled, graduating first in her class. Now a junior, she attends Bob Jones University in South Carolina. I cannot but help wonder if our pretend school sessions helped her decide to pursue a major in Counseling. Bridgette graduated fifth in her senior class. She also attended Bob Jones University until this year. She decided to take a year off from school, and works with AmeriCorps as a Volunteer Service Coordinator. Bridgette told me that she decided to pursue this dream because she remembers me saying, "You can do anything you set your mind to. Never give up!" It is funny how my sisters remind me of the small things I forgot when we played school. My strict lessons helped shape their lives, decisions, and their accomplishments.

"Drowning"

Clear to the eye
Cold to the throat
Fatal to lungs

Cut hands press and pound
Tint the glass red

Two eyes listen
To rising water
To a last breath

Silent scream
Hands float, red fades

"Screenplay Adaptation"

Scenes from a Screenplay Adaptation of "Roman Fever" by Edith Wharton

FADE IN:

EXT. TERRACE-NIGHT

At a small bistro table on a terrace in the 1960's, Gilda Slate is knitting and Sophia Truesdale is crocheting. Mrs. Truesdale looks in shock.

MRS. SLATE

That's right, Sophia. I wrote the letter. All your sentiments of that evening were a figment of your imagination—or should I say my imagination.

Mrs. Slate sits back in her seat with a contented smile on her face.

MRS. TRUESDALE

I don't believe it. How could you have? (beat) How cruel you are, Gilda, to keep that from me and to keep me away from Christian. (beat) I truly loved him.

Mrs. Slate smiles broader and leans back in her chair. She begins to pick up her stitches a little faster.

You knew it, didn't you? You knew it and you went ahead and married him anyway. How could you have stooped so low?

MRS. SLATE

You know, I really shouldn't have told you—but in a way I'm glad I did. (beat) It's all for the best, Sophia, and now we can move on and become (beat) closer.

MRS. TRUESDALE

You think we will become closer after you told me all this?

MRS. SLATE

Well, I hate to break it to you, darling, but I wasn't
the one corresponding with someone else's
soon-to-be husband, now was I?

There is silence at the table. Mrs. Truesdale stares at Mrs. Slate. The waiter
returns to the table with Mrs. Slate's glass of wine.

Thank you.

She sips the wine.

Ah. 1945. It was a very good year.

She giggles.

It's sort of funny, you know.

MRS. TRUESDALE

What is?

MRS. SLATE

Well, you must have waited for such a long
time for Christian atop that Eiffel Tower
that cold winter day.

MRS. TRUESDALE

I didn't wait that long.

MRS. SLATE

Oh, come now, Sophia. I can't believe that.

MRS. TRUESDALE

Well, it's true. I couldn't have been waiting
more than five minutes.

MRS. SLATE

Is that all? Well, whoever said that true love
will wait for an eternity was horribly wrong!

MRS. TRUESDALE

Well, I would have waited longer, but I didn't
have to. He came just after I did.

Mrs. Slate stares at Mrs. Truesdale in disbelief.

MRS. SLATE

You mean he came?

MRS. TRUESDALE
Of course he came.

Mrs. Slate slowly sets down her wine glass.

You see, Gilda, I answered the letter.

Mrs. Slate drops her knitting, and puts her hands on her pallid, wrinkled cheeks. With her fingers, she twists her thin lips. With her hand, she makes a flapping gesture of confusion.

MRS. SLATE
I never thought you'd answer the letter!

MRS. TRUESDALE
It's getting cold. We should leave the terrace
and go inside.

Mrs. Truesdale slips on her red sweater and starts to pack her things. She glances at the view, then neatly puts her crocheting away.

MRS. SLATE
I can't for the life of me find the opening to my
bag in such darkness.

Mrs. Slade fumbles around for a minute before recklessly gathering her things. The ladies rise from the table and start down the terrace steps.

MRS. TRUESDALE
You know, in a way, I feel sorry for you, Gilda.

MRS. SLATE
Oh? Don't be silly. Why would you ever do that?

MRS. TRUESDALE
Well, you thought I was just waited that night.

MRS. SLATE
[laughs] Well, it's all in the past. Besides, I had
Christian for thirty years and all you have is a
letter that he didn't even write. So in a way I
pity you, Sophia.

Mrs. Truesdale stops walking down the steps. Mrs. Slate turns around and looks at her, shielding her eyes from the light of a lamppost at the top of the steps.

MRS. TRUESDALE

(without emotion) I had Barbara.

Mrs. Slate's jaw drops. Mrs. Truesdale starts down the stairs, passes Mrs. Slate, and walks into the city lights of Paris.

FADE TO BLACK

"Junior League"

For three years Janet Scarboro had not received an invitation to join Oakboro's Junior League. At the time of Janet's first disappointment, I had not yet moved from Valley Heights to Oakboro, so Janet's preliminary tactics were handed down to me by word of mouth over bridge tables at Dogwood Country Club.

Like mountain myths and folk tales, the stories became embellished to delight any novice to the area. Newcomers to the social circle, of which I fortunately feel extremely comfortable to be included, informed me of Janet's ventures—from the first batch of cookies baked to cozy little gourmet luncheons—to solicit League votes. I personally became privy to Janet's antics one April afternoon while I was sipping sherry and relaxing on Sadie Miller's begonia-decked terrace.

"Darn, I might have known," Sadie spewed after returning from an interrupting telephone call.

"Anything the matter?" I asked unsuspectingly.

"Oh, it was that Janet Scarboro. She's running by after dinner to bring home-made coffeecake."

"How thoughtful," I said, slightly envious of Sadie for having such a close friend while I, a relatively new face in the neighborhood, was still trying to remember that Queen Street intersects Magnolia Road.

Sadie slumped in the bamboo chair. Pressing her blonde curls against the flowered slipcover, she signed. Her mouth screwed into a smirk as she hissed, "Thoughtful? Tell me, Margaret, how would you like to be bribed?" Without waiting for my answer, she continued, "No, thank you!"

"Maybe it's not a bribe. Perhaps it's pure and simple old blackmail. What's she got on you? That new Anne Klein suit you bought at Lucille's and haven't told your husband yet?"

"Nothing like that," Sadie promised. "How did you find out about my new Anne Klein?"

"I know. That's all."

"Well, anyhow, it's the League. Janet's been trying for goodness-knows-how-

long to get in. As you know, we vote the first week in May for next year's provisional members. Janet knocks herself out bring League members cakes and homemade rolls and gourmet dishes. Trying to buy our vote!"

I tugged at my gold earring. "Why don't you just vote her in? Seems to be an easy way out."

"Because she's a pain in the royal arse. She'll drive you crazy, talking in that little cooing voice and blinking her eyelashes." Sadie paused just long enough to draw a breath. "She's so . . .so pretentious. She'll go on and on about her decorating scheme for their great room and her newest design for the hand-knotted quilt she's making. And, besides that, she drives me nuts with that constant neon-sign eye batting."

"She seems pretty talented to me," I commented truthfully.

"Well, yeah, she can do just about anything," Sadie admitted, offering me more sherry. "She's won several prizes with her crewel and needlepoint. And she's always knee-deep in some kind of recycling project or protest against animal experimentation."

I accepted my cocktail refill and then got up enough nerve to add, "Maybe you two just have a personality clash."

"I don't know," Sadie said. "If she were not so sugary. Everything that comes out of her mouth is honey coated. And then, to boot, she has to flutter her eyelids. Those blinking eyes will absolutely drive me bonkers one day."

Finally, I met Janet. Sadie and I had decided to do lunch at the Club grill while our kids took their one o'clock swimming lessons. While we were trying to decide whether to order the chicken or shrimp salad, I noticed Sadie looking up from the menu. Her lips parted to reveal polished orthodontic pearls, and I heard her say, "Why, Janet Scarboro, how nice."

Sadie chatted on, so I carefully observed Janet while waiting for the inevitable introductions. Sadie, whose heritage goes all the way back to the Colonists, always remembers who should be introduced to whom and how the formality changes when one person is old and decrepit and what to do about men being presented to women or girls introduced to old men. Important things like that.

I tried to analyze Janet objectively, blocking out any tacky episodes the girls at the Club had previously related. About the same age as I, she was definitely as well preserved. Her black hair showed no signs of gray—probably thanks to that marvelous new temporary rinse our town's Mr. Henre discovered at a cosmetology seminar in Raleigh.

Janet looked normal enough in the yellow-and-white striped Ralph Lauren

dirndl skirt and matching blouse with its little embroidered status symbol that she kept directing to my line of vision. Donna Karen mesh sandals were strapped around her pedicured feet. It was rather difficult to tell if she had designer sunglasses because she had them anchored on the top of her head. Everything about Janet certainly looked acceptable.

"—and this is Margaret Davidson," Sadie said, nodding my way. "I don't believe you two have met."

As I offered my hand to Janet, I got a whiff of her Joy perfume. She smiled pleasantly enough and properly acknowledged our introduction. "Glad to meet you," she cooed in honey-coated tones as her eyelids rippled ever so slightly.

There it was! Another dramatic wave of her lashes as she announced, "Now, when you finish your lunch, I want you both to come over to my house for dessert. And, of course, freshly roasted coffee. Imported."

The lash wave turned into a flutter. Then, blinking. I tried to re-focus on the twin diamond studs in her ear lobes because I knew I would lose my sanity if I looked directly at those flashing lids a moment longer. I will have to admit Sadie was right. This woman was driving me bonkers.

"And then I want to take you on a walking tour of my estate," Janet said. "The gardener has been there all week, and my pansies are simply gorgeous." The words rolled from Janet's throat like kitten purrs. Each syllable was accompanied by a sharp snap of her eyelids.

I smiled right back at Janet Scarboro and pretended I was enjoying our meeting. But I definitely would not vote for her in May, when my own provisional membership changed to member in good standing. We don't need phonies like her in our League.

"Café Italia"

They weren't good travel partners. Mel wanted to get up early in the morning, see the sites, and experience the local London culture while James would have slept through the daylight if he could. But she woke him up every morning, saying his name softly hoping maybe he wouldn't hear her and she could leave him a note telling him she had gone out on her own for a couple of hours. But no matter how quietly she whispered, he always heard. On their first morning, when she still thought she wanted his company, her hand had hovered above his shoulder as she thought about shaking him gently, patting him lightly in the way she liked when her mother woke her. But, she pulled her hand away. She couldn't do it. She needed to maintain the barrier of the night stand width space between their beds and so while they shared the walkway between the beds, she resolutely avoided touching anything on his side, certainly not the bed, with or without him in it.

They were staying in a small, charmless hotel room. It was two paces from the door to the beds and two more to the bathroom only large enough for one person to stand in, and then only in front of the miniature sink. The two feet of carpet which separated their beds was the only truly empty space. And Mel was glad for it. As the days wore on, she willed the space to get bigger, wanted more for herself. They had agreed to share a room because neither of them really had the money for this trip. Sharing a room was a purely economical decision, at least for Mel. But, she thought the room would be bigger.

James was a nice guy, to be fair, and certainly had done nothing wrong. He deferred to all of her plans, allowing her to buy the plane tickets, book the hotel, and lead the way around London, often following a step or two behind her, much like a slightly timid puppy. He didn't complain about or comment on anything. He simply handed her money to cover the cost of each necessary expenditure, smiling absently as he wrote the check or doled out pound notes. That was what was wrong.

They had only been in London for three days, but she had nothing left to say to him. James wasn't the sort of person one was comfortable sitting quietly with. He got anxious as if the silence indicated something was wrong. Mel didn't always want to talk. Sometimes, she just wanted to sip coffee and be quiet. That Londoners seemed to think Nescafe counted as coffee had already put a crimp in her plan, but she quickly adjusted to ordering proper English tea and pretended to like it. Mel wanted to watch people, observe and try to absorb the culture.

She hoped that once absorbed, it would radiate out from her, an aura that would mystically speak of her natural sophistication and intimate world knowledge. She imagined herself in jovial conversations with natives.

"Jolly nice day, isn't it?" she would quip, just to get the ball rolling.

"Indeed. And where are you from?"

"The United States actually."

"Really. Quite posh for an American, aren't you?"

Mel hated looking like a tourist and wanted to blend in; that probably wouldn't happen on this trip. While Mel looked everything up on a map before they set off, wanting to maintain the appearance of looking like she belonged, James insisted on stopping in front of the tube maps, tracing his finger along the possible routes they could take.

"We need to get to Leicester Square. We can take the Victoria line and transfer at Green Park." James's finger lingered for a moment and then he placed it back at the starting point.

"Or, we can take the Circle-District line and transfer at Embankment." He considered the lengths his finger had traveled. "The Victoria line option seems shorter and more direct."

Mel stood several feet away, already knowing that they should take the Victoria Line. When they went through the stiles, she had her pass ready, inserted it hurriedly and walked through without stopping, like an authentic Londoner, she thought. James fumbled to pull his pass out of his wallet, a line forming behind him, turning the ticket several times until it was right side up and ambling through the opened gateway to where she waited, trying not to block the escalator traffic, on the other side. She had to tell him to stand to one side and let people who wanted to walk down pass. He didn't understand why anyone would walk down an escalator.

On that third morning, they slept through the hotel breakfast, James on purpose, Mel unintentionally. She woke up just as it was ending at ten, took a shower, unfairly annoyed that James was still asleep, wishing as she brushed her teeth that she were traveling with someone who was naturally inclined to get out of bed early, berating herself for being irritated with him when she hadn't awoken early either. She woke him snapping about the late hour, insisting that he needed to get up.

"I need coffee. I'm going to the café up the street. Housekeeping is going to want to get in here soon.."

"We're paying for this room. Shouldn't housekeeping wait on us?" he grumbled.

"Meet me when you're ready. Take your time," she snarled. James groggily pushed the covers aside and stuck one thin, pale leg out of the covers, stretching his foot towards the floor. She sidestepped his outstretched toes and walked out the door, allowing it to close loudly behind her, and headed up the street to the nearest diner.

In the 24 hour Italian restaurant, she drank a café Americano wishing for an American-like refill of her very un-American, doctored-up Nescafe. Sitting across the way from Mel was a sad looking man resting an elbow on his thigh, cheek in his open palm, staring down at his untouched plate of food. His clothes were rumpled, vaguely unclean and dingy. A tattered army duffle sat close to his feet, partially blocking the walkway between the tables. He hadn't moved in a while and she wondered if he'd fallen asleep there. He began to lean slowly to the side and she briefly hoped he'd topple over, or downward into his food. She didn't want him to hurt himself, but she needed something to laugh at and imagined that would be fairly funny. An older man walked in, ordered coffee and took a seat at a table against the wall, near the dozing man. She watched the men, trying to figure out what to do with the day. They hadn't seen Trafalgar Square yet. The guide book said it was "unlike many squares in London," a must see, which made her want to avoid it. True Londoners wouldn't hang out at such an obvious tourist trap. She thought about returning to Covent Gardens to shop at the open air market and browse small book stores, but then remembered that James would be along and she didn't want to drag him behind her. She imagined him shuffling his feet impatiently as she stopped to consider silver jewelry and hand painted wine goblets, or to examine a dusty volume of Shakespeare's tragedies. His shuffling feet would rush her and his silent opposition would annoy her. She wanted the luxury to consider each purchase, maybe even haggle over prices with the vendors. Perhaps it was a good day to explore Soho.

A young man entered. He was dressed in an expensive-looking but wrinkled grey suit and untrimmed sideburns. He looked as though he had just been on a first job interview, one he wasn't completely prepared for. Mel wanted to tell the young man to hold out for something better, that the first job offer was never the best. He shouldn't become desperate and sell out, grasping at the first money-making opportunity that came his way. Mel had made that mistake herself, joining an accounting firm that specialized in managing finances for small companies the Monday after she graduated from college.

She managed the records for several independent publishers. The accounts had sounded exciting. She took the job thinking she would get to mingle with the clientele and their newly discovered, promising young authors. She would be invited to book premieres and awards ceremonies, drink martinis and hobnob with the literary elite, perhaps even have a brief, illicit affair with a couple of eccentric writers. Five

years later, the little black dress she bought with her first paycheck hung in her closet with its tags still on, not worn to any of the elite cocktail parties she'd spent hours imagining herself at. She could recite every writer's annual income by heart but wouldn't know one of them if he stood next to her. She had never even seen the buildings where the publishers worked. She knew the publishing companies' secretaries by voice only. She wanted to ask if they went to the parties. She wanted to gossip about her favorite authors.

"Did you read Michael Rush's latest book? I thought it was divine, though the mother was a bit too cliché for me. So stereotypical of the mother-witch trope. When he read the confrontation scene between her and David out loud though, it really came to life for me. And I thought his comments on the role of the editor in the writer's process were very insightful. But, between you and me, is it really good for his image to be toting around a young twenty-something bimbo as his date? Who is she?" Instead of having conversations with people "in the know," she talked to low-level assistants long enough to confirm that there was enough money in the payroll accounts.

Mel looked out the window at the sidewalk as James appeared, walking past the entrance to spot her in the window and then stepping backwards a few paces in a mock reverse march to the door. It would have been funny if he were John Cleese. But James just looked immature and silly. If Mel hadn't looked up, would he have continued past? She wanted to be left alone to meet the young man with side burns, to counsel him and perhaps make a date for tea later that day.

"I take it we missed breakfast," James commented, gesturing towards her pastry with one hand as he pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. Mel nodded, glaring in a way that she knew suggested it was all his fault. Silently, she reprimanded herself. He wasn't to blame. She hadn't woken up either and breakfast was only important to her anyway. He had only visited the breakfast room on the first day at her request.

"I know it's covered in the cost of the hotel, but I don't eat in the morning," he'd remarked that first morning, declining the "traditional" English breakfast: two fried eggs, tomatoes, sautéed mushrooms, sausage, bacon, and toast. He drank the short glass of orange juice set before him by the hotel waiter and silently watched her chew. The next morning, he hadn't come down at all but waited for her to return to the room, showering and getting dressed in her absence. If she wanted breakfast, Mel told herself, she should have woken up earlier.

She took a deep breath and tried to fake pleasantness, even as she studied his profile and despised it unreasonably. His cheeks were soft, puffy almost, suggesting the fat man who would appear as he approached 40. His eyes, though a lovely shade of blue, were too small

for his face and masked under heavy eyebrows which desperately needed plucking. The girls at the office had discussed this numerous times.

"He has real potential to be cute. A good woman could fix him right up," Amy said at lunch. "Dress him a little better, certainly make him wear something other than Nike tennis shoes with dress pants, get him a decent haircut and pluck those eyebrows and he could be a real catch. Someone should snap him up." She stared pointedly at Mel. Mel despised her single status and hated the women who offered to set her up even more. They pitied her, thought she was defective because she was alone. When James joined the office, Mel rejoiced in having a single ally to fight the married masses with. The office women hadn't seen him as a partner in single solidarity but as a partner for Mel's life. While Mel brushed off their suggestions at work, at home she sometimes tried to picture them having breakfast together in a sun room off the kitchen of a small, suburban house. Most of the time, she could only picture herself in an efficiency shoeing a scraggly cat off the furniture.

"I've been watching the man over there. He's bound to fall over into his food at some point."

"Do you think he's drunk?"

"I don't know. It seems like it should be much more interesting than that. Where do you think he's from?" James turned to look.

"I don't know. Maybe he's stoned."

Mel knew before they had ever made plans that she would become bored with James, like she so often did at work. James handled the accounts for several independently owned restaurants. He was the type who lingered in the lunch room and had mundane conversations about the latest band he had seen.

"They were so cool."

"What kind of music?"

"I don't know. Alternative pop, I guess. Like Nirvana, only more garage band. The drummer got really drunk and was totally getting everyone off beat. It was cool. You should check them out."

"I'll try." Even when Mel tried to get away from these conversations, James would continue talking to her back as she walked to her desk. At work, they both took orders; their opinions didn't matter unless it was the opinion that a particular account lacked funds.

June was a slow time in the office, tax season long over, budgets readjusted accordingly, and so it had seemed like the perfect time to take off. Several people in Mel's office and the neighboring one had talked about taking a trip overseas, but the practicalities of spouses and kids

had gotten in the way of their mass daydreaming. The spontaneity of this trip, the actual ability to leave the country without having to consult or consider anyone else asserted to everyone around her that single was better. All the women in the office envied her spunk and freedom, but none could go with her. James alone had been willing to go with her and that had seemed like enough at the time. He probably hadn't wanted to go to London at all. But he wasn't the sort to refuse an invitation.

Mel wished he were someone, anyone, else.

She looked James in the eyes, hoping to spark some sort of conversation, but James only grinned at her wryly. He didn't seem to know what to say either.

Mel took out her notebook. Every evening before she went to sleep, she recorded a list of pictures she'd taken each day. She didn't want to get home and find herself unable to identify where she'd been: Big Ben, Parliament, Westminster Abby, Buckingham Palace, The Rosetta Stone housed in the British Museum, Tower of London and London Bridge, all captured on film shot with a manual Canon 35 mm camera, which she hoped looked artistic rather than touristy. It was terribly difficult to carry around, cumbersome, requiring her to choose between zoom and regular lenses, removed and replace caps, fiddle with g-stops and adjust shutter speeds in response to light. Mel didn't know if she'd shot even one decent picture.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mel saw James look around uncomfortably. He drummed his fingers on the table. She looked down at her notebook trying to figure out what photo opportunities she may have missed, hoping James would disappear into the ink on the page, become a creation of her imagination, a badly lit snapshot. Perhaps if she slammed the book shut, closing up her list of photographs, when she looked up it would all be gone, existing only on film and on the college ruled lined paper. She knew it wouldn't happen yet she hoped that he would sense she wanted to be alone and leave. But James wasn't that type of person.

"Let me just finish looking at my notes and then we can go."

James said nothing in response. Mel knew he wouldn't say anything to risk upsetting her, not on purpose anyway. He seemed incapable of voicing desire- he certainly hadn't on this trip. Only once had he mentioned what he thought the trip should be like.

"I would like to spend the first few days going out at night, having a good time, then perhaps rest for a day and spend the last few seeing the touristy sights," he'd said on the plane. He wanted to describe his life as one big party, drinking until dawn, sleeping off a hangover to be proud of, and starting all over again. While Mel wanted to regale

people at parties with witty stories, James wanted to stun anyone who would listen with tales about the wild parties themselves. But since they'd arrived, Mel had made all of the decisions, buying tickets for shows at discount kiosks, choosing which restaurants to go to and whether to dine before or after the theatre. For the most part, they had attended to her dream of a cultured vacation rather than his fantasy of an exciting one. But after three days of being surrounded by culture, Mel lacked witty stories of lucky mishaps and tales of rendezvous with exotic strangers. She had a notebook which detailed the dates and times she was at choice tourist spots and several rolls of out-of-focus pictures.

The side-burned boy got up to leave. Mel smiled at him, willing him to stop at their table, but he didn't even notice her. The man with the tattered bag had pushed his food aside and gone to sleep on the table.

Mel closed her notebook, clicked her pen into its plastic casing and shoved both into her bag. She stood up, twisting her scarf around her neck and grabbing her coat.

"Ready," she sighed. James stood up after her and the pair walked toward the door, awkwardly stepping around the duffel bag. Mel pushed the door open and walked out into the cold.

"I was thinking we could go to Trafalgar Square."

"Mmmm" James commented as they walked towards the tube station.

"Lisa's Poem"

Lie down with me
let me touch your skin
let me feel your breath
and be lost in your eyes;
the color of oceans
that vast creation
where men have been lost
crushed by the waves
and tossed by the storms
those eyes of seagreen
containing the world,
of life aquatic

I am like Pandora
greedy for my gluttony
of treasures unknown
lifting the latch that
would let these things lose
set them upon myself
wholly consumed

A gentle caress
brings shivers abundant
like a cool, gentle breeze
on a sultry, summer day
A day longing to be
spent at the shoreline
gazing out over
that sea green horizon
shivers awakening passions
energies pulling like the moon
building, gathering intensity
consumption drawing near

I the sand, you the water
our rhythm ever constant
your soft, foamy wetness
taking away each layer
pulling with each undulation
farther into this sea.

"The Awakening"

Emerald Isle, North Carolina, will hold a place in my memories for quite possibly the rest of my days. In the late summer of 2003, our family chose this location for a week of rest and relaxation.

We settled into a lovely two-bedroom condominium facing the vast expanse of ocean. While not extravagant, our lodgings indicated great thought and planning. An otherwise ordinary journal grew into the most memorable feature of our accommodations. Entries from prior guests detailed their reflections about the place. This simple book developed into a collection of bedtime stories which my daughter Shelby read with great care to her younger brother Sean.

The first day on the beach neared perfection. The temperature hovered around ninety degrees, with humidity held in check by the ocean breeze. Sunshine glistened on the water's surface, beckoning our entry. High wispy clouds floated as far away as the everyday routine left behind us at home. Sean, the first as usual to enter the water, proudly exclaimed, "Shelby, get in, this is the life!" After positioning our gear, my wife and I joined the children to swim and raft in the surf.

With lunchtime drawing near, we acted upon the recommendation of a friend who suggested the Big Oak Drive In. This small, quaint walk-up lunch spot in a neighboring village stands unaffected by the passage of time. Big Oak specializes in "shrimp burgers," a simple sandwich consisting of fried shrimp, coleslaw, and their own patented brand of hot sauce. The combination of atmosphere and appetite transformed that meal into culinary bliss.

That evening we set out for the city of Beaufort, once the home port of the infamous pirate Blackbeard. Here we found a thriving coastal community steeped in history. Many locals still refer to Beaufort as a small drinking village with a fishing problem. A spooky yet entertaining Ghost Walk marched us through parts of the city unseen from car windows, including Blackbeard's house and a two-hundred-year-old cemetery.

As the dawn of a new morning stretched into midday, clouds started building on the horizon. A weather report indicated that Hurricane Alex churned northward and parallel to us, but posed no imminent threat. A landfall prediction of the storm near Nags Head gave us only mild concern.

Little did I know what impact Alex would have on me directly.

The beach had been Red Flagged for the day, indicating that conditions favored the possibility of rip currents. The surf pounded only slightly rougher than normal, so I allowed the kids to play in it on their boogie boards. After a short period of time, I noticed that they crept slowly outward into open water. I grabbed an extra board and worked myself around them in order to herd them back to the shore. Although successful in my salvation of Shelby and Sean, I made a serious mistake.

One moment I stood no more than twenty feet from the beach. The next moment I found myself at least one-hundred feet out in the ocean. This came with no warning and no sensation other than a gentle push. Terror took hold of me like a shark with prey. Instantly I opened a conversation with myself that began with, "OK, stay calm, you've seen this on television." Within seconds, panic ran the show, and that dialogue evolved into, "So this is how it ends?"

Two truths surfaced: one—had it not been for that small raft that I clung to for dear life, I would have surely drowned, and two—a powerful, confident voice whispered sternly, "Quit thrashing, and swim along the shoreline, not toward it!" As I followed directions, calm washed over me with a force equal to the tide. At last, roughly thirty minutes later, with one final great shove, a wave crested beneath me and deposited me into shallow water, no more than knee deep. I lay there motionless except for a chest heaving to consume dry air. Out of the stillness, my wife Kay approached and asked innocently, "Are you okay? You were out there for a long time." Fortunately, for her sake, I lacked the energy or lung capacity to respond in anything other than pants and grunts.

As I sat on the beach for the remainder of the day, I sipped ice cold Coronas that never tasted better. I noticed the way my wife and son absorb the sun's rays while tanning and not burning. I noticed how my daughter's hair combined red and gold, like something out of a fairy tale. I thought of regrets and opportunities past and present.

I want to watch my children have children.

I want to grow old with my wife.

I received a second chance.

“What Trees Teach”

indoors, where the air is still, we watch the wind
beating, bending back branches of oaks, pines, pear trees:
a fierce spinning of leaves and limbs
as lightning sings the surrounding space—

minds-stopped momentarily, we look closer,
past the bark, through the trunk,
and see the stillness that is within
amid the external torrent.
they bend

—may break—

but with an unspoken acceptance of this moment,
a “yes” to the terrible beauty, the uncertainty of living.

we could learn to do the same.

"I Left the Petals on the Water"

So I empty my pockets and unbutton
the outermost layers of my skin.
I leave them in a sleeping pile, breathing deep
and dreaming of their soft white innards
walking around without them.
I'm hoping I'm invisible, like a ghost without its sheet.
I'm hoping the wind doesn't blow me away.

Instead it caresses the inside of my thighs
and bites my back, digging its fingers
into my sides, it holds my head and whispers, "Be patient"
before blowing across my skin to kiss me.

The kiss blooms inside my lungs,
white petals blessing the walls.
It reaches up and squeezes
the rose inside my ribcage,
and with knotted fingers
pain ties a red ribbon around my chest.

Two more white petals wrap my legs
and move them forward.
Step by step I tear my hole in the water,
beating waves with my thighs and apologizing with my back.

I don't know if it accepted my apology or not,
but each wave stitches itself behind me,
swimming over top of me,
cold blue hands clasping,
until my shadow is just a bruise
beneath the surface.

"Spikes"

In Memory of Harold Herman Hodge (d. January 2007)

Across ages, in the wicked barrow, in the dugout waking to the game, stooped the Grene Knicht, Ty Cobb, sharpening his scythe, shaping his spikes. Metal screeched on metal, tore apart peace. The Grene Cobb glared across the diamond at those he would cut, second baseman and shortstop, when he slid spikes high. They shook.

* * *

The boy's hands shook like shining on the foil-wrapped box as he opened it, not for Christmas, nor for birthday, but for an occasion much more important to him, the beginning of the new Little League baseball season. Without mercy, his father had teased him, the serious, serious one, about giving him "a pair of gold-braided shoestrings." The boy could tell that there was something heavier than shoestrings, but they were there, tied on a pair of rubber-spiked baseball shoes. Mercy!

* * *

The last time he wore rubber spikes, he was on the pitcher's mound, called in from shortstop to put out a fire, the bases loaded, no outs, the opposition's cleanup hitter at the plate. Who had hit a grand slam the night before. The pitcher threw one pitch. The ball seemed to climb straight up, so he turned his eyes to the sky, all eight of them did—turned his head, all eight of them did, to watch the ball disappear over the centerfield fence.

When he approached the picnic shelter at his thirty-fifth high school reunion, he noticed a group of old men standing there as if waiting for him. Eight old men stood there abreast waiting for him to come close enough to see them in unison turn their eyes to the sky, turn their heads as if watching a baseball flying to center field. Forty years, and they too remembered.

* * *

When he graduated from high school, retiring from childhood he said, Uncle Harold gave his spikes to his nephew. Nephew had to wait for a few years to grow into them. Nephew placed them in the sacred place, on his nightstand, beside his arrowhead collection, his glove, his bat, where he could see them when he said his bedtime prayers.

Nephew would touch the shoes. Lift them shining with polish, and turn them to admire the clean metal spikes arranged beautifully in triangles. Nephew prayed like hell for his toes to grow.

* * *

Last high school game. Last baseball game. Against the arch-rival. Their catcher nicknamed Choo (as in choo-choo, unstoppable engine). Six-three, two-twenty. Walked, stood on first. Their next batter, their best, right handed, would almost certainly pull the ball. I glanced at Coach: "Cheat a little toward second?" He nodded: "Yeah, cheat a little." I glanced at Jimmy at short. He cheated a little toward the hole. And that's where the hard grounder went. Should be an easy double play, but Jimmy bobbed it, just for a moment, and I had to wait at second for his throw. Wait for Choo. By the time Jimmy's throw arrived, I had no momentum, no leverage. Standing there, stock still, it seemed, trying to make the pivot and relay. Keep a foot on the bag. The unstoppable engine roaring down the track. I don't know where the ball went, but I went high into the air, my left trouser leg ripped, my left thigh gashed, set on fire, a foot above the knee.

Coach put a couple of band-aids on the cut, and put my pants back together with tape. I went back onto the field, and the game resumed.

So full of angry rage I couldn't see straight.

Prayers are sometimes answered to no avail. Prayed to get to third. Got to third. Prayed for a hit or a weak grounder. A weak grounder went to the right side, so I hauled it down the line. To spike Choo and take my revenge. Somebody said it looked like a gnat bumping into a rhino. A rhino protected by shin-guards, big fat mitt, chest protector, mask.

Hung up my spikes.

Not literally.

Threw them with the glove and bat into the closet.

Spent the summer reading Sandburg and chasing skirts, shiny bronze bodies at the pool.

Went off to college to study poetry.

That fall, the President was assassinated.

We retired from childhood.

Dad said things had turned out "rough as a cob."

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EDITOR'S NOTES

I wanted to take this opportunity to thank Jennifer Sherman for all of her help the last two years in getting more artworks in the *Apogee*. It was her idea in the first place, and she has done a wonderful job as Art Editor.

The artwork by students in this issue is among the best that we've published. It adds great energy and vividness.

The number of submissions from various segments of the University community continues to grow. We are grateful to professors Andrea Wheless and Scott Raynor for allowing us to print pictures of their sculptures and paintings, and to professors Alice Sink, Michael Gaspeny, Leah Schweitzer, and Mark Fleming for allowing us to print their stories and poems.

Mrs. Sink continues to be a strong supporter of the *Apogee* in another way, by encouraging Evening Degree Program students to submit their writing. This issue contains several works by her EDP students.

This issue contains our first screenplay, an adaptation of a famous short story. We hope other dramatists will submit scenes from their works. We would also very much like to publish material by composers.

The core of the *Apogee*—and of the University's creative life—continues to be those student poets and fictionists who work hard on their writing day in and day out, trying out their wings. The *Apogee* is proud to help them fly.





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