the bridge, Volume 6, 2009

Bridgewater State College

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To
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs,

Dr. Howard London,

for
being as proud of our success
as we are of your support
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MISSION STATEMENT

The Bridge is produced and managed entirely by students. Our charge is to serve, as we are dedicated to showcasing the artistic talents of the student body while providing internships in both editing and graphic design. Our goal is to excel, as we wish to pay a debt to our alumni, keep a promise to ourselves, and set an example for our successors.

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Once a fire was crackling in the fireplace, the questions began, presented hesitantly at first, but more confidently as time passed. Ten minutes into the interview, we felt sure of our footing, largely because our interviewee—the inimitable Mr. Robert Atwan, founder and series editor of the prestigious Best American Essays anthology—put us at ease with his disarming mixture of charm and brilliance. As the evening progressed, we could not help but think of our good fortune, both for being students at an institution that would present us with this extraordinary opportunity, and for having been selected as editors for volume six of this journal.

In September, four months earlier, we’d sat around a large conference room table, unsure of what our editorships had in store for us. We had heard the stories from past editors, how the meetings would last up to sixteen hours, that there would be no winter or spring breaks, how some of us probably would not make it to the end. We also heard this charge: we owed it to the college, to the journal’s legacy of excellence, and to ourselves, to make this volume as good as, if not better than, the others.

That would be no small task. Fortunately for us, the students at BSC are capable of producing some of the finest literature and art in the country, a fact confirmed by the dozens of national awards won by works in previous volumes. But even with the benefit of a talented student body, our work was cut out for us, and we took it seriously.

We began, as in years past, by committing ourselves to function as a team, meaning that there would be few divisions of labor; all editors did everything, from reading, selecting, and editing the manuscripts, to photographing art submissions and proposing layout designs. We also committed ourselves to breaking new ground; beginning with this volume, for instance, all alumni are eligible to submit work along with the current student body. Finally, and most importantly, we remained faithful to the decree established by the editors of Volume I—only works of the highest caliber will be published. To ensure this, we considered each submission blindly. Among the seventy-one works included are a touching tribute to the life of a young man by his mother and sister; prints that reflect an undeniable mastery of the craft; a captivating oil painting of a child; a short story that grapples with the meaning of compassion; an etching that captures the splendor of nature; and a personal essay that celebrates the service of a war veteran.

For helping us to produce this volume, we are indebted to a great many people, perhaps none more so than President Dana Mohler-Faria. We also would like to thank the Bridgewater State College Foundation, the student body, and all the faculty, staff, and alumni for their continued support. Needless to say, we must thank our faculty advisors, Professor Mary Dondero and Dr. Jerald Walker, and our alumni consultants, Ms. Rosann Kozlowski and Ms. Linda Hall.

And of course we must thank Mr. Robert Atwan, who generously opened his home to us for an evening of inspiring discussion, delicious Buffalo wings, and a cozy fire. When the interview ended, we had been in his living room for nearly six hours. We gathered our coats and prepared to brave the mid-January cold, leaving the warmth but taking with us a newfound sense of clarity about the art and craft of the essay specifically, and about the role of the artist in general. We hope you enjoy reading our interview with him as much as we enjoyed his company. Likewise, we hope you enjoy this volume of The Bridge as much as we enjoyed producing it.

The Editors
April 2009
Pépère is a hero, but he can’t remember why. When his unit was threatened with being overrun, he and a handful of other men were ordered to fight a rear-guard action, which is a military euphemism for “delay the enemy as long as possible until you are killed.” Pépère followed his orders. Gradually, enemy bullets found their marks among the men in his unit. Friends slumped lifelessly to the ground. Enemy artillery observers crept the barrage of shells steadily toward their position until shrapnel sliced through Pépère’s comrades. Pépère survived along with one other Marine, whom he carried out on his shoulders. The other Marine couldn’t leave the position under his own power—he no longer had his legs.

Pépère can’t tell us specifics about serving overseas, but he reminds us, “I shouldn’t be here.” When he tries to tell us about the war he fought, it almost always begins with him saying his last name, “Belanger!” as he mimics his commanding officer. He points his finger into space and from there his story fizzles out. It’s impossible to understand.

Pépère survived the Korean War.

Pépère can’t take care of himself. He lives with my aunt during the week and stays with my stepmother and father on the weekends, usually from Thursday afternoons to Sunday nights.

“Don’t use the bathroom down here,” my father says as he exits it after stepping in for only a few seconds.

“Why?” I ask.

“Pépère pissed all over the floor again.”

Again? Had he deteriorated that much since I last saw him?

At least we hid our toothbrushes, comes my next thought.

As a child, I was obsessed with war. I had plastic army men by the hundreds, from the American Revolution to modern times, at the houses of both my mother and father. I would make bombed-out towns with Lincoln Logs for hours in the basement of my father’s house, meticulously placing each log or roof board. Snipers hid in second-story windows, deep in the shadows, while machine gunners had unobstructed fields of fire down alleyways and main streets. Before every battle commenced, I would run upstairs to find Pépère so I could bring him down to see my work. In hindsight, I should have never done that, as I may have reopened old mental wounds, but as a child it was the only way that I thought I could impress him—the Marine.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he would say, his voice soft.
One step at a time, he would make his way back upstairs. Dinner would usually be ready soon.

“Oh! That damn dog! It’s this big!” he shouts, holding his arms outwards.

If you ask him enough times to clarify just how big my sister’s dog is, he eventually says he’s as big as an elephant. We laugh because we know we can’t turn him back. There’s no point in wishing he’ll get better, so we laugh with him. His mind will only get worse.

He has no idea my sister is his granddaughter. She’s just the girl who owns the huge dog.

“That’s his truck, Gill,” my father repeats to Pépère. Guilbert is his first name, but I never call him that.

“Oh,” Pépère replies, slipping back into the corner of the rocking chair. “That’s a nice truck. Is it good?” he asks me.

“Yeah, Pépère, I love it.” I realize I am talking to him like a child. I hate myself for that.

I drive a red Ford pickup truck. Before that, I drove a red Toyota pickup, but only briefly because the frame rusted away and it became unsafe to drive. Toyota paid me one-and-a-half times the truck’s value, and with that money, I searched for a new one. My stepfather would tell me about trucks he saw along Route 6 as he drove to work. I told him it had to be red.

“It’s in your favorite color, Gill,” my father chimes in.

“Oh, yeah?” asks Pépère.

“What’s your favorite color, Gill?”

My heart drops and my stomach tenses as I watch him think.

“Blue?”

He has to ask.

“No, Dad, it’s red,” says my stepmother. Pépère can no longer remember his favorite color.

Pépère doesn’t know I’m his grandson. I’m the guy who always needs a haircut and drives the red truck.

I am in elementary school.

“Dad, can I make Pépère jump?” I ask my father, whispering into his ear so Pépère can’t hear me.

“No, no more. He’ll have nightmares if he jumps too much,” my father tells me.

When Pépère came home from Korea, he would wake his wife at night, screaming in fear, shooting at imaginary Chinese and North Korean soldiers that he had been dreaming about. Ever since I had known Pépère, he would jump nervously at loud, unexpected noises. I’ve been smacked in the head and sworn at by him, though he never really means it. The gunfire and explosions have yet to leave his body, along with the shrapnel in his knees.

Pépère’s beer of choice is Budweiser. With all the medication he takes, he shouldn’t drink at all, but my stepmother and aunt allow it. Accumulating years in your life is one thing, my stepmother reminds me, but enjoying those years is another. Pépère knows he can have two beers a day, and according to him, it must come from the red can. The beer in the red can was the final drink he had with his brother before his brother passed away.

I hand him the tall clear glass that he always uses.

“Thanks,” he says as he takes it from my hand, immediately proceeding to pour his beer into it.

I hold back my laughter as I see the head grow larger and larger. He drinks his foam, and then a few minutes later, he drinks his beer. Pépère never rushes.

I almost had a toast with Pépère once, but by the time I got back to the living room with my drink, Pépère’s mind had moved on to something else.

One of the earliest memories I have is of meeting a man in a wheelchair whose legs were gone from the knees down. I remember a ramp was in the front of his house. I never knew why I had that memory until a few years ago. Talking to my father and stepmother one night, trying to piece together as much as I could
about Pépère’s time in the Marines, I heard the story about the buddy he saved who had lost his legs.

“You went with us when Pépère visited him, but that was years ago,” my father informs me.

“No, I remember,” I reply.

I’ve only seen Pépère stooped forward, hobbling whenever he walked. It’s difficult to picture him supporting someone across his narrow shoulders.

“Mémère died, Michael.”

I repeat my sister’s words in my head.

Pépère took his wife’s passing better than I expected. Months before, while visiting her at the nursing home as she recovered from her surgery, I was struck by Pépère’s affection and concern for her.

“You tell that nurse…” he would say to her, trailing off into nothing, pointing his finger angrily. “Tell that nurse…”

For some reason he was always mad at the people who worked there.

“I’m all right, Gill,” Mémère would reply.

“Are you coming home tomorrow?” He asked this question every time he visited.

At the wake and funeral, he remained strong. “Everyone’s got to make that trip,” he said reassuringly.

He brings up Mémère occasionally in conversation, but always refers to her as his mother. More than likely it’s because my stepmother calls her “Mom” in front of Pépère. It’s sad to think he can’t call Mémère his wife, but it’s also cute. We take the cute and do away with the sad.

Pépère applied finish to hardwood floors. That was his job. Whenever I do a floor with my brother-in-law, I can’t wait to tell Pépère because it’s the closest thing I have with him in terms of being able to make a connection. I can see his eyes glow, though only momentarily, indicating a brief arousal of thought.

“You’ve got to be careful,” he warns me.

“I know, Pépère. Thanks for looking out for me.”

He nods his head and returns his attention to the television.

Watching television with Pépère is always exciting. He loves shows on HGTV and sports. If a home is being remodeled, Pépère constantly reminds us that the people on TV have no idea what they’re doing. During a game, however, is when Pépère is the most vocal. Terry Francona runs like a girl, according to Pépère, and after a while, every baseball player becomes a “Son-of-a-bitch!”

Perhaps the most perplexing thing about Pépère is his signature phrase whenever he gets overly excited. He claims it’s French, but we’ve never been able to figure out what it means. It sounds like, “Eek Gad Non!” None of us can say it as well as he does.

There’s a picture of Pépère on the mantle of the fireplace from when he was just a boy, his older brother standing alongside him, both dressed as sailors. The smile on Pépère’s face is genuine. My father cracks a dirty joke and Pépère laughs uncontrollably and says, “Oh! I don’t know about him!” as he points to my father. The smile on his face matches the unending smile in the picture. The red can, half its contents in the tall glass, sits by his side. His red hat hangs off his rocking chair with the Marine Corps motto “Semper Fi!” emblazoned in golden letters across its front.

Pépère can’t remember names. He can’t remember his favorite color. He can’t remember that his wife was not his mother. He doesn’t realize that the game he’s watching on TV is actually from last week. He does, however, remember that two beers a day is what he’s entitled to, and that in our company, he never loses the things that make life worth living.
Father is shaking at the picture window, looking, as usual, out and beyond. I want the bleating horn out front to stop, the words of a letter I do not want to read to self-efface. Half of her in the cab already. How can her hand on my shoulder feel so unfamiliar, the wax print of her lips so quickly melt on my left cheek?

All the heat of Georgia gathered in the kitchen relaxes to a kind of hum. Years of clippings slip from the fattened cookbook to the floor where I bend down to pick them up.
Untitled
I had been to the old logging site on previous camping trips, and I decided to set aside an hour this time to visit it again. My father and brother were with me, but I was looking forward to finding time by myself. I loved that I could walk through the surrounding woods and not see anything that resembled human existence. Being alone in such a place made me feel alive.

Our fourth night in the wilderness carried a chill that lasted into the morning, cold enough for a frost. I dressed with the anticipation of the summer sun’s warmth: bathing suit and vest. My father and brother had groggily left their beddings and packed, though they were slow compared to me. I was the first in the water, and I eagerly led them in my blue kayak through the rips. When it is overcast, as it was then, reading a river can be difficult. The gray sky makes the water a near-black shade, making it almost impossible to see any rocks submerged just beneath the surface. Still, I do not make many mistakes when it comes to reading rivers: I had only hit three rocks over 120 miles and six days. My father tried following my path, though he was slower and had less response time. My brother’s red ship attempted other paths I would not take, and he hit many more rocks. I glided over most issues, while they weighed more and floated lower, gouging deep marks into their boats.

When we reached the site, I imagined that the men from the old logging camp had stayed in a cabin with a black cast-iron stove, keeping warm on cold nights, huddled around, drinking coffee and eating out of cans. When they finished a can, they threw it out the door of the cabin. For them, it was only a temporary place; they had stayed long enough to clear-cut the ancient forest for miles around before being moved elsewhere along the waterway by their company. Horse-drawn barges carried supplies and men up the shallow river, while canoes and longboats carried them down. The man-made waterway was created for logging.
couple of earthen dams had prevented water from flowing toward the main river and had formed a large lake and river system—all for the benefit of man.

When we arrived at the site, I asked my brother and father if they had ever wondered what this place would have looked like when it was all clear-cut.

“Of course,” my father replied. “It was all tree stumps at one time.”

“I never really thought about it,” my brother said plainly.

I looked around, taking in the scene. “Imagine that all of this,” I said, “for miles, was tree stumps and mud, and the sky was gray. There was nothing around. All the animals would have abandoned the area, and mud would have gone into the rivers. The place would’ve been—hell. But it would have been great, too. I don’t know.” They looked at me like they didn’t understand. “I’m not saying it’s great that all the trees were gone,” I continued, “it’s just that—I don’t know—that the area would have been so much different. That makes it interesting.” More than interesting, I thought; the emptiness of the landscape would have been fantastical, an eerie wasteland with not a living creature around for miles. Having gotten what they wanted, the loggers would have moved on, like any predator. Decades later, a new forest grew, and the mass murder was overcome; this was what I was thinking when my father pointed toward something in the river.

“What’s that?” he asked.

I saw whiteness and at first I thought it was quartz, and then wondered aloud if it were a plastic bag, perhaps one of ours. My father and brother said they hadn’t dropped anything. I draped my leg over the lip of the kayak; my sandal patting against the water’s surface as I looked at the white object again. I reached for it with some kind of honest selfishness, fearing that another would take whatever it was. Yet no one would do such a thing, I realized, as the primal instinct to grab and bring close took over.

It was a wolf skull. The teeth and lower jaw were intact, and the thing seemed to have been placed there just moments before. It was nearly impossible to find both a small skull and jaw in the shallows of a massive river with a strong current, especially after the heavy rains. Somehow, I had not seen the whiteness in the water when I brought my boat to shore. Somehow, I’d gone over it with my kayak and had not harmed it. And, somehow, my kayak moved just enough for my father to notice the whiteness and ignite my interest.

What had intrigued me about that side of the river an hour before—an old camp filled with artifacts, a wood stove, and the foundations of buildings covered in mosses of varying greens—was nothing compared to this discovery. This miraculous skull was an entertainment. I thought about how the wolf may have come to the water’s edge and been killed by some watcher, or that the youth might have drowned and washed up on the bank. Despite the cause, the little creature’s hair and flesh had been removed, and its other bones had probably been consumed entirely.

An hour or so later, we stopped at a beaver dam that was blocking the flow of a minor stream that connected into the river. There
was silt along the crater-like environ that the beaver had created. Looking into the water, I thought of how the creature could easily sever the tendons on my ankles.

My brother found the skull of one of the builders in the silt, and he and I couldn’t believe our luck. Our father, we thought, must have planted them for us to find. Of course, that was crazy, as he would not carry anything extra with him if he didn’t have to, nor would he make it so obvious that he had planted them by having them so close in time and distance from each other. Still, it was hard to believe that seven times down and we had never seen a skull, and here we had two in as many hours.

“This is impossible,” I said. “Dad, you put this here, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” he responded. “I planted that beaver skull for Tony to find. And the wolf, that was for you.”

His sarcasm was evident, but, to me, it seemed like he was lying. “I really can’t believe this, though,” I told him. “I’ve never seen a skull here. What are the chances?”

“Apparently good enough for you two to find them. Now I want to get one.” He looked around as if his quick search would grant him an animal skull of his own.

I looked for a beaver skull along the crater, but saw none. In the deeper parts, there were pieces of quartz that I managed to pick up, always wishing them to be a skull. I thought I saw a beaver swim quickly across my path beneath the still surface. I went back to the dam and stood on it, so as to be above water—a severed tendon will snap up inside the leg and become hard to retrieve.

A few minutes later, we got back into our kayaks and traveled farther down the river, stopping at a site that was set about twenty feet above the water. The path up went over some precariously placed rocks on a sandy incline. I’d arrived first, taking the shortest route possible, cutting right across the river.

This turned out to be a poor decision. While crossing, I’d seen that there were some rocks in places where none had been before. I’d stood up in my kayak to see that there were three sandbars that were only covered with a few inches of water. Things had changed since my last visit.

The river was low that year, though the rains were heavy and the waters had been running at about thirty miles per hour a couple of weeks before. The turbulence was evident: the typical places that the sandbars lay were completely redrawn; deep channels with larger rocks were on the eastern side of the river. The debris, including smaller stones, pebbles, and sand, had been violently removed.

I’d passed over the sandbars, struggling, pushing hard into the rocks with my paddle so that I would arrive first. I was scratching up my kayak, and I could have turned back, or slipped between the river’s obstacles, but I’d wanted to be the first one there—the first of our family to experience the site that year. The canoe veered close to an island on the west bank and was able to cut into a channel that led right to the site, where I remained in my kayak and waited.

My father and brother finally arrived, as well as two men in a canoe who said that they had seen a dead deer on the northern silt—the side closest to us. I asked if my brother and father wanted to go with me to take a look at the thing. Their faces were red, and sweat was falling onto the gray rocks beneath them. They both told me they were fine.

My father suggested a plan. “Go along the bank and cross the river to get to the island. You can probably walk across since the island is so close to shore.”

Deciding to try my father’s idea, I got out of the kayak and brought along the camera that he had been letting me “borrow” for years. I ran upstream along the high riverbank, crushing pinecones on the clean trail. I stopped when I could see the resemblance of a body, and looked down at the black river. There was no way to cross, as the water was deep and the muck near the island would be impossible to get through. A tree had fallen and spanned part of the space, but I could tell it would not hold my weight. The top of the tree was removed, and I wondered if it had broken off when the water level was high, or when some person had climbed out and fallen.

I looked to the islet and what it hid; a grayish-brown mass was surrounded by green stalks of marsh grass that I could see from my place on the bank. I felt an urgency to get to it, and hurried back to the site for my kayak. I pushed it out, got in, and sped toward what I thought would make for a great picture.
The current seemed stronger and I felt my muscles straining hard, pulling me toward what I wanted. The blue bow separated the blades of green, and the little teeth of the grass made scratching sounds as they were moved aside. I quickly looked back to see if the others could see me; the bend in the river and the high bank obscured their view. I was alone.

The brown and gray tones of the animal became more prevalent as I pushed closer, becoming my only focus. There was complete silence as the craft glided into the silt and I peered through the grass. My feet sunk deep into the muck, but I moved forward like it had no effect. Before seeing the body in full, I stopped and thought about what it might look like.

Taking a few more steps brought it into clear view: its feet to me, its head to the left. A leg had been torn from its socket, the skin cracked open, exposing where the joint should meet. The eye was missing and the ribs were protruding. The belly was nearly nonexistent. Hair had been washed away, but there were some tufts left: brown on the tips, and white near what used to be white skin. There were no flies, no maggots consuming it. The deer was mummified in the summer sun.

Deer make a lot of noise when they are going through the woods—whether running or not. They tend to hit every branch that’s on the ground, and their hooves hit every rock. They breathe heavy, spewing mist on cool gray mornings. The pines they pass become wounded, and sap sticks to their coats. If they see some biped, they will pause. The bucks will snort loudly and prance off into some thicket, flaring their white tails. The does are braver and will stay around to watch. This works to their disadvantage, as hunters easily kill females. Any deer that has seen one of their own shot is likely to run from the sound of humans.

The baby followed its mother, not even being chased by some predator, but just trying to keep up. Together they crashed through the low branches leaving an obvious trail, complete with hair on the cracked limbs. The two got to the river just after the flood and tried to cross for whatever reason they had. They were afraid, as the river was moving extremely fast, though not as quickly as a few days before—the water had since dropped a couple of feet. Roots were exposed all along the muddy banks, and sections were collapsing. The grass in the woods had been submerged so its strands were tinted gray and brown, all seemingly combed and carefully placed in uniform lines. Small debris and foam careened downriver.

After a few moments of trying to tread water, the baby gave up, consumed by the river that pushed it beneath the surface and crashed it into rocks. It inhaled water and bled, becoming unconscious in seconds. That was what must have happened.

When an object is in moving water, there is a space right behind it that has a suction-effect, bringing in passing things for a moment. After traveling some distance, the waters had quieted in this spot, and the body was caught up by the suction and pulled back onto the island. So, there it lay.

I stood, examining the creature from a distance a while longer. I broke myself from it long enough to take some pictures using a film camera—probably one of the last ones left in the age before digital. I got close, taking detailed shots of its head, neck, ribcage, spine, and the dislocated limb. The spine was articulated through the dry reddish-black skin; I had not noticed how many colors this body entertained until looking at the spine. Again, I removed myself and viewed the scene, then took a final picture of the deer lying there, making sure to encompass it all.

I felt alone, which is what I thought I had wanted. I was drawn to the deer in a way unfamiliar to me: it was causing a powerful current like a boulder in rushing water, sucking me in. Viewing the deer after that final photo, I thought, this is perfect peace. Its horrid story did not pain me; it was interesting, and now its life was over.
The scene was beautiful, the turbulent river had calmed, and the brutal final moments of the deer were passed. I wanted to gain some type of positive insight, but the soft surroundings of the deer’s resting place were not enough, nor would they stay the same. I was frozen, looking at the body as a whole. The scene absorbed me and the pictures might have later done the same had I not decided that I would leave them undeveloped. The film, I realized, contained a putrid shock quality—still images that would ruin my memory.

I got back into the kayak, washed my feet in the cool water, and let the river take me slowly back to my father and brother. I thought about how I had come there to be away from civilization, to escape the everyday hassles that consume life. I’d considered going on a future trip by myself to live in the wild like some character from a Jack London story, but now I knew that there was something obvious I would miss, something vital. Being in the solitude of the wilderness, like the deer, had its splendor, yet the animal had struggled to be with its own. Thinking of the deer in its horrendous beauty—a life extinguished and a body changed then preserved—I knew I would never go down the river alone.
Why? Asks the syringe suspending
A tear from its piercing neck.
Not quite ready to let go.

The scalpels seem un stirred, marred
In flesh and bags of blood simply wait,
Scarlet with anticipation.

The tiles, sanitized,
Stained with the last drops of life.
Soon to be wiped forgetful,
Bouncing numbing lights.

The monitor grieves aloud.
Penetrating all,
A wailing death knell.

They all plead.
Badger beg and bargain.
Doctor, they say,
You must know why.
You must.

He looks at the gauze packed tightly.
Meticulous four inch squares,
Desperate to stay in control.

The mask and the cap,
The gown and gloves.
All seek answers.
All.

Shock
SOHEIL JAMSHIDI | POETRY
Untitled

KATE THURSTON | PRINTMAKING | LINE ETCH WITH SUGAR LIFT | 12" x 12"
Walls of China

ERICA ROBINSON | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 16” x 6”
On The Couch

DEBRA BRANDZEN MAREK | PAINTING | OIL | 18” x 14”
Marlboro Dan

DANIEL MALONEY | PRINTMAKING | SILKSCREEN | 12" x 19"
Waiting

GRANT H. FERRO | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 16” x 11”
Hide and Seek

SEAN LEARY | DIGITAL MEDIA | VECTOR DRAWING | 13.5” x 10”
Cage Chair

THOMAS W. MOORE | SCULPTURE | PLYWOOD & PLEXIGLASS | 15” x 14” x 29”
Will You Have Some Tea?

MICHAEL KILLEEN | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 13.5" x 10.25"
Friends

MARY LAWRIE SHEA | CERAMICS | WHEEL-THROWN & HAND-CARVED | 3” x 3” x 8”
Caught in Transition

STEPHANIE LAWRENCE | MIXED MEDIA | ACRYLIC & PAPER | 20” x 24”
As it burns through its newfound path
She laughs
    And    rests her head on her backward bent forearm
Her left breast is bare and the beads favor the company of the right
Her eyebrows convey more emotion than her eyes
The gold encased gem grazes her jaw line
Her hand extends to stroke the silk petals that lie gracefully in her crevices
The smoke of her cigarette blown so far from her mouth
Aches to return
The beads so delicate that
If she were to hang from them
It would be a most elegant death
Untitled

JASON R. GREGORY | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 20” x 16”
On July 29, 1999, Timothy “Tippy” Sullivan was killed in a car accident in Warner, New Hampshire. He was seventeen years old. The two essays that follow were written by members of Tippy’s family as they attempt to come to terms with his passing. The first was written by his mother, the second by his older sister. Both authors are currently undergraduates at Bridgewater State College.
We had gathered as a group, as was now the custom, at the cemetery after my father’s anniversary Mass. He had died four years before on Christmas Day, and there we were, two days after Christmas. Individuals took turns at the grave saying prayers, crossing themselves, and then stepping back into groups along the edge of the burial area. I noticed my daughters separate from their cousins, shivering in the cold, not speaking. My husband had wandered off someplace.

It was my turn at the grave. I stepped forward, closed my eyes, and started to say an “Our Father.” Somewhere after “Thy will be done,” I lost focus and started thinking about other things: the weather, laundry, if my car needed an oil change, and what my sister was serving for lunch. After an appropriate amount of time, I crossed myself and opened my eyes.

I looked at my father’s gravestone. It was still the same; all pertinent information listed. To the right of his name was my mother’s. All information listed except date of death; she was still with us. It had been a snow-free December, a fact that normally would have cheered me, but not at this moment. After reading the stone, my gaze wandered to my feet. Directly in front of me, where my father’s coffin had been buried, there was the precise rectangle that had been carved out of the dirt. The small box holding my son’s cremated remains had been placed over my father, then the sod was returned. There hadn’t been enough time for the ground to blend back, for the grass to knit together and conceal the scarred earth. The powers that be could have at least had the decency to provide snow cover so that I wouldn’t have to see it.

My mother appeared at my side. We both stood there staring at the graves as if something magical might happen.

“How you doing, Ma?” I asked.

“I can’t believe he’s been gone four years,” she said, referring to my father.

I nodded. The thing that I really couldn’t believe was that my mother was still alive. I didn’t think she’d last a month without my father. When my son died I thought the shock might end her. Not so. She was still ticking.

“You haven’t had the stone engraved yet.”

Also, there was nothing wrong with her eyesight. The opposite side of the stone was to be engraved with my son’s name. It was blank. “No, I haven’t done that yet.”

“It’s been nearly five months. It needs to be done.”

“I’ll get to it,” I said.

“If it’s a matter of money, I’ll pay for it.”
“It’s not about the money.”

“Well, see to it then.”

My mother walked off toward the cars, signaling an end to our graveside visitation. We were going to my sister Lisa’s house for the Murphy family Christmas party. We had combined two tedious family obligations into one day. We were efficient, if nothing else.

I stood for a moment, staring at the rectangle as people shuffled off to their cars. Then I raised my head looking for my family. Tara, Maeve, and Bridget were still huddled together, lips turning blue from the cold because, as usual, they were not dressed for the weather. I scanned the cemetery looking for the lone figure of my husband. He was off in another section, meandering amongst headstones of strangers, smoking a cigarette. I told my frozen daughters to get in the car and I walked over to get my husband. It was past noon. He needed to eat.

It was just over a week until Memorial Day. Spring’s brief visit to New England seemed as if it was ending; tulips and daffodils were wilting on their stalks, and the buds on the lilac bushes were forming. But in the mid-afternoon, when the wind shifted and picked up, blowing over the chop of Buzzard’s Bay, the chill of it forced me off my mother’s deck and back into the sunroom. My timing was perfect; Mom came in from the kitchen carrying cups of tea just as I pulled the heavy slider closed.

“Why are you closing the doors?” she asked.

“Cold wind has picked up.”

My mother carefully set down the cups, hers on the end table next to her customary chair, mine on the glass-topped dining table in the center of the room. With a nod she indicated that I should sit in the seat directly in front of her. She had a clear view of everything in her domain: the neighbor’s yard, the street, her walkway, and the long stretch of water facing west with distant views of a lighthouse and the faint outline of the town of Marion. Those instructed to sit in the chair that I had reluctantly lowered myself into were going to get the third degree. I was prepared for it even before I walked through the door. I’d had forewarnings from my sister. My mother was on a tear.

She took a sip of her tea. It was scalding hot, the way she always drank it, but she took a mouthful without a wince as she examined me over the rim.

“You’re not drinking your tea.”

“I’m waiting for it to cool down a bit,” I said.

She carefully placed her teacup on the table next to her seat and turned back toward me, her hands clasped together in her lap. Her shoulders were square and the line of her mouth was straight and thin.

When I had arrived fifteen minutes before, she had greeted me with a kiss and asked for a report on my family. I quickly updated her on all the news: Tara had withdrawn from Plymouth State, but she would return to college next semester; Maeve and Bridget were still adjusting to their new schools, but they were making friends; my husband was still dealing with depression, but he had entered grief counseling. My mother asked pointed questions, expecting concise answers. I could have no problem for which I didn’t also have a clear, linear path to resolution. Now that those polite inquiries were out of the way, any affectations of warm and fuzzy motherhood were gone.

“You’ve gained more weight,” she said.

“Thanks for pointing that out,” I replied. “I thought the washing machine was shrinking all my clothes. Mystery solved.”

“Don’t be flip, Diane. This concerns me. There is heart disease in this family and extra weight puts you at risk,” my mother said, picking up her tea and taking another sip of the black brew. My mother was Australian and complained that American tea was too weak. She filled her cup halfway and squeezed the bag to get out every last bitter drop. With just a splash of milk and a touch of sugar, it must have tasted like rocket fuel.

I sighed and braved a mouthful of my tea. As soon as my lips touched the liquid, I pulled back. It was still hotter than hell.

“Lisa tells me that she’s been by the cemetery and the stone has yet to be engraved,” my mother began. “At Christmas you said you were going to see to the matter.”

“I intend to,” I said. “I’ve just been busy.”

“This shouldn’t be a time-consuming matter. It’s quite simple, really. As I said before, if it’s a matter of money....”

“Money’s not the issue. Besides, what’s the damn hurry? Why can’t I do it when I’m ready?”
There was silence except for the soft clack of my mother’s teacup on the side table. Her eyes focused on me, but I wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“‘It needs to be done. There’s no sense in delaying,’” she said. “‘Besides, having your son lying in an unmarked grave is disrespectful. Disgraceful, really.’”

She had a valid point, but I still didn’t feel like I had the strength to do it. I glanced over at my teacup and I could still see steam rising. I couldn’t even drink my tea to fill the awkward silence.

And then my mother began to speak. People had often remarked how much they loved her accent. I’d never heard it—she always sounded like my mother to me—but as she started to tell her story, I could hear the Australian in her voice.

“At the beginning of the war, they took all our men to protect England against the Germans. They left us vulnerable, just women, children, and old people. We were scared to death, frightened that Japan would invade, and there we were, sitting ducks. We were so happy when the American soldiers came.”

I looked at my mother as she spoke, but she was focused to a spot over my shoulder, staring at the neighbor’s yard as if it had transformed to a beach with the blue Pacific stretched out and she was searching for ominous signs of Japan’s approach.

“I was engaged to a boy. He was beautiful. Blond, blue-eyed, tall. I loved him.” Her eyes darted to meet mine. “Not like I loved your father,” she quickly added. “Your father was everything to me.” I nodded in acknowledgement. Her gaze drifted to her hands, folded in her lap.

“He was a pilot. His plane went down in the sea. They never recovered his body or the bodies of the others on board. Their graves are in some dark hole in the bottom of the ocean. No marker. Nothing to say that they lived. That they mattered to someone.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. I told my mother that I was sorry about her fiancé. That it was sad that all those boys left and never came back. And then I told her that I’d get the stone carved within the week.

I took a sip of my tea; it was still hot, but I drank it anyway. My mother continued looking down at her hands for a moment and then released a sigh and reached for her tea. Her eyes focused over my shoulder to the neighbor’s yard.

“I must ask, Diane, why is getting the stone engraved such a dreaded task? Why have you kept putting it off?”

I really wasn’t sure how to answer that. In situations like this reactions and emotions don’t always follow rational thought. I gave the only answer that I could think of: “If you write it, it becomes real.”

She turned toward me and sat back in her chair. I heard the scrape of her teacup on the end table. I shifted my gaze to a blank spot on the wall somewhere in between the faux-nautical knick-knacks hanging there. She sighed again before speaking. “Diane, really, you were always one given to fancy. This is real and you have to deal with it. It’s unpleasant, tragic actually, dying so young.”

I didn’t respond. I remained still, my dull stare fixed on the wall.

“Your family is hanging on by a thread. The girls need you to hold things together, keep them moving forward. For their sake, you can’t roll in a ball and pretend it didn’t happen.”

My first impulse was to rise to my own defense. I had been handling everything for the past ten months. My mother had no idea what I had been through, and I hadn’t the energy to try to explain it to her. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. All she would see was the unmarked grave.

I rose from my chair and stood in front of the sliding glass door. The wind was still kicking up the harbor, and a lobster boat was pulling traps right off the shore in front of my mother’s house. There was no sound in the room for a few minutes. There was no sighing or scraping of teacups while I stood watching the lobsterman work.

“So, you’re doing all right, then,” she said.

Looking back over my shoulder to where my mother was sitting, our eyes met—hers were damp and a tissue was crumpled in her fist.

“Yeah, Ma. I’m fine, really.”
When I left my mother’s house, I drove up the street and pulled over to the side of the road. After fishing my wallet out of my bag and removing a wad of papers from one of its compartments, I sorted through business cards and grocery receipts until I came across the small picture. The right side of the photo was crinkled from being in the wallet for so long. It was of my son, his first grade picture. He was grinning; his teeth seemed too big for his mouth, and his straight, blond hair fringed his forehead above his huge blue eyes. There was just a hint of rosy blush in his pale, chubby cheeks. As he had grown toward manhood, the cheeks had thinned, and the hair had darkened, as did his blue eyes to almost a cobalt shade. I kissed the picture and tucked it back in my wallet with the receipts I didn’t need and the business cards I’d never use.

Cindy at Newton Memorial was quite helpful as I ordered the engraving for the stone.

“Your son?” she asked. When I nodded she gave her condolences and remarked on how young he was. I nodded again and wondered how often she had to express sympathies. Does it get routine for her? Is she even affected by the constant sadness or is there some kind of shield she had erected for herself?

Cindy completed the order and handed me a bill. As I wrote out the check, I thought of my son whose pertinent information they would be engraving on the stone. I also thought of another young man whose grave is at the bottom of the North Sea. When it came time to make a notation on the check’s memo line, I wrote “Beautiful Blond Boy.”
For about eight years after my brother Tippy’s death, I went through periods during which I was desperate to bring him back. It usually happened in the summertime, right around the anniversary at the end of July. I didn’t mean “bring him back” in the physical sense—that’s not possible to begin with, and even if it was, it wouldn’t matter because there was nothing left of my brother but a small bag of ashes buried in Needham. I was afraid that I was forgetting Tippy—I had forgotten long ago the sound of his voice, and it was only a matter of time before the photographs began to fade and I forgot what he looked like altogether. It terrified me.

The whole idea of channeling spirits seemed about as plausible as resurrecting a zombie-Tippy, but after conducting some research and consulting some accounts of spirit readings, I decided to go to the professionals. It was either that or buy a Ouija board at Wal-Mart, I decided, and conjuring spirits on my own was not something I was prepared to do.

There was a tea room not too far from my house that had a good reputation as far as fortune-tellers were concerned. My sister Bridget went with me; she had been there a few times before. “The woman I sat with described me to a T,” she said as I drove. “She said that I was in love with someone who would break my heart, and she was right. She also said that I’m not in college right now because I have too many interests and I don’t know what I want yet. But she said I’ll know soon.”

It all sounded vague to me, and I said so. “Why didn’t she tell you what was going to happen? Wasn’t that what you paid her for?”

“That’s not how it works,” Bridget replied, clearly annoyed with my lack of knowledge in the occult. “They see flashes of a person’s life. It’s not always clear.”

I began to have second thoughts about forking over my hard-earned cash to a person who only saw flashes, but Bridget insisted that we still go. “I took the afternoon off for this,” she said. “It’ll be worth it, I promise.” We were quiet for a minute, and then Bridget asked me why I had been so insistent on seeing a psychic.

“It probably sounds weird, but I need to talk to Tippy again.”

“That’s not weird. I feel that way too sometimes.”

She spoke casually to me as she pulled a small glass bowl and a rolled-up sandwich baggie holding a little bit of weed from her purse. “Want to blaze before we go in?” She smiled and held them up as if they were a peace offering.

I shrugged. “Sure. Just wait until we park, okay?”

The building was a large Victorian-style house on a busy street. I pulled into the narrow lot and parked away from all the other cars as Bridget carefully packed the bowl, balancing everything on her lap. I hadn’t smoked in months, and I knew I would cough and embarrass myself in front of my more experienced little
sister. When she passed the pipe to me, I took a hit, singeing the side of my index finger with the lighter in the process. I held the smoke in my lungs and silently counted to five before releasing it into the cabin of my air-conditioned car.

“I’m not cut out for this anymore,” I joked between coughs, trying to ignore the searing pain in my finger. “I can’t even light a bowl properly.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” my sister replied, taking the bowl and lighter from my hands. She brought the pipe to her lips, and without bothering to light it again, she took a long hit. After she exhaled (much longer than five seconds later), she continued speaking. “I need to stop doing this so much. Maybe I’ll try next week—you know, once the anniversary has passed and everything. We have our own ways of coping, I guess. Can you believe it’s been eight years? Jesus.”

“What are you doing that day?” I asked before taking my turn, trying not to burn myself.

“Going to a 311 concert in Vermont with some people. We’ll probably stop at the crash site and smoke a blunt for Tippy.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Why? What’re you doing?”

“Visiting the grave,” I said. “Avoiding Mom and Dad. That’s what I do every year. Maybe I’ll drive up to New Hampshire or something. I hope the weather’s nice.”

“It always is.”

“I know.”

We were quiet for a minute. Bridget finished what was left before declaring it cashed. She rolled down the window and tapped the ash out of the bowl. “Ready?” she asked me.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

Inside, the house was decorated with lace window dressings, rose-colored wallpaper, and strange, blurry photos of Victorian-era people on the walls. It looked like a parlor from the early 1900s, except it all seemed about as authentic as a Cracker Barrel restaurant.

There were half a dozen round tables adorned with flowers and embroidered doilies in what was, I assumed, the dining room when the house was used as somebody’s home.

A woman with long, wavy brown hair approached my sister and me. She wore a black dress with a hem that almost brushed the blue carpet. She welcomed us to the tea room and showed us to one of the small tables, handing us each a small black book as we sat down. “It’s a menu,” the woman said. I’d probably looked confused. “Take your time,” she continued. “I’ll be right back.”

I thumbed through the menu and assessed my options. There were all sorts of different readings: chart readings, tea leaf readings, aura readings, crystal ball readings…the list went on.

“What are you getting?” I asked my sister.

“Spirit reading, tarot cards, and—” she paused and furrowed her brow, “—and a palm reading.” Bridget closed her menu and set it in front of her. She took this business very seriously, I could tell.

“This house is haunted,” Bridget told me as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. “It says so in the menu. And,” she added, “I can feel it.”

I smirked. “Of course you can.”

“Don’t be so skeptical. You have to have an open mind.”

“I’m trying, Bridgie,” I said as I unsuccessfully held back laughter. “Seriously, I am.”

“The last time I was here, the woman I sat with told me that I have ‘the gift.’ She said she could tell that I have psychic abilities—that I’m sensitive to the presence of spirits.”

“Cool—maybe you don’t need to go to college,” I said. “Maybe you could get a job here as a fortune-teller.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I couldn’t tell if she was actually offended or not until she laughed and called me an asshole.

When the woman came back, I ordered the same combination that Bridget did. She was the expert, after all. The woman asked us for our first names and zodiac signs. “I’m a Libra,” Bridget said after she gave her name. “My sister Tara is a Gemini.”

The woman smiled as if she knew something that I didn’t. A moment later, I was called across the room by a different woman, whose name I learned was Jill. My psychic was tiny, at least six inches shorter than me and probably about half my weight. She wore dark blue jeans and a bright red tank top that exposed her pale arms, which were mostly covered in colorful tattoos. I waved good-bye to Bridget as she was led in the opposite direction by a different psychic.

Jill invited me into a small, bare room, hardly large enough for a couple of chairs and a table. There was a window; the blinds
were shut, but I could hear the cars whizzing by outside. The psychic tossed her long black hair over her shoulder and sat across from me. Our knees touched.

“Before each session,” she began, “I find it helps if we meditate. I want you to relax and focus on the person you hope to make contact with today. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

I had many questions, mostly concerning the validity of fortune-telling, but I shook my head anyway. Jill took my hands in hers, and we sat in silence, eyes closed. Compared to her hands, mine felt enormous, like baseball mitts, and I was overly conscious of the raw, oval burn on my finger, but somehow, after about a minute, I didn’t care about that anymore. Her pulse beat against my wrist, and I felt my heartbeat falling in sync with its rhythm.

“I need you to say your full name three times. Speak slowly and clearly.”

I cleared my throat. “Tara Murphy Sullivan,” I said. My voice shook as I spoke, but I wasn’t sure if it was because I felt completely ridiculous or because I was a little nervous that this woman might actually know what she was doing. I said my name two more times. I kept my eyes closed.

Jill began to chant softly, calling any spirits willing to speak to her on my behalf. For about a minute, there was nothing. I listened to our breathing and tried not to move my hands too much, which were getting a little sweaty, still clasped in Jill’s.

“I can feel the presence of a male spirit,” Jill said. She gripped my hands a little tighter. “He’s young,” she continued. “Fourteen or fifteen, maybe?”

“Could he be seventeen?” I asked.

“Could be,” she said.

“It might be my brother.”

“What’s his name?”

It was strange to hear him referred to in the present tense. “Tippy.”

“Tippy?”

“That’s right.”

“He’s definitely related to you—he looks so much like you,” she said, “except his eyes are blue and he has blond hair.”

For a second, I thought my heart stopped. How did she know that? Bridget and I were brunettes, and I was quite sure that my sister and I didn’t discuss Tippy’s physical appearance while we were waiting. I still wanted to believe that it was a really good guess, but a startled, “Holy shit,” escaped my lips.

“He misses you,” Jill continued. “He says...he says he’s sorry. He’s sorry for the pain he’s caused. He watches over you and your siblings...your sisters. He misses your mother, and he worries about your father.”

I opened my eyes a little so I could actually see what Jill was doing. She was sitting straight up in her chair in a way that looked uncomfortable. I didn’t doubt that she was feeling something, but I didn’t feel any different. If the spirit of my brother was in the room, I thought I would’ve felt it. It was disappointing. Her eyes were still closed, so I shut mine once again.

“He’s talking very fast,” she said. “I’m having trouble understanding what he’s saying. And he’s wheezing—did he die because of a chest injury? Did he have asthma?”

I didn’t want to tell her how he died—I wanted her to tell me. It seemed like cheating, but I told her anyway. “Car wreck,” I said. “Could’ve died for a lot of different reasons, but I think it was the brain stem injury that did him in.”

“Was he driving?” she asked.

“No,” I said, and wondered how she could know some details but not others. I was beginning to think that I had made a mistake coming to this place.

“He says that he felt no pain,” she continued. “It was over quickly and he never suffered.”

This, I knew, was untrue. At home, I had a copy of the police report. It was eighty-two pages long, and I read it several times a year. It included hospital records, the paramedics’ notes, and interviews held with the witnesses and family members. For me, the most difficult part of the report to read was the detailed testimony of the elderly couple who discovered the car upside-down in the woods. George and Jeanne Hallenborg—I had never met them, but thought about them often. In her handwritten statement, Mrs. Hallenborg described seeing my brother: “I saw a young man lying half-out of the rear window. His face was bloody, and when I spoke, he uttered a moan. I would like to think my words were reaching him, but I can’t be sure.” She and her husband waited at the scene until the paramedics arrived. It was almost four in the morning. Three hours later, my brother would die at Concord hospital. Tippy had suffered. I wished I could believe otherwise, but I knew too much.
After the accident, I strove to understand what had happened. I had always found comfort in knowledge; it gave me a sense of control. The accident was something different. While I knew most of the details, there were still a few things that I didn’t know, and the only people who could answer my questions were either dead or permanently brain-damaged. I knew everything I could possibly know about the accident, but still, I had no closure. And suddenly, sitting in a tiny room with a psychic, it dawned on me: it didn’t matter. None of this mattered. Nothing I did would ever bring him back. I had to let go.

I opened my eyes. “I’m glad he didn’t suffer.” I didn’t know what else to do but play along.

Jill smiled. “He has a lot to say about you,” she said, laughing a little. “He’s telling me how smart you are—how you could do anything. You were his best friend, he says. He’s been trying to contact you over the years, but he doesn’t think you’ve been noticing.”

“Did he ever make the toilet flush on its own? I noticed that.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

She paused. “He’s saying something about a John…who’s John?”

“My ex-boyfriend,” I answered automatically.

“Your brother doesn’t care for him much.”

“That’s understandable. John’s a prick.”

“But you still love him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

Jill opened her eyes. She gazed at me for a moment before shaking her head. “No. You still love him. Stay away from John. He’ll try to contact you within a year, and when he does, you cannot meet with him. He’ll only hurt you. He almost destroyed you.” For the first time during our session, Jill released my hand and rubbed her neck. Her breathing sounded strained.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” she began, “when there’s a strong connection between myself and a client, I can feel things. Are you the one with breathing problems? Have you had any injuries that impaired your breathing?”

I nodded. “Yeah, well, kind of… I tried to kill myself. Over a year ago. I tried to hang myself.”

“Because of John?”

“Because of a lot of things.”

“I can feel the cord around my neck,” she said.

It was actually a belt, but I didn’t say so.

“Your brother says it wasn’t your time,” she continued.

Well, obviously, I thought, and hoped she wasn’t able to read my mind.

“He has to go now. He’s waving good-bye.”

I wondered what else he had to do; I couldn’t imagine him having a particularly busy schedule as he floated around in the spirit world. But then I realized that a half hour had passed. Our time was up and the spirit reading was over. I felt the muscles in my throat constrict, and I tried not to cry. I wanted her to tell him I loved him, but the whole idea seemed unnatural to me. I had said good-bye eight years before. There was no way to bring him back, I thought again, and that was something that I would just have to accept. When I thought about it that way, it was strangely comforting.

When I met Bridget at the front desk, she was paying her tab.

“How was your reading?” she asked as she handed her money to the same woman who greeted us an hour before.

“It was interesting.”

“Did she contact Tippy?”

I nodded. “I think so.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yeah,” I said after a pause. “I did.”

———
Brownie

CHANTEL BETTERTON | PHOTOGRAPHY | INFRARED | 10" x 8"
I’m warming myself against the continually flowing snow. It is just above my ankles and just below the dog’s chest; he carefully steps. Looking upon the deadened, dry area of the earth, he finds the shadow of a tree at the end of a garden and barks.

We stay on the road until I hear the familiar creaking of the old, broken tree under the weight of the icy-falling. It leans against another tree, snapped at the trunk, rocking slightly, producing the uninterrupted noise of timber stretching in the cold as we draw closer. I pace to the side, avoiding the tree, and we approach the vacant field.

I unleash the dog and he speeds and scampers across the cresting, scattering white. He ignores the sea of dirty snow trailing behind his ever-moving paws. Running and jumping, biting at snowflakes that won’t be caught, he only stops to clumsily flip his head back and make sure I’m there. The wind mats his faun coat and hits his eyes until he winces, but he begins running again, with specific direction.

Fearless, he runs across a seemingly lifeless field, clean of any footprints except his own. The field, surrounded by the forest: an open and exposed threat to any wild animal that steps out. A bird circles overhead, a hawk. The dog barks with a low growl toward the woods, eyes unblinking, aware of something I am not.
I stalk up behind him and try to snap the leash on quickly, but he struggles to get at what he sees. I need to pick him up. “Otis! Stop!” I yell. He refuses. His collar slips over his head as he pulls backward. He turns, chasing toward the woods. I have no control. He stops a few feet away and just barks, over and over, each bark snarling out slower, more emphasis on the in-between growl.

Looking over the concealing brush, I see a movement in the forest at my knee level. I run toward the dog and grasp his tail, catching him immobile. Stepping and rebalancing to hold onto him, I hear a squeal from underneath the heel of my boot. There’s a red flash at the edge of the tree line, a fox running back to the woods. I look down at the creature I have crushed. I swoop the dog into my arm and back away from the no-longer squealing patch of fur, now pressed deeply into snow. I secure the dog in my arms like a burping baby over my shoulder and move closer to the mousey-looking creature. It’s smaller than my palm, unmoving except for the constant, constant shivering. Its tiny black eyes reflect the sun with a glow. Under the ice, it will die from the cold, the fox, or me—if I was merciful. But I’m not. I unravel a scarf and cradle the absurd creature, a vole; its face looks afraid, but it’s too injured to move.

When we arrive home, I find a crisp cedar log and set it into the iron wood stove. Otis stretches out on the rug in front of the fire, bares his belly to the flames, and falls asleep panting. I find the former fish’s tank from the cellar and blanket it with newspaper. The vole remains shuddering in my hand and I give him peanut butter on a stick before letting him down. He scampers around, almost like Otis. I let a racing hope flash through my mind that he was just terrified and frozen. But I see the way he waddles, dragging his back two legs. His spine is broken; he will die in the night. He looks back up with the beaded eyes. I grant him more peanut butter before I sit in the big chair by the soft-smelling flames. The dog is curled around my feet, and the vole will soon be gone, our time together remembered only by me. I let where the mind goes, go, as the flames burn down to cinder, to ash, and finally out. I let the heart stay colder than the fire.

Late in the evening, the snow has stopped and the vole has died. I touch him and he’s no longer warm or soft, a stiff little patch of fur that’s not even frozen, eyes closed. I wonder if my death will be as compassion-filled and pointlessly peanut-buttered as his last day. I lose words searching for the future of us embraced animals. I think of how others have welcomed the cold days and the fires that sometimes warm us, and how the dog knows everything he needs to know, lying by the hearth. Even if others let their hearts melt and freeze in cycles like seasons, we’re cold.

It’s midnight and twenty-seven degrees. The vole is dead in the fish tank and the dog is still curled in his living room spot. I don’t sleep like the dog, next to the corpse. I stay awake until I have nothing else I can do. I move quietly. The dog barks when the door creaks open, but I lose sight of him behind me. With corpse in hand, I return through the snow-ridden black night. The sky is dark. This was the last terrible cold day this creature will know, and now there will finally be warmth. He’ll be digested. I leave him in the woods where I saw the fox. This time, I feel no fear at the wood’s edge.
Self-Portrait

LAUREN HALL | PRINTMAKING | SILKSCREEN | 18” x 24”
The annual John Heller Award was established in 2003 to recognize a student whose body of work exemplifies excellence. The award received its name from one of our most beloved and distinguished faculty. Professor John Heller taught in the department of Art from 1968 to 2001. He was an inspired artist, a dedicated, gifted teacher, and an unselfish giver of his time, wisdom and expertise.
Lost

MARY LAWRIE SHEA | CERAMICS | WHEEL-THROWN & ALTERED | 5" x 5" x 10"
A Path Through the Woods

JEAN CABRAL | PAINTING | ACRYLIC | 6" x 6"
Hand-Dyed Scarf #2

LISA ARNOLD | WEAVING | HAND-DYED FABRIC | 10” x 72”
Ladybug

Laurie A. Riley | Jewelry | Fused Glass & Silver | 7.5” x 1.25”
Tinkerbell

JASON R. GREGORY | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY | LIGHT PAINTING | 8” X 10”
Self-Portrait Box
SARAH HAAG | SCULPTURE | WOOD & PLASTER | 31" X 6" X 8"
White open doors;
Carnations red,
Blushing cheek

Doors
I have left
Unfold for you.

“White open doors,”
Spoke the church bells
Spoke the girls in the yard,
Spoke the birds in song

White
In bloom
For your presence;

White open doors,
To the great wilting
In my need
Robert Atwan is Director of The Blue Hills Writing Institute at Curry College and the series editor of the prestigious anthology *The Best American Essays*, which he founded in 1985. His essays, reviews, and critical articles have appeared in *The New York Times; The Los Angeles Times; The Atlantic Monthly; The Iowa Review; The Denver Quarterly; The Kenyon Review; River Teeth*; and many other publications. His edited books include *The Writers’ Presence; America Now; Ten on Ten: Major Essayists on Recurring Themes; Our Times; Convergences; and Left, Right, and Center: Voices from Across the Political Spectrum*. In January 2009, Mr. Atwan invited *The Bridge* editors to his home in Milton, MA to gather around a roaring fire and discuss his career and the art and craft of the essay. Editors Kyle and Matthew were in charge of the questions. All of the editors helped maintain the fire.
The Bridge | Tell us a little bit about your education. Where’d you go to school?

Atwan | My parents insisted I attend parochial schools, so growing up I had nuns and priests most of the time. I went to college for five years and I never started a September the same way as the previous September. I started by studying engineering, then I took a year off and worked full time while I went to evening school to study sociology, earned some money, paid tuition, changed majors and colleges again, then I went back to Seton Hall, which had a Paterson campus at the time, and that’s where I finally graduated with English honors in 1963. After that, I went to graduate school at Rutgers for English and stopped at the master’s level, though I satisfactorily completed all the doctoral course work and exams.

The Bridge | You mentioned bouncing around through a few different majors. When did you choose to study English?

Atwan | I became an English major my junior year and I had to take a lot of courses to catch up. But I’d been reading all through. I was a philosophy minor, also.

The Bridge | What made you ultimately settle upon English?

Atwan | I decided to do something that many people don’t do in life: I decided to do what came easiest. English was very pleasurable, and it was just something I could do without a lot of exertion. I was simply good at it. I could read poems and novels and interpret them and write papers. And I could do this and hold part-time jobs at the same time. When I was in high school, and when I was a first year engineering student, I didn’t know that people could major in writing and literature. I was the first person in my family to go to college, the first person in my whole family to get an education past high school. My parents were both factory workers in Paterson, New Jersey, the blue-collar, working-class community where I grew up. My father, who was a skilled machinist, thought if you went to college you studied engineering. And then for me to find out that I could actually get a college degree reading novels? Wow!

The Bridge | How about extracurriculars?

Atwan | I was editor of the literary magazine, called Wings. I did that my junior and senior years. I also played varsity baseball for one year and basketball for two.

The Bridge | When did you actually decide to become an editor?

Atwan | I had a lot of success teaching freshman composition at Rutgers and I was pretty good at it. Some friends of mine and I were among the first to start using popular materials in the classroom. Instead of starting by reading Shakespeare or Conrad, as was common back then, we started analyzing ads from popular magazines and identifying their audiences and how the ads worked strategically, and then we moved on to newspapers and best sellers. A friend and I wrote a proposal for a textbook based on our methods, sent it to Oxford University Press and they accepted it. It was called Popular Writing in America: The Interaction of Style and Audience and it was published in 1974. It’s still in print. After that, I decided to work full time on college textbooks. I’ve since published college books with McGraw Hill, Random House, Longman’s, St. Martin’s, and others—that was all before I started Best American Essays.

The Bridge | Could you tell us about what your job as series editor entails?

Atwan | There’s a guest editor every year and that guest editor is required to read approximately one hundred essays, and then choose about twenty from that pool for the book. So my job is basically to go through all the national periodicals and select the hundred that I consider best and submit these to that person. To do that, I probably screen about three hundred, three hundred fifty essays, and pick the ones that I think will have the best chance of being selected. The fact is that there aren’t a lot of essays published in a given year that are of really high literary quality. So I actually find, say, perhaps sixty really first-rate essays, but we do one hundred because that’s sort of a generous sampling and gives the guest editor a chance to look at a variety of topics and forms. But essentially in any given year I think I see only about fifty to sixty really, really solid literary essays.

The Bridge | So why do you think it’s so difficult to be published if the quality isn’t very high? And does that mean that these periodicals are publishing primarily works that are average or less?

Atwan | The New Yorker isn’t. It depends on the periodicals that you’re looking at. Many periodicals, such as The Nation, The New Republic, and Commentary, are dealing with the political world and not publishing essays, most likely. They’re publishing articles, political commentary. When I’m talking about essays, I’m referring mainly to the essay as a work of literature. That’s what the series is devoted to. The kinds of things that Emerson...
wrote, Montaigne wrote, Robert Stevenson, E.B. White, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin. That’s a different animal from the general prose you find in most of the magazines, even The New Yorker. I want the series to showcase the kind of literary, reflective, personal essay that is a work of literature. There aren’t many periodicals that publish these, nor, I should add, even want to. Most periodicals are interested in journalism, up-to-date reporting, not literary essays.

**The Bridge |** Why do you think that is?

**Atwan |** First of all, it’s not their bread and butter and especially not in this economy. *Atlantic*, for example, a terrific magazine, is really interested in informative articles or articles that have some sort of newsworthy quality. And it’s not looking for what magazine editors once called “navel-gazing” or “thumb-sucking” pieces. They generally, with a few exceptions, want hard news or information or interview material as opposed to a work that demonstrates a literary effort, a clear literary intention. And I’m going to complicate this by saying that so many people are writing memoir now and many of these memoiristic essays do not qualify for *Best American*. They often seem to be pieces from a longer work or something in progress. I’m finding that a lot of my guest editors would rather have reflective essays, essays about something, than have the now common “I, I, I, I.” I don’t know how many guest editors have said the equivalent of, “Bob, please don’t send me any more essays in which I see editors have said the equivalent of, “Bob, please don’t send me any more essays in which I see the word ‘I’ fifteen times on the first page.”

**The Bridge |** Should young writers avoid writing essays about themselves?

**Atwan |** No, I wouldn’t go that far, and the liberal usage of “I” doesn’t mean the piece is bad. Henry David Thoreau used “I” throughout all of his works, but when experiences are entirely mundane and so particularized to an individual, readers will think: “Well, you know, why should I care about your experiences unless they translate into something larger that offers me some substance for thought and reflection and experiences that more people can identify with?” I think a big problem with memoirs today is that the writers seem to take a reader’s “identification” for granted. Good writing never does that—it earns the reader’s identification. When I select the candidates for the volume, I like to see essays contending with a subject. Virginia Woolf, a great essayist, was referring to the essay when she said that “The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea.” I’m always looking for essays with “backbone.”

**The Bridge |** The idea your son had, to write a book about Facebook, was certainly a good one. He published it last year, correct?

**Atwan |** Yes. It’s called *The Facebook Book*. It’s humor, satire. He received a contract after his agent submitted it to only one or two publishers. It’s a terrific and timely book—I recommend it to students everywhere.

**The Bridge |** Was starting *Best American Essays* as easy? How did you get that off the ground?

**Atwan |** I was reviewing books then for *The New York Times Book Review* and they sent me *The O. Henry Stories* to review in 1984, I believe it was. It made me wonder why there wasn’t a similar book like that for essays. And so I wrote a proposal and after a few rejections a publisher accepted it. But one day the editor said, “Bob, I’ve got to bring up a sensitive subject. No one likes to use the word ‘essay.’ Can we call it something else?” I went back and rethought it. God, what else are you going to call it? *Best American Articles* doesn’t sound right. *Best American Nonfiction* doesn’t sound right. So I told the editor that we were just going to have to take the plunge and use the word “essay,” and the publishers said, “Okay, we’ll take a chance. We’ll give you a contract for two years. If at the end of two years, we don’t sell anything, we’ll kill the series.” So I had two years and I made sure the anthology was literary, one that would attract literary people. The first guest editor was Elizabeth Hardwick, a very talented novelist and essayist herself and very prominent in the New York literary world, and the second year I went to Gay Talese, who was considered a founder of New Journalism. It worked. After that, about five, six years later I noticed magazines had begun using the word “essay” in their tables of contents. They’d been avoiding the “E-word” because it reminded people of what they had to write in school. The term was used as a pejorative.

**The Bridge |** In your 2005 foreword, you disclosed your initial uncertainty about the series’ longevity. When exactly did you realize that it was here to stay?

**Atwan |** I guess after about the fifth year I knew it was going to stick around. But the first year was very sketchy. No one knew about it. It didn’t get promoted very well. It was a good idea to get Gay Talese to do the second year because that got more attention due to the popularity of literary journalism. And we got some reviews. Anthologies are not often reviewed.

**The Bridge |** In the same foreword, 2005, you mentioned that going into the second edition you felt like you had boosted the spirit of the essayists. Do you think that was key in getting the material so that you could continue the series?

**Atwan |** I believe, and many people have told me this, that the
In my graduate school you read Ralph Waldo Emerson, but you did not read him as an essayist. Nobody even talked about him as an essayist. They talked about him as a great American writer or thinker, as a great influence. They talked about his prose. But they never discussed his genre or his craft. And this neglect of criticism kept the essay in the dark for a long time because it was considered a fourth genre. E.B. White once said that because he wrote essays, he was a second-class citizen in the republic of letters. There could be no Nobel Prize for him, since he wasn’t a dramatist, a poet, or a novelist. Those are the three genres. In the 1950s, one of the most important books of criticism at the time, *The Theory of Literature*, opened with a statement that implicitly defined literature as poems, plays, and novels. It seems that around that time, the essay was no longer being taken seriously as literature.

Yet when Fielding wrote *Tom Jones*, one of the great novels of the eighteenth century, he inserted essays between chapters every now and then throughout the book. And you know why he did that? He did it to prove he was a writer. Because he thought that anybody could write a novel. “I’m going to show you how I can really write by including these essays,” he seemed to be saying. In the eighteenth century, the essay was considered a serious literary endeavor by many.

**The Bridge** | Now *The Best American Essays* is regarded as the most important anthology of its kind. But lately, a few others have sprouted up, such as Lee Gutkind’s *Best Creative Nonfiction*. What do you think sets *BAE* apart from all the others?

**Atwan** | It’s really more dedicated to the essay as a work of literature than to nonfiction prose in general. And so the essay—its structures, its various types, the way that the author’s mind works inside the essay—these literary matters are all very important to the series. Whereas in creative nonfiction anthologies there are often lots of narrative memoirs, personal narratives, expository narratives, and so on, which years ago would not have been considered essays. So I think the series is distinguished by its dedication to looking at the essay as a craft and as a serious aesthetic form. Still, I try to concentrate on three types of essays: the personal essay, which overlaps with autobiography and memoir; the informative essay, in which you’re reading something that’s really well-written and well done, but you’re gaining information at the same time; and the polemical essay, which is your argumentative piece, but done in a way that you can still see, in a sense, the mind at work. Each volume of *The Best American Essays* usually consists of a mix of these three types of essays.

**The Bridge** | Can you elaborate on “the mind at work”?

**Atwan** | The essayists take a topic and looks at it the way, say, a cubist painter looks at objects, from all different kinds of angles and perspectives. Good essayists are able to do this, to make you see the mind in process. One of the biggest problems I’ve found when you teach freshman composition is that students have very little sense of process, so they think that they have to begin a paper with their conclusion, then in the middle part support the conclusion, and then, well…conclude. Writing essays isn’t necessarily about coming to a conclusion. Few students know how to show a mind reflecting on something and evaluating it as it’s in process. Students are rarely taught this or exposed to appropriate models of writing to gain appreciation for the process. But that’s what Montaigne did as an essayist, it’s what so many great essayists have done, and so the models are out there, but the models students follow these days are driven by news and commentary. There’s one thing you can never say to a talented essayist, and it’s “What’s your point?” Because a good essayist is going to say: “Wait, there isn’t necessarily a single point here. I’m looking at a whole bunch of things.” But in freshman composition, the worst way writing can be taught, in my opinion, is by asking students to write five paragraphs that add up to a single point. Perhaps it has its functional use—writing as utility, so to speak. But the results won’t duplicate the literary essay or the way the essayist’s mind operates.

**The Bridge** | How do you define the essay?

**Atwan** | I’ve been trying to define it for a long time. The attempt now strikes me as an unsatisfying enterprise. It’s like defining anything. If you try to define the novel, your definition leaves out seven different kinds of novels. Just try defining poetry. Basically,
briefly, the essay to me is a literary form that’s marked by a mind in the process of its own unfolding.

**The Bridge |** How do you define creative nonfiction?

**Atwan |** I never was sure what that was. It’s a term of convenience, I think. The term that I first used was “literary journalism.” That was the term that everybody used back in the sixties and early seventies. It’s an umbrella term that also included “literary nonfiction,” but it isn’t necessarily essayistic. Literary journalism or nonfiction could be a long book by Tracy Kidder on how people build houses. John McPhee has written probably twenty-five to thirty books of nonfiction, but he has published only a handful of essays in his entire career, and he would acknowledge that. Literary nonfiction and creative nonfiction are very topic driven. They, and I’ll use the terms interchangeably, consist of interviews, profiles, information-gathering. They involve a lot of skillful reporting techniques. But these are done in a much more literary fashion than standard journalism, which is trying hard not to be too literary. John McPhee, for example, might choose salmon as a topic, perhaps seeking to discover why salmon is now a major part of American cuisine, which it didn’t used to be. And then he would go research the history of salmon, visit rivers and fishermen, and conduct interviews and then he’d craft all of the information he’s gathered into a prose narrative. He called his course at Princeton The Literature of Fact, and that’s not an essayistic method. He’s collecting facts and then orchestrating and choreographing them into prose in the best possible way, but his own mind in action isn’t a significant part of his writing process as he’s doing it. The subjective mental process is largely eliminated. He’s giving you this factual, objective treatment of a subject. Still, he truly cares about the form in information.

**The Bridge |** And so the essay and creative nonfiction are not synonymous?

**Atwan |** Not really. Creative nonfiction could refer to a three hundred page book. That’s not an essay. *Walden* is not an essay. *Walden* is a nonfiction book, although you probably could make a case that the basic structures behind it are essays. Creative nonfiction just became a popular term to encompass the literary nonfiction that was coming from the New Journalism. Quite a few really good writers back in the sixties and seventies, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Lillian Ross, Hunter Thompson, began developing this form of reporting that was very personalized and impressionistic. It got them in a lot of trouble because the older and more traditional journalists couldn’t stand it. And there were some knotty legal problems because most people assume nonfiction is true.

**The Bridge |** Isn’t it?

**Atwan |** One of the biggest issues when you’re writing nonfiction is that you have to think about what it is that we can’t know. The New Journalists were doing things that seemed overly impressionistic and subjective, and Tom Wolfe was at the forefront of that. There was steady criticism, but that work really took off because it was so much more entertaining and more fun to read than the standard fare. But people lost jobs along the way, especially newspaper columnists when they began making things up. By the eighties and nineties, there was a lack of tolerance for these kinds of columns as opposed to what had been the case in the past. The essay has been damaged by this, in my opinion, because essayists no longer feel comfortable inventing characters and situations.

**The Bridge |** Was there a time when they were comfortable doing this?

**Atwan |** In the eighteenth century, when the essay was considered a solid literary form, Addison and Steele, Samuel Johnson, and Oliver Goldsmith were among the chief practitioners, and they had enormous influence on America’s first major literary essayist, Washington Irving. None of these writers had problems with making up stuff, even though they were writing for newspapers. No one said, “You can’t say that without documentation or without two witnesses,” etc. The audience was sophisticated enough to know there may be made-up characters and situations. We’ve reached this real problem, I think, with writing essays, and now with memoir, always demanding to know if something is true or not. If you’re writing something that’s verifiable, you better be careful. But if it isn’t, you have some creative room.

**The Bridge |** In the wake of the whole James Frey debacle.

**Atwan |** These liberties with factuality were going on long before he was born. But because Oprah went overboard with that book it created so much more publicity. Now there’s a new memoir scandal. Did you see the news about the Holocaust story? [Angel at the Fence, by Herman Rosenblat.]

**The Bridge |** It’s about the little girl with the apples. She would bring him apples and then they met in America and they got married.

**Atwan |** Now, what they said in *The Times* the other day is that they’re now not going to publish it as a memoir. It’s going to be published as a novel. And you think, “Wait a minute, someone writes a memoir, some parts are discovered untrue and then suddenly the same work can be called a novel?” What happened to art forms? Can you simply say, “I wrote a work of nonfiction but it had some
fictional details, so now it's a novel?” What talented writer would imagine that you could do that? The novel is an art form. It’s a literary form that is a complex and extremely difficult thing to do. You don’t just write a nonfiction narrative and say, “Oops, it’s not all true, so now I’ll just call it a novel!” These stories just show us how little critical judgment the public possesses. It’s too bad Americans as a whole aren’t better readers.

The Bridge | But if you write a nonfiction piece and it’s not one hundred percent true, what would you call it? Doesn’t “not true” equal fiction?

Atwan | Ah, now you’re getting at the heart of the problem, the heart of darkness, actually. It’s really tough to get into that. I think we need to return to a notion of the essay that allows for fictive or, say, semi-fictive characters, situations, and events. Humorous essays do this frequently. I find David Sedaris’s autobiographical humor hilariously funny, but does anyone think he’s not exaggerating and bending facts and situations for comic purposes? One of the greatest essays in American literature is Hawthorne’s preface to The Scarlet Letter, in which he writes about finding an actual scarlet letter used by Puritan officials in his office drawer, and that’s how the famous novel comes into being. Well, that never happened. Now, does that automatically make his essay a short story?

The Bridge | If you were about to go to press with Best American Essays and someone called you and said, “I confess, everything in my essay is made up,” what would you do?

Atwan | Well, that of course would depend on what’s at stake—libel? Hurtful lies? But generally I would encourage my publisher to go with it if I thought it could still be regarded as an essay. To me it’s an issue of form and genre, not truthfulness. Why couldn’t someone write an essay about intelligent life on Mars—even if we don’t have proof there is such life on Mars—couldn’t there be a speculative essay? Logical inconsistency can also be considered untruthful, but if you found such inconsistency in a political essay, would you then conclude it’s therefore not an essay but a fiction? That would be nutty, no? But, anyway, my publisher would most likely get nervous and say no. When I was working with Joseph Epstein on Best American Essays 1993, I came across an unlabeled piece and I couldn’t tell whether it was fiction or nonfiction. I assumed it was fiction, because the author was a prominent short-story writer, but it turned out to be nonfiction. And I remember Joe said something to the effect: “Well, if it were a story it would have been a real good one, but as an essay it stinks.” I thought that his remark underscored the importance of artistic criteria. A piece can’t just interchangeably move between the two genres.

As I mentioned, Addison and Steele represent the origins of the modern essay. They wrote for a newspaper and they used fictional characters and fictional events. There are responses to fictional letters that would come in from so-called readers who were also fictional. Now, what do we call what they wrote? They have never been known as short story writers. There wasn’t even a genre called the “short story” then. When the modern essay began its course in the eighteenth century with the great English periodical essayists and then was carried on into the nineteenth century by some American essayists—there was no short story. The short story evolved long after the essay. Writers like Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne developed the short story as they experimented with various kinds of essays. Writers at the time often called what they were doing tales and sketches. Hawthorne and Irving referred to their collections as “Tales and Sketches.”

The Bridge | A short while ago, you said that most readers assume that nonfiction is true. What should writers of nonfiction assume when they start writing in the genre? Should they assume that they are obligated to tell the truth? Or should they understand that maybe truth isn’t relevant in nonfiction?

Atwan | Truth is a big, troublesome word. I think that if you’re looking at what the truth is, you need to think more along the lines of literature than contemporary journalism. But literary truth isn’t veracity and accuracy and all the things you’re told in J-school or a court of law. What Hawthorne would consider the truth would be the truth of the human heart. If he were writing an essay, he wouldn’t be bothered by inventing a character or a composite character he might meet during a leisurely walk. I imagine very few readers at the time were going to say, “Well, Mr. Hawthorne Liar, you never met that person, you’re just making that person up.” Unless he was referring to a specified and named individual, readers would understand the literary or compositional purpose of the made-up character. Today, we live in a much different literary world. Anyway, I will just come back to this point: I think you can do anything you want to do in nonfiction as long as you don’t cross the line and present information as fact that somebody can challenge and establish as false. Then you get into trouble.

The Bridge | So would you say the truth is a lie you can get away with?

Atwan | I’m not saying that’s the truth. I’m saying that in writing you can get away with things because who’s going to say you aren’t telling the exact truth. You may know you aren’t but who else knows? And what does it matter? Virginia Woolf’s “Death of a Moth” is a wonderful essay, one of her classics. Did she really watch a moth dying on her windowsill that lovely September
afternoon? Virginia was there with a moth and the moth was dying all that time? And did it look just like that and was she really watching out this window, or was she thinking that morning, “You know, I’d like to write an essay about a moth that sort of dies because I saw one yesterday and now I’m going to set it in my window and…”? Who can tell? Who knows? So, are we supposed to then say that’s not an essay because we didn’t know it happened, we can’t prove it happened? If her husband wrote in his journal: “I was home with Virginia that afternoon, and now and then I peeked into her study and she was writing away. But let me go on record to say that it was a rainy day, not a sunny day, and, second, there was no moth.” So if a scholar discovered this testimony tomorrow in a newly found journal of her husband’s, would a classic English essay suddenly be eliminated from the history of the essay because the event as she describes it apparently didn’t happen? What can we say other than that we don’t know whether some of the things we read happened or not.

The Bridge | So a writer of nonfiction should not be constrained by fact?

Atwan | I think a writer of nonfiction is constrained by fact. But verifiable facts. It may be that if no one can verify something it doesn’t qualify as a fact. These are muddy waters.

The Bridge | So, if it’s not verifiable, then you can get away with lying and no one can say you’re lying? But is there any kind of moral obligation to tell the truth, just for your own sake, with your own writing?

Atwan | I’m not someone to dictate moral obligations. Those should be for an individual writer to decide. Yet remember one thing: in a very real sense, just transcribing actual physical events into words entails some degree of falsification—of time sequence, specific details, perspective, and so on. Writers of memoirs seem often to recall what others said to them when they were six years old—do you believe this dialogue is accurate?

The Bridge | Should we say that putting things in nonfiction that did not happen is the equivalent of leaving things out that did?

Atwan | I’ve got to think that through. That’s a very good question. I suppose the answer would involve the old sins of commission as opposed to the sins of omission. But yes, memoirs very often commit sins of omission. My favorite examples have to do with celebrity memoirs where there is so much left out because the celebrity is trying to write a success story. And every celebrity, no matter what field they’re in, wants their fans to believe that their success is self-made. They didn’t become a success because they had a parental connection that got them into Yale and then that connection helped them get their first job and then one day helped them get elected President. Those connections are not going to be a main feature of the autobiography. They’re going to be either eliminated or glossed over. The message is: “I made it on my own.” That’s just one example of omission that I find frequently.

The Bridge | Hopefully, we’ll get an in-depth answer out of this very simple question: What should we write about?

Atwan | Many of us operate under two very questionable principles: one, we should write about what we know best, and two, since we know ourselves best, we would write best if we wrote about ourselves. Both of these seem bogus to me.

Don’t always write about what you know. In the first issue of Best American Essays, 1986 issue, there is a great essay, one of the best in the whole series and I was so happy to have it, by Donald Barthelme—a great short story writer. He died years ago. His essay is called “Not-Knowing,” and it’s about the importance of seeking rather than having knowledge. Some of the best writing is by people who are struggling with understanding something. That’s what the essay is really all about.

The Bridge | Final question: do you have anything else you’d like to share with our readers?

Atwan | Oh, God, we covered so much! It was invigorating intellectually. A lot of things I hadn’t thought of. Thanks for the opportunity and thanks for keeping the fire going.

The Bridge | Thank you for inviting us.
The white hand-me-down Explorer sloshed across the bridge as the river below spit water over its thick wooden railings. Audrina watched her little brother Landon as he sat behind the wheel. He flipped his side-bangs out of his eyes and stared through the rain-streaked windshield. As he downshifted to compensate for the breaking car in front of him, she thought he seemed strangely mature. He looked the same as before, with his apple-green eyes and long, slender jawline, but the way he held himself made him seem somehow unfamiliar.

“Have you been up here much since you moved to Dad’s?” she asked.

He reached forward and turned down the loud techno beats that were vibrating the black and silver Discman between them. “Yeah, a couple times.” He hesitated, biting at the tips of his nails. “But I just feel like there’s nothing going for me up here, you know? All anyone ever wants to do is party. It’s fun, but it gets old.”

They passed the freeway sign that told them they had made it to Mount Vernon. Home, she thought, and then wondered if it even was home anymore. Landon slowly exited the freeway, his directional flashing long before it was needed. As they headed down Section Street, she looked toward their old home that used to remind her of the dollhouse her grandfather had made for her when she was young. The tan and white paint was now peeled and cracked in complex web-like designs.

“Kept in touch with Mom since she moved?” she asked, drawing her eyes back to Landon.
“Yeah, a bit. We still fight a lot, though.”

“Well, at least you can just hang up now.”

Her response was answered with a strained laugh. “You’re not going to stay here in the Valley, are you?”

“No, I’m not.” Audrina tried to sound convincing. What she really wanted though, was to melt back into the hard partying and ease that her pre-college life had been.

Turning a slow left down Division Street brought them closer to Oran’s house. They had talked some since she had left; he had called her almost daily, but she had avoided most of the calls unless she was feeling particularly lonely. As they pulled down the long alleyway, she almost smiled at the four rusted cars that were scattered throughout the cigarette-littered driveway. With his Explorer in park behind the mess, Landon helped her unload her backpack.

“Thanks for the ride, bud,” she said.

“No problem. Give me a call when you’re ready to head back.”

“Okay, will do. Love you.”

He nodded in return.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she made her way toward the door and climbed up the weathered wooden steps. She looked at the window beside the door and fixed her long hair, wondering if he would like, or even notice, the new red streaks or the piecey bangs that rested above her left eye. The reflection brought a moment of confidence that had her raising her cold hand to knock twice on the chipped, brick-red door.

“Come in,” she heard a muffled voice yell.

Audrina turned the knob and entered the familiar, white-tiled hallway. With each step, her feet stuck to and then cracked free from the beer-splotched floor.

“Hey, Trav,” she spoke to the back of a brown mohawk that poked up over a dark green suede couch.

Travis turned halfway around, revealing a Busch can held loosely in one hand and a small pipe in the other. “Hey,” he said, smiling. “Good to see you. Oran’s in his room. Might be sleeping. I’m not sure.” He took a long inhale off the already burning bowl, then turned back toward the TV.

Stepping over a laundry basket heaped with musty clothes, Audrina made her way to Oran’s bedroom and opened the door. The room was precisely as she remembered. It was nothing more than a few pieces of furniture surrounded by piles of clothes, trash, and open beer cans. The mustard-yellow walls were
covered with his Asian-influenced paintings, and her favorite poster of a pale, lanky man playing piano in a green-lit room still hung where she had tacked it above his bed. Oran lay on top of two blankets—one of which had a blue and white floral pattern and had been her bedspread as a child. He was wearing a white wife-beater that showed off his small but defined biceps and a pair of black jeans that sat just below his hips. Some of his sandy blond hair winged around the edge of his gray beanie, making his blue eyes stand out strong and sharp.

“Hey,” she said almost shyly as he stared up at her.

“Just as beautiful as I remember. I almost forgot what your face looked like.” He stood and drew her into a hug. His skin against hers felt good. She started to rub her fingers over the black skull tattoo that took up the majority of his upper arm, but stopped.

He gently pushed her to arm’s length. “What’s wrong, baby?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know. I just don’t want to make things hard again. I miss you, so I really wanted to see you. But…”

His eyes darkened. “You’ve told me so many times. I understand you can’t be with me right now. I just want to enjoy you being back, so let’s not talk about it, okay?”

“All right,” she said and sprawled on the mattress that sat on the ground. He lay down next to her and began tangling his fingers through her thick hair.

“I like the new look,” he said, his free hand tracing circles on her stomach.

“Thanks. I wasn’t sure you’d notice.”

“After five years of being with someone, you notice these things.” He sat up, lit a cigarette, and V-ed his long fingers around the orange filter.

“You smoke in your room again?”

There was a loud, insistent pounding on the front door that Oran quickly got up to answer. Audrina stretched her arms high above her head and inhaled. The fresh smoke that mingled with the stale cigarette smell of the room nauseated her. She got up and walked out to the living room.

“Hey!” Rusty came at her, his long, greasy black hair pulled into a low, swinging ponytail behind him. He picked her up in a strong hug and spun her in a couple staggering circles.

Audrina looked down at him and smiled when they stopped spinning. “Hey, Rust. How’ve you been?”

“Great. Would have been better if you were around, though,” he said, winking at Oran. Oran gave him a small smile that Audrina knew was entirely false. Rusty set her down, and went into the kitchen.

After a moment of rifling through drawers, Rusty looked up toward her. “Hey, come here for a second.” The combination of his sunken eyes staring at her and the overzealous tone that his voice had taken made her hesitant, but she smiled and walked toward him anyway.

“Close your eyes and open your mouth,” Rusty spoke softly.

“Rust, what is it?” She drew out the words.

“Trust me.”

She felt a rough urge pull at the pit of her stomach, and after shoving him playfully in the chest, opened her mouth and squeezed her eyes closed. She stood there for a moment, then felt the gritty pill on her tongue. A strong chemical flavoring stung her mouth. She tilted her head back and swallowed.

“So what was it?” she asked, opening her eyes.

“Yellow Butterfly.” His teeth ground against each other as he spoke. “I only gave you half of one though. They’re kind of speedy. Trish has some that are cut with heroin. They’re good, but not uppers like these.”

As she felt Oran’s hands on her shoulders, she turned around and gave him a kiss on his stubbly cheek. Rusty handed Oran a Pabst and a circular yellow pill. After splitting the pill in half, Oran tossed it into his mouth and took a long drink of beer. Rusty chopped up another pill on the countertop with a small, dull razor-blade, then used a flat-faced card to turn it into a gritty powder.

“Did you want any more?” he said to Audrina’s watching eyes.

“Sure. Might as well.”
Rusty pulled a brown, weathered wallet from his pocket and took out a fifty-dollar bill. He rolled it up tightly and handed it to her.

“It’s best to use the bigger bills,” he said with a laugh. “Easier to avoid the hep that way.”

“On that dirty note,” she said as she unconsciously rubbed her nose, “I don’t think I want to rail it.”

“Then don’t, and I will,” Travis said from behind her.

“You can just suck it through if you want,” Oran said quickly. “It will taste shitty, but it’ll be worth it.”

She looked from Travis to Oran, shrugged, then bent over the counter and sucked half the line through the bill. A sour taste stung the back of her throat. She handed the bill to Travis, and watched intently as the yellow powder instantly disappeared off the brown-stained countertop.

Travis lifted his head without displaying the slightest hint of watery eyes.

“And now, we wait,” he said, a wide smile stretching across his face.

She lay facedown, her lips pressed into the soft carpet, and wondered if this was what it would feel like to lie on clouds. Six hands rubbed and pulled at her skin. Her breathing became deep and fierce, and a low moan seeped from her lips. She concentrated on deciphering between the wavering sounds of the orchestra that blared through the two speakers positioned on opposite sides of her head. As the woman’s shrill voice took on a higher octave, she felt each hair on the back of her neck prickle into sharp, spindly points.

“Enjoying yourself much?” Travis’ voice broke through, and Audrina’s only response was a long, unintelligible murmur.

“That’s what I thought,” she heard Rusty say as his wide fingers pushed hard into the small crevices directly behind her earlobes. The song ended, the hands stopped moving, and Audrina sat up, slowly pulling her shirt back on.

“You guys are amazing. I’m rolling so hard again.” She stood, and with eyes closed, danced small twirls in the center of the living room.

“Come here, baby.” Oran’s voice hit her like a wave. With flushed cheeks and a dizzy head, she dropped to the floor, her legs crossing beneath her. Oran crawled toward her, his head poised in front of him and his black pupil-filled eyes locked on her, unwavering. It wasn’t fear that she felt, but instead a deep guttural craving. As soon as he was in arm’s reach, he pounced on her, knocking her onto her back and forcing out a quick, hard breath. He tore at her clothes and she watched as each tangled piece made a barrier around them. The quick zip of his jeans broke into her thoughts, and she realized she lay naked on the stained living room floor.

She reached for the closest article of clothing. “But—”

Oran hushed her, placing his index finger against her lips, and pulled the shirt from her grasp. “Just pretend they’re not here.”

The slight touch of his finger on her mouth left her exhilarated and breathing hard. He leaned in through the dark toward her. With every shove of his hips against hers, she felt her skin melt into the carpet beneath her, and it wasn’t long before her entire body was relaxed and numb. She turned her head to the side with a tooth-grinding smile. “I love you,” she sighed on an exhale. He leaned in and kissed her, and the music stopped abruptly. She heard Oran’s voice, the quiet whispers of Travis and Rusty, and then slowly the sounds tunneled away.

She opened her eyes and stood quickly, feeling a rush of beads tumble through her head. Bending over, she gathered her clothes and after bumping into a sharp-edged coffee table, tossed the pile onto the couch. She rifled through them in the dark, and dressed herself. Quietly, she inched toward the window, and with shaking hands, cracked open the blinds. They were crisp between her fingers. A burst of light seared through and she quickly pulled back from the window, feeling instant relief as the room returned to black. She made her way to the other side of the room and knelt down, sending a series of loud snaps traveling like dominoes up her spine. Picking up her bag, she slung the straps over her shoulders, and walked toward the entryway, leaning against the walls for support.

Audrina opened the door and squinted her eyes against the sunlight that broke through the heavy gray sky. She shut the door behind her and nervously reached into the pocket of her long black coat, pulling out the nearly empty pack of Marlboro Reds, and placed a cigarette between her quivering lips. Her shaky thumb skidded across the back of her lighter causing a quick
flicker of fire. She tried again with no success. On the third attempt, the end of her cigarette glowed. While she walked down the narrow driveway, her insides flipped in angry circles. With her index and middle fingers she pushed into the small bump at the center of the back of her skull and thought she could feel exactly where the pill had penetrated a hole in her brain. She took in a nervous breath of the cold air. Her jaw popped loudly. The single word why ceaselessly pounded in her head. It taunted her until she found herself running, as if she could escape its haunting repetition.

Wheezing and sick to her stomach, she finally stopped and hunched over, resting her hands on her knees. After a number of deep breaths, she pulled out another cigarette to replace the one that had dropped a half-mile back. Her face was sticky with sweat. A red Toyota Tacoma passed by and the dark eyes of a chubby man with round glasses stared at her without blinking. She imagined what she must look like in her wrinkled clothes, with her makeup dripping down her face, and her hair pulled up into a frizzy mess on top of her head. The taste of blood made her realize that she had been biting down on the side of her tongue. The quick sensation of pain had her momentarily feeling relief from the incessant pounding in her head. After the break faded, she placed her head in her hands and continued in a blind walk.

She watched out the window as they passed the thick trees that lined the freeway. Landon hadn’t said much since they left, but she could tell he was feeling the same as she; his hair was tweaked and greasy, and dark grayish circles had sunk into the skin under his now dull green eyes. Audrina shifted in her seat and crossed her hands in her lap. She reached for a water bottle and tried to unscrew its lid. Her hand ached in the attempt. Throwing it at her feet brought a feeble glance from Landon.

The broken white strips molded into one as the merge lane ended. Her phone vibrated. She opened it and saw that she had six missed calls and five unread text messages. Assuming they were from Oran, she tossed the phone down by the water bottle. Again she felt Landon looking at her, but she continued to stare out the window. He flipped the directional on at the last second and exited the freeway, pulling into an AM/PM. Without saying anything he opened the car door and went to sit on the curb, taking a green pack of menthols out of his pocket.

She got out of the car and sat next to him. He handed her a cigarette and lit it.

“We can’t do this anymore, sis,” he said, finally breaking the silence.

She leaned against him and took a long drag from her half-burnt cigarette, blew the smoke out, and watched intently as the wind swirled it in circles, then carried it away.
The First Outfit

RHONDA EATON | POETRY

The selection made, I step out.
Reflection sends me back.
The game is on: me against
the closet. Our seamless
Step in. Slam door. Repeat. Wearing
a path in the rug. Like I walk
in and out of this poem. Glaring up,
Hands on hips. Ending where I began.
Do Not Enter

REIKO KAWAHARA | DRAWING | COLORED PENCIL | 24" x 40"
London Bridge

ERICA ROBINSON | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 16" x 11"
Blooming

TANIA HENRY | CERAMICS | CLAY & BROWN SLIP | 6.5” x 6.5” x 4”
Untitled

AYA TSURUI | PAINTING | ACRYLIC | 24” x 36”
One

KIMBERLY HABERL | SCULPTURE | STONE | 6.5" x 8" x 7.5"
Just After Waking

LAURA M. BOWEN | PHOTOGRAPHY | DIGITAL | 10” x 7”
Discovery:
Telekinesis

SEAN LEARY | DRAWING | CUT PAPER & MARKER | 21.5" x 68"
Teacher’s Key

MELISSA PACE | CONSTRUCTION | ALTERED BOOK | 5” x 8”
Invisible Man

STEPHANIE CORREIA | PHOTOGRAPHY | SILVER PRINT | 10” x 8”
On the shelves of comic shops and other trendily obscure places, there is a tiny white book, anonymously penned and published, called Manifesto. Imagine a stoned, depressed, modern Holden Caulfield hitchhiking across America, getting drunk, and criticizing everything. Its binding is simple and the cover blank. There are no chapters, there is no plot, and the story’s timeline is as bent, scattered, and fragmented as its caustic narrator. Its structure is prose, more or less, and one could justifiably call it an anti-novel, but there are no clues to determine whether it is fact or fiction. It is a familiar story of the angst, loneliness, and improvable superiority complexes that plague the white upper-middle class protagonists of so many independent films and young prose.

A red flier pokes out from the middle of the book, revealing a list of the story’s influences and pseudo-poetic snippets such as “dream HUGE dreams” and general advice falling somewhere between sentimental and cloudily anarchic: “FAIRNESS TO THE SHITTY WORLD” and “if you don’t like the government—be the government.” Contact information for the publisher, dedrabbit—a self-proclaimed “underground network of people committed to art, individual freedom, and social activism”—is listed as a phone number, website, e-mail address, and post box in Northampton, Massachusetts. But the mystery of Manifesto is seemingly being guarded like a pile of nihilistic treasure. The website has an international list of bookshops that carry the book, many of which, I later found, received only single copies in unmarked envelopes. “CALL THE NUMBER BELOW BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO KILL YOURSELF,” the page read. Calling yields endless ringing,
or the cheery Sprint PCS robot-lady’s voice: “You have reached the voice mailbox of…” she says, her voice a soulless metallic tease that does not return calls or acknowledge voicemails. Months worth of e-mails have gone unanswered.

Assembled in directionless, minimalist vignettes as though it were originally conceived on Post-It notes, the text grinds and roils like a stomach battered by scotch and nicotine. It is frustrating, compelling, and beautifully sad. In five years there will be a master’s thesis on its brutal, simplistic delivery, and somebody will compare it to Hemingway. Someone else will call it the ranting of a spoiled, angry manchild. And every word of it may be true. He might be real. He might be sitting next to you. He might have vomited in the woods behind your house.

If art is to hold a mirror to the world, Manifesto did so to mine one summer. I was stoned and drunk and younger and caught up in it, and thought the words to be those of a bitterly enlightened perspective. That the individual responsible for Manifesto is out there, somewhere, became for me a catalyst of immense anxiety and obsession. If, as the flier suggests, the primordial stirrings of a revolution are beginning, the anonymous forces behind it must be reachable. Surely, there is a room somewhere filled with the stale smells of revolt and smoldering joints where dedrabbit birthed the book. I wondered if they set cars on fire in bi-weekly displays of disgust for the human condition. Maybe I could hang out with them.

Manifesto has earned itself a handful of underwhelmed online reviews and a neglected thread on the SomethingAwful.com forums, where a user claims that an ex had met the author and that the book is true. He was unavailable for further comments. Greg Swan of PerfectPorridge.com reviewed the book and addressed its air of mystery via e-mail: “I was mailed Manifesto in an unmarked envelope and don’t recall the postmark. After reading and reviewing it, I mailed it to my friend in Maui. My friend gave it to a homeless guy whom he shared a few nights with in an abandoned van on Willie Nelson’s beach. That book is purely viral in the most physical of sense.” Greg never got an e-mail response from dedrabbit either.

Liz, of Newbury Comics in Norwood, knew “very little, other than it sells really well. It’s elusive.” Aaron, another store manager, was sheepish and mostly polite, wearing a modest brown polo shirt and a chirping yellow nametag hanging from a lanyard emblazoned with pins of every band that has reigned over college radio charts in the last several years. He phoned a woman named Michelle. Their conversation was hushed and marginally discreet with the tone of an inside joke, like the Manifesto phone call happens regularly. He chuckled to Michelle while peeking out from behind a display of anti-government pins and vibrant plastic sunglasses, as though trying not to be heard or seen. He hung up the phone and reported that “Management
dressed men in their thirties browsed tarnished punk vinyls. She said that her manager met "the kid asking us to carry the book," but that he was at lunch, check back later.

Her manager was Josh Burkette, a mousy man whom I found absorbed in a laptop, stomach full. The book did not seem particularly strange to him, or worthy of obsession, but he explained what he knew.

"I never actually met the kid. He e-mails me…dedrabbit at Yahoo. I'm sure it's the author. I think he graduated from Hampshire College a couple years ago. People say they've seen him in Northampton passing out the book, saying things like, 'Here, take this. You need this book.' That sort of thing." He seemed amused as he recalled this, and that was all he could say. But Josh Burkette knew a lot about the man that he e-mails only casually. And he never made any eye contact, barely looked away from his laptop, and shuffled anxiously while he spoke, as though there were more to the story.

Northampton was far less lively, but the Monster Masher was there, and seemed to be making better money along Route 9 in the center of town. A ruddy man in a red windbreaker and old sneakers gave him a dollar and seemed to be admiring his cape with a glossy look of awe while he ate a truffle from a place a few blocks away that sells fist-sized pieces of chocolate. Nobody handed out any books and nobody knew of the author. So there is no underground art movement, no graffiti-smeared basement meeting area, just a stoned young man from Northampton with a poetic virus to share. This is nothing special. If it's anything, it's well hidden. My search for a collective of artists and tragic revolutionaries is over, and dedrabbit's invisible revolution is just one man's idea. "Make your dreams come true/don't be realistic/everything is possible/ENNUI IS THE ENEMY," "life impends," "the frozen world thaws," reads the red flier. I should have looked closer: "The collective is in your head."

The invisible revolution is anyone's to claim.
Tree in November

BETHANIE SYLVIA | PRINTMAKING | COPPERPLATE ETCHING | 10” x 10.5”
Longing

JIM BROSNAN | POETRY

I want to know
if you still remember
our search for cowboy hats?
You looked tired
in your faded
denim and red shirt,
the last time I saw you.
The scent of blueberry pie,
its lattice top oozing with juice,
permeated the autumn air
outside the kitchen window
where you stood with a baking
pan in one hand, a boiling
kettle in the other.
I still see you with the black
cat, curled up in your lap, as
we conversed sipping mint tea
across an aqua oval table
on the side porch
that warm October afternoon,
in celebration of your birthday.

I hear you’re traveling now,
living in the moment—
spending weeks in Tuscany.
I hope you are still
painting those tranquil
Italian landscapes in warm
muted pastel shades.

Did you ever find the answer?
Were the moments satisfying?
What can I ask,
but for your safe return?

I don’t understand
your sudden change of heart.
I slowly pulled apart the two ends of the Adderall capsule, dumping the powdery contents onto a piece of scrap paper. Not powder exactly. It was more like a pile of tiny pellets that would roll around rather than puff away if you blew on them. I crushed the pellets into dust with a clear plastic ruler, grinding it back and forth, lifting it and using the edge to rebuild the pile to crush again. I worked meticulously, getting my lines perfect. Three lines. Three parallel, congruent lines, equidistant from each other. No pellets, all powder. The kind that can puff away. The kind that can be sucked through a rolled-up dollar bill into the back of my nose where it stung and coated my throat with a chalky, kind of tangy taste that would ooze from my nasal passage onto my tongue for hours. Even if I drank soda, it would only wash the taste away briefly before it crept back into my mouth.

In the windowless basement room of my house—my parents’ house—I had created a second bedroom. A counter spanned two of the walls, and blankets hung by Velcro were draped over the sides, curtaining off a place for me to sleep under the counter when my own bedroom wouldn’t suffice. Blankets for a curtain, layers of blankets for a mattress, and a blanket to be used as a blanket. I imagined I could go anywhere, live anywhere, as long as I brought blankets.

I had already snorted one Adderall, but I hadn’t crushed it up first and when I sneezed immediately after, a slime of saliva and little white pellets shot out of my mouth and onto my hand. After I rinsed my hand in the bathroom upstairs, and then rinsed down the pellets that stuck to the inside of the drain, I decided I needed to try again.

My psychiatrist listened to me rant about my existential crisis and the turbulent debate in my mind over whether or not Ayn Rand was right, and then asked me why it mattered. Faltering slightly, I asked him how I was supposed to live my life and make day to day decisions without knowing whether to base them on altruism or rational self-interest; utopian discourse put a moratorium on trig homework. He gave me a book to borrow. The Passions of the Mind. It’s still in my basement.

His couch was brown leather and uncomfortable, and I always got distracted trying to figure out how to sit instead of listening to him. It felt like school. I’d suddenly be aware that I had no idea what was going on and have to fake it. I mentioned the word “focus” and he gave me a Ritalin prescription.
He was fantastically easy to fool, or else he was glad to encourage drug abuse. Once I started on attention deficit medications, the theme of our meetings became describing how they were helping, but not enough. I had a new prescription nearly every time I left his musty, green office. Either stronger or higher doses. Soon, I was switched to Adderall, and bumped up from 10 milligrams to 20, to 30, to two 30-milligram extended release capsules and two 15-milligram regular pills to be taken daily, as needed. That was in addition to a slew of alternating Prozacs, Lithiums, Paxils, and other drugs that were meant to keep me from wanting to kill myself.

“Get out of bed and go to school!”

My mom has a weird habit of going iambic when she’s yelling, accentuating each second syllable in an ascending scale of intensity. Going to school was not on my itinerary that morning. I was too tired, I think, or I hadn’t finished some assignment and wanted more time to not do it anyway. High school was like that. She yanked at my blanket, exposing my bare skin to the rush of cold air that would grip my thighs and my chest and hold on, making me shiver until I got dressed and ready for the world, but I pulled back. I tugged the blanket over my shoulder and rolled, wrapping it back around me to trap in the fleeting heat. In my room, my real room on the second floor with a window and a mattress, but without a bed frame or box spring because I liked being closer to the ground I guess, there was a me-sized space between the mattress and the wall. Holding tight to my end of the blanket, I rolled into the space, cocooning myself into a snug and secure bundle, beyond my mom’s capacity to unravel. So she threatened to get a bucket of water, presumably to flood me out of hiding, and disappeared out my door. I waited for a beat, considering whether or not she would really drench me. I hopped up with my blanket and crossed the hall into the bathroom, locked myself in, and napped in the bathtub.

My best friend Keira had her own apartment downtown with our friend Donnie. Keira’s girlfriend Nora practically lived there too, and so did I. The place was always a disaster. I knew there was a carpet in the living room because I’d helped them move in, but it was hardly visible under the layers of dirty clothes and blankets. A futon and two bedraggled refugee couches set the bounds of the room, with a coffee table in the center. At any given moment, the table held several overflowing ashtrays and a mess of soda and beer cans which had been resourcefully converted to ashtray reinforcements. To set a drink on the table was to sacrifice it, or else risk spitting ashes and Camel Light butts later. A sweatshirt sleeve is minimally effective in scrubbing the sandy ash taste from one’s tongue.

Keira was gorgeous, but in a dirty hippie way. Or maybe she was dirty, but in a gorgeous way. Her bright blond hair, done into a series of tight skinny braids which knotted together like dreadlocks more often than not, was shiny despite being infrequently washed. Her hips swung under long, flowing skirts with Aztec-looking patterns in earth-tones. She always smelled like cigarette smoke and the restaurant where she waitressed. Once, when I tagged along with her to a music store, she ran into some guy she apparently knew who bragged about how many days in a row he’d been wearing his pants. Keira laughed and said, “Yeah, I just washed a pair of cargo pants for the first time in forever.” It made me think changing less would be cool. Maybe wearing clean clothes was why I was following her around like a job shadow. Maybe I should have been taking notes.

Watching a movie in the living room, Donnie and I sat on the couches while Keira and Nora were sprawled together on the futon. Keira’s glass bowl was being passed slowly around, and we sank into a stoned haze in the smoky room. I always passed the bowl immediately after taking a hit, self-conscious of seeming greedy, but Keira would hold onto it and socialize. She often told a story about that. “Jake hates when I talk with the bowl in my hands. He’s like, ‘Keira! Pass the bowl, then talk.’ He calls it The Magic No-Talking Stick: ‘None shall speak while in possession of this artifact. Transgressors will be put to death,’” she’d quote. “He’d get all worked up and I’m like, ‘Sorry.’ And I’ll pass it, but when it comes back around to me, I do the same thing again. I just don’t want to pause what I’m talking about.” She’d usually be holding the bowl while telling that story. Keira retold stories often. The more times I heard a story, the closer I felt to her, like it elevated me above other people she knew. How many times had unwashed pants guy heard about the Magic No-Talking Stick? Not as many as me, I bet. I’m her best friend.

The movie disappointed me. It had been too hyped up. I was getting ready to say so when Keira and Nora started to get up and go to bed.
“Really? Already?” I asked. “Aw, come on. You guys are dull.”

Keira laughed, “You’re welcome to the couch tonight.” I was always welcome to the couch, but I couldn’t blame her for going off to be alone with her girlfriend—it was her smile, not a passing smile, but like the rest of the world had to hold on a second so she could smile at me, like she and I were a pair and she sympathized with me wanting everyone else to disappear for a while. Maybe I imagined that. I was too stoned to even get up, so I laid down and stared at the DVD title screen. It played quotes from the movie on a maddening loop through the night and I watched miserably for hours, unable to sleep with all the Adderall in my system.

It wasn’t the next morning, but it may as well have been; it happened often enough. I woke up to the orange sunlight filtering through the orange blanket used as a window shade. Blankets do everything, like Ford’s towel in Hitchhiker’s Guide.

“I’m late for school,” I said to Keira as she smoked a wake-up cigarette on the futon.

“Want me to drive you?” she asked.

“Yep.” I paused. I picked up her bowl and a lighter from the table, lit what was left, and took a hit. “Nope.” I went back to sleep.

“You said you’d be home by eleven last night.” My mom was drinking her coffee at the breakfast table as I came in one morning. I hadn’t slept yet. Adderall defers the need to sleep.

“No, you said I’d be home by eleven last night.”

“No, you said I’d be home by eleven last night.”

“You’re grounded.” Sometimes she tried to act like there was some unknown leverage that gave her authority over me.

“Okay,” I said, turning around and going back into the garage. I picked up my bicycle and rode back to Keira’s. I didn’t go home for a week.

“I missed you like the desert misses the rain.” This guy was trying to be poetic for his girlfriend in front of the rest of us in Keira’s apartment. I had to hold back laughter. He obviously knew he’d ripped off the line, but I think he thought it was obscure enough to steal or something, that we had somehow missed the nineties. I glanced around the room and met Keira’s eye. She had clearly caught the line as well, and we smirked at each other in mutual enjoyment of the moment.

With Adderall keeping me alert and pot keeping me floating, I got lost between Keira’s stories and the music she played as we drove through dark backroads around farmhouses on the outskirts of town. I hadn’t slept in more than two days, burning through Adderalls to keep myself awake, and I started having mild hallucinations—progressive rock guitar riffs manifested as swirling beams of light, shooting past my face or passing through me as we drove. I rocked my head side to side in time with the music and felt myself split into several entities, following in a train of motion, each separated by fractions of a second. I began to think I was transcending time, my consciousness existing simultaneously in multiple instants spanning a few seconds into the past. I was trying to spread myself out over longer intervals when Keira’s voice brought me back down. Her voice was soft and blue. I was focused on the sound more than what she was saying, but I fully enjoyed hearing her speak. It was comforting.

The guy was fucking huge. Probably the largest man I’ve ever met. I’m sure that without breaking a walking pace, his momentum could carry him through drywall like the Juggernaut. He was the drug fiend boyfriend of Nora’s friend’s sister or some shit like that. He was sweating and twitching from withdrawals, and I was trying to rip him off, charging him five dollars each for twenty Adderalls. I think I was sweating too. Marilyn Manson posters were plastered like wallpaper in the tiny room. I don’t even know whose room it was, or whose house. It was a portrait of white trash. Furniture stood crooked on broken legs. A knocked over bong left a puddle on the mattress. A corner of a dresser was sticking into the wall, straight through a poster. Pot was chain-smoked like cigarettes while the six or so people crammed into the room discussed where to get real drugs. I pictured it like a crack house on television; the cops would bust in at any second. I felt like a narc, or an impostor, and prayed none of them would happen to know my SAT scores, or that I was a Boy Scout, and realize I wasn’t one of them. No one did. Why would they?

Strung out on Adderall myself, my face felt hot and flushed and
my breathing came in short huffs like I couldn’t exhale enough before needing to inhale. Time seemed to move in clicks, seeping slowly by before lurching forward to catch up. I focused on the air in my lungs. I’d snap back to attention and realize I’d been zoned out, then start to phase back into my mind, distracted once again. Shadows moved continuously on the borders of my vision like ghosts. Where was Keira? I shoved a hundred dollars in my pocket and left the room as the huge guy started breaking open my pills.

Out of breath, as I always was when I rode to Keira’s place, I dropped my bike in the gravel outside her window. The security camera in the hall watched me heaving as I tried to准备 myself to speak into the intercom before ringing. It saw me ring, wait five minutes, and ring again. It saw me go back out to see the light on in Keira’s window, and it saw me come back in and ring once more. If it could see through the glass, then it saw me ride my bike past the door on my way back to my house.

The class chattered about last night’s talent contest. It had been so long since I had come to school that I hadn’t even heard about it until then. Detached from the general dialogue, I waited in nervous agitation for our history teacher’s arrival. The man was round and boisterous, and I could already predict the kind of show he would surely come up with: “Glad you could join us. How was your extended vacation?” It was only a few weeks from graduation, but the classroom felt as alien to me as it had on the first day of school. I realized then that catching up with all my schoolwork in time to graduate was unrealistic. I resolved to pick up a withdrawal form from the guidance office and officially drop out. Keira could tell me about how to get my GED instead. “Hi!” I said enthusiastically as our teacher entered the room. With the burden of needing to pass lifted, joviality swept over me.

“Going somewhere?” my mom asked from the kitchen with dinner on the stove. Standing by the door, already wearing my jacket, I felt a little silly. I still had fifteen minutes to wait.

“Keira’s coming to pick me up.” I ran back up the stairs to my room and pulled the shades away from the window to peer out, looking for headlights in my driveway. She was usually late anyway. I threw off my jacket and tried to think of something to occupy me until she got there, but once I’m ready to leave, I can’t start something else. I sat in my desk chair and tapped my feet. Twenty minutes later, I went out for a cigarette so I’d be in my driveway when she got there. When I finished the cigarette, I went back inside and acted like I hadn’t been expecting to be gone by now. After leaving Keira an obscene number of voicemails, in which I became progressively more apologetic for leaving so many voicemails, I went back upstairs and acted like I hadn’t been expecting to do anything that night.

My stepfather grabbed my shirt as I tried to push past him to retreat into my basement safe haven, yelling at me for ignoring my mom while she yelled at me for always sleeping all day. I pulled out a knife from my pocket and held it between us, pointed at his gut. For a split second, there was tense silence, like the space just after the last tick of a time bomb.

“Just leave me the fuck alone,” I said. I’m sure that with a knife backing me up, I sounded as angry and demanding as I hoped, hiding my desperation to escape. He stepped out of my way and I ran downstairs and curled up in my blankets, under my counter, with my fingers wrapped around my knife. I watched the door anxiously, willing it never to open. At that moment, I could rest. I wasn’t planning on stabbing anyone, but the knife would keep them out of reach. I tried not to think about how I would get out of the situation. At that moment, I could rest. I always needed to rest. But still, eventually I would need to leave the room. I couldn’t see how anything would be normal again.

The officer who came to my door told me his name as he slowly entered the room. He told me, conversationally and calmly, how the situation was described to him by my parents. He told me to give him the knife. He ended a lot of his sentences with, “...okay, Matthew?” It sounded patronizing, but I noticed myself being lulled into a cooler state, feeling like I should say, “Yes, okay, sir.” I could see my life calmly falling apart as he stepped closer to me. I imagined how much it would suck to be forced to deal with some punk kid, some emotionally unstable, knife-wielding kid, and have no idea if he would attack me. I folded up the knife and held it out to him. It was a pocketknife with a Boy Scout emblem on the side. I wonder if anyone has ever been murdered with a Boy Scout pocketknife.

When he told me I had to come out, I said no at first, but I quickly realized there was nothing I could do about it and I didn’t want...
any more trouble. I asked him if I was going to jail. He said something reassuring, but entirely noncommittal, something like, “Let’s just get you out of there for now,” as he and another officer escorted me up the stairs. I hoped he liked me. I wanted him to think of me as the most cooperative and respectful punk kid he’d ever had to take a knife from.

I was glad to leave in an ambulance instead of a cop car. Maybe the neighbors wouldn’t think I was degenerate; I’d just fallen off a ladder or something. Ambulance rides are kind of fun anyway. Strapped down to a stretcher, I watched the streets extend behind me as we drove to the hospital, like being a kid in the rear-facing backseat of a station wagon. Kind of.

Everything is so goddamned white in hospitals. I laid quietly in my gurney, listening to carts’ wheels clicking on uneven tiles and the man down the hall screaming, “It hurts,” sobbing, and choking on his words like something from a horror movie. I picked at my fingernails, not sure exactly what I was waiting for. As the man tired himself out through the night, his screams died down and came less frequently, picking up only when a nurse passed by his door and he screamed for her, “Nurse! Nurse, please! It hurts! It hurts!”

Another man was shouting too, less violently, but right across the hall, so I could hear clearly his accusations of the nurses keeping him against his will. “I want to go home. You can’t keep me here. I checked myself in willingly, I should be allowed to leave.” He carried on a one-way conversation, continuing in sequence with each nurse who passed through our hall as if they were all the same person, explaining how his dad kicked him out of the house and he only came to the hospital for a place to stay, and going into detail about the fight with his father, painting a very self-sympathetic picture. I imagined being his age, he sounded at least forty, and still being able to feel slighted when my parents kicked me out.

I tried to think of something funny to shout about to mock the crazies and hopefully entertain the nurses, but I decided against it. The hospital was keeping me for 24-hour observation, so I pulled the mattress and blankets off the gurney and set up a bed for myself in the corner. The walls and floor were smudged and grimy and I found myself concerned about breathing this low to the ground. It didn’t smell healthy. How often do they give hospital rooms more than a quick mop with bleach?

Bumped from a hospital overnighter to an indefinite stay at a special facility, I followed the administration lady along the sidewalk, past a group of kids wearing laceless shoes playing on a basketball court. I still wore only my johnny and padded brown hospital socks. The whole group stopped to watch me pass, and I was suddenly very conscious of the breeze on my naked back and my pale, skinny legs. They were all under eighteen by definition of the place; it was the Adolescent Dual Diagnosis Unit, or ADDU, “dual” referring to a combination of emotional “self-risk” issues and drug abuse. So, at a couple months shy of adulthood, I was probably the oldest patient there. That didn’t assuage my insecurity as I tightened the johnny around myself and continued on, feeling like a new inmate being led down a row of cells while the existing prison population sized me up. I kept a stone face, hoping the thug-looking teenagers would get the impression that anyone who can remain stern wearing a gown shouldn’t be fucked with.

My mom brought me some clothes from home, including my favorite hat. A counselor lady immediately informed me we weren’t allowed to wear hats. I argued for a minute about how that was a stupid rule, and then slammed my fist into the wall, which turned out to be metal. My hand swelled and my wrist was screwed up and sore for at least a month after.

Every day we had to line up in front of a window to get our pills from the pharmacist. She reminded me of the stereotypical lunch lady from television shows, fat and cranky and handing out shit we didn’t want as we marched past.

“What’s this?” I asked when she gave me the little white cup. I thought of Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I could pull that off—lead the crazies in a rebellion. Damn the pills! “What if I don’t want to take them?” I asked, my nerve cracking a bit under her glare so that my tone sounded more politely inquisitive than defiant. She told me they’d give me the medicine in a shot if I wouldn’t swallow it. I resolved to take the pills with an attitude, but I again came off as compliant.

Those of us in the lounge room crowded around the door to
see the fight in the hall. A girl who called herself Kitty Kat screamed and kicked at the counselors who tried to restrain her. From my angle, I could barely see her, only hear the smashing reverberations against the walls and the verbal assault of curses and threats that sounded as if they were tearing up her throat on the way out. I could see clearly, however, when my roommate, Carlos, started pounding on the counselors from behind, wrenching them off and shoving them away. Kitty was his “girlfriend,” in the kind of captive relationship borne from the search for fellowship in such an unfamiliar and adverse situation. It’s the kind of bond that withers easily when the unifying adversity is removed, but on the same token, no force of reason could have kept him from violently defending her. The romanticism of it all swept over me and I even considered rushing in to help him, though I knew it was a hopeless cause and that the staff was only acting for Kitty’s well-being. Within moments, a few 300-lb. security guards rushed into the hall and quickly pinned Carlos to the floor. Both he and Kitty were sedated and the rest of us were sent to our rooms.

I stood with my back to the wall, head down, palms pressed into my eyes. My fingers tugged on my hair and I choked down sobs. Shawna, my favorite of the counselors there, stood by my side and tried to talk me through my breakdown. I had no idea why I was so torn apart. Stress, anger, and a hopelessness like being lost or trapped came out of nowhere and overwhelmed me. I wanted to smash through the walls or just snap my own neck and crumple to the ground and be done with it.

“I don’t know. I just—I don’t fucking know,” I cried. Shawna pleaded with me to calm down and breathe. She was pretty. I wanted her to like me more than any of the other counselors, and I didn’t want her to see me screwed up like that, like I was as messed up as the rest of the patients. I looked up at her face, at her silky straight hair that barely brushed her shoulders. I looked at her neck and pictured the soft skin squish in my tightening grip, and I wanted to do it. I wanted to strangle her right there, and part of my consciousness was terrified at seeing how psychotic that was. I was. I dropped to the floor and curled myself into a ball, too afraid to let myself do anything else.

“You wanted to hurt me?” Shawna asked. I’d told her what happened, once I’d calmed down. The way she looked at me, like she was worried that she had done something to upset me, made me feel even worse. I hurriedly assured her that it was nothing she had done, but from then on, our relationship was a bit more distant. A bit more proper. A bit less like we were friends.

The doctor explained to me that certain medications can have adverse effects on patients, and that clearly, Wellbutrin was not for me. Clearly.

I’d been doing much better since they changed my prescription, so on one of her many visits, my mom was allowed to take me outside. I followed her through the parking lot to the soccer field, where she said there was a surprise waiting for me. I pictured a big gift-wrapped box without imagining what would be inside. There was no box, but Nora and Donnie stood expectantly in the grass. Donnie especially, holding his arms out as if to say, “Ta-da, it’s me!” looked as though I had better be excited to see him. And I was, too. It was nice to see my friends after so long, so I showed no sign of disappointment when I ran up to them as fast as laceless shoes allow. I didn’t prompt them to tell me Keira was at work. And I didn’t outwardly scoff when they passed along her “Hello” and regret at not being able to visit, too. I appeared excited as I repeated the doctor’s pronouncement that I’d be free to go within a few days. I made conversation as we walked around the field, kicking a lacrosse ball a few steps ahead of us, bringing up my Wellbutrin freak out and my decision to stop taking prescriptions once they released me. I only told them to tell Keira I said “Hi” in ritualized parting fashion. I’m sure Donnie bought it.
The orange glow, filtering in through the orange blanket over the window, created a dreary atmosphere in the smoky room. The apartment had always been dim, but I guess I'd gotten used to the stark white of fluorescent-lit hospitals. Guests, a few of whom I didn't recognize, were dispersed among the couches in an array such that there was no spot for me to sit and leave the obligatory comfortable empty space between strangers. I sat on the arm of a couch closest to the door. The guy next to me moved away slightly, discreetly accommodating to social convention.

Keira had barely said hello to me since I'd arrived. Well, that's not true exactly. I had been anxiously dreading the kind of attention that would accompany my first day back from the hospital, but I still expected it, so the commonplace conversational greeting I'd received disappointed when it should have relieved. And Keira's attention was quickly drawn away toward requests to break out the weed. Now Keira and Nora stood in the kitchen, and I waited impatiently for them to join the group on the couches, wanting nothing to do with the prevailing conversation. Chuck, I think, was describing the chain of events that led to a warrant out for his arrest and his developing plan to escape to Indiana.

The socially responsible guy to my right puffed away at Keira's bowl and handed it to me. I wanted to tell him he was an asshole, though I'm not sure why. I handed the bowl off to the next guy across the table, casually deciding in that moment that pot was really not going to help my agitated mood, nor had it been helping my situation in life much lately. Maybe it was time for a break.

“Hey, I have to head home,” I said. “I only stopped by to say hello.” I faltered for a moment, considering a hug goodbye, but Keira wasn't really the hugging type.

I still see her around occasionally. They were evicted from the apartment, but I sometimes consider going to see her at her restaurant, or calling her up. Her number is still in my phone.

On my back porch, I watched smoke curl out of my mouth in the window reflection. It was nice to be able to smoke a cigarette again, and to be unsupervised and wear shoelaces. Still, I found myself missing it there. Suddenly deprived of a routine and in need of a goal, I felt a bit empty. And bored. With cigarette embers softly crackling as I drew them closer, I began considering reenrolling in high school. It'd give me something to focus on in the meantime. Meantime, I wondered... until what?
Park Jumper

LAUREN MCNAIR | PHOTOGRAPHY | B&W PRINT | 8” x 10”
The Stone Table

GENEVIEVE BERGERON | INFRARED PHOTOGRAPHY | SILVER PRINT | 20” x 20”
Untitled

MICHAEL BOUDREAU | PAINTING | ACRYLIC | 24” x 36”
Contrasts

MARY LAWRIE SHEA | CERAMICS | WHEEL-THROWN & HAND-CARVED | 18” x 3” x 9”
Journey

LEE PINA | PAINTING | ACRYLIC | 14” x 14”
Woodstar Café

AMANDA DAVIES | PAINTING | ACRYLIC | 24” x 18”
Shrew’s Fiddle

KRISTINA STAFFORD | SCULPTURE | STONEWARE & FLOCKING | 22" x 7" x 39"
Confusion

MELISSA PACE | CONSTRUCTION | ALTERED BOOK | 11” x 7.5” x 6”
In My Hand

SCOTT SIMONETTI | SCULPTURE | WOOD & STEEL | 33” x 30” x 48”
Patty’s Teapot

AIMEE MAURER | CERAMICS | STONEWARE | 9” x 5” x 6”
Turban

CATHERINE BARROS | DRAWING | CHARCOAL | 24” x 36”
I never learned to play a musical instrument. I've always found this to be one of the single most disappointing things about myself, coming in just behind my marked tendency to say the wrong things and the fact that I chew my nails. It's not like I never wanted to learn. In fourth grade, I'd gone with my parents to see the movie *Pure Country*, where George Strait strums reflectively on a pretty, acoustic guitar with little white doves painted on it and wonders, “Just me and my guitar. Do you think anyone would buy that?” I repeated the phrase to my best friend Callie on the swings at recess on the following Monday. She pushed her thick plastic-framed glasses up the bridge of her nose and shrugged good-naturedly. Callie had been playing the piano since either of us could remember, and could even do a credible version of the title theme from *The Phantom of the Opera*. She had also heard me muse about my future musical endeavors before and knew already that I was chronically unable to take the next necessary steps.

I carried my love of music with me as I grew older, but I still remained a mere listener. I had even laughed at my brother Frankie—younger by four years—when he took up the trombone for a year in grade school. I'm still convinced that he took up playing the thing as an excuse to menace other band members with the trombone slide.

I worked in the promotional department of a radio station now, arranging for the distribution of bumper stickers and T-shirts at concerts and events. There were perks, like occasionally scoring free tickets to the must-see
concerts. But usually the days were long. One night after work when I was on the phone with my mother, resting on the ottoman and rubbing my tired feet, I mentioned my still-stinging regret that I'd never played a note. She quickly moved to correct me, hoping to be a comfort.

"You played the recorder," she told me. "I remember you practicing for the big Memorial Day concert."

I sighed rudely into the phone. "That doesn't count."

She ignored my comment. "And you used to be my little tambourine girl. You remember that, don't you? I think we might even still have it in the attic. The tambourine, I mean."

I scoffed at Mom and changed the subject, but later the memory gave me pause. The tambourine was a gift from my grandmother. It had a smooth white plastic surface and the rest was lime green, with circles of shiny gold metal protruding all around and catching the light while I shook it and made up songs. Later, I covered the top of the toy with stickers: flowers, hearts, a unicorn, and my favorite, a glittery green frog with a wide smile on his face. I used to take the tambourine with me wherever I could—outside to play, over to Callie's house, and best of all, to family parties. On Christmas Eve at my grandparents' house, I finished my cookies and jetted into the living room, where I spun around the Christmas tree, banging on the tambourine and singing "Jingle Bells" in a whirl of colored lights and laughing relatives. "Look at her go!" my grandfather said. "The tambourine girl!" At six or seven years old, it was like being a superhero, or at least famous. On occasion, my toddler brother Frankie would reach his pudgy hands out for my tambourine, even grab it, but I really didn't like to share it. I would try to keep it away from him as best I could without making him cry. Once, I snatched it out of his hand, hard, and Frankie started crying. Mom saw and scolded me, and Frankie cried harder. That day, I had to share, but I was still always loath to. It was my special thing, and I loved being the tambourine girl.

One day, just after I'd started second grade, my teacher, Mrs. Bixler—a tall, willowy woman with sharp elbows and long, thin fingers—announced that tomorrow we'd have show-and-tell. Callie asked if she could bring in her teddy bear, and Mrs. Bixler said yes. Jim Laughlin asked if he could bring in his dog, and Mrs. Bixler said no. I didn't ask a question because I wasn't sure what I should bring in. A smile lit my face as I realized what I wanted to bring. I imagined how impressed everyone would be with me and my tambourine. They would all want to play with it; they would all wish they had tambourines and stickers and grandmothers like mine.
The next morning, as I followed my mom up my street to the bus stop, the tambourine jingled in my pink and purple My Little Pony backpack. Frankie was a few eager, but deliberate, steps ahead of us. He seemed fiercely determined about something or other, but I couldn’t say what. It was a beautiful fall day already, crisp and only a little cool. The sun was shining and the air carried the scent of fallen leaves. I walked with a special rhythm, letting the sound of the tambourine punctuate my every step.

“You brought it,” Callie said when I swung myself into our usual seat, near the back of the bus with the older kids, but not close enough for them to notice and tease us. I looked at her quizically. “I could hear it when you were getting on the bus,” she explained. She was holding Mugsy, a good-sized stuffed polar bear with matted, now-grayish fur and nicked-up black plastic eyes. I grinned and pulled the precious instrument out of my bag, noting the way that the frog sticker sparkled in the early morning sun with approval.

When it was time, Mrs. Bixler touched the tips of her fingers together and asked us all to gather in a circle on the large carpet that took up most of the center of the classroom. “Bring your items for show-and-tell,” she commanded, and the classroom erupted. All of the kids in the class began talking, laughing, rummaging through their bags, and occasionally losing their grip on the treasured items in question; Jim dropped his soccer trophy and froze until he saw that it had survived the incident unharmed. I noticed Julianne Lee disappear into the coatroom and figured she must have forgotten her own show-and-tell item in there.

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Julianne had long blond hair that was never broken at the ends, and her parents had already let her get her ears pierced; she always wore little gold studs. Her parents had also bought her a gold ring with a sparkling pink sapphire in it, next to which was a tiny chip of real diamond (she had shown it off at lunch one day to everyone’s astonishment). She smelled like lilac soap. Back then, I had once mused that if Julianne were a dog, she would be a French Poodle. I wondered what she had brought for show-and-tell.

I took a seat next to Callie on the carpet, placing my tambourine in my lap and then looking around the circle at what everyone else had brought. Callie’s wasn’t the only teddy bear, and there was also a weathered soccer ball, a shiny pink plastic horse with the kind of skinny legs that always snapped off, some baseball cards, and a Barbie. Mrs. Bixler was quieting everyone down when Julianne emerged from the coatroom and nudged her way into the circle, carrying a large black case.

“Shhhh,” Mrs. Bixler commanded, flapping her hands in a downward motion, trying to hush us. Jim was the last to notice the teacher, and was still talking loudly to Nick Thomason when he realized that Mrs. Bixler was looking down at him with sharp disapproval. His jaw hung slack for a moment, and then he snapped it firmly shut. Mrs. Bixler gave a small nod and then continued to address the rest of the class.

“As you know, today is our show-and-tell day. I see that all of you brought in some very interesting things, and I can’t wait to hear about them.” She smiled now and looked around the circle, Julianne and her large black case catching her eye. “It looks like you’ve got something interesting there, Julianne. Would you like to start?”

Julianne nodded, her long blond ponytail bobbing as she did. She got up and stood in the center of the circle with her case, leaning down to unlatch it. We all knew what it was already because of the shape of the case, but there was still a collective gasp when she lifted her beautiful, cherry-varnished violin out of its red velvet lining. It was in perfect condition and the light glinted off the instrument’s smooth, rounded curves. But more than that, it looked like something an adult would own. And we all knew that Julianne would be able to play it.

“This is my violin,” Julianne said matter-of-factly, holding it in one hand and her bow in the other. “My mother plays the violin, and her mother did too. She says that it’s important for me to start early so I can be really good. So far I’ve learned ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.’”

Mrs. Bixler beamed. “It’s wonderful for children to play an instrument, and to start early. Do you know who wrote ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star?’”

Julianne shook her head.

“It was Mozart,” our teacher proclaimed. “And he was no older than all of you at the time.”

Even Julianne looked amazed at this, but a moment later she
had thought of her own impressive fact, which she quickly offered to Mrs. Bixler. “My bow is made from horsehair,” she said. “They take this special kind of horse’s hair and pull it until it looks like this.” She held up her bow and gestured to the taut white strands.


“Would you like to play us a song?” Mrs. Bixler asked Julianne. She nodded and tucked the violin under her chin, hesitating a moment with her bow poised. Then she began to play. What she was playing was undeniably “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” and it sounded really good. Everyone was quiet and focused on Julianne. She closed her eyes while she played. I tried to imagine myself with my own violin, eyes closed, performing at a great big symphony hall. I imagined a single spotlight, and the audience tossing red roses onstage. I looked at the pretty velvet insides of Julianne’s violin case, and the pink sock that was tucked in one little cranny (I guessed that she must have used it to clean her violin, or polish it, or whatever it was that she did with the instrument to keep it looking so nice). I wished for velvet and varnish, sapphires and lilac soap. I was sometimes jealous of Julianne, not only of what she had and how she looked, but also of what she could do, playing that instrument so gracefully, something my loud and clunky self would probably never be able to. When Julianne finished her song, everyone clapped, especially Mrs. Bixler.

“Thank you so much Julianne. That was wonderful.” Mrs. Bixler smiled and looked around the circle as Julianne packed up her violin and took her seat again. “Who would like to go next?”

No one volunteered.

“Alyson?”

I looked up in surprise at the sound of my name, and I felt my heartbeat speeding up in my chest.

“Did you bring in a musical instrument as well?”

I stared at the teacher blankly. No, I hadn’t brought in a musical instrument. Had I? I looked at the toy tambourine in my lap and then back at Mrs. Bixler. Her eyebrows had begun to knit together with concern at my stunned silence. Finally, I nodded and stood up, but stayed out of the center of the circle.

“This—” My voice came out funny at first. “This is my tambourine. My grandmother gave it to me.” I tilted the stickered side of the tambourine toward my classmates. My face was getting warm. Even my ears were getting warm. “It’s pretty neat,” I offered. The class watched me in silence, but certainly not awestruck silence. “That’s it, really.”

“Very nice,” said Mrs. Bixler. “Do you play it?”

I nodded.

“Would you like to play for us?”

I shook my head. “It’s just basically a toy,” I said, my voice nearing a whisper. I sat down.

“Thank you, Alyson,” said Mrs. Bixler warmly. She spied Jim’s soccer trophy. “Jim. What have you got there?”

My cheeks stayed hot for a long time. I looked over at Mugsy, who was sitting in Callie’s lap. His scratched-up eyes seemed to twinkle. I forced a small smile at him, and I listened to Jim talk about how his dad told him that soccer was called football in England.

After show-and-tell, I made a quick stop at the coatroom to bury my tambourine in my backpack and gather my things. I was mostly quiet when Callie and I got back on the bus to return home. I left school with nothing of the exuberant rhythm of this morning’s walk to the bus stop.

My mom and Frankie were waiting for me when I got off the bus, and Mom smiled and waved as I approached. She had her long brown hair in a ponytail, which I always thought looked pretty, and she seemed to be in a really good mood. I pouted anyway, and her smile shrunk a bit at my approach.

“How was your day, Alyson?”

I didn’t say anything and continued to pout. Mom held my hand as the three of us headed down the street. My tambourine jingled involuntarily with each step I took as I kept pace with my longer-legged mother and hyperactive baby brother.

“Did you have fun at show-and-tell?” she tried again.
There was another moment of silent sulking before I let it all come pouring out.

“Julianne Lee brought in her violin and played ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,’ and it has a bow made out of a horse’s hair and a case with velvet inside, and I think she’s a show-off.”

Mom raised her eyebrows slightly at my outburst.

“What makes you say she’s a show-off?”

“Because she has to be better than everyone.” My throat was getting tight and my stomach was getting upset. It didn’t sound like Mom was going to be on my side on this one.

“Do you think that you were jealous of Julianne?”

“No,” I said in a mopey way that meant yes.

“Do you think maybe you want to learn to play the violin?”

I shook my head and watched my sneakers traveling over the pavement, and the shadow of my hand in Mom’s that was preceding us, just large and distorted enough to be fascinating.

When we got home, I dropped my bag to the floor in the living room. It made an unmusical clang.

“Why don’t I go fix you a snack?” Mom suggested as I flopped onto the floor next to my bag. Frankie followed Mom into the kitchen, and I was left to sit, alone and still grumpy. I pulled the tambourine out of my bag and frowned at it, at how tiny and plastic it was, at the jumble of randomly applied stickers. I noticed that a corner of the frog sticker was beginning to curl. I started to pick at it, scratching at the sticker and trying to peel it off, when I realized that Frankie had made his way back into the living room. He stared at me with his wide baby-blue eyes and shoved one fist into his mouth. After another moment he reached out his free hand, grasping at my favorite toy again. I smiled at him—the same kind of not-happy smile I’d given Callie’s teddy bear earlier—and I handed him the tambourine. His face lit up and he began banging it furiously as he toddled out of the room.

After the talk with my mother on the phone, I headed out, going nowhere in particular, just out. Pulling up my collar against the chill of the early March night, I walked down the sidewalk and hummed quietly. I passed a few restaurants and bars, full of noisy, animated people and teasingly delicious smells. I kept on walking. In the distance I thought that I could hear someone keeping a loud and raucous beat. When I turned the next corner, I saw a pair of boys under a streetlight, heads bowed as they each played on a pair of overturned white plastic buckets. I watched from a distance for a moment, then I stepped closer and watched the kids play on their makeshift drums until they finished their song. I broke into a round of applause and smiled through my mildly chapped lips. One of the boys took a bow, and then made a slight nod to the overturned baseball cap resting in front of them on the pavement, which contained a single rumpled dollar and some scattered change. I dug in the pockets of my wool coat for something besides the keys to my apartment. I found two quarters and a dime, and quickly moved to place them in the hat.

“My last cent,” I informed them, smiling again even though my nose was beginning to run. They resumed their drumming as I slowly walked away.
She only does it when she’s desperate,
When there’s nothing else to pop
Or drink,
Nothing to inhale or inject—
No Ritalin around to snort.

Sick with only oxygen,
She scrapes the inside
Of her bowl clean.
Scratches the tip of a paper clip
Against the colorful

Curves—The hallow breast
Of the bulb blown
To fit perfectly in an unsteady hand.

Hardly a crack on the soft glass,
She chips at the residue with care.
Opium, hash,
The hardened goop
Of cannabis
Crumbling to the center easily.
She only does this when she’s desperate

Her table top—
A meth lab of contraptions.
Empty Coke cans
Wrapped in tin foil,

Twelve cigarette butts floating
In a fish bowl,
The smell of tar and sulfur
Beneath fingertips
Rubbed white with wanting—

Needing more than just air to breathe.
She penetrates the mouth piece
Reclaiming everything
That got away.

She only does this when she’s desperate.
Knocking loose
The bits that cling like guts
To the ribcage of her last high—
The sticky ball like silly putty on her pointer.

Her knee bouncing up
To meet the bottom of the table—
Calf muscle tightening.
She’s halfway to the finish line
Shouting madly—

This must be love!
She hits the bowl just once
All tension seized to exist—
Lungs contracting in resistance,
She coughs up a cloud of smoke.

Nearly choking on her happiness.
Charlie, I thought I saw you again yesterday spinning around in the rinse cycle with three pairs of pants, four blouses, five shirts, and nine socks.

It was your reflection that I glimpsed in the door of the washer, but I didn’t turn around. Instead I watched you spin with the socks and wondered if you were dizzy.

Later, at the coffee shop, when I’m standing in line, and my ears are assaulted by noise, months later and I still wonder whether or not you heard me calling after you that day.

Did you hear me when you were walking away, or was the noise on Romsey Street too loud, the rat-a-tat-tat of heels on the street, the shrieks of children playing. Were they too loud?

Did you hear me, Charlie? Does it matter? Would I have stopped and turned if I had heard you? I never did, did I?

I guess it was just your turn to walk away. Your turn not to stop. Not to turn around. I never realized before how hard it was to wonder whether or not your voice was heard.

And yet I can’t turn around to see if you’re really there, more than a reflection. I just sit still and watch you spin.
Diner

NICOLE FONTENAUT | DRAWING | PENCIL | 25” x 22.5”
warmed to life with the
touch of the slender
tips of her fingers that guide into a mix into a spiraling dive of formation, creation, now a
splendor
now a splash
of realization; cake
chocolating the spires, bowl brimming the sugary confection to salt to the viscous egg
to peak
at perfection; we stop.
Pressure

ANNE HEYWOOD | DRAWING | CHARCOAL | 11” x 17”
The Games These Children Play

RYAN OLSON | PRINTMAKING | COPPERPLATE ETCHING | 14” x 10”
A green rivulet’s unrest finds
Peace in these alpine waters.
As worried mothers find children.
Exhausted birds find home.

Wise blue glass without beginning
Or end, reflecting
A sliver moon through twilight.

This lake has no waves.
It massages the shore
With care,
It whispers its existence.

It accepts rocks sent
To skip across its surface
Without incident
And they will sink, their ripples
Will set out, searching.
Until they lose themselves.

The sun will swell over
Mountains, guarding an oldest friend.
It will leak onto their snowy caps.
And your memories will turn
To sepia.

You will stand barefoot.
Icy waters kiss
Your skin through glossy stones and
You will not feel

Cold. Rays embrace blue
Vastness, and just for you in black
Horizon they will sketch a tower.
Of mortar, iron,
And age.

The worn gray facades will peer
Into you deeper
Than you peer into them.
And with warmth the lake will greet it,
As the sun, the mountains, the fading stars,
And you.
Self-Portrait
AYA TSURUI | DRAWING | CHARCOAL | 22” x 29”
It was nearing noon, and the April sun beat down. The hot season was coming to a close, but daytime temperatures still hovered around 115°F. I was bent over, ankle-deep in cloudy yellow water. My hands were plunged into the mud at the bottom, breaking up the dirt that had just been dumped in. Having emptied the last sack of rocks and earth, Haruna stepped into the shallow pit beside me. His faded blue and white T-shirt had a large tear in the shoulder, and was otherwise coming apart along the seams. Sweat ran in dirty rivulets down his face and arms, shading his blue-black skin gray. His soaked pants clung to his slim calves. He looked over at me every once in a while and grinned, his teeth white against the dusty background. Did I not need a rest? I assured him I was fine. For me, this was not simply labor, and my subsistence did not depend on the result of our effort. I enjoyed the heat of the sun on my back, the squish of my toes in the mud. I found a calmness in the repetition of the work, of being part of the process, of feeling useful, for once, in this world in which I was trying to belong.

I had arrived in the northern region of Burkina Faso in West Africa only a few months before to begin my service as a Peace Corps health volunteer. I was stationed in the small village of Tina-gadel, based in its local health clinic. While I went to the clinic daily, my presence felt futile. I was not medically qualified to treat patients, and the members of the small staff were too overworked, or uninterested, to involve themselves in outside projects. I was struggling with the main language of French, and only beginning to grasp the rudiments of the local language of Sonrai. When Haruna appeared at my house that morning, he
invited me to go with him to Gosey, the gold mining site. I went, if only to feel I was doing something.

I had gone to Gosey once before, during my first week in Tina-gadel, to assist the clinic staff with a polio vaccination campaign. As I sat under the hot sun with the vaccination team, dozens of mothers crowded in close to us. Any attempt to form a line quickly dissolved. Babies screamed from where they were tied to their mothers’ backs, their tiny foreheads beginning to glisten in the heat. I took down the names and ages of the children we vaccinated, the majority of them disturbingly underweight, their noses crusty with dried snot. Insistent mothers pressed in on us, impatient to get their children treated and resume their own duties: cooking, grinding, washing, panning.

From my perspective, Gosey seemed a filthy shantytown. There was trash everywhere. I saw no order in the mudbrick houses and thatch-and-reed huts that seemed to have been randomly constructed. The land surrounding Gosey was lumpy with low piles of crushed red stone, where shallow pits and tunnels had been dug and gold sought. The bushy thorn trees that dotted most of the landscape of the Sahel were absent in Gosey, having long been uprooted or chopped down for firewood. While Tina-gadel was by no means lush, numerous neem trees jutted out from the middle of people’s courtyards, their thick foliage, bright green all year round, creating large areas of shade. Gosey seemed naked and exposed to the burning sun and harsh harmattan winds that swept down from the Sahara.

Men who had been working in the mines passed by, carrying shovels and pickaxes, their pants shredded from wear and their bodies dusted white from dried mud and pulverized rock. Their eyes were bloodshot from the dust, lack of sleep, and the amphetamines they popped before descending the shafts. There were itinerant workers from other regions of Burkina and the bordering countries of Mali and Niger. I was shouted at, or yelled to, in languages I had never heard. In my village, while I didn’t exactly blend in, people were used to my presence, knew my purpose, and were beginning to know me as a person. The bleakness, the desperation of Gosey, intimidated me. I’d had no desire to return.

But from my house every morning, I could see women gathering around the pump at the edge of the village, filling their striped plastic buckets. They headed out in small groups for the five kilometer walk to Gosey, their necks stiffly swaying as they balanced full buckets of water atop their heads, babies on their backs. One had to pay for water in Gosey, a cost that would eat into—if not devour—any money that might be made. The women would spend the day working in pits like the one in which I now worked with Haruna, before returning in the evening. Much of the population of Tina-gadel seemed to disappear into Gosey during those first few months. Being the dry season, there was no work to be done in the fields. The opportunity was taken to earn money searching for gold while waiting for the arrival of the rains, if they came at all.

The shaft where Haruna and his partner had collected the dirt lay in the distance. We had been working since early morning; Haruna and his teammate took turns descending into the narrow ten-foot hole. They had dug up and shoveled the dirt at the bottom into old rice sacks. I hauled the filled sacks over to the water pit, following a narrow path that skirted more holes and pits where more men worked. Haruna’s partner took his rest, seated at the edge of the shaft, watching us as he smoked a hand-rolled cigarette.

When we had broken up most of the dirt, Haruna took a beaten metal pan with a round bottom and, reaching low into the water, scooped up the runny mud. Holding the pan in both hands, he moved it in a small, circular motion, the yellow water swirling inside. At each pass, water dripped down like pottery glaze along the sides of the pan. Bits of debris and sand were flung up to the metal edge, and water was eased out by the twirling motion. A few more passes and the water was nearly finished, a remaining puddle sloshing up the residual grains of sand. Haruna held the pan out to me and, tipping the water out of the way, pointed to the bottom. I squinted to see where his finger was aimed, then spotted it: flecks of glinting yellow, not much bigger than the tip of a pen.

“That’s all?” I asked in French. “That’s it? That’s gold?”

“Yes,” he answered, excited. “It’s a lot!”

The five hours of labor we had put in yielded only these few tiny specks; I found it hard to believe that they were even worth much. Haruna placed the gold in a small piece of clear plastic, twisting it closed like a candy wrapper. We panned for a bit longer and, having collected a few more flecks, headed out of the mining
area toward the edge of town. I followed, my wet feet sliding in my sandals as I made my way over scattered piles of rock and past mining shafts.

We entered a small reed hut that belonged to the buyer. Haruna emptied the gold we had collected into one side of a tiny metal balance and placed a coin and matchstick in the other. The proprietor eyed the balance, removing the matchstick and replacing it with half of one, changing the coin and adding another, until the two small pans were equally suspended. Satisfied, he removed some cash from a tin box and handed Haruna 6000 cfa, about twelve dollars.

After splitting the profit with his teammate, Haruna insisted on buying lunch for the two of us. We devoured a big bowl of rice and beans, and fried dough balls dipped into a sour porridge of dried manioc. The hot porridge, seasoned with spicy red pepper, was delicious, despite the heat of the day. Haruna used the remaining money to buy food for his family: a few kilos of rice and some cooking oil. The money was finished, and he would return to the mine the next day to begin again.

That evening, neighbors stopped by my house. “You worked in the gold mines? Was it hard?” My limited Sonraï only allowed me to answer in the affirmative. Haruna’s friends commented to him, smiling, that he had taken the nasara, the foreigner, to the mines. The next day, and the next, as I passed women in the village on their way to Gosey, they paused, inviting me along.
CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES

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2009 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association: 
Gold Crown Award 
Thirteen Gold Circle Awards:
Adrienne Berkland, “Fauvism”
First Place for Single Illustration Rendering Photographic Material

Jenna Doyle, “Untitled”
First Place for Photograph: Black and White or Black and White with One Other Color

Nicole Fontenault, “Bianca”
First Place for Single Illustration: Black and White

David Bevans, Jr., “Scarred”
Second Place for Essay

Sarah Haag, “Untitled”
Second Place for Single Illustration Rendering Photographic Material: Color

Benjamin Thurston, “Corporate America”
Second Place for Illustration: Black and White

The Bridge Staff
Third Place for Typography Throughout a Magazine

Nicole Fontenault, “Untitled”
Third Place for Single Illustration Rendering Photographic Material: Color

Cheryl Tullis, “Vista”
Third Place for Photograph: Two or More Colors

The Bridge Staff
Certificate of Merit for Cover Design: Two or More Colors

The Bridge Staff, “Untitled”
Certificate of Merit for Single Illustration Rendering Photographic Material: Black and White

Bernadette J. Bossé, “Woods”
Certificate of Merit for Illustration: Black and White

Alexandra Carvario, “The Rose”
Certificate of Merit for Essay

2008 | Associated Collegiate Press: 
Pacemaker Award 
Best-in-Show for Literary Magazine: Third Place

2008 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association: 
Annual Critiques: Gold Medalist
VOLUME 4

2008 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association:
  Silver Crown Award
  Twelve Gold Circle Awards

2007 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association:
  Annual Critiques: Gold Medalist

VOLUME 3

2007 | Associated Collegiate Press
  Pacemaker Award
  Best-in-Show for Literary Magazine: First Place

2007 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Gold Crown Award
  Nine Gold Circle Awards

2006 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Annual Critiques: Gold Medalist

VOLUME 2

2006 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Gold Crown Award
  Seven Gold Circle Awards

2005 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Annual Critiques: Gold Medalist

VOLUME 1

2005 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Silver Crown Award
  Six Gold Circle Awards

2005 | College Media Advisors
  Apple Award: Best-in-Show for Literary/Art Magazine

2004 | Columbia Scholastic Press Association
  Annual Critiques: Gold Medalist
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