2005

the bridge, Volume 2, 2005

Bridgewater State College

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Bridgewater State College
Bridgewater, Massachusetts 02325
thebridge 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.

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 Heller taught in the Department of Art from 1968 to 2001. He was an inspired artist, a dedicated, gifted teacher and mentor, and an unselfish giver of his time, wisdom and expertise. The recognition of this piece in thebridge is dedicated to his memory.

2004 Recipient Rose Esson-Dawson
Raku Bottle #3 ceramic

The John Heller Award
Producing the first volume of thebridge was an extraordinarily difficult task. It was the inaugural issue, after all, and all of the challenges that accompany such maiden voyages were in abundance. A great deal of valuable knowledge was gained during that process, however, and preparations to produce the second volume were made with the hopeful notion that this time things would be easier. We were wrong. Our quest to be even better meant accepting new challenges, and new challenges meant new obstacles. We are particularly grateful, then, for the phenomenal assistance and support we received from so many members of the BSC family, most notably: Dana Mohler-Faria; Mercedes Nuñez; Nancy Kleniewski; Louis and Cynthia Ricciardi; Michael Somers; Bill Davis; Eileen O’Sullivan; Brenda Molife; Evelyn Pezzulich; David Ostroth; Lois Poule; Barbara LaFrance; Roger Dunn; Candace Maguire; Howard London; Alan Comedy; and Kathy Evans.

The staff would also like to thank the faculty who distributed fliers and journals to their students and otherwise promoted our cause, especially the members of the departments of English and Art. Thank you to Missy White, Jack Murphy and the good people at the Campus Bookstore for allowing us to distribute the journal from their premises, and to Kevin Manning for keeping a fresh stack available at the library's circulation desk. The mailroom's James Ferguson, Michael Lehane, and Paul Auger were again invaluable, as were the copy center's Deanne Farino and David Plante.

We would also like to express our gratitude to: the office of Public Affairs' Eva Gaffney, Marie Murphy, Linda Balzotti, John Winters and David Wilson; Shanshan Cui; Kevin Farrell; Adam Stilgoe; Daniel DiCenso; Lauren Carter; Courtney Smith; Nancy Moses; Ruth Hannon; Anna Jearld-Martin; Darlene Costa-Brown; Aeon Skoble; Marica Dinneen; Donna Wood; The Campus Climate Action Group; Bill Smith; Jagwiga Smith; Andrea Garr-Barnes; Susan McCombe; Tom Curley; Lynne Lennon; Virgina Smith; Lisa Shaw; Tony Esposito; Matt Maderos; Barry Guaraldi; Ed Newcomer; Ed Homewood; Jennifer Dawson and the Comment; Cindy Kane; Rob Lorensen; Frank Freitas and RPI Printing; the hundreds of students who submitted work for consideration; and, finally, all of the faculty, staff, students, family, and friends who eagerly anticipated thebridge, Volume II.

Everyone listed above, it is fair to say, joins us in saluting President Dana Mohler-Faria and the Bridgewater State College Foundation for making this journal possible.

It is also fair to say that this year's editors deserve to be saluted as well. They were faced with the daunting challenge of raising an exceedingly high bar even higher, and through an impressive display of perseverance, professionalism, creativity and dedication to excellence, their challenge was met. We are very proud of them. And we suspect, after you've seen the job they have done, that you will be very proud of them, too.

MD, JW
To

Ron Pitt

for making our mission
a mission of his own
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2006 Submission Guidelines 125
Because the first issue of the bridge received so much recognition, we anticipated a high volume of submissions. But we did not expect 627 - virtually double from last year. Sorting through these pieces was exhausting, but it was also exhilarating. The BSC student body, from freshman to graduate to alumni, is endowed with the finest talent we have ever seen. With so much to choose from, we devised a system to make the process more efficient. We decided to individually assign a number value to the manuscripts and art; the numbers were then tallied and the pieces that received above a minimum amount of points were the subject of nine hours of intense debate made all the more fun by a great deal of pizza. By the day’s end, we had a list of students whose work would be included. Some of these students, incidentally, had more than one piece selected. Because the entire selection process was blind, multiple works by a single student is a testament to truly exceptional talent. Moreover, it is a testament to the fact that we fulfilled our solemn responsibility to bring you the best works, not the most people.

While the literature and art selected represent a wide array of subjects, they are unified by what we value most: excellence of craft. The painters are at the top of their game as they deal with themes ranging from isolation to self-awareness, and the photographers masterfully make poignant commentary about the world in which we live. The prose includes moving explorations of birth, patriotism, the irony of a dying man’s final thoughts, and the emotional honesty of a young woman’s relationship with her widowed father. There is humor in a man’s quixotic crusade to teach his neighbor a lesson for displaying Christmas decorations too early, and there is joy as two boys search for salamanders in the backwoods of Georgia and discover a world of beauty and hope. These pieces ring with a maturity and depth found not in the exploitation of melodrama, but in the quiet observation of life’s lessons. The works included have had an endearing impact on us, and to have had the opportunity to surrender ourselves to them, and then to present them to you, was truly the most rewarding part of this amazing journey.

And the journey was indeed amazing. But it was also intimidating. Volume I was fantastically successful, garnering numerous awards and acquiring local and national praise. While we were proud of our predecessors, we felt tremendous pressure to meet the incredible standard that they had set for us. In fact, during our first meeting, our advisors made it clear that our obligation was to exceed it. For seven months they pushed us, and we worked harder on this journal than we had ever worked on anything before. We hope we have met everyone’s expectations and, in the process, represented the college well.

The Editors
March, 2005
Leaves gradually fade
from green to fiery hues
brilliant infernos,

explosions of heat
that blaze along dry Fall ground
and scatter in waves,

when October ends
flames reduce to ash piles
crisp brown burnt embers

that drop silently
along the busy roadway
without being known.
Isn’t Watermelon Delicious?

by Lauren Carter
2nd Place, thebridge Award for Non-Fiction

It was just another Thursday night at Axis. White lights were flashing, music was pumping, and I was mildly buzzed. My best friend Stacey and I were making our way around the edges of the crowded dance floor, looking for a table where we could plop down and briefly escape the frenzy of the hot, crowded club. Then my favorite song came on. I don’t remember what song it was; it was a long time ago and I usually had a new favorite song every other week. But at the time, the song that started playing was my favorite, and I was ecstatic. As soon as I heard the baseline I guzzled what was left of my drink, broke out into some kind of overenthusiastic dance move, and shouted, “Let’s go!”

Stacey looked over at me and laughed. “God, Lauren,” she said, “sometimes you’re sooo white, and sometimes you’re sooo black.”

It was an interesting idea. That I could be one or the other, at different times. I wondered when I was which one. So I asked her. She started to answer, but the music was too loud and I couldn’t really make out what she was saying. Plus, my favorite song was on. I decided to leave that conversation for another time and a quieter place, maybe a café with free refills on flavored coffee.

We never did have that conversation, and I never did get the answer I was looking for. But the idea stuck with me. That a behavior related to a skin tone. That my behavior related to two different ones.

It wasn’t a totally new idea. My black cousin Reagan had told me for years that I acted “so white.” I thought I was just acting like me. But apparently, with my Bart Simpson t-shirts, my “proper” speech, and my affinity for Vanilla Ice, I was masquerading as a white girl in a black girl’s body. I didn’t know those characteristics belonged exclusively to white people. Or at least that’s how I feel now. But then, I felt inferior. Way behind in the race for true blackness. I’d never know all the latest black sayings, never listen to all the latest black music, never wear all the latest black clothing. I’d never be as black as she was. Or so I thought.

That’s before I read James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, in which the nameless protagonist, the son of a white father and black mother, spends his life switching from white to black and back to white again. When he discovers his blackness as a child, he looks the same way he always did: like a white person. But internally, he realizes there’s black blood running through his veins, or rather blue blood with black ancestry in it, and he withdraws. He isn’t what he thought he was. Really, though, nothing’s changed. Externally, at least.

So it kind of surprised me when, at the end of his story, he became white again. It was as easy as 1—2—3. Or, rather, it was as difficult as watching a black man being lynched, and deciding to forsake your race
to better your condition. While I could attempt to analyze and judge his
decision, decide whether he succumbed to the race game or merely chose
to stop playing it, the validity of his decision to pass isn’t as important as
the fact that it could be made. That he could become white again, simply
by deciding to be. It was a miraculous transformation. Which got me to
to thinking, if you can miraculously transform from black to white, or vice
versa, then how real is either category?

My sister transforms all the time, depending on who’s looking at her.
She’s black in terms of ancestry. Partially, anyway. Our mother’s Italian,
his father’s black. And though her hair came out extremely nappy, her
skin’s extremely light. Now that she chemically straightens her hair, most
people don’t know she’s black unless she tells them. She can pass. Not
among black people, usually; they can see it in her features. But to the
untrained eye, amongst the world at large, she is generally perceived as
white. So which is she? Is she what her ancestry dictates, or what other
people’s perception decides?

It’s a ridiculous question, I know. But only as ridiculous as the fallacy
it’s based on. When you lump a group of people together based solely
on the color of their skin, of course ridiculous questions like these come
up. It’d be the same if you lumped them together based on eye color, hair
color, height, foot size, or any other arbitrary characteristic over which
they have no control.

Funny, that we would choose to separate and define people based on
factors beyond their control. Well, maybe not funny. But certainly
ingenious. And an excellent way to subordinate one group in order to
elevate another. Because isn’t it true that all of these external factors, in
actuality, say nothing about a person’s character? Isn’t it true that the only
real measure of a person is in their actions, not the size of their ears? Isn’t
it true that anyone who has survived and succeeded, in any facet of life,
did so almost exclusively because of their intellect, their will to persevere,
and not because of the fullness of their lips?

When Frederick Douglass found ways to teach himself to read, it
wasn’t because of how tightly his hair was or wasn’t coiled. It was because
of his will to learn, his ingenuity, his intelligence. After six months of
torture by his brutal master Covey, Douglass made the bold and beauti-
ful statement: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; now you shall
see how a slave was made a man.” And when he did make that journey
from slavery to manhood, it wasn’t because of the size of his muscles, it
was because of the size of his spirit. When blacks survived slavery, it wasn’t
because of the length of their eyelashes, or how many freckles they did
or didn’t have on their faces. The folktales and spirituals that emerged
out of that era as survival strategies had nothing to do with appearance,
and everything to do with a will to overcome seemingly insurmount-
able obstacles. And when Bigger Thomas, the main character in Richard
Wright’s famous novel Native Son, became the agent of his own demise, it
wasn’t, contrary to his own beliefs, because of the darkness of his skin; it was because of the darkness of his mind, and all of the things he believed he would never achieve.

Maybe life would be simpler if skin color really was an indicator of character, if external factors determined internal worth, and people with similar complexions could unite as one. Then all the dark-skinned peoples of America could heed the message of black separatists like Marcus Garvey and return home to Africa. We could take a giant plane to Nigeria, and once there we could blend easily into the community, as if we’d been there all along. But in reality, those Nigerians would probably be quick to point out what I’ve recently come to realize: that the significance of skin color is that it is the color of one’s skin, and not much more. That it does not necessarily imply a common set of values, a standard behavior, a singular way of life.

And why should it? Aren’t there a number of ways that human beings can characterize themselves as individuals? Isn’t it true that race is just one ingredient in a large and complicated recipe? Is there an unspoken agreement that it remain the primary ingredient, defining all other aspects of life? I know that my life is about much more than being black, and, for that matter, being black is about much more than the color of my skin.

Which leads to the question: what exactly is being black about? And when are people authentically black? When they start celebrating Kwanzaa? When they fill their wardrobe with Roc-A-Wear and Phat Farm? When they stop playing Elton John? When they gobble down a delicious slice of watermelon? Is that what blackness is? A holiday? A piece of clothing? A song? A type of food?

I never looked at being black that way. I never considered that a dashiki would give me blackness, and I never thought that a lack of one would take it away. I never thought I had to do, have, or say anything at all to be black. I just thought I was.

I never told her so, but when Reagan said I was acting “so white,” she was wrong. Whites don’t have a monopoly on listening to Vanilla Ice, and even if they could have one, I doubt they’d want it. I don’t need to act out my blackness, just like I don’t need to act out my eye color; it’s simply an intrinsic part of who I am. True, the color of my skin implies an ancestry that the color of my eyes does not, and I’m aware of that ancestry; I draw from it daily. But I don’t need to wear Lugz and use slang to prove it. Maya Angelou said, “I am the hope and the dream of the slave,” and I haven’t forgotten about those hopes and dreams. I understand the debt that I owe to my ancestors, and I pay it back every day, in my own way, that has nothing to do with what jeans I wear, and has everything to do with how I live my life. The width of my nose is not my inheritance. The will to survive is.

Stacey’s statement in that nightclub was one of my first, or at least
my most memorable, experiences with “double consciousness” as W.E.B. DuBois defined it, of being conscious not only of how you see yourself, but of how others see you; I’d never thought of myself solely in terms of white and black, but I realized the extent to which other people could. For a long time after that night I wondered where the line between black and white was, and in what moments I crossed it. I don’t wonder about that line anymore.
I stepped out my front door fifteen minutes before Mass began to warm up my car. I still had on my slippers and could see my breath in the cold, crisp air. Temperatures had dropped into the teens the night before and ice covered the windshield. I had to breathe on the lock to get my key in because that was iced over, too. I should have known my car wouldn’t turn over if I had trouble actually getting in, but I tried anyway. It was useless. Instead of having another ten minutes to finish my coffee, and debate some more about whether or not I was going to vomit from drinking too much the night prior, I had to go inside and put on my boots and tell my father it was time to start walking.

He happily obliged and went to the chair by the front door where everything was carefully and methodically laid out for him. He put on his wool cap, his winter parka, and of course, he grabbed his walking stick. My father consistently refused to use a convenient fold-up cane like most blind people because he said he wasn’t blind. Which, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he wasn’t exactly. He’d been born with something called Nystagmus, which is simply a fancy medical term for uncontrollable eye movement back and forth. He lacked the muscle strength around each pupil to keep them in one place, to keep them looking only straight ahead. In basic terms, his eyes wandered. They had gotten progressively worse with age. His sight was nearly gone and occasionally a translucent build-up of fluid would collect in the corners of his eyes because of the constant movement. Sometimes it would start to seep down his face and he’d have to discretely wipe it away with a handkerchief.

But no, technically, he wasn’t blind, so he refused a cane. He preferred the smoothly carved wooden stick I bought him at the Irish Cottage a few years ago for Christmas. The tag said it was made of the Blackthorn trees in Ireland, which inspired in him a sense of pride; he had always been rather old-fashioned that way.

So, securing my hat on my head, I looked at my father and gave him my arm as we made our way down the front steps and towards St. Patrick’s Church. The walk was bitter cold and listening to the rhythmic pitter-patter of our shoes hitting the frozen ground was the only thing that distracted me from concentrating on how frigid it really was.

“I wonder what the temperature is,” he mused.

“I think the weatherman said it was somewhere in the low twenties,” I replied as we passed a row of shabby cottages, much like the one we lived in. I felt depressed seeing them look so newly bleak and frozen. I wasn’t so sure I was ready for winter to set in just yet.

“So did you have a good visit with Matt last night?” he asked.
Weather that cold wasn’t worth discussing for too long anyway, and me going out on a Saturday night was certainly out of the norm. All of my close friends had moved away long ago. “Yeah, I did,” I replied, exhausted and unconvincing. We had gone to Grumpy’s Pub for the night and gotten rather drunk. But it was a somber, estranged kind of drunk. We talked very little for two people who had been friends for so long. At times it felt as if we were two strangers sitting together at the bar, sharing a bowl of stale peanuts and nothing else.

“How long is he home for?” my father asked, just as his left foot dropped into a sunken part of the sidewalk. He quickly gripped my arm tighter to keep from falling. His walking stick must have skipped over it, which I always found useless in that regard. He huffed abruptly and I used both hands to steady him. Then we continued on as if nothing had happened.

“Just this weekend,” I said. “He’s just visiting his parents before he heads back to New York.”

Ahead of us I saw that the church parking lot was already full and I could hear the organ begin to play.

In church I followed the same routine I’d followed every Sunday for the last nine years since my mother died. I knelt, I blessed myself, I sat, I stood, I sat back down again, I repeated the Our Father, I asked for forgiveness, I daydreamed, I picked at the dirt under my fingernails, and I shifted constantly in my seat because it was hard and uncomfortable and I was bored. Before my mother’s fatal heart attack, she would attend church with my father instead of me. Once she was gone, though, church suddenly struck me as a very lonely place to be as a widow. So I took him to keep him company, though sometimes I quite enjoyed listening to him sing the hymns.

We’d gotten into a routine over those last nine years where after Mass my father and I would go next door to Betsy’s Diner for lunch. Roberta, an overweight, unfriendly woman who always had smudges of lipstick on her teeth, would be working. My father would order liver and onions with a glass of milk and I would order a tuna melt with unsweetened iced tea. But, as I said, that particular Sunday I was unusually hung over, and after my father ordered his regular meal, Roberta glanced at me knowingly, and I hesitated.

“What’ll it be dear, the same as always?” she asked.

I thought about it for a few seconds and decided that no, a tuna melt would not work well with how I was feeling. “I’ll just have some toast today, actually,” I said. Roberta collected our menus without even looking at us, and I added, “Please.”

After a few minutes I went to the bathroom to wash my hands, and when I lethargically approached the table, wiping my hands off on my corduroys because the bathroom had run out of towels, I didn’t know that the sandwich before me was a tuna melt and not toast. Or maybe I was so used to
getting a tuna melt that it took a moment for it to register that it wasn't what I had asked for. Either way, it wasn't until I got a whiff of the cheesy, fishy scent of my lunch that I began to feel queasy, and I realized that no matter what I asked Roberta for, I'd always get what I always got. It was sort of funny, really. Had I not felt so nauseous, I might have laughed.

I ate some of my French fries, in a desperate attempt to settle my stomach, and avoided looking at my father's liver and onions at all costs. I was pretty sure I'd throw up any second and didn't know how I'd make the walk home. Sitting through Mass hadn't been entirely unbearable because at least I had things to distract me from how I was feeling. But at Betsy's Diner that Sunday, it was just the two of us, and all I had was what was on the table in front of me and a neon sign to my left that told me to Eat Heavy. So I half-interestedly read the church bulletin which my father had just folded up and placed on the table between us.

It wasn't until I saw an advertisement for a Peace Corps volunteer meeting that I became more focused on what I was reading and less so on the acidic burp that was lingering in my throat. A moment later, I looked up from the bulletin and stared at my father. He was working a piece of liver in his mouth while his eyes roamed, as always, though sometimes, when my mother was alive, he'd manage to stare at her intently for a few seconds, as if she were the only one worth gaining absolute control of his retinas for. It looked like such a strained action, but now and then, under the dim light of our dining room, he'd do it. Almost always she would catch him. He'd blush every time and seemed embarrassed that his feelings for her could be so easily read by what should have been simple eye contact.

Thinking back, it could have been any number of things really, but I suspect what really tempted me was the toilets. Actually, they were no more than deep holes in the ground. Either way, they were so drastically different from what I currently used that it was enough reason for me to apply. Though, deep down inside, I never thought it'd develop into anything more than that.

The meeting was held in the musty basement of St. Patrick's Church. Some local volunteers that were currently home for a visit put together a forty-five minute presentation about the Peace Corps and how to get involved. Jules and Kyle were their names and they were a married couple donning dashikis made by the tribe they were volunteering with in Niger. Their presentation involved slides of the mud huts they built and slept in, and even the toilets they'd dug themselves. The pictures of the landscape seemed barren, but the pictures of the people and their culture, so temptingly rich. I remember sitting in the cold, metal, foldout chair in my green pullover fleece and Levis watching this couple, and wondering if our lives could be any more different.

I'd figured that going to the meeting would be strictly informative and not at all inspirational, because nothing in that church inspired me. If
the meeting had been held at the community college I attended, I might have feared being swept away with other young students also in need of a change of scenery. Simply being within classroom walls nearly did that to me anyway. But I knew that wouldn't happen at St. Patrick's, so I saw no problem in going, and I saw no problem in applying as soon as I got home. Or rather, as soon as I finished convincing my father that although the meeting was interesting, I wasn't personally interested in joining.

Part of me knew when I filled out the application and asked for recommendations from some of my professors that I was being unrealistic. It seemed absurd and I hesitated before I finally dropped all the forms in the mailbox a few weeks later. It was almost a game to see how far I'd go in the process before succumbing to the realities of my life as I had so many times before. And this was even more ridiculous to me, as it wasn't an application for the good-paying secretarial job or the out-of-state college education I had turned down in the past. This was volunteer work. This was willingly sleeping in a mud hut, eating bland rice, and shitting in a hole in the ground for two years because even that seemed more appealing to me than continuing to live with my father in a remote fishing town at the age of twenty-eight.

Applying was harmless, I figured. “I’m just curious,” is what I eventually told myself when I let the blue metal hinge slam shut at the post office before getting in my car and heading home. “He doesn’t even have to know,” I mumbled as I pulled into the driveway and saw my father’s silhouette in the window. “Not yet anyway.”

And I was right. It would be five months before I’d receive the acceptance letter.

When I came home from class that day, my father was not sitting by the window waiting for me, and I panicked. I found a note from him saying he had gone for a walk to the library. He never went for walks by himself, especially to the library, which was a good distance away. I thought of going to look for him, expecting to find him sprawled out on a sidewalk somewhere, but I didn’t. To this day, I can’t say exactly why I didn’t go. I just didn’t, or maybe, I couldn’t. I guess, in retrospect, I felt like it would have been embarrassing for him; like a parent searching the neighborhood for their child who had stayed out after the streetlights came on. So instead, I paced around our one-level house, thinking about all the different horrible scenarios he could have gotten himself into by going out for a walk, alone, on a nice spring day, in a remote fishing town. He got lost, broke his leg, mugged (what was I thinking?), cracked his head open, lost his walking stick, and was hit by a car twice all before he casually strolled in the front door holding two books.

And then, naturally, I was relieved and somewhat furious. “Where have you been?” I asked quickly.

“I went for a walk,” he said. “I left you on a note on the counter by the mail. I heard the library was having a book sale this week,” he added, raising his hand holding the two books.
I pretended that I never saw the note. “Oh,” I said, trying to sound sheepish, “I didn’t see it.” I lifted the mail off the countertop and added, “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” he said cheerily. “I bought you these. Jan helped pick them out.” At this point he handed me the two books and I noticed he was smirking. Something melted inside of me then, which made me feel suddenly vulnerable.

“Thanks,” I said. I still had the mail in my hand, and it was when I reached for the books that I noticed the top letter was addressed to me from the Peace Corps. I leaned over and kissed my father’s whiskered cheek before heading to my bedroom, curious. I took so long reading, then re-reading, then re-reading some more, my letter of acceptance into the Peace Corps, that my father and I had no choice but to consider ordering take-out because I didn’t emerge from my bedroom until way past the time I would normally start dinner. When I suggested Chinese, however, he grimaced.

“Why don’t we go to Liam’s early and get dinner there?” he suggested. We would be going there after dinner to hear The O’Rielly’s and to drink Guinness anyway, so it seemed logical enough. But truth be told, the food wasn’t all that great.

As I slid into the driver’s seat I watched my father pat his back pocket for his wallet before getting in. I couldn’t stop thinking about the letter, and naturally, questioned how hungry I really was.

The music hadn’t started yet when we were seated, or even when we received our meals. My father ordered corned beef and cabbage and I had to laugh at how predictable he had become over the years. I picked at my turkey club and coleslaw. I couldn’t quite concentrate on eating my meal because I kept staring at my father for some reason. He seemed different. The entire day suddenly seemed different. I watched his eyes as they moved back and forth for a while. I kept wondering that if I didn’t know my father had this problem, would I even be able to recognize it? At a quick glance, he just looked like an old redheaded man with pretty pale blue eyes and about three day’s worth of stubble. Sometimes I joked that he looked like a leprechaun. But not a disabled man. Not a man who needed assistance in any way, really.

I watched him a lot when we ate meals together. I’m not really sure why, but I guess because it was something to do and because he was all I had to look at. Though I watched him when my mother was alive, too. Generally I knew he was lost in thought if he sat back in his chair, rested both arms on the edge of the table, and cocked his head up and to the side like a dog. If I wanted to know what he was thinking, or if I simply wanted to break the silence, I’d jokingly ask, “Dad, where are you right now?” Almost always he’d smile at being caught in a daze, face his plate and maybe start cutting his meat again, or get a fork full of mashed potatoes before he’d reply, “Nowhere special.”
I often couldn’t help but agree, and so early that night, when I watched my father sit back and rest both arms on the edge of the table, I didn’t ask a darn thing. I was too afraid of what I knew he’d say.

Eventually the folk band came on and the entire bar - all twenty of us including the staff - gave them our attention. My father seemed to really come alive. He moved his chair around the table so that he was sitting next to me, facing the miniature stage. With each sip of his beer he sang along a little bit louder. Friends of his stopped by our table, regulars, or townies I should say, to say hello. They joked with each other, and caught up on gossip, while I listened, watched, and occasionally forced a smile. But no one I knew or really cared about, aside from my own father, was anywhere in sight. I was the youngest person in that pub by about fifteen years I figured. And I was only one of four females, two of whom I knew were the middle-aged wives of the banjo player and tin whistler.

I barely even paid attention that night to the music, the banjo player, or the tin whistler. I had grown to appreciate that kind of music, but it was the same every week, the people were the same every week. I was quiet and dazed. My father would lean over and ask me questions about who was playing what in the band or who was standing over at the bar that he might know and I basically ignored him. I suddenly had no desire anymore to answer his questions. Or to describe to him that the man playing guitar had a head full of white hair and a mustache and that he was wearing a red T-shirt that accentuated his pot-belly and that his jeans looked rather faded and his boat shoes rather worn down. Because the man playing guitar always looked like that and I was bored by it. And I realized that night I had been bored by it for quite some time.

These obligations, however, these tiring, boring requirements of me, were not the worst part of that night. They were, I realized, often the worst part of every week of those last nine years, but not of that night. No, the worst part of that night was when the waitress came to ask us if we wanted another round, and my father looked at me.

“You folks want two more?” she asked quickly. She had frizzy blonde hair and her face looked like a battered seawall, as my mom would have said. I glanced down at my empty mug, but for some reason, I didn’t feel ready to answer her. Eventually I had no choice. My father turned to me, his back to the waitress, and he focused his eyes on mine for just a moment. For just enough time for me to really notice that the unavoidable build-up of fluid in the corners of his eyes rested weightlessly in the wrinkles above his cheeks when he smiled. For just enough time for me to notice how, even when focused, his eyes shook quickly and painfully in place. For just enough time, I realized, for him to ask me, “What do you say, Anne, have you had your fill?”

And for just enough time, I recall now, for me to ignore the liquid dampening my own cheeks while I replied, “Yeah, Dad, I think I have.”
Today they buried my fourteen-year-old cousin.

Today I watched a little girl, screaming, reach for the coffin of her older sister, not quite grasping what has happened. Today hundreds of faces that I have never seen before gathered to mourn the loss of someone close to me. Today I cried and hated life for its cruelty and unfairness, but valued the one I’m blessed with. Today, September 15th, 2004, is a day that I will not forget. These are the moments that demand an explanation, but are never satisfied.

Having recently turned fourteen, Allison was just beginning her career as a freshman at Norwood High. Thursday morning had marked the opening of school and, consequently, Thursday night had marked the first, but surely not the last, sleepover of the school year. Allison, Shawna, and Annemarie spent the night performing the usual teen rituals, speeding through homework and dinner for the more entertaining pleasure of hair styling. The three girls were all entering high school and had only just met. They quickly became friends and used the opportunity of a sleepover as a means of getting to know each other and to relieve some of the tension associated with the new world they had been thrust into.

Friday turned out to be a typical crisp September morning. The girls set out early, eagerly anticipating their second day of school. They had decided to walk this morning rather than requesting a mom as a chauffeur, because the sun was coming up and although the air was cool, it was already turning into a beautiful day. They laughed and playfully shoved each other as they began the ten minute trek.

The girls paid little attention to their surroundings as they walked, skipped, and stumbled toward their destination. They cared only about the things that run through a typical teenage girl’s mind: boys, clothes, parties. Lost in their conversation, and the thought of what wonders awaited them in the day, they never noticed the gold Honda Civic speeding down Chapel Street.

People often think about the terrible things that might happen. What if my plane crashes? What if I fall? What if? But, more often than not, these terrible things don’t happen. The thought has often crossed my mind, “Crosswalks are dangerous. What if I get hit? Will the person see me? Will they stop?” But it doesn’t happen. They always see me. They always stop.

That morning Amanda was in a hurry. She had a class to teach and she was running late. It happens to all of us. Maybe she missed her alarm, or spilled her coffee on her blouse; I don’t know. What I do know is that as she traversed the length of Chapel Street in Norwood, Massachusetts on the morning of September 10th, she was going just a little too fast. The
sun was coming up and, as it broke the horizon, the light blinded her eyes. She temporarily lost her bearings.

Almost to the school, Allison and Shawna laughed and yelled to Annemarie as they entered the crosswalk. Annemarie had fallen behind because the flip-flops she had decided to wear were hindering her walking. As she met with the quarter mark of the crosswalk, Allison, who was well in the lead, turned to laugh at her friend’s clumsiness.

Time stopped. The ingredients of disaster had been mixed. It all tragically fell into place.

You watch these movies, these television shows where people get hit by cars and they always seem to hit the windshield with their back. They always pull these magnificent rolling maneuvers or they flip over the car. Then they get up and they walk away. And we buy it. Why wouldn’t we? It’s entertainment.

They tell me that my cousin was hit so hard that her shoes stayed on the ground where her feet had previously stood. They say the impact sent her flying up in the air, then directly into the windshield of the car. They say that her spinal cord was snapped the instant her head shattered the windshield.

A little girl, my cousin, hit the windshield of a car head first at thirty-five miles per hour.

They always stop. They always stop.

These words haunt me.
Untitled
sculpture by Michelle LaMorge
For M.

the particle physicists tell us around
a mouthful of jargon that all
matter is constantly in motion constantly
spinning and shifting revolutions on
an invisible track the dearly beloved (clutching
the lily) the mausoleum the lily the
pistil the stamen the mourners’ black
silk and even the atoms
of your hair while you sleep forever
swirling away into infinity which
leads me to believe that there is
no such thing as eternal rest
Acores

photography by Jason Viveiros
What we see is that it is ever changing
It travels in circles, but never completes a perfect cycle
Like the moon as it veers further off course
It washes in and out, back and forth
Like waves eroding patience and clarity
Winding through acres of heartstrings
It finds its target, but never quite completes its path
Flying past, over and under
Like drunken darts in a misty tavern
Close enough to tease far enough to elude grasp
Princess Anne looms bold on the horizon
Clouds pass, voyeur to my struggle
My outstretched arms make awkward attempts to catch it
I live for the moment when it will pass through me
And pour what it has prepared for me onto the sands
Cosmic

poetry by Eric Marshall

And you went back to the Earth that day,
as we stood in the wind swept grass
and tried to grasp the things that made you whole.
The buds on the trees blooming green and white,
cherry blossom petals rolling sweetly,
I watched them trace your mound of dirt.
The sun was bold and bright,
but the ground was soaked.
I was locked up inside, doing all that I could to stay dry.
It was like the first day of spring,
we hadn’t felt the sun like this in months.
“Take back your sun” – the words echoed in me.
“Take back your sun, you were ours.”
Dream-catchers and John Deere.
I caught hold, for a moment, of what made you whole,
and as I fought the tears, the wind came stronger.
“Let it go.” Your words reverberating deep sunshine blue. “Let me go.”
And later in the field I would hear you again.
This time in an explosive brilliance of pinks and oranges,
but with much less clarity; you were slipping away.
A breeze blown to a gust breeching my soul,
I thanked you, and you thanked me.
Where would you go?
“To be cosmic,” you said. “To be all the things that make me whole.”
Cabbage

photography by Jason Viveiros
Self-Portrait

photography by Megan O. Kenealy

A senior majoring in Art.
Shades of Beauty

photography by Kimberly Silva

Winner, Campus Climate Action Group “Diversity” Art Contest, 2004
It’s funny how a picture, movie, or saying can take you back in time. It can conjure up emotions, a feeling of time and place and space. Unwittingly, these items carry with them a memory; for me it’s a song.

The memory is of me sitting in traffic with my mom, munching on Wheat Thins scrounged from one of the many grocery bags in the backseat of our gray Volvo station wagon. My bare feet are propped up on the dashboard; my mom is lounging in the driver’s seat. My hair is pulled away from my face, but little wisps stick to the back of my neck; my t-shirt is plastered along my backbone.

We’re on the highway, but since we aren’t going anywhere fast and the air conditioner is broken, all the windows are down and the sunroof is wide open. There is no breeze along the Cape Cod Canal, and you can feel the humidity hanging thick and oppressive in the air.

Without a doubt, the best music for this type of trip is classic rock, and the anthem playing is “Freefalling” by Tom Petty. Don’t ask me why, but every time my mom and I are stuck in traffic, thirsty, sweaty, itching to get to the beach, this song is on the radio. It’s one of my favorite memories, sitting with my beautiful mother and belting out the words at the top of our lungs, totally carefree.

So, now years later, no matter where I am or who I’m with, whenever I hear “Freefalling” I think of that one, imperfect yet beautiful summer moment - just me, my mom, a box of Wheat Thins, the sun, and a song, and I realize how much I’ve grown, how little I’ve changed, and how much I’m loved.
Dawn

painting by Claire Tremblay

A sophomore majoring in Art.
White Ceramic with Horse Hair

by Christina Sarkisian

1st Place, the bridge Award for Three-Dimensional Art
Untitled

painting by Corie Dias
Hospital Window
by Giovanni Pimentel
1st Place, thebridge Award for Photography/Digital Art
Standing Tall

photography by John Diehl

A senior majoring in Art.
Sticks and Stones I

jewelry by Kristina Stafford
She’s Not Seeing Me

painting by Kristen Backstrom

A senior majoring in Anthropology.
Garden Fantasy

by Michelle LaMorge

2nd Place, The Bridge Award for Three-Dimensional Art
In late summer sunsets, sometimes I’m a paper cup
filled with air so sharp and clear
it’s crystal
letting light through me -
in watercolor hues deepening
- drenching, saturating me with brilliant oils,
skies indigo,
emerald-jade shadows dripping off leaves
free-falling cool over me
moving in circles on a hot park bench.
I.

Yes,
I’d love to come to your party
tonight,
but I’m going to prison
to visit an inmate who knew my father
better than I did.

II.

When I smelled his cologne
coming at me
from a hundred feet
away
I heard drums beating
from beyond brick walls,
vio/ent/inspired,
and thought of what
might have been.

III.

I don’t know why
I wanted to cry
when I saw you sitting
at the head of the table.
Maybe it’s because
the room was still,
and you were wearing
your best blazer
that’s only slightly too big
for your frame,
and your shoulders were hunched
forward, as if
you’d recently experienced defeat.
If I had spoken
I would have said that’s silly,
you could never lose.
But talking over pain
has never worked
well for me.

IV.

Or what about
when I saw her face,
pale and wrinkled,
so excited because she could get us
to the ground floor
with a simple swipe
of her card.
Thick lenses that magnified her eyes,
a blue janitor’s uniform.
But she was too old to be working.
The moisture surprised me, and I thought,
she probably lives alone
in a two-room apartment
where nobody comes to visit.
Shadows at the Beach

photography by Catie Carson

A sophomore majoring in Criminal Justice and Communications.
Self-Portrait in Text

digital art by Mark Medeiros
Philip hadn’t seen Jean in years. He hadn’t expected her to look so different, and certainly not so beautiful. Her red-gold curls of hair were straightened and dyed raven black, and her features seemed sharper, as if she had lost a little weight. Her eyes, of course, were unchanged. They were still large and pale green, sparkling with life. She wore a black T-shirt and a flowing, ankle-length purple skirt. Jean stood taller than Philip when she rose to meet him, and would have been even if her shoes had been flat.

“I can’t believe it’s you!” Jean cried with delight. “Do you even know how long it’s been?”

Philip nodded. “Three years.”

“Three years,” Jean repeated, and Philip watched her study his face. He knew he hadn’t changed. He still looked young, short, and slight. His sandy brown hair was even cut the same way it had been at their high school graduation some seven years before. He wore a nondescript, green button-front shirt and khakis – his off-duty uniform. “You look great,” Jean said, and they both sat down at their corner table.

Jean had chosen a Thai restaurant for their meeting, a cozy little establishment tucked into an unassuming suburban strip mall. Each of the restaurant’s neat tables was covered in a white tablecloth and topped with an intricately folded napkin and small floral arrangement. It was about two in the afternoon, and Jean and Philip were the only customers.

“I saw this place on my way into town,” Jean told Philip. “Do you come here often?”

Philip shook his head. “Me and the guys usually pick up some subs at D’Angelo’s.”

Jean smiled mischievously. “Do you guys eat a lot of donuts?”

Philip half-smiled and looked down at his silverware. “We do eat quite a few donuts,” he conceded.

Jean’s tinkling laughter filled the quiet restaurant. Philip watched her hands as she toyed with the folds of her napkin. Her fingernails were painted with a fresh coat of deep purple polish. Philip raised his eyes and found them locking with those of his female companion. He looked away after an instant.

In another moment the waitress, a pretty girl of about seventeen, arrived. She poured them each a glass of ice water from a clear crystal pitcher, then asked for their orders. Jean ordered her meal first, as Philip had just now looked at the menu. His eyes darted around the unfamiliar items offered by the restaurant.

“Ready to order sir?” the waitress asked. Philip looked pleadingly
at Jean for help. He heard her whisper “cashew chicken” and quickly repeated the words to the waitress. The waitress smiled politely at him and disappeared into the kitchen.

Philip took a long sip of water before resuming the conversation. “So how are things in New York? Seeing your name in lights?”

Jean tilted her head, smoothed the black hair pouring down her shoulder, and smiled at Philip with modest pride. “My name isn’t in lights yet, Philip, but New York is good. I’m off-Broadway, but I’m in walking distance.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Philip said. He remembered the playbill Jean had mailed him from one of her first shows after graduating from NYU. She had been a chorus girl, one of many, and he had to scan the cast list twice to catch sight of her new stage name – Genie.

“And what about you? What are you up to these days?” Jean inquired, leaning closer to Philip and resting her cheek on her hand.

Philip shrugged and smiled. “Go to the bar, follow the Sox, whatever.”

“And your job?” she wondered. “Life on the force?”


“Is there a lady in your life?” Jean asked teasingly. She and Philip had kissed once, in eighth grade, a brief experiment and the first kiss for both of them. Their friendship throughout high school had been cheekily flirtatious but ultimately platonic, even if Philip did take Jean to senior prom. Jean had looked gorgeous dressed in an elegant daffodil-yellow gown with her curls piled high on top of her head, but Philip had been sure to be a perfect gentleman, by now too afraid to risk their friendship on a romantic gamble.

Philip shook his head. “Not currently, no.”

Jean giggled, and then asked her next question; “Do you still draw?”

At first Philip shook his head no, but then added, “I doodle.”

“You know what you should do?” Jean suggested excitedly. “You should become a police sketch artist. That would combine everything.”

Philip shrugged. “I’m happy,” he said. He watched those green eyes of hers as she studied him. He thought of Jean in high school - the way her untamed red curls framed her cherubic face. She used to wear oversized band T-shirts and torn jeans, and would look up from her older sister’s dog-eared copy of No One Here Gets Out Alive just long enough to tell him what he had missed when he cut Spanish. She tried out for the school musical as a lark in their freshmen year, and her fate was sealed.

“I always thought you would go to art school,” Jean confessed.

“I always thought I would drop out of high school,” Philip told her. “So at least I made it that far, right?”

His father had been a police officer too. A man of few words, Dad always looked tired and a bit disinterested. He had retired now, and lived for poker night with the guys, the only night that Mom still let him smoke cigars.
“The benefits of the job are great, Jean. I'll be able to retire young and then...”

“Then you'll go back to drawing?” she wondered.

Philip shrugged. Jean was studying him again, with a hint of sadness in her face. After a moment she brightened, as if someone had flipped a switch.

“When you retire, you can come and see me perform,” Jean told him. “I'll still be doing it, no matter how old we are. I'll be a wrinkled old prune, and I'll still be dancing and singing.”

In eleventh grade, Jean had played the lead in the high school production of Antigone. Philip remembered seeing her after the play. She was so excited that she couldn't keep still. She hugged him at least once, and spoke loudly, flapping her hands as a side effect of her excess energy. Her skin had had an orange tint from the heavy pancake stage makeup she was wearing, her hair was disheveled, and her eyes glittered. Philip was proud of his friend that night, but also slightly jealous of her passion.

Jean had tried to impart some of her own passion and determination onto Philip, praising even the most ludicrous doodles that he made on notebook covers in math class. They had met in an art class, in junior high. Jean was new in town and sat next to Philip. They began a conversation when Jean caught sight of Philip's sketch of a youthful, Taxi Driver-era Robert De Niro. When they got to know each other better, Philip showed her more of his work. There were more portraits, some cartoon figures, and a comic book of Philip's own invention that he had never shown anyone else. Jean and Philip would sit together in the back of boring classes and she would watch him draw. He took requests, and she never failed to think of something new for him.

The food arrived and Philip peered curiously at his lunch. It smelled delicious, and he found himself smiling down into the plate of white rice, chicken, fresh vegetables, and—yes, those were cashews—that was laid before him. He looked up at Jean and shared his smile with her. She looked amused.

After the waitress left again, Philip watched Jean whisk her napkin into her lap with a theatrical flair and begin to dribble a small container of a golden-brown liquid onto her plate of vegetables and white rice.

“What is that?” Philip asked.

“It's peanut sauce,” Jean explained, digging in with her fork. “Try your food, okay? I really think you'll like it but I can't stand the suspense.”

He loved it, and savored a few mouthfuls before he resumed speaking. “How is Annette?” Philip wondered. Annette was Jean's older sister. She was getting married that weekend, which was why Jean was in town.

“Annette is great,” Jean told Philip. “She's a June bride! She is so excited and looks absolutely beautiful in her gown. She's letting me do my own thing as Maid of Honor, which is pretty cool. She says she sees you around town all the time.”

Philip shrugged and said, “Everyone does.” He was silent for a moment and then chuckled quietly.
“What?” Jean asked.

“I was just remembering the other day; there was a noise complaint over on Birch Street,” Philip recalled. “I had to go tell these fifteen-year-olds in a garage band to keep it down…”

He thought of the kids. There were three of them - drummer, guitarist, and bass player – all looking terribly unimpressed by the young, unimposing figure before them. One of the boys, the guitarist and presumed leader, pushed his shaggy blond hair out of his eyes to get a better look. “Are we in trouble?” the boy asked.

“You will be,” Philip had intoned, reminding himself of his father, “if you don’t keep it down.”

“I felt like such a narc,” Philip told Jean.

Jean wiped her mouth with her napkin and laughed. “You are a narc, silly.”

Philip stabbed a slice of carrot with his fork.

“It is an important job though,” Jean added with seriousness. “If it’s what you really want to do.”

Philip shuffled his feet under the table and started almost perceptibly when he felt his foot brush against Jean’s. “You said Annette is letting you do your own thing as Maid of Honor?”

Jean nodded. “No ugly puffy sleeves for me. Annette let me choose the dress and she approved it.”

Philip listened to Jean describe the dress, nodding and shoveling cashew chicken into his mouth. Her dress would be a deep violet; the other bridesmaids would be in blue.

“Annette is very happy with it.” Jean laughed and added, “And the guy, she’s happy with him too. His name is Gary, and he’s an architect.”

“Everyone loves an architect,” Philip confirmed.

“Of course,” said Jean, before taking a sip of ice water.

Annette wasn’t much older than Jean, and it struck Philip as a bit surreal that she was getting married that weekend. It seemed like he and Jean had just been teenagers, children, like those boys in the garage. He had spent so much time waiting for his life to start, and now, he supposed, it had.

“You know,” Jean was saying, “I’m really glad we got a chance to meet up after all this time. I don’t want us to end up as, like, Christmas-card-friends, who never really talk anymore.”

Philip nodded his agreement.

“I think I’ll come visit you again. We can go into Boston,” Jean said brightly. “Catch a game?” Philip suggested.

Jean nodded. “But then I’m dragging you to a show.”

Philip laughed. “It would beat poker night with Dad.”

“I bet it would. I can’t imagine you winning big in poker. Your face is like an open book, Philip,” Jean said, grinning deviously. “I can see everything in your face.”

Philip wondered if she could see his father there.

They finished their lunch and split the bill without any argument
from either side. Philip slipped the waitress’ tip under a water glass as he
and Jean rose to leave.

“I hope to see you again in the near future,” Jean said to him as they
stood out in the parking lot, “just as soon as I can get myself out here again.”

“Maybe I’ll come see one of your shows before then,” Philip suggested.
Jean looked surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Philip straightened his small frame and stood a bit taller.

“Why not?”

“I can’t wait,” Jean said, her lips curling into a grin. She moved to hug
Philip before they parted ways. He caught her in open arms and held her
just as long as he thought he should – and then a moment longer.
Molly had always wanted to be one of those dark heroines who loved to watch lightning storms and write deep, meaningful poetry. That kind of girl (in books she'd read) always had some terrible disease, or tragic love story, but had the strength to overcome her troubles and wind up happy. But Molly hated lightning, was terrified of thunderstorms and the possibility they'd take out the electricity and leave the house in darkness. And her few attempts at poetry had yielded results too shameful to term even shallow — they were more like gobbledygook. So, no, Molly wasn’t deep. She wasn’t strong either, that was for sure — she was having enough trouble coping with her seventeen years of life.

And of course Molly wasn’t fighting some terrible disease. She’d never had anything worse than a cold, though sometimes she wondered, if she did come down with some awful affliction, what it would be like and if she could handle it, if everyone would fuss over her while she whispered clichés about death being the next great adventure (she’d gotten that from Robin Williams’s movie *Hook*, so even her imagination wasn’t complex). And she had certainly never suffered through anything resembling a love affair — the closest she’d come was telling Adam Linsky in the eighth grade that she liked him, in an email, and then when she got an email back from him asking her to be his girlfriend, chickening out and acting like she had no idea what he was talking about. That certainly did not qualify as a love affair, or even love, just a stupid incident where she’d wimped out and ruined something that could have ended well.

She’d thought about that incident often, as well as all of the other incidents that pointed to her lack of adventure; perhaps that was her real tragedy, that she thought too much. She’d been told this by her teachers and parents and friends, and while she acknowledged it was true she wasn’t sure what to do about it. She couldn’t just turn off her brain, empty it of all sound like some Zen master, because, well, who could except actual Zen masters? Sometimes, rather than think about her own life, she tried thinking about superficial things, like clothes and food and summer blockbusters, but her mind would stray back to herself. And sometimes she tried to focus on deep, meaningful things that her favorite protagonists in the novels she read thought about, stuff like politics and dying soldiers and the way cows were treated when they were being raised for slaughter. But politics bored her because Republicans and Democrats were in favor of long roundabout speeches that said essentially nothing and that was all she needed to know about their issues. As far as dying soldiers, well, that depressed her, and maybe this was her instant disqualification from dark heroine-ness, but she didn’t like to dwell on sad thoughts that even
protestors couldn't really do anything about. (A voice sometimes whispered to her that politics and protesters and soldiers were all connected, and maybe something positive could come out of them, which gave her a weird feeling down under her skin that there was something there that could be big, be her life's calling or at least a way for her to make a difference, but she had tried pulling it to the surface and it wouldn't come and she didn't know where to start, so she ignored it and, like Adam Linsky, it eventually went away.) And hell, she really, really liked hamburgers. While she had some sympathy for the poor cows, she just couldn't invest any real feeling into the thought of their cruel treatment. So Molly just went along, thinking and worrying about things that had an impact on her life but that were ultimately meaningless. Things like whether she could handle her speech class, because while she loved talking, she hated to do so when people were actually listening. Things like whether or not her new puppy Enid missed her little puppy brothers and sisters and her doggy mommy because it wasn't as if Enid could talk and tell them everything was a-OK at her new abode. Molly concentrated on things like that, and how, after seventeen years of life, she was utterly boring and lived through her books and the various misadventures of her friends.

And she thought about having never been kissed. The heroines in her books were always, always getting kissed. The ones who had to choose between the clean-cut nerds and the scruffy musicians but wasn't in a rush to give up either. Molly hated that girl as much as she envied her, because Molly herself would never cheat (at least she hoped not) and these girls were being rewarded for it by getting to kiss not one guy but two. And the poor, sick, dying girls always had some boy hanging on them, whether he was introduced to her at the beginning of the story and was sick, too, or had been her best friend all her life and then finally she realized he loved her by the way he was standing by her, and that she loved him too, which she could tell when she realized that she had to fight, damn it, so she could live and spend the rest of her life (or at least until the last page of the book) with him. Sometimes, of course, the dying love interest would go ahead and die when the heroine was finally better, and that would suck, and sometimes the heroine would die and leave the love interest to carry on, and that would suck even more, but there were always, always kisses before that.

This is what she just happened to be thinking about when she met the boy in the bookstore. She'd gone there to get the latest Harry Potter book, even though she wasn't sure she should bother after it had been shredded by the critics (she was considering it mainly because Harry Potter was the ultimate dark heroine, even though he was a dude, and she'd been following the stupid series for six books now and deserved some absolution). She located the book and flipped to a random page and read that Harry had just walked in on little Ron and little Hermione snogging, which Molly knew was British for making out. Little Ron and little Hermione, sidekicks extraordinaire, who she'd known, technically, since they were eleven, were
kissing. Kissing! Molly was jealous of the fictional characters, and that was when she knew that she desperately needed to get her first kiss over and done with before she went, well, even crazier.

It was then that a guy around her age popped up and asked if she was going to buy the book or not, because it was the last copy and his little sister’s birthday party started ten minutes ago and ten-year-old girls had really, really sharp fingernails and really, really shrill screams. Molly’s initial reaction was embarrassment, because she was seventeen and not ten and shouldn’t be buying a book for herself that was on a ten-year-old’s wish list. Her next thought, which she managed to not speak aloud before running through a politeness filter (which was so rare for her, because while she thought a whole lot, the only thing she didn’t think about was what she was going to say before she spewed a whole lot of words out of her mouth) was that this guy, while unbelievably cute, was a pretty ass-y brother if he hadn’t gotten his sister a gift yet and was late to her party.

All she did in the end, though, was drop the book on her big toe (embarrassing, but not as bad as, say, twenty other things she could have done) and, after picking it up, say, “Eh, err, um, well, here, um, you take it... my cousin, she err, probably has it...” Molly wasn’t her most eloquent around cute guys. Or guys who weren’t her father or brother.

He gave her a look. The boy was exceptionally good at making people wither. Or maybe not people, maybe just Molly, which, at that moment, was all that mattered. The look, anyway, said I don’t believe you but I’ll pretend I do, for the sake of propriety and not of making you cry of embarrassment and shame. Or at least that was pretty much what Molly got out of it, especially when he finally replied, “Probably; everyone else does. My aunt got two copies the day it came out.”

Molly raised one eyebrow. It was one of her few talents and she was extremely proud of herself each time she used it. Eternally grateful for the guy’s kind pretending, while still mortified that he didn’t believe her, and still withered from that damn look of his, Molly let out the one emotion she was feeling that didn’t make her sound like an idiot: her incredulity. That, too, was a particular talent of hers. “And she never let your sister read it?”

“Carmen wasn’t allowed to read it until she reached double digits. Something about darkness and disparity and suicidal tendencies. It was all my aunt’s doing, really. She’s paranoid.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Molly said, losing all semblance of control and talking without thinking. “The sixth book was really depressing and I heard this one got even worse. Can’t blame your aunt for thinking it’s not suitable for kids, nope. I was just wondering, you know, why, if she had two copies, you were buying a new one... but no, I can understand, I always like my own copy, brand new, for a first read-through.” Sometimes when Molly started talking, she forgot to stop. This was one of those times. The strange guy was now smirking at her. If she’d been in a better
mood, she probably would have considered it a grin, but it was definitely a smirk right now, because she was a dork who read children’s books and couldn’t stop staring at this stranger’s lips, and it was all Ron’s fault. Sweeping Hermione off her feet like that. The brute.

The real-life person right in front of her was able (if it was even a struggle at all) to wipe the smirk off his face, though, and he won some points with Molly when he asked her why she wanted to buy the book for her cousin if it wasn’t good for kids. It was pointed, but also a good point, and Molly always respected that.

She considered, this time, what to say. It took quite a while – a thousand and three hundred years in Molly time but probably only four seconds. She settled on, “My cousin is fifteen,” which wasn’t a good point or anything, but it was honest, and hey, why not try that out for a change?

Unfortunately, honesty wasn’t a real conversation booster and in fact pretty much killed that line of conversation deader than Bill at the end of Kill Bill 2. (Not that Molly’d seen it, but she’d read the reviews and some of them gave away a little too much. Yes, it was sort of in the title, but he’d obviously not been dead at the end of the first if he made it to the second, so really, the movie reviewer should have warned people that his review was only for those who had already seen the movie – which Molly had always thought defeated the purpose. Although the fact of the matter was that Molly had read the review never intending to see the movie, and therefore it hadn’t been spoiled, and therefore, maybe the reviewer knew that some people like Molly just liked to know whether current popular movies sucked as much as she thought they would, and that reviewer was doing Molly a favor because for the past few years whenever anyone talked about the Kill Bills, she could sound knowledgeable with the fact that Bill did, indeed, die.)

Sometimes, when there was an awkward pause in conversation, Molly’s mind wandered.

“Well, it was something. Then it turned into more, as he added, “I’ll be sure to write that down somewhere. ‘Last minute bullshit just hurts.’”

“Don’t just write it down. Spread it around. Make it your gospel. That way you’ll never have to worry about your sister’s claws again.” It
wasn’t until Molly had actually said the word gospel that she realized how supremely lame she was being, and that she was staring at this boy’s lips again. Quickly she pulled back and examined the face as a whole; it was sort of, kind of, a tiny little bit, laughing!

In fact, a sound came out of his mouth that also resembled laughter. And he didn’t bring up the gospel thing either. All he said was, “Little sisters should come with a manual. And a nail clipper.”

“A muzzle, too, I presume?”

“And a mute button.”

“You know, I’m a little sister myself, I should be offended.”

“But?” He smiled at her, and she withered, this time deep in her stomach.

She really, really wanted him to grin at her again, and again, and forever. She instantly thought up a dozen funny things to say, an entire repertoire, to keep this guy whose name she had yet to learn eternally smiling at her. Then she deleted them all from her mental list, because she was never ever going to see him again after this moment and fantasy was a cruel joke. “Now that my brother’s moved out and I can look back objectively, I can admit that I was a whiny pain-in-the-ass.” She’d said ass. There was probably some rule about that. Oops.

The guy didn’t seem to think she’d done any wrong, though. He even smiled a little more. “Maybe, one day, I’ll look back and objectively say that I probably am a pretty lousy brother. I could have at least bought Carmen her birthday present before the day of the party, huh?”

He meant to bring it back to the bullshit-gospel thing, Molly knew, but it brought Molly all the way back to the beginning, when he’d first surprised her, when he talked about needing the book and the ten minutes late thing. Which in the very end of it all basically ruined any chance Molly had of being kissed that day, or a day in the future by the guy she’d met that day, to be more precise.

See, in one of Molly’s books, the conversation would have kept going because the heroine would have gone with the bullshit-hurt-gospel joke, and kept being witty, and probably brought the guy up to the roof to watch a lightning storm, and they would have made out, and she would have shared some of her poetry with him, and later it would turn out he was under the witness protection program and she’d have to go on valiantly without him, but she’d survive, and write poetry about her lost love, and publish it in a compilation book, and he’d read the book in Madrid or something and know she’d always remember him. In one of Molly’s books, this conversation could only end meaningfully, and deeply, and with kissing.

But Molly wasn’t a heroine, and she didn’t like heights much, and while she didn’t think about the treatment of her hamburger before it became hamburger, she did think too much. It was a flaw that had cursed her throughout her life, and it was, cruelly, and without doubt, her true tragedy. That Thursday, it was her thinking that screwed her out of...well, she didn’t know what would have happened with her and this strange boy,
because she knew what would happen to a dark heroine, but she wasn’t a dark heroine and she didn’t give herself the chance to find out what would happen to regular-girl Molly. She did, however, think about little Carmen and how sad she’d be if her brother missed her party because he was flirting (they were flirting, right?) with a girl at the mall. How Carmen had probably bragged to all of her little girl friends about her cute, strong big brother, and how cool he was, and how if he didn’t show up at the party at all because he was exchanging names and numbers and vows of everlasting love with some random freak in a bookstore, Carmen would be devastated and probably ostracized. These thoughts naturally led Molly to open her big stupid mouth. But first she raised one eyebrow again, for good measure. “Speaking objectively, of course, as a former little sister? Late to the birthday party hurts even worse than a last-minute gift.”

And because the guy wasn’t really a bad big brother, as far as she could tell, because she didn’t know him and never would, his eyes widened and he thanked her and grabbed the book and headed off to the register. And Molly cursed herself, and her thoughts, and the fact that she had to struggle through insignificant events like this and come out on the bottom instead of struggling through huge deep problems and coming out on top.

Molly decided, at that moment, to stop reading for a period of exactly how long it took her to get her first kiss. Or at least until she learned how to stop thinking so damn much. Or at least until she stopped being afraid of the dark. Or at least until the latest Harry Potter book reached the bookstore.
Raku Bottle #3
ceramic by Rose Esson-Dawson
Recipient of The John Heller Award, 2004
From an Afternoon with Miriam Schapiro

by Tami Thomas

2nd Place, thebridge Award for Painting/Drawing

A senior majoring in Art.
Sisters

drawing by Mandy Lyons
Winchester
photography by Kimberly Silva
Seven

by Megan O. Kenealy

2nd Place, thebridge Award for Photography/Digital Art
Obsession

painting by Scott Franoeur
P.S. Thanks

ceramic by Laurie Ann Amberman
Chairs

painting by Janine Woodward
It was the metallic tang of blood that finally woke Alec Doyle from unconsciousness. His dark mahogany eyes fluttered open briefly before once again closing, unsure of what the all-encompassing darkness held and how far it extended. The only coherent thought possible for Alec was the banal, Where am I? The first few moments of Alec’s reawakening formed a thick haze, clouding his capacity to grasp his precarious situation. His eyes finally opened and began to focus on the shadows that stretched before him, his pupils dilating wide to let in what little moonlight existed. A large tree gnarled with age and stripped of leaves was the first image Alec clearly saw and recognized. It loomed in the distance, isolated in a field of dark yellow grass, cut off from the woods that stood many yards behind it.

Shattered glass. Twisted metal. The smell of smoke. Instantly, images and smells, sensations and pangs inundated Alec’s senses and caused him to bolt upright in his torn leather seat. He looked out the windshield. Cracked glass resembling spider webs filled his immediate vision before he was able to take in the sight beyond. Thick white smoke poured from the wrecked car, spewing its way from the mangled hood into the inky night sky. The hood of the car had crumpled like an accordion, forcing parts of the engine back into the interior, pinning Alec’s legs. He struggled weakly to free them, but the immense pressure instilled a sense of futility, and he ceased his efforts.

Where are the police? Alec wondered. He twisted around as much as he could, hoping to observe red and blue lights flashing about him and uniformed men rushing in from all sides. But the night was dark, and the surrounding landscape empty of all life. The field that now held the twisted wreck, of what used to be a simple white hatchback, hid quietly downhill from the silent three-lane highway that lay above it. The sounds that first heralded the vehicle’s arrival to its current resting place, those of breaking glass and cheap Japanese engineering being dismantled into scrap, now gave way to an ominous silence that blanketed the field in a quilt of solemn dread.

As numbness and shock began to wear off, the grotesque pain that had been waiting for Alec’s attention finally obtained it. He became completely conscious of the agony that radiated from his abdomen and of the blood trickling from his head. His left shoulder throbbed with intensity from where the seatbelt had clutched him, and his legs begged to be released from the car’s vice-like grip. He lifted his scratched left hand and wiped the blood from the left side of his face, following the trail of crimson to its source: a jagged horizontal gash that ran from behind his ear upwards to his temple. The wound wasn’t deep, and did not concern him as much as...
the torture his torso suffered. His right hand traveled across the torn shirt that exposed his pudgy, hairy stomach, searching for the root of his agony. Much to Alec’s dismay, he found the terrifying source. Located not more than two inches up from his right pelvic bone, he discovered a smooth rounded object protruding queerly from out of his dark stained shirt. A slight tug revealed that the unknown instrument was imbedded firmly and could not be removed without further damage.

Panic and fear began to rush in on Alec as cold sweat appeared on his brow. The fear of all men, the secret knowledge that the end is near, descended on Alec and stirred in him a blinding desperation. “Help!” he shouted into the night, “Help! Get me out of here! Please for the love of God! Help me!” His voice echoed over the expanse, traveling across the barren field into the woods, barely waking the multitude of small creatures from their nocturnal slumbers.

The response to Alec’s cry was a resounding silence, and that alone filled him with horror. A world crammed with people, a globe brimming with souls, and yet here he had managed to find a piece of uninhabited solitude. He thrashed against his seat, trying desperately to free his imprisoned legs, but the more he fought the tighter his confinement became. He grabbed the steering wheel with his stocky arms in an attempt to pull himself up, yet it was no use. His strength, his very life, began to ebb as the evening tide. He sank down onto the steering wheel, begging for absolution from such a lonely fate.

“Oh God, please, please. I can’t…I don’t know how to…oh Lord please let me…Please? I don’t want to…not out here. I only closed my eyes for a few seconds, a few…please, my God, please.” He sobbed through his prayer, his voice choking out the simple words he hoped would bring his salvation. He leaned his forehead against the steering wheel as a lurking weakness began to overtake him and his mind drifted towards one distinct memory.

A gorgeous day, clear skies and a warm, bright sun greeted Alec’s rising. He followed the regular, almost automatic routine of showering, shaving, applying deodorant and dressing. In the radiance of morning he chose to wear light colored khakis with matching brown belt, and a burgundy polo shirt. He observed himself in the hallway mirror, smoothing his hands over his protruding stomach before running them through his receding brown hair. Alec Doyle wasn’t unattractive with his small nose, rounded chin and almond shaped eyes, but he wasn’t conspicuous. He was a face in the crowd, one who gave you the sensation of having noticed them someplace before yet he left you no better or worse for having seen him.

He lived three blocks from his job, that of an insurance adjuster, and always walked. He relished this personal time where he didn’t have to speak to anyone or have them speak to him; he became invisible on the cracked cement streets of his small town, and that was fine indeed. He
walked out of his cramped studio apartment earlier than usual and began to head in the direction of the aging two-story brick building where he hoped to build a life. Alec had a heavy walk, and ambled stiffly down the narrow weed encrusted sidewalk, thinking what a wonderful morning it was. He breathed in deeply and let the cool morning air settle in his lungs before slowly exhaling. Yes, he thought, wonderful.

As he prepared his mind to spend this magnificent day inside an air-conditioned office building deciding the monetary value of someone’s pain and suffering, a bustle of activity caught his attention. Across the street, snuggled between Suds Dry Cleaners and Fiesta Clothing, stood a small French café named Franco’s. It blended seamlessly with its surroundings of small brick buildings and quaint little stores, the only point of distinction being the French flag that hung almost ceremoniously above the entrance door. Usually the café had few patrons and to Alec’s notice never attracted a crowd. Yet this morning it positively hummed with business. Alec, upon checking his watch and concluding he had a few minutes to spare, decided to indulge his curiosity. He crossed the street and stood in line behind the two people who protruded from the building.

“Excuse me,” he asked, tapping the small woman in front of him on the shoulder. “What’s everyone waiting for?”

She turned around, briefly glancing at him before responding offhandedly, “They’re serving the Taste of Paris special for only three dollars today.”

“Is that a big deal?” he inquired.

“Well,” she started, looking everywhere but at Alec, “in the grand scheme of things I suppose not. They give you a cappuccino and croissant, but the cappuccino alone is usually worth six bucks.”

“Oh?”

“It’s just something different I suppose.” She finished the last part of her sentence as she was turning around to face the moving line. Alec followed through the glass door that advertised the daily hours and entered into a small, poorly lit room. The smell of hot baked goods filled his lungs and caused saliva to pool inside his cheeks. Several patrons stood together in the cramped space in front of the display counter, huddled on the black and white checkered floor as though receiving Holy Communion. The line moved quickly, and Alec took in the sweet pastry smell mixed with the sounds of machines whizzing, frothing, and spewing forth the liquid remnants of dark exotic beans.

“Next!” a short, slight girl with auburn hair shouted from behind the display counter, her body hidden by decadent chocolate éclairs, a tray of Pâté à choux, and variations of croissants that lined the case.

“I’d like the Taste of Paris special, please,” Alec said hesitantly.

“For here or to go?” was her automatic reply.

He thought about it, unsure of how late it would make him if he ate here. He glanced at his watch; he was scheduled to start in five minutes, but surprising himself he answered, “For here, please.”
The girl set about removing a bulging croissant from the display case covered with sticky syrup and chopped walnuts. She placed it on a white porcelain plate and set it on the counter before she disappeared behind an off-white wall to the side. She returned with a small matching white cup filled with frothy, caramel colored cappuccino and placed it next to the croissant.

“Three dollars.”

Alec handed her the money and thanked her. She in turn took his payment and bellowed for the next customer while he headed for a tall table in the back by a sunlit window. He placed the delicate cup and small plate on the rounded, dark red table as he looked outside. Men and women walked hurriedly by, strangers consumed with lives unknown to Alec and perhaps vastly more interesting than his. He felt this moment of cosmic insignificance, of his infinitesimal place in the universe, and he grasped it only momentarily before it slipped from his mind.

Ignoring the world beyond, he picked up the rather large croissant and eyed its flaky exterior coated with fine walnuts. It looked delectable and was quite the welcomed change from his usual breakfast of black coffee and an old fashioned donut. He sank his teeth into the pastry, and while the sensation of heat covered his thin, chapped lips it was the surprising burst of orange marmalade flooding his mouth that set his mind tingling. He pulled it from his mouth and, while chewing thoughtfully, examined the light orange jelly that had been hidden. It was the very definition of delicious, and Alec felt an inner delight that was not a part of his morning routine. He smiled, and almost giddily devoured the rest. The cappuccino was gulped down with equal avarice, and its bitterness enchanted his tongue after its bathing in sweet pleasure.

Alec emerged from the café invigorated and licking his lips hoping to capture an errant walnut or lingering glaze of jelly. If that is what a taste of Paris is like, he thought, then I wonder what a touch of Paris is like? Or a smell? Or even a sound? He let his thoughts run away with him as images of chain-smoking men donning black berets and fanciful ascots danced across his vision. He smiled at the thought of eating that same croissant in a real Parisian bakery surrounded by real Parisians. It would be so different, so real as to be unreal, and suddenly he realized his soul was ravenous for such an experience. He was restless at work throughout the day, and by three he had called a travel agent inquiring about airfare to France.

“How ridiculous am I? he mused. It was food! A pastry! Why am I now suddenly ready to jettison myself out into the world? He continued to mull over it, and by the time he had reached his apartment and inhaled the stench of stale pizza boxes and cheap flat beer he’d decided to pack a suitcase.

“I’ll go tonight,” he said aloud. “I’ll go to the airport tonight, buy a ticket, and be in Paris in time for a croissant and cappuccino.” He chuckled and began throwing t-shirts, underwear and socks into a leather bag.

What about work? the voice of reason chimed in.

“I’ll quit.”
And your apartment?
“I’ll call my father, he’ll figure it out.”
Isn’t that selfish?
“Am I not allowed to be?”
What about your belongings?
“Well,” he paused, “they can be put into storage.”
Are you coming back?
“I don’t know.”
What will you do for money?
Alec sat down on the edge of his full sized bed with a pair of faded white socks in his hand. “I’ll get a job at an insurance company there.”
How is your French these days?
“Ok, I don’t have to live there, I’ll go for a week.”
With what money?
“I’ll use my savings.”
And your car payment next month will come from where?
Alec sighed, his breast heavy with unfathomable disappointment. He kicked the bag from off his bed and replaced it with his own body. “But I want to go,” he whispered.

Violent coughing brought Alec back yet again from unconsciousness. He was choking, gagging on a warm viscous fluid. After several seconds of forceful hacking Alec finally gagged up the offending liquid onto his leg: it was blood. The moonlight reflected the small black stain that slowly settled onto his pant leg. It startled him, and instantaneously he was brought back to grim reality. He was not in his apartment softly weeping, but here in this metal sepulcher watching the blood creep from his body. The point of no return had been breached and Alec began to feel the pain slowly recede. As he felt his weight for the final time sag against the steering wheel, he saw himself under the Eiffel Tower smiling. Men with pink ascots dancing, women moaning *mon amour* at their lover’s touch, and pure laughter. He walked into the city, the taste of orange marmalade still lingering on his lips.
How I wish I could pull issues apart
neatly on the diagonal
so that decisions would jump out at me
like popcorn.

I never would have thought
issues could face themselves so evenly,
squarely as children do
when bringing playground seesaws to rest.

They climb off,
run away to play.
What is the telling weight I need?

I wait
in the shade by the riverbank,
dropping thoughts
one by one like pebbles
into a yellow leaf curled like a cup.

It keeps moving in languid circles
on the eddy by my feet:

such graceful indecision.
I was asleep when my daughter was born. I missed her first wail after waiting five long years and nine months just to hear it. She was born at 1:20 a.m. on December 15th after twelve agonizing hours of laborious panic, poking, prodding, and profanity. As they hurried me to the operating room, I heard someone yelling, “I’m not numb, I’m not numb!” Just when I was about to tell her to shut up, I realized she was me. The anesthesiologist had administered my first epidural a few minutes before, and I was promised relief; I had none and I was panicking.

The operating room was freezing. Obnoxious Christmas carols echoed off of my enormous belly, making me nauseous. “I’m not numb,” I yelled again as they strapped my arms and legs down. They rolled their eyes at one another (just another hysterical mother not ready for childbirth). As they draped me I began to cry. No one could hear me pleading over “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.” I was alone. I knew I was going to feel this. I knew this was going to hurt. This was going to be the ultimate sacrifice.

I began to chant a mantra: It’s almost over, it’s almost over, it’s almost over - slice. The first drag of the scalpel was the worst. The three slices following didn’t burn like the first; the nerves had been cut through. The doctor began to tire of my whining and chanting and decided to perform a sharp-dull test. She began to poke my belly in different spots while alternating the point and the blunt end of the scalpel. Each time I sobbed “sharp” or “dull” she nodded. I looked at her and saw her eyes peering over her mask; they widened as she looked over my mountainous stomach at the attending doctor. As she said, “Holy Shit,” the anesthesiologist prepared to give me a spinal. They rolled me on my side as if rolling a beached whale into the sea, and I grunted and snorted like one. They promised absolute relief. I couldn’t breathe. The spinal had numbed my chest, but not my belly.

I screamed and went back to my chanting. They had decided to put me under general anesthesia. Hysterical, disappointed, and terrified, I began to cry and claw at my husband. “Don’t let them hurt the baby! Stay with her until I wake up!” I screamed. Then I heard nothing. I felt nothing. All I remember is waking to the piercing pain of an empty belly and my own screams.

I was soon quieted with some sort of pain potion and I woke again a few hours later. Groggy and confused, I tried to move to the edge of the bed where I saw the fuzzy outline of a face. “Did I have a baby?” I asked hesitantly, as if asking a stupid question.

The voice that responded was slurred and strange, almost drunk with grotesque absurdity. “Yes,” the face said, “but, before we get to that, I have other things to discuss with you. We opened your uterus and retrieved the
baby, but…” Vomit began to rise in my throat. Scenes from other peoples’
dead baby stories flashed into my blurred mind. After five years, nine
months, and twelve hours, I had slept through my baby’s birth and death.

She continued, “…as I was about to close, I saw another mass. Stacy, I
removed a nine pound, twelve by eight inch ovarian cyst. It had engulfed
your fallopian tube and ovary, which were also taken out. You then
underwent another few hours of surgery. You will have quite a bit of
healing to contend with.” She began to rise.

“What about my baby?” I asked more frightened than I had been while
listening to Rudolph. As she came closer and sat, I swallowed. Overcome
by pain, I slept once again.

I awoke to the feeling of a warm lump beneath my left breast. I opened
one eye to see a dark clump of freshly washed and dried hair. For a brief
moment, in my medicated trance, I thought it was the result of an
unshaven armpit. There, beside me, was my baby. After five years, nine
months, and seventeen hours, I nursed her for the first time. As I stared and
tried to focus, I swore I would never fall asleep again. Overwhelmed, I slept.
Crystalized Day and Night

painting by Gerard Bergeron
Kristina’s Special Sauce

ceramic by Kristina Stafford

A junior majoring in Art.
Mask

ceramic by Mandy Lyons
Thanks, England

by Chris Demsey

1st Place, $8bridge Award for Painting/Drawing
Detail of cover art.
Hooves Enchained

photography by Jade Stanbrook

A junior, major undeclared.
Tea Set

ceramic by Mandy Lyons
Skyscraper

painting by Elizabeth Davenport

A senior majoring in English.
Small Pit Fired Pot

ceramic by Christina Sarkisian
This morning when I brought Amy to the hospital, I'll admit, I was a little apprehensive. And sleepy. I don't like hospitals, and neither one of us had slept in over twenty-four hours because Amy was having an EEG performed at 7:30 a.m. It's a sleep-deprived stress test of sorts and I volunteered to stay awake with her to help her get through the night. Amy wasn't allowed to have caffeine in her system before the procedure, so instead, I drank a few cups of coffee and lightly kicked and nudged her whenever she began to doze on the couch.

When we walked through the double doors of St. Joseph's Hospital in Nashua, NH, we were immediately greeted by an elderly woman named Gertrude who seemed to know my sister rather well.

"Back again, are you Amy?" she asked. "Now what are you having done today?"

"An EEG," she replied groggily, "again." The results of last week's test were inconclusive, I guess. The elderly woman looked at her rather sympathetically through colorful spectacles that rested on the edge of her nose. Her white hair was gathered in a bun on the top of her head with loose wisps hanging across her forehead.

"Well maybe this time they'll be able to figure out what it is," she said as she handed my sister a form to sign. Gertrude's hands were pale and wrinkled and I could see fat blue veins running through them.

"Let's hope," Amy replied. We headed for the elevators and when I glanced back at the front desk I saw Gertrude looking down at Amy's release form while dolefully shaking her head. I got an uncomfortable tightness in my throat seeing that.

The room where the procedure was to take place was on the second floor. It was small and contained a bed, a computer, a few seats and a wall lined with shelves that had a sink and cabinets under it. The technician, named Valerie, greeted us and allowed me to take a seat while Amy got up on the bed. Amy took off her baseball cap and handed it to me while running her fingers through her hair. She removed her sneakers and leaned back on the bed, adjusting her pillow, then crossing her hands over her stomach. It seemed so routine, so commonplace that it disturbed me.

"I see you know the drill," the technician said with a smile. Amy sighed. I continued to sit quietly in my seat watching as this woman, who looked like she was not much older than me - twenty-two - made markings all over Amy's head using a mini tape measurer and a red pencil. Then she unfolded some gauze, rested it on the pillow next to Amy's head, and squirted a big glob of grayish-white adhesive onto it. Amy continued to stare up at the ceiling blankly and I continued to stare at her, concerned, while Valerie began dipping a Q-tip into the adhesive. When all the preparations were completed, and Amy had
twenty-four colorful wires stuck to various parts of her scalp and forehead and chest, the lights were turned off and the testing began.

Amy had a heart attack two years ago while getting fitted for a bridesmaid dress. She was thirty years old, and a mother of two baby girls. The doctors haven’t been able to find anything concrete, or curable, from testing her heart. So now they are testing her brain. I’m sure that happens often.

We joke about it now because we can. She survived and now we say, “Amy, remember when you had a heart attack because you couldn’t fit into your dress?” Because some people do that. Some people make jokes about things that scare them. It’s kind of like how that entire morning in late November, Amy complained about having chest pains. She kept saying, “It feels like an elephant is sitting on my chest” and “I feel like I’m trying to breathe under water” and whatnot. The similies were priceless, from what I’ve been told (because I wasn’t actually there). I’m sure her complaints were quickly disregarded. Or they were laughed at. I know some offered up predictions as to what was wrong with her, such as, “Maybe you pulled a muscle picking up one of the girls” or “Perhaps you’re coming down with a chest cold.” I was at work a few towns away, but had I been there, I probably would have done the same. She has always been one to over-exaggerate.

One time she was babysitting me when I came down with a fever. My mother was working a night shift, and my father was at a town council meeting. Amy had been put in charge because she’s the oldest. She was sixteen, I was six, Sarah was fourteen, and Kate was eight. As we often did whenever all four of us were forced to spend time together, Kate and Sarah retreated to the living room to play Nintendo and Amy and I retreated to her bedroom to listen to Prince and do each other’s hair. And as I was singing half-heartily along to “Little Red Corvette” while pulling her hair back into various clips and elastics, Amy looked at me in the mirror and took notice of my flushed cheeks.

“Court, you feelin’ all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. Fine,” I responded much too quickly. I didn’t want to get sent to bed early because I loved when, after I finished doing her hair, I’d get to watch her pick out, and try on, outfits for the next day of school. She felt my forehead and cheeks with the back of her hand and said, “Let’s take your temperature, I think you have a fever.” Sure enough, I did. It was above 100 degrees and so naturally she freaked. She called my mom at work, who calmly told her to give me a cool bath and some Tylenol. They’d be home soon enough. Quickly, Amy ushered me into the bathroom to do both, at which point I noticed she had blue mascara streaking down her cheeks.

“Get undressed,” she said. She seemed rather frightened about something so I did what she said. “And get in,” she added. And I did that, too. The bath water was freezing cold and I began to shiver.

“It’s cold,” I said shaking. I had goose bumps all over my body.

“Good, the more you shiver, the quicker your fever will go down,”
she replied frantically. She left the bathroom door open and as she made her way into the kitchen, passing the living room, I could hear her yelling something at Sarah and Kate. They were still playing Nintendo, I think, un-phased by my sudden illness. Then I heard the freezer door shut and soon after Amy returned with three trays of ice cubes. She knelt down next to the tub, felt my face and cheeks again with the back of her hand and, while my body shook uncontrollably, looked into my eyes. I felt a sudden warmness come over me at that moment. Her eyes never wavered from mine while she continued to crack open the ice cube trays and dump them into the tub.

For better or worse, I tend to be less emotional than Amy. This morning, for example, when they began testing her, I sat very still while they had her hyperventilate. I watched the lines on the glowing computer screen jump drastically up and down and listened to her labored breathing. I managed to keep my cool, which, I suspect, had a lot to do with the fact that I hadn't slept in over a day. Occasionally I glanced at her body lying on the bed, but seeing all those wires connected to her head reminded me of Frankenstein and I got very leery. It became increasingly hard to swallow. Especially when they continued to flash a strobe light in her face. I felt like I was watching some kind of sick science experiment, or bad horror flick, and not simply another attempt at a successful diagnosis.

Speaking of diagnosis, supposedly, when Amy's complaining about her chest pains became more persistent, and therefore, more serious, my mom jokingly told her to put a baby aspirin under her tongue. That is what the doctors told my mom to do because she is a diabetic with high blood pressure and a family history of heart disease. Clearly, she was the obvious candidate for a massive heart attack, not a thirty-year-old mother of two.

“If the pressure subsides, Amy, you'll know you're having a heart attack,” she laughed nervously. Though I don't think anyone was laughing much when Amy began to cry and had them call 911 because the pressure did, in fact, subside. Actually, my mom began to cry, too, out of fear I'm sure. It's really no laughing matter when you think about it. And my father started praying, because some people do that when they feel helpless. And my sister Kate took my nieces for a walk so that they wouldn't see their mom get put on a stretcher and hooked up to machines. And my sister Sarah sat nervously by, unable to save her, at the same time wondering if her Maid of Honor would be alive in three weeks to stand beside her at the altar. And I continued to scoop ice cream a few towns over, oblivious to what was going on at home.

I came home that night, like every night, with hot fudge sticking to my forearms and crusted ice cream flakes on my t-shirt. I smelled like a billy goat, and I was tired. The muscles in my arms hurt from being used all day. All I wanted to do was take a shower and go to bed. When I walked in the door, I saw my sister Kate sitting solemnly in the living room with her boyfriend and my two nieces.

“Where is everybody?” I asked. I bent over and picked up my niece Isabelle. She was two. The TV was on but no one was watching it. Kate took
a while to respond and I stared at her, annoyed.

“At the hospital,” she said quietly.

“Why?”

“Amy had a heart attack,” she responded. Natalie, my other niece, was crawling on the floor, picking up Cheerios and putting them in her mouth. I began to panic the more I thought about what I had heard.

“What do you mean she had a heart attack?” I asked accusingly, as if it were Kate’s fault it happened. I gripped Isabelle tighter. People do that sometimes, I guess. They grab onto whatever is closest to them for dear life when they are confused. Isabelle flinched and looked at me. “Where’s mumma?” she asked innocently. You’d think if I were to cry, it would have been at that moment. But I couldn’t; instead I stared at my sister waiting for some kind of explanation.

“We were getting fitted for the bridesmaid dresses today and Amy kept complaining that her chest hurt. We thought she was just being... Amy,” Kate said as she began to sob. Her boyfriend rubbed her back and stared intensely at the carpet directly below him. He seemed ashamed for her. I looked all around and felt a burning in my stomach.

“Well, where is she?” I asked. “What hospital is she at?” Isabelle started pulling off my blue bandana, and with it, pieces of my hair. I was irritated and didn’t want her touching me. I put her down.

“South Shore,” Kate replied. “Mom and dad are there with her. Sarah went home. I’ve been watching the girls most of the day.” She sounded tired, understandably.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t anyone call me?” I stared at her unblinkingly. It seemed a logical enough question, but she wouldn’t even look at me. She turned her head towards the TV.

“We didn’t think to,” she replied quietly.

“Oh,” I said again.

That night while my parents waited at the hospital with my brother-in-law, and Sarah was at home with her fiance, and Kate was out sitting in a car staring wordlessly at the ocean with her boyfriend, I was lying in bed with Isabelle. Natalie slept in a portable crib in the corner of my room. My room was small, and the house was disturbingly quiet. I could hear Natalie sucking on her pacifier with ferocity for seconds at a time, then nothing. I could hear the crinkle of her diaper whenever she tossed in her sleep. And there was the sound of the rubber bottoms of her footed sleeper scratching against the vinyl of the crib whenever she kicked her legs. It was quiet enough that I could hear my own pulse in my ear when I laid on my side to look at Isabelle.

The room was dark, but enough light shined through the window that I could see both of my nieces if I needed to. But I didn’t need to. They were sleeping peacefully, and I was trying to close my eyes and relax, listening to Natalie’s sucking and feeling Isabelle’s tiny, warm body up against mine. I could not close my eyes though, despite the fact that they burned like someone had thrown chili powder in them. Instead I watched the shadows of the room change when the wind blew and rustled the leaves outside the window, or
when a car drove by and illuminated the entire room for a few, brief seconds. I watched Isabelle’s belly move up and down, slowly and rhythmically with her breathing. I watched as half of Elmo’s face, which covered the front of her pajamas, disappeared when she inhaled, then reappeared when she exhaled. I lay comfortably still, with just my eyes open and wandering for most of the night. My eyes searched just about every corner of the room. For what, I don’t know. Then I was startled by the ringing of the telephone. Startled, of course, is a euphemism as I very nearly jumped out of bed when the silence was broken so abruptly. My heart raced and immediately I got very nervous. I expected the worst. If I’d ever desperately wanted to have faith, it would have been at that moment. To have been able to say “Please, God, let it be a wrong number” and to have had the confidence that that would work is no doubt why I ever believed in God in the first place. It’s a much more reassuring concept than simply enduring the temporary paralysis that took over my body. My ears rang, my throat was tight and my face became flushed. After a few seconds I got out of bed and went to the kitchen to answer the phone.

“Hello?”
“Court?”
“Hi,” I said.
“It’s Mom,” she said. Her voice sounded hoarse from crying. I wished my voice could’ve sounded like that. “How are the girls?”
“They’re fine; they’re asleep.”
“Oh, good.” We were both quiet for a minute and all I could hear was the grandfather clock ticking behind me and my mother’s breathing from the other end of the phone, so far away.
“How’s Amy?” I asked finally. I wanted to know, but didn’t want to know. I was afraid to find out while sitting by myself at the kitchen table with only self-pity to comfort me. I was afraid to finally cry.
“Well, that’s why I’m calling,” she began. I thought I’d throw up any second, or pee my pants. The cold linoleum floor was too much for my bare feet, and the thought of crawling back into bed with my newly orphaned niece was more than I could bare. “She’s being taken to New England Medical in Boston.”
“Why?”
“Because it’s a better hospital and the doctors there might be able to find out what’s wrong with her,” she replied.
“Well, is she going to be okay?” I asked angrily. What did she mean they might be able to find out what’s wrong with her? They had to know at least something about what was wrong, I thought. I was relieved she wasn’t dead, but confused that the doctors couldn’t help her. Their job is to figure it out and make her better. Why isn’t she better yet?
“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “They don’t know.” I wondered if she thought whispering that would prevent me from hearing it or, at least, prevent her from believing it was true. “I’ll call you when we do, though.” And with that she hung up and I began to do what I always do now whenever the
phone rings in the middle of the night. I thought about how I would react if my sister Amy died. Sometimes I write her eulogy in my head because I know that if she should die, I will be the only one composed enough to get up and talk. So I think of all of the reasons that I love her and all of her idiosyncrasies and I come up with a new speech every time. All the speeches are moving, I admit, but always a tad cosmetic because some things are better left unsaid in churches. How would I delicately describe a bond, which grew, in part, out of discussions about sex or comparisons of bra sizes? I think about the fact that she is only my “half-sister,” that we have different fathers, and I wonder what that really means in the whole scheme of things. I think about how growing up I used to want to be just like her, and how now we have such little in common, but I’ve never stopped admiring her with the awe of a small child. I think about the day I got Confirmed - she was my sponsor - and how I barely have faith anymore but wish, for her sake, that I still did. Mostly I wonder what would become of my nieces if they had no mother to raise them. I think about the fact that my brother-in-law would be the one to bring them into adulthood, and I wonder how I’d really feel about that. I think about a lot of things, lying there after the phone rings in the middle of the night. Because people do that when they know they have no control over science or medicine or supposed divine intervention: they think about things. Because sometimes it’s all we can do.

This morning, as Valerie, the EEG technician, turned on the lights and began removing the wires from Amy’s head and chest, I began to collect our things. I picked up her pocketbook and gave Amy her baseball hat when she sat up.

“Thanks,” she said while pointing to her head. “Now you see why I needed this.” Her hair was greasy in spots from the adhesive and it seemed to go every-which-way, much like it often did after I had finished doing her hair as a child. I cracked a smile and ignored the liquid filling my eyes. I put out my hand and helped her stand up, but she got dizzy and fell back down onto the bed. Her gaze was distant and I tried desperately to meet it.

“Maybe we should wait a few minutes,” I said. I won’t lie; I wanted nothing more than to get out of there, but instead I sat down next to her on the bed. I could see she wasn’t ready to leave. She rested her head on my shoulder as we sat there, and Valerie proceeded to print the test results to be examined later by more specialists. She left the room to make copies and the two of us were quiet for a long time.

“What are you thinkin’ about?” I finally asked her when I couldn’t take the silence anymore.

“Oh, just stuff,” she replied tiredly.

“Me too,” I managed to force out, “me too.”
The Fluttering Treasure of Milkweed

by Wendy Anne LaVoie

The Fluttering Treasure of Milkweed is meant to be read as four poems. The left side (wing) is a poem, as is the middle (or body), and the right side (wing). Finally, the piece can be read as a whole from left to right.

Emerge
Tender
Chrysalis

Breathe deeply of
The sky
Blue celestial seas,
Cotton clouds
the pupal bonds
Which hold
Your visionary
Core of being
Lay claim to
Your kingdom
With the
Radiant Splendor as
Monarch the ruler,
For the heath

Genuflect in unison with the zephyr,
Celebrating the sonnet of the sparrow.
You dance, for the lilacs,
Suggesting a sweet hypnotic,
Scent of myrrh.
Oh morning’s first blush of hue. Like evening’s Rainbow
dreams which sunrise entices to flutter away.
Leave only
those sacred transitional prisms
Which form thy empyrean castle
Of your fortress. Fields of poppies,
thy fertile matrons, pollinating the
meadow dynasty
Slumber in their florid quilting
Shade beneath spruce arms
Awaits beyond the oceans’
lullaby of the cicada’s purl
The warm earth’s bosom, zenith
As you soar majestically
In the wake of the winter thaw

Child of Colors,
Oscillate on a lambent flame,
Fresh with the morning dew
The Flowers which
afford an epoch
Repose; unveil your petals,
Of nature’s prismatic palette,
The lavender dragons which unlace
Momemtary spells of moisture
Reflectively imitate you as you dual a façade with
Plundering bumblebees. Escape
Masquerade the floral trumpets
Existence of
Nurtured seedlings
Coveted fruit of the terrene
Disembogue from lassitude
Swaying virescent tendrils which
Gently part, exposing the
Courts which hail thee,
A symbol of rebirth

A junior majoring in Environmental Geography.
The sun is shining,
glistening wet like sweat
that drops between fanned branches,
and drips and runs, tickling,
making the trees shudder and shake
as they wait for the towel of night
to wipe them off.
Self-Portrait Inspired by Gerhard Richter

painting by Matthew McArthur

A senior majoring in Art.
DaVinci Code

painting by Anthony Sylvia
Thirst
digital art by Elizabeth Redmond

A senior majoring in Art.
Three Musicians

painting by Janine Woodward
Bridgewater Square Churches

drawing by Mandy Lyons
Beauty

digital art by Beth Horka

And if that weren't enough
A young boy met a youth opposite
He stood next to me and
And from then on

In the land where all things are as they are meant to be
We made our own way, and
We wandered through our dreams and
I never knew I, and never knew you

And there he stood in the wings of night
And placed a hand on his name
And stroke a line through his name

There was a smile on his face and
We entered the land of beauty and

The week before he was doing his best
So she said with a smile, "Why don't you join us?

She wanted him to be there too
She helped him with the brush and
It was then that the boy was better than he

That week--the boy she'd met two years ago

I heard my voice quiver, tears should never be

As I thanked him for picking the very best one

And the boy she'd met two years ago

The problem was not with the world; the problem was me

And for all of those times I myself had been blind,
I vow to see the beauty in life.
Aruba Blues

jewelry by Laurie Ann Amberman
Untitled

painting by Corie Dias
Most people accept the fact that in autumn, leaves are going to be on the ground. But not my father. One day he actually went outside eight times to make sure that by nightfall not a single leaf was on our yard. He was even more fanatical about straight lines when mowing; he’d go over the whole lawn again if he made a mistake. Sometimes he would get ambitious and create different patterns. And he’d always have such a serious look on his face while he was working, as if he were performing the most important job in the world.

We couldn’t help him mow because that job was too important for children, but we’d help out in the yard in other ways. Bright and early every Saturday morning, my two brothers and I would stand outside on our four acre lot, waiting for orders, and my father would appear with a two-page list of items that needed to be completed by designated times. Our list included raking leaves, weeding flower beds, trimming the edges of beds, planting bulbs, trimming bushes and disposing of the cuttings. While my brothers and I would be doing these side jobs, my father would be blowing leaves off the yard and cutting the lawn with amazing precision. Naïve, we thought he was an obsessed dictator who wanted to punish us with yard work.

But eventually I understood that he was using that yard to demonstrate life lessons. When he would catch us botching a job, he’d make us start all over again, informing us we wouldn’t get anywhere by cheating. And when we would actually complete all our tasks to his satisfaction, my father would make sure we had a sense of accomplishment, telling us to ask our friends what they’d done that day and compare that to how much we’d already completed. I love my dad for forcing me and my brothers to work together. In a society where there is so much focus on individual achievement, and families can tend to foster a competitive attitude amongst siblings, my brothers and I learned that we needed to work together and help each other out if we wanted to succeed.

Though we started off wishing we were playing sports with our friends instead of planting bulbs, over time our distaste turned into respect and a tedious chore became a prideful responsibility. My father would always say, “The care you take in your yard reflects the care you take in life.” Hard work was important to him; he’d worked his way up from janitor to Vice-President of a company over a twenty-five year span. He’d made his own success in life, and, looking back, I think he was teaching us to do the same.

My brothers and I always told our dad that when we had kids we’d never make them do yard work; we’d just hire someone else. But as we’ve
gotten older, we’ve chosen to do the yard work ourselves. Even though my two brothers are out of the house now, every weekend they still come home to help me with the yard. Now, our dad sits and watches us from the living room window.
It is the Saturday morning following Veteran's Day. Sal sits in his oversized sofa chair nestled in the corner of the living room. He sips his coffee and reads the paper, occasionally looking up towards the picture window when the sound of squirrels crackling the leaves drift into his ears.

Sal lives in a small ranch-style home with his wife, Maria. They have lived in this house for thirty-five years, and raised two children in it. Now the house is only occupied by Sal and Maria, with sporadic visits from their children and grandchildren. This weekend, however, Sal is home alone. Maria is spending the weekend with her sister who lives two and a half hours away and the children and grandchildren are thousands of miles away vacationing in Florida.

Sal places the coffee mug on the end table next to him, lays the newspaper on his lap, and stretches his arms back above his head. He smiles as he thinks about his decision to stay home rather than accompanying Maria on her visit to her sister. He had promised Maria that he would rake the leaves and be useful while she was gone, but right now he takes a moment to enjoy the pleasure of not being bothered.

Sal reaches forward and pulls the ottoman closer to stretch his legs while thumbing through the pages of the local newspaper. He comes to the “Letters to the Editor” section and raises his bushy gray eyebrows in interest at a letter entitled, “A Very Plastic Christmas.” Sal nods in agreement as the author complains about how, each year, holiday decorations can be seen earlier and earlier and not just in stores, but in front of people’s homes as well. The author specifically points out the ridiculous plastic decorations displayed on lawns every year.

Sal grunts in exasperation, folds up the newspaper, and places it on the end table. He reaches for his coffee, wraps his fingers around the hot mug, and draws it to his lips. As he tilts the mug, allowing the bitter taste to flow slowly into his mouth, he stares through the window and fixes his gaze on the house across the street.

Every year, Sal thinks as he shakes his bald head disapprovingly and squints, his hazel eyes nearly unseen because of the sagging skin that hangs above them. He places the coffee mug back on the end table and slams his fists on to the arms of the chair, his mood transforming from tranquility to agitation. “Every year, the lights of those horrible plastic people shine into my home,” Sal mutters. He raises his left arm and points his long, bony index finger in the direction of Big John’s house.

Sal lifts his legs off the ottoman and pushes it to the side, giving himself room to stand. With both hands on either arm of the chair, he thrusts his body up and brings himself to his feet. Fully annoyed with thoughts of
plastic Christmas decorations soon to be displayed on Big John’s lawn, and completely forgetting the serenity he is to enjoy being home alone, Sal jerks around and picks up the mug in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Just as he turns back and begins to leave the room, the corner of his eye catches movement from beyond the window.

Sal turns his head to the right, and sees Big John’s garage door slowly opening. Before the door is entirely open, he can see Big John emerge below it, dragging behind him what appears to be a plastic snowman. Sal’s jaw drops in shock. His heart begins pounding with such intensity that he lets the newspaper fall to the hardwood floor, and brings his hand up to his chest to muffle the fast beating sound.

“It’s not even Thanksgiving yet!” he shouts at the window, and storms away, disgusted at what he has just seen. “This is just what that editorial is talking about. At least I’m not the only one who feels this way,” Sal thinks as he stomps his bare feet across the coarse brown rug that lies in the hallway leading to the kitchen. He stops and leans across the breakfast bar that opens into the living room. He can see through the window that the plastic snowman has now been joined by a plastic reindeer.

“This is ridiculous!” Sal throws his hands in the air, forgetting that the mug filled with coffee is still in his hand. Coffee soars to the low ceiling only to fall on top of Sal’s bald head. While the coffee was not fresh from the pot, it is still hot enough to sting his unshielded scalp and cause him to yelp out in pain. Slamming the mug onto the breakfast bar, Sal cautiously places his hands on his slightly burning skin. He turns to the right and walks to the sink where he pulls a towel off its hanger, and proceeds to dab his head dry.

As he cleans the coffee off the floor and ceiling, Sal mumbles to himself and growls over the awful start to what could have been a lovely Saturday morning. He chuckles the towel into the kitchen sink and marches back down the hallway and into his bedroom, never once glancing towards the window.

Several minutes pass before Sal emerges. He has changed out of his terry-cloth robe and moccasin slippers into a flannel long-sleeve shirt and a pair of yellow sweatpants with so many holes that they look more like Swiss cheese. As he passes the living room, Sal purposely turns his head to the right and cups his left hand beside his left eye, mimicking the blinders that racehorses wear. He continues to the end of the hall and stops, once again, at the breakfast bar. He places his left hand on the granite counter and taps his fingers. He closes his eyes before taking air in through his nose, filling his lungs to full capacity, then slowly releasing it through his mouth; a calming technique he learned from Maria.

His relaxation tactic is suddenly interrupted by ringing. Sal snaps his eyes open, his heart resumes pounding and he moves in the direction of the telephone. He grabs hold of the cordless phone located by the sink, and presses the “Talk” button.

“Hello?” he uninterestedly answers. “Oh, hi dear. How is your visit
going?” He asks this to feign interest in his wife’s activities, but truly his mind is preoccupied with the happenings occurring across the street. As he leans with his back up against the kitchen sink, his legs out in front of him and crossed at the ankles, he hears a break in Maria’s chattering, which prompts him to speak.

“Guess what?” he bitterly asks. “Big John is at it again, but this time it’s one week earlier!” Sal listens for several seconds and then continues; “Yes, I know. I won’t say anything to him, but I hate it. It is weeks before Thanksgiving! The pumpkins from Halloween haven’t even rotted yet! It’s an eyesore! Fine, fine! I’ll calm down. Yes, I’ll rake the leaves. I was just on my way to do that when you called. Okay, well have fun. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Bye.”

And with that, Sal places the phone back on its charger. He looks to the left where the breakfast bar is located, then turns and walks straight to the mud room off the side of the kitchen. Here he plops onto a folding chair and reaches for his boots. He sighs with each insertion of his foot, knowing he will have to talk to Big John and knowing there will be no way to delay the Christmas decorations, for each year Sal has failed to stall him. With his boots laced up, Sal stands and reaches for the doorknob.

He descends the steps and saunters over to the garage. He grasps the garage door handle and pulls up with all his might. After surveying the overcrowded garage, he spots the rake covered with cobwebs in the back corner. Sal chuckles to himself and thinks, “I guess Maria was right. It has been awhile since I raked.” He makes his way through the maze of clutter.

Sal leaves the garage with rake in hand and walks to the end of the driveway. He looks to the left and sees Big John attaching a white cord to a plastic Mrs. Claus. Sal begins to rake the fallen leaves, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on the house across the street. His eyes move from one plastic reindeer to the next. Perhaps it is the sound of Sal’s teeth grinding or maybe the sound of the rake scratching at the leaves, but Big John, who has been securing his plastic people (probably to keep them from escaping, Sal thinks) looks up and in the direction of Sal.

“Hiya, Sal! How are you on this beautiful morning?” Big John flares out his fatty arms as if to engulf some invisible bystander in a bear hug. Before Sal can answer his first question, Big John follows up with a second; “What do you think?” He waves his left arm around like he was Vanna White revealing a prize on “The Wheel of Fortune.”

“Oh, well…” Sal stops raking and looks to the ground in hopes the leaves would suggest something nice to say. He picks his head up and inquires, “Isn’t it a little too early for Christmas decorations to be out, John?” Sal’s eyebrows curl up, pleading that it is too early. Although Sal refers to John as “Big John” in private, he would never say it directly to him. Sal coined the nickname years ago to describe the extent of John’s girth. Not to mention, as he often states to Maria when she scolds him for his insensitivity, he is a very tall man.
Big John shrugs his shoulders and smiles. “The kids were hounding me to set up the decorations.” Big John has two children, an older girl and a younger boy. They are in elementary school, and still filled with the spirit and excitement of Christmas. Sal doesn’t buy it, though, fully confident that Big John’s true intentions are to irritate him.

“What’s with the white cord?” Sal gestures to the cord Big John has tied to the plastic people scattered across the lawn.

“Every year the decorations fall over because my lawn is sloped, so I concocted a system to fix that problem using cord and wood stakes. Good idea, huh?” Big John’s right eyebrow lifts into the fatty mass of his forehead.

“Yeah, great,” Sal mumbles under his breath.

“Well, I have a lot more work to do, so I better get back,” Big John says as he points out all the plastic Christmas decorations laying on his paved driveway. “And you have a lot of raking to do!” He chuckles a deep belly laugh, eerily similar to that of Santa’s.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Sal tilts his head and shrugs his shoulders, all the time hoping Big John will tangle himself up on the cords and topple to the ground.

“Oh, hey Sal?” Big John turns back to face Sal, who has resumed raking, and adds, “Don’t worry, I won’t turn the Christmas lights on until after Thanksgiving. I promise!” Big John grins and goes back to fastening the cord onto Mrs. Claus.

Sal just shakes his head and drags the rake along the leaves.

Several hours pass while Sal is in the front yard. He fills ten large brown paper bags with leaves, and there are still more on the ground. He begins to feel a cool breeze blowing through the holes in his sweat pants and decides to call it a day. Even though there’s more work to be done in the front yard and behind the house is still covered under a thick blanket of leaves, he figures he will have enough time to finish it all up tomorrow morning before Maria comes back.

As Sal walks towards the garage, dragging the rake behind him, he glimpses across the street and sees that the construction of the plastic Christmas display is nearly complete. Big John has erected as many plastic people as the lawn can handle. It runs the gamut, from the Clauses to elves to candles to reindeers and even a gingerbread man; all of which are strapped down to the earth with cord and wooden stakes. Sal notices a new addition on Big John’s lawn; a plastic Mary, Joseph and three Wise Men are sheltered beneath a Big John-made manger. Sal shakes his head in doubt at the stability of the manger as it sways in the westerly breeze despite the cord and wooden stakes all around it.

As Sal is about to turn up the driveway, he spots an object lying in the cradle between Mary and Joseph. It’s baby Jesus! Sal grimaces. “Hey, John!” Sal calls over to his neighbor just as he’s hammering in the last stake around the gingerbread man. Big John looks over at him, and Sal says, “Baby Jesus doesn’t come until December twenty-fifth.”

Big John studies the manger and replies, “That’s okay. I want it to be complete.” He returns to striking the stake.
Sal feels the blood boil in his veins over Big John's ignorance, but bites his tongue. He treads up the driveway and tosses the rake in the garage. Sal aggressively pulls down the garage door, which slams to the ground behind him, but Sal doesn't even blink, he just stomps up the stairs and into the house.

Sal keeps to himself for the rest of the day. He draws the drapes shut across the living room window in an attempt to avoid the catastrophe across the street. He spends the remainder of his time sitting in his oversized sofa chair, only getting up to use the bathroom or to get something to eat and drink. He sits reading old *Newsweek* magazines, and when that gets boring, he turns the television on to CNN to catch the latest news briefs. Eventually, Sal falls asleep in his chair while CNN plays softly in the background.

As Sal shifts his body around in his oversized sofa chair, being still asleep, but able to sense his surroundings, he feels a pulsating rhythm bouncing across his eyelids. He groggily rubs his closed eyes as he wakes. He spreads his arms out to the side, arches his back up towards the ceiling and extends his legs far across the ottoman to work out the kinks developed during his nap. He rolls his head to the right, in the direction of the television, and opens his eyes only to discover that the pulsating lights are coming from behind the closed drapes.

A look of confusion creeps up on Sal's face as he wonders if there's an ambulance outside. He lifts his body out of his chair and makes his way over to the window. Sal pulls open one side of the drapes and is enraged to find that the blinking lights are coming from Big John's house.

"That bastard," Sal swears ferociously. He tugs the drape back across the window, then goes back to his chair and drops himself into the indentation his body left behind. He crouches over with his elbows on his knees and face in his hands. His heart is beating at a rapid pace and he can feel the rage consuming his body.

Sal suddenly stands. He slides his feet into his mocassin slippers and reaches back for the remote control and presses the "Power" button. He turns back and walks out of the living room and in the direction of his bedroom.

"I've had it! I'm gonna fix him good," Sal mutters under his breath as he walks into his bedroom.

Sal comes out of his room dressed in black sweatpants and a black sweatshirt. He makes his way to the kitchen. He opens the bottom cabinet to the left of the sink and fumbles around in its far reaches. After a few moments he stands holding a whiskey bottle and proclaims, "This will be for celebration!"

He places the whiskey bottle on the counter and reaches for the cabinet door above him. Opening the door, Sal rummages through the contents, stretching his arm to the back of the cabinet in search of his cigars. He finally grabs hold of the cigar box, and places it down next to the whiskey bottle.

"This, too, will be for celebration!" A malicious smile crosses Sal's face.

Sal looks at the clock's digital display on the microwave. The clock reads 11:37 and Sal decides that it's late enough for most people to be
sleeping. He goes to the mud room and sits down on the folding chair. Feeling a sense of deja vu, Sal slides his feet into his boots and firmly laces them up. He rises and grabs hold of his black ski cap hanging on a wood rack next to the back door.

He walks to the front door, pulling the cap onto his head, and places his hand over the doorknob. Very stealthily, he draws the door open. He stands for a moment looking from house to house and lawn to lawn to see if there are any signs of people moving about. Not seeing a single person, and noticing that most of the houses are dark, Sal confidently tiptoes down the stairs and out to his driveway.

Again, he pauses and cautiously looks around for any people, but the only movement is the reflection of Big John’s Christmas lights bouncing off the nearby trees and houses. Like a predator hunting its prey, Sal quickly jolts towards Big John’s front lawn.

Sal gets down on his hands and knees and crawls towards the gingerbread man, yanking at the cords surrounding it. It takes many strong pulls to pry the wooden stakes out of the ground before the gingerbread man is free. Sal realizes that his task is going to take longer than he originally thought, but continues his mission nonetheless.

Had his neighbors gone to their windows this evening, they would have seen a figure dressed in black scurrying across Big John’s lawn, dislodging the plastic Christmas decorations from the ground. Fortunately for Sal, though, that is not the case and he continues his work unnoticed.

One by one, Sal jerks at the cords and releases the constraints around the plastic decorations. He crawls on hands and knees from one plastic object to the next, until all of the decorations are free. Sal doesn’t touch Mary, Joseph and the Three Wise men, though. Instead, he takes Baby Jesus out of the cradle and into his arms. He softly tiptoes to Big John’s porch and places Baby Jesus on the stoop.

Sal surveys the plastic people, who have fallen over, and wonders what he will do next. He hadn’t thought this far ahead when he was in his bedroom brainstorming his revenge. As he contemplates his next move, lights appear at the end of the street.

“Shit!” Sal whispers, and drops to the ground. Sprawled out on his stomach, Sal watches as a car from down the street speeds by.

Feeling nervous that his plan is not going to work after all, he decides that the only way to finish what he has begun is to get rid of all of the decorations. Sal gets back on his hands and knees and grabs hold of the nearest objects: two plastic candles and a plastic snowman. He jumps to his feet, but then slumps over trying to conceal himself, and runs across the street back to his house. He quickly scampers over the dry leaves, hearing the cracking sounds echo against the quietness of the night, and finds himself in front of his fence. Sal looks over his shoulders, puffs of air escaping from his mouth, and tosses the candles and snowman over the tall wooden fence.

He races back to Big John’s front lawn and takes hold of more plastic
decorations, which he tosses over his fence. One by one he removes Santa, Mrs. Claus, the gingerbread men, more candles, another snowman, elves and the reindeer. Sal continues until all the decorations, except for Mary, Joseph, the Three Wise Men and Baby Jesus, are in his backyard. Somehow, Sal thinks, removing them seems sacrilegious.

Sal’s mission isn’t complete though. As he tosses the last elf over his fence, Sal looks to the blinking lights arranged along the house and landscape. Icicle lights line the edge of the roof, while big bulbbed, multi-colored lights decorate the bushes, railing, and windows. Sal skitters over, and searches for the power box. He follows the string of lights to their source on the side of the house, and unplugs them.

“Whew, I feel better.” Sal lets out a sigh of relief, having completed what he set out to do.

He makes his way back to his house as quickly and quietly as he left it. Inside, he rips his ski cap off his head and places it back on the rack, then goes over to where his whiskey and cigar box await him.

Sal takes a small glass out of the cabinet, throws a few ice cubes from the freezer into it, and fills the glass to the rim with his whiskey. Then he flips open the cigar box and gently lifts out a fresh cigar and a pack of matches. With his spoils in hand, Sal goes over to the back door and lets himself outside.

He walks toward the pile of plastic figures, kicking leaves as he goes. A teeth-baring grin spreads wide across Sal’s face at the sight of Big John's plastic Christmas decorations. Sal lifts the cigar to his mouth, flips the pack of matches open and with a flourish lights a match. As he puffs on his cigar and sips his whiskey, Sal can feel the rage that had earlier consumed him leave his body and fly off with the wind.

He settles against a tall oak tree and admires his work until he realizes that he can’t keep the decorations in his backyard because then Maria will know what he has done. He devises a quick solution, deciding that he will put the plastic people in garbage bags and drive over to the dump to dispose of the evidence. “Not tonight, though.” Sal shakes his head. “Tonight, I’m going to enjoy the peacefulness I deserve,” he declares to the whistling wind, and holds his glass up as if to make a toast.

While Sal sits under the oak tree, the wind picks up and the temperature drops. After nearly a half an hour, every exposed part of Sal’s body has turned a bright red and is beginning to grow numb. Although Sal has not finished enjoying his whiskey and cigar, he realizes that it’s time to go in. He takes a last look at his handiwork and smiles smugly. Placing the glass of whiskey on the ground, Sal takes a long satisfying drag on his cigar as he slowly brings himself to his feet using the tree trunk as support. As Sal struggles to move on his numb feet, he loses his balance and his feet kick out from under him. Instinctively he grabs for the tree, which sends his burning cigar stub airborne before landing somewhere in the leaf-covered backyard.

Sal is frantic. In the dark he is unable to see where the cigar landed.
Afraid to waste time running inside to turn on the outside spotlight, he feverishly begins to kick up the leaves around him, but to no avail. Within seconds he begins to smell smoke. Sal looks to his left and sees a growing flame coming from the leaves. He runs over to the smoldering leaves and in his panicked state does the only thing he can think of: he picks up his drink to empty it on the fire. As the whiskey leaves the glass, Sal comes to his senses and realizes that liquor will only make it worse, and surely it does.

The flames whoosh into the air. The breeze catches the growing flames and blows them into the direction of the oak tree, setting the low hanging branches and the remaining leaves ablaze. Sal panics and searches his yard for something to put out the flames. Thoughts race through Sal’s head: “Should I call the fire department? If I do, then everyone will know what I’ve done! If I don’t, my house is going to burn down. Shit, shit, shit!”

The putrid scent of burning plastic stings Sal’s nose and he realizes the flames have engulfed the plastic decorations. “Fire extinguisher!” Sal announces. Just as he’s about to run into the house, he hears the alarming sounds of police cars and fire trucks very nearby, and then sees the lights from the vehicles reflecting in the neighbor’s window.

Vehicles brake with a squeal and Sal hears doors slamming and men calling out that the fire is in the backyard. Sal runs, with his back to the flames, toward the gate and is met by several firefighters jogging in with the hose.

It doesn’t take long for the firefighters to get the flames under control. All the while, Sal is out front speaking with a police officer about the events leading up to the flames.

“Sir,” the police officer inquires, “what happened here?”

“Uh, I was only, uh, having a smoke and drinking some whiskey, and I, uh, dropped the cigar still lit, accidentally, and...” Sal fumbles through his explanations watching the smoke rise above his house. He looks around his block and sees that the once dark houses are now lit, and heads are poking out of doors and windows. Sal resumes his explanation; “Flames broke out, and I, by mistake, threw the whiskey on it, and...”

Sal is interrupted as Big John walks over exclaiming, “Holy shit, Sal! What happened here?” Big John looks Sal up and down, and adds, “Why are you dressed all in black?”

“Um, just a fire.” Sal tries to remain cool and collected, hoping his actions won’t be exposed. “I didn’t call 911, Sir,” Sal says as he turns back to the police officer. “How did you know?”

“Oh, a neighbor called saying she was awakened by the smell of fire. Lucky for you, she sleeps with her window open and the breeze carried the scent right into her room.” The police officer nudges Sal in a manner to suggest that Sal should be grateful. Sal slumps back, and lets out a weak chuckle.

“Oh my God!” Big John cries out. “Where are my Christmas decorations?” Big John didn’t notice them missing when he ran out his door.
Just as Big John begins ranting over his stolen Christmas decorations, a firefighter approaches Sal, and says, “You’re lucky, sir, your backyard isn’t in ruins. Your Christmas decorations, on the other hand, were destroyed.” He holds out a deformed, melted snowman.

With a look of embarrassment, Sal reaches out to the plastic mess, and replies, “Oh, well, I...”

“Wait,” John interrupts. “Isn’t that mine? You don’t put up plastic decorations. How did my snowman end up in your backyard? Did you steal my decorations?”

The police officer, firefighter and Big John stare at Sal.

“Sir, did you?” the police officer suspiciously asks.

Sal’s eyes dart from the faces of the three men standing around him. His palms are sweaty with nervousness. He smells the stale scent of burnt leaves and plastic in the air. He looks beyond the firefighter, and sees the other firefighters and police officers cleaning up and getting ready to leave. Sal looks to the police officer and states, “Yes, I took them.”

Big John gasps in shock, and asks, “Why would you do that?”

Sal tries to think of a logical explanation, but comes up with none.
Untitled

drawing by Sean Brady
You were my mirage;
a botched algorithm,
past-life placebo.
I strained you through my consciousness
and ended up with dead, dry wires,
frayed memories of a failed connection.

I visited my physician
and he told me the effect of our intertwining
was minimal,
that I should recover within a period of days.
“Id be willing to call in the leeches,” he said,
“though I don’t think that will be necessary.”
I’m quite sure he’s mistaken.

My brother said I’ve been living too long
in your yellow glare,
and I should prepare to “bring out the gimp.”
I asked him what he meant,
but he put his headphones back on,
so I never got an answer.

Wait, I don’t have a brother.
But if I did, I think that’s what he’d say.

Friend #1 said if I wasn’t careful,
I could be accused of displaying disinterest.
She recommended I “try harder to seem less aloof.”
I’ve taken her advice to heart;
now I maintain expressions of rapt fascination
at all times.
My eyes are tired from keeping them open so wide,
but I think the adjustment is working.

When you said “for now”
it implied there might be a later,
so I’ve been waiting in the between-lives area.
Take your fourth left, and you’ll find me there.
Until then, I’ll whet my appetite
on regurgitated morsels of almost-happiness.
Wasn’t dinner delicious?
Bug’s-eye View

Climbing now, this web
of soft and nourished flesh
Hair, like leaves,
tangles dark around me
The glimmer of their eyes-
Salt tears to swim in
While mouths,
softer than a kiss
or wings of whisper-thin
Breathe life
more fragile than my own.
Integration

photography by Jason Pietroski

A junior majoring in English.
Stepping into the lobby of the Emerson Majestic Theatre, I knew I was out of my tax bracket. First off, I had the distinct feeling that my girlfriend and I were the only people who'd taken the Red Line to get there. We hailed from a town that had more cows than Cadillacs, and the theater's deep maroon walls, adorned with murals of plump, gilded grapevines, reminded us of our station. We were dressed to fit in, but it was hard to ignore the long train of luxury sedans dropping off other patrons at the door. This was, after all, opening night at the opera.

At eighteen, my interest in opera was at best an aberration. To me, classical music was a rebellion against the lack of technical skill in modern popular music. Opera was the last refuge: it was marginal enough to be left alone by the prevailing Britney Spearsism of the late 1990s. My girlfriend had acquired a cautious curiosity in my interest, so I'd saved three weeks worth of paychecks to take her to *L'Elisir d'Amore* for her birthday. *L'Elisir*, though not the most popular opera, is a good start for a beginner because it’s as light-hearted a story as you’ll find in opera. The title translates into “The Love Potion,” so the plot was fairly obvious, and I was confident in my girlfriend’s ability to experience the spectacle of opera without being lost in plot twists.

As we walked from the lobby and took our seats in the front balcony, its splendor daunted me. Muses beckoned from the domed walls, and each impressive mural or sculpture was framed in gold plate. We sat immersed in decadent wealth and excess; I was both disgusted and inspired. A stranger in a strange fairytale land, I questioned how I could, if I could, or if I wanted to, fit into this place.

I vaguely remember brewing in this insecurity before the show. I vaguely remember being impressed by the performance. These memories are only phantoms and blurry impressions, however. What I remember clearly is that it was October 16th, 2001, and that we were called to rise for “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

On the faces of the blue bloods around me, there was a trace of surprise. After all, the opera isn’t a baseball game. I highly doubt that many in that balcony would be seen in the Fenway Park bleachers next Sunday. What’s next: peanut vendors in the orchestra seats? The vision of hundreds of older patrons rising slowly in their thousand-dollar tuxedos and evening gowns, placing hand on heart, searching for a flag, bordered on surreal.

Regardless of the views we might hold now, we were all caught in a cautious acceptance of patriotism and reverence that swept our nation after September 11th. The uncertain future loomed before us (especially
those of us of draft age) and although we tried to maintain the motions
of normalcy, the death of our security burned in our memories. A snake’s
nest of questions, history, and fears were uncovered on that day, and
although precisely which serpents we wrestled differed from person to
person, we were all equally overwhelmed. As a nation, we were unsure of
where to go, what to do, or who to hit. Patriotic displays like reciting the
Banner at an opera were not the aggressive jingoism they are construed as
today: they were something to do in order to convince ourselves that we
were doing something, because we weren’t sure what to do yet. I suspect
we still aren’t.

As each patron rose to salute, the white noise of conversation trailed
off. Many looked around the theater with puzzled expressions. The lights
dimmed, dropping deep shadows over the gentle curves of the performance
hall. In the darkness, the theater grew intimate as our attention was drawn
to the dimly lit stage. From the stage’s recesses, a chorus of fifty singers in
17th century attire emerged. As we stood in silence, the peculiarity of my
position struck me: Here I was, the Marxist son of a carpenter, knee-deep
in the leisure class, staring intently upon dozens of Italian peasants. Life’s
a funny thing sometimes.

Two taps of the conductor’s baton, and the orchestra’s string section
glided their bows into a soft prelude. One by one, each section added their
colors: percussion, woodwinds, brass. The soothing prelude gently enchanted
us, sweeping away the awkwardness of the moment. The conductor’s white
gloves guided his musical marionettes with broad, gentle sweeps; scores of
players hung off each flick of his wrist. One of these hands turned to the
chorus, and with a tender tug beckoned them to begin.

Their voices were soft, clear, and intense. After a few seconds of unity,
their voices divided smoothly into a six-part harmony, the verses of the
anthem taking on six personalities and tones. Timpani, piano, violin,
cello, French horn, clarinet, baritone, soprano, and tenor: they all
contributed to a tonal wave of focused catharsis that rolled unyieldingly
through the audience and crashed against the resonant walls.

I remember feeling a strange sense of understanding in these moments.
I considered the blue bloods around me. Many had surely done business
at the World Trade Center: how many friends, colleagues, and employees
had vanished from the lives of the people in this theater? I had always felt
resentment towards the perceived safety the rich enjoy, shrouded behind
their estates and entourages. How troubling must it have been to lay down
to sleep on the night of September 11th realizing that security had been
illusory all along?

Even to an eighteen-year-old Marxist (a position I have since
abandoned), this realization was chilling. No matter how much money
they had, who they knew, or what they did for a living, nobody could feel
truly safe anymore. Our national unity was forged in survival and
with the upper crust in the theater. It was more than enough.

Eyes hypnotically forward and memories set aflame, we became flotsam in an undammed tide of musical reverie. By the time “Whose broad stripes and bright stars” arrived, I realized that I had been quietly singing along. I felt a twinge of self-consciousness; then I noticed that everyone else was singing, too.

The vibrations of the chorus were echoed sympathetically on the lips of the audience. Performance and audience, actor and patron, speaker and listener were indistinguishable. Regardless of social status, personality, or musical skill, we all became utterly and irretrievably human in those short minutes.

Hundreds of strangers, tuning forks set to the same frequency, proclaimed, “Yes, I feel this way, too. I know what you’re thinking and what you’re feeling, and I know how afraid you are. Don’t worry, though, because I am, too.” The identities we’d walked in with us were melted into a communal awareness born of our common thoughts and emotions. We were connected in our uneasy, unsure, painfully optimistic look at the future, and for those moments that connection dashed our individualism to pieces.

In our despair and struggle, the Banner rallied us:

*Oh say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave.* . . .

Damage would be repaired. Life would continue, and we would persevere. After all, what other option did we have? The stress and burden of our plight welled up within me, and I heard a woman behind me sob uncontrollably into her silk handkerchief.

*O’er the land of the free.* . . .

The music hung precariously on a high, climactic note, taxing the performers and the audience alike. Hundreds of voices quivered, shook, steadied. Hundreds of souls poured themselves into the air, hovering, crackling with strain. All sought to shatter, until a crash of timpani brought the tonic chord and the final release:

*. . .and the home of the brave.*

As gently and delicately as they had entered, the strings of the orchestra painted the air with an electric darkness before trailing into a deep silence. The momentary kinship and connection between us announced its presence for a few seconds in that dark silence before, as happens to all tuning forks, our common vibration faded away. I became myself again, and slowly others became distinct from me. I awakened to gentle moisture in my eyes, which I wiped away with the sleeve of my dinner jacket. The lights grew a few shades brighter, and the dark mass of humanity was again defined into a hundred separate profiles that slowly descended to their seats.

We were each ourselves again, but for the rest of the evening, the quiet ring of community and combined fate persisted in the back of our minds. For once, I didn’t mind that I owned the shoddiest suit in the
house. For once, I didn’t mind that the cars pulling up to the curb cost more than the sum of my college education. I led my girlfriend from the lobby: content and smiling. As we walked hand in hand down Tremont Street, each streetlamp, office light, and traffic light yearned upwards into the night. Striving heavenward together, they illuminated the skyline of Boston like a brilliant, glowing mosaic.
Beauty #IV Cocaine

photography by Megan O. Kenealy
Wife Beater

photography by Jason Viveiros
staccato

hum
from
Palm Reader.

fluid

Callous repeat.

I said I bleed
because the past pain
might last
days and chains stay.

She said, “paint it.”

so I drew

breaths
sheaths
reef repeat.

She said, “You float in puddles
masquerade dance
My hands and
May explodes fields with clovers.”
Joel liked being in his new room, but he didn’t like the fact that it was still crowded with dusty boxes. His bed and dresser were in place, but sorting through everything that he would later place into his bookshelves, in the closet, or under his bed, would be tedious. The sight of his now-empty fish tank saddened him even more. Only a month ago, it housed a newt.

Joel called his newt Beth, and she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Her rough-textured skin was soft, moist, and delicate. She was a brownish-black above, but, when flipped onto her back (which she understandably detested), she was a brilliant mottled red from chin to tail.

Though a languid creature in her tank, Beth became more flighty and robust as soon as Joel scooped her out to examine her. The heat of his sweaty human hand made her more active, and in a minute Joel would turn his palms into treads to prevent Beth from falling. When he placed her on the floor to watch her move, she would crawl about in her ponderous sprawling gait and stop in mid-stride. While she was static, Joel would lower himself to the floor to see his newt from her level, and he noticed that when Beth was otherwise motionless, her throat constantly undulated, pumping oxygen throughout her cylindrical body, compressed tail, delicate four-fingered hands and five-toed feet. Her bulbous dull green eyes stared obliviously ahead, yet when Joel opened a nearby jar to set a tiny squirming earthworm in front of her, she would voraciously snap it up with her pinkish-white tongue, clamp it in her mouth, and force it down her throat by closing her eyes.

Joel would watch with glee and fascination, smiling so constantly that the corners of his mouth began to ache. Eventually, it would be time to put her back. Keep a newt out of water long enough and it might become sticky. Handle a sticky newt without wetting your hands first, and a leg or a tail might still remain when you put it someplace else. A wet newt, on the other hand, is calming. At least Joel thought so. Whenever he had a stomachache, he would lie down and place Beth, still dripping wet from being in the tank, on his ailing belly and it would have the same effect as placing a wet rag on your forehead to alleviate a headache. Joel never knew how or why newts had this effect on him, but they always seemed to.

“Good, good girl,” he would whisper when placing her back in the tank, though he knew she couldn’t hear him and didn’t have a complex enough brain to understand what he meant anyway. Besides, Beth was quite mute beyond the occasional click or squeak she would emit from the back of her throat when being handled too much. But it mattered little. Keeping a newt was its own reward, and as Beth was transformed from
a sluggish crawler to a graceful swimmer underwater, she was even more
gelic to behold.
Joel was crushed when Beth died, but his mother was quite relieved. Not
that she minded the newt at all, but she didn’t like the idea of having to haul
live animal in a tiny water container in a hot car from Timonium, Maryland
to Athens, Georgia. It was convenient that she had no pets to worry about;
looking after two children, one entering the fourth grade and the other in
her last year of junior high, was stressful enough. Joel’s older sister Aspen
had a pair of gerbils she had to give away to her friends before the move,
but she wasn’t heartbroken by the separation. Joel, on the other hand, cried
when it was time to ceremoniously bury his lovely newt. The thought of
flushing her down the toilet or throwing her in the trash as a mere fish was
horrifying to him. Amphibians deserved more respect than fish, he thought,
but he was quick to scold and educate anyone foolish enough to mistake
Beth for a reptile. All the while, his mother impatiently reminded him that
they would buy a new one once they were settled, but the only pet store they
found in the downtown area had recently closed.
Crickets and cicadas provided the evening ambiance of the new place,
along with the banjo twang of the green frog. But on quiet mornings like
this one the deep-pitched jug o’ rum from the bullfrog could be heard for
more than a half a mile. The screen door was useless against the palpable
humidity, but Joel opened it anyway. It was nice to listen to the sounds of
nature in the morning, to be confronted with the natural - the enveloping
heat from sliding open the glass door and the quiet serenity of the woods
outside, before being thrust into the unnatural - the tedious and arbitrary
classes at school. The screen door bridged the gap between two worlds
already; it was a portal from the dark, cool comfort of their pitiful apart-
ment to an alluring outside world. Looking back into the living room,
Joel could see Aspen sprawled along the couch. She was carefully paint-
ing her toenails some absurd and glittering shade of blue. A towel was still
wrapped around her head, and although she was dressed after her morning
shower, her skin still looked incurably moist. Just like a newt.
“So what do you think of Georgia so far?” Joel asked.
Aspen didn’t even raise her head. “I hate it,” she said flatly.
“Why?”
“Why do you think?”
Aspen looked up this time. “Oh, don’t tell me you opened the door!” she
growled. “Joel, why the hell did you leave it open, it’s disgusting outside . . .”
As she stood up from the couch to shut the door, Joel remained where
he was, watching.
“I swear,” Aspen sneered, “sometimes you have no common sense.” As
she sat back down and resumed painting her toes, she continued; “And you
can do things around here, too. You don’t have to stand around all the
time like a zombie.”
Joel tried at that moment to think about what it might truly be like to
be a zombie. He didn’t find it too difficult, given his sluggish state early in
the morning. Being mute in his undead state couldn’t be that hard either,
for he didn’t like to speak much. No matter what he said it was doomed
to be misheard. People would either laugh or look in bewilderment because
he obviously didn’t speak loudly enough. Still, even as a zombie he did
not think a harpy was an enviable state of being. Even if that harpy had
painted every claw on her vulture-like talons a sparkling shade of blue.

Just then Joel’s mother entered the room. Upon her left shoulder hung
her purse, and hanging underneath that was her hastily stuffed knapsack,
filled with handouts for today’s music lesson.

“Joel, Aspen!” she said. “What are you doing, we’re going to be late!?”

“Mom!” Aspen protested. “I haven’t dried my-”

“You should have been done with that ten minutes ago!”

“Hey, sometimes it takes longer!”

Before she would argue further with Aspen about various points of
no importance, Joel’s mother quickly instructed him to gather his things
and be on his way out. Joel did as he was told, but as he waited near the
door, he felt a curious sense of relief: it was Aspen who made them late
this time, not him. She would be the aloof, irresponsible one. Aside from
his mother’s scorn, he cared little if they were late. In a certain light, he
thought it would be pretty exciting if, for example, the car wouldn’t start.
Or, better yet, if the three of them were abducted by aliens.

Unfortunately for Joel, none of those things came to pass, and as he sat
in the car seat staring thoughtfully out the window, Aspen was dropped off
at the Junior High School. Then the car turned the opposite direction and
reached the Elementary School, where both Joel and his mother entered
to spend their day; Joel went to his homeroom and his mother went to her
classroom in a different wing. She would remain there long after the school
day was done, but after several hours Joel would walk home and access the
apartment with his own key. That was his favorite part of the day.

Ms. Fri seemed reasonable enough for a fourth grade teacher. More
than reasonable; to Joel she was a towering goddess. She was the goddess
of flawless tact and composure, logic and reason, and the victory of gentle
persuasion over force. Joel could think of no one more perfect. Only a
few days of school and Joel had never heard her raise her voice, and he
found it impossible to imagine her doing so. And she was young, too, probably
younger than Joel’s mother by ten years or more. Joel wondered what she
did outside of the classroom. He wondered if she were married, and if she
had any kids of her own. And in a certain light, that was disquieting, too.

Today her in-class assignment only called for a simple filling in of
blanks about yourself. It was what she called a “bio-poem.” The first and
last line in the poem was the first and last name of the student, while in
each of the nine lines in between, you would write three or four descriptive
traits, answering such introspective phrases as “who feels,” “who gives,”
“who needs,” “who fears,” and “who would like to see.” Joel was introspective enough to have no difficulty writing, but he did not, however, know that Ms. Fri planned to read each of them in front of the class, which in turn would try and guess the identity of the author.

The class crowded around on the carpeted floor as Ms. Fri began to read them off. Joel couldn’t guess most of his classmates, but the other kids seemed to do better. He was quite dismayed when Ms. Fri reached his bio-poem.

“Who likes . . . newts, Godzilla, drawing . . . ”

He could hear snickers here and there, and almost immediately a chorus of “Joels” filled the room. He nearly despaired, for how could they guess his identity so quickly, let alone reduce it? He guessed it was because he was the only person who didn’t mention some kind of sport. But Mrs. Fri put her hand up and continued reading:

“Who fears . . . dogs, water, and . . . failing?”

This time there were laughs instead of snickers.

“Dogs?!” someone thundered.

“Water??” another student was baffled.

Joel sneered. Half the class said they were afraid of bugs. It was the pinnacle of insanity, really. A dog could rip you to pieces. What could an insect do?

“And finally,” Ms. Fri read, “who would like to see . . . more amphibians, Alaska, and . . . a Yellow Jackets movie?”

Once again it was met with a chorus of “whats.” Even the teacher looked baffled. Joel didn’t want to explain. Thank God they didn’t know what the Yellow Jackets were; they didn’t deserve to know. It was Joel’s best-kept secret and he hadn’t known it would be read to the class. He would keep himself silent while Ms. Fri would ask the question, because he couldn’t be any more hilarious and incorrigibly strange than he was already.

“All right, so who do you think wrote this?” Ms. Fri asked rhetorically.

“Hey, you’re Mrs. Parish’s kid, aren’t you? Hey, your mom’s real nice,” Sean said as he found his way next to Joel on the sidewalk. “So, um, you like newts, huh?”

Sean’s girlish voice was unmistakable, as was his red curly hair. Somehow these features made him seem even more annoying. Joel had barely spoken to him before, and he didn’t want to speak with him now. Too many people assigned him the epithet “Newt Boy” for the rest of the day. They didn’t even know what a newt was, Joel thought. The idiots. He turned his attention toward the houses he passed on the sidewalk, the crude wooden picket fences, and the fields of sun-warmed grass.

“Don’t worry if they call you Newt Boy or anything,” Sean continued. “I mean, I wrote down that I liked my brother’s strategy games and no one knew what that meant either. I used to have a newt once, I think,” Sean said. “Maybe you can tell me.”

“What did it look like?” Joel asked uneasily.
“He was this big,” Sean said as he held his two index fingers a foot apart, and then made a 20-inch circle with his hands, “and this fat and he was black and covered in little white spots. I found him under a log in my backyard and I kept him in a jar with dirt and leaves and stuff.”

“He was under a log? I think he was a salamander then. Do you still have him?”

“No, I killed him,” Sean said. “But not on purpose. I gave him to my brother to look after when I went to a summer camp and he didn’t feed him. When I got back he was dried up and crusty. It was really gross.”

Joel was horrified, but when he summoned enough energy to speak, he said, “Hey, do you know where you could find any newts around here?”

“You might try the woods,” Sean said. “Me and my mom went hiking there the first day we moved in.”

“Where are the woods?” Joel asked.

Sean pointed well beyond the picket fence they were passing and into a field. It looked lush and overgrown as it was, but further in the distance he could see the woods themselves. A small chain-link fence was in the way, but those were always climbable.

“Way back there,” said Sean. “You can get there through Mr. Houston’s yard, but way on the other side of the yard’s the highway where the official path is. That’s where my mom took me.”

“Wow . . .” Joel said, feeling envious. His mother and sister hated the outdoors.

“We sometimes go there on the weekends. I’m sure I could get her to take you with us sometime.”

Joel’s heart leapt through his throat when he heard the charge and thunderous bark of a huge dog on the other side of the fence. Joel jumped back, past Sean. All he could see through the cracks of the fence were bits of shiny black fur and the beast’s feet underneath.

“Whoa, you jumped like a mile,” Sean said.

“I hate dogs,” Joel said through clenched teeth.

At that moment, he wanted to cross the street. He didn’t care that the traffic was heavy and there was no crosswalk, he didn’t care if he’d have to cross the street yet again to get to his home a quarter of a mile ahead, he hated dogs that much.

“Oh, he’s just barking because he doesn’t know us,” Sean said. “He’s harmless.”

Joel was rigid. The damned dog was still barking its head off.

“Don’t worry about him,” Sean said. “He’s Mr. Houston’s dog. He can’t hurt us.”

“Mr. Houston?” Joel asked.

“He owns this yard,” said Sean. “C’mon.”

Joel continued up the sidewalk, though this time he made sure Sean was standing near the fence instead. As they continued the dog followed, barking fiercely as it ran along the fence. Eventually, the wooden planks merged with a chain-link fence, and Joel could see the dog in its entirety, and it was no small, yappy thing. A fearsome, demonic creature this was, sinewy and black as coal. It might as well have had three heads.
“Draco!” cried a guttural voice from the other end of the yard. “Draco, come here.”

There, at the other end of the yard, near a small gray house with chipped paint, stood Mr. Houston. He was a heavy man with short white hair. Joel had seen him before, usually in the yard near his grill, and each time he always wore sunglasses, a leather baseball cap, and never anything over his undershirt. The yard looked dead and untended, and it always displayed an odd banner from a state or country Joel wasn’t familiar with: the one with a red flag crisscrossed by a blue starry ‘X’.

“Good boy . . .” Mr. Houston said as he stroked his dog.

He glanced back at Sean and Joel coldly, then went around the back end of the house and his dog followed. Sean waved as Mr. Houston wandered out of view, but there was no response.

“Do you know him?” Joel asked.

“Well, kind of,” said Sean. “He sometimes goes hunting in the woods when his son comes home.”

Next to Mr. Houston’s house, separated by another rusty fence, was the Auto Body Shop. Beyond the tire stacks was a field littered with the skeletal remains of automobiles. To Joel the vacant, rusted shells looked deadly and sinister.

“I don’t know too many people around here.” Joel shrugged, adding, “I just moved.”

“So did I! I moved from North Carolina. Where’d you move from?”

“Maryland.”

“So why’d you move?”

“Um . . .” Joel said uncomfortably, “I don’t think I want to tell you.”

“Why not?” said Sean.

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you.”

“Why, what is it?”

Joel looked at the ground.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” Sean said, his expression sad.

“Well, I’ll think about it . . .” Joel shrugged.

“Okay,” Sean said, and then he turned toward the garage as if forgetting where he was, and walked toward it.

“Where are you going?” Joel asked.

“I just want to check on something . . .”

Joel followed Sean around the side of the Auto Body Shop, where Sean looked up at a window and gripped the sill. Pushing himself up, his feet scrapped the rough brick wall and allowed him a moment’s gaze through the dirty glass. Then he dropped down.

“Okay, your turn,” Sean said.

“What’s inside?” asked Joel.

“You’ll see.”

Joel took off his backpack and jumped up to grip the windowsill, but he found his own grip too feeble to sustain him. Sean helped him up
almost immediately, and soon Joel found himself a higher view of the interior than he could have been afforded otherwise. It was the mechanic’s office no doubt. There was a desk, a cabinet, and on the opposite wall . . .

Naked women!
Truly naked, truly authentic! It was the most compelling reason he ever had for peeking through someone’s window. Joel’s breathing nearly stopped. He thought of Ms. Fri.

Joel jumped back the second he saw a gray haired mechanic stand up from under the counter. Landing on his feet, he quickly scrambled to pick up his backpack.

“I check every now and then to see if they change the calendar,” said Sean.
“‘There was a guy in there!’ said Joel.
“Did he see you?” Sean asked.
“I don’t know.”
“Holy shit, let’s run.”
Joel nodded, and the two bolted as fast as they could from the garage.

A few blocks later, Sean entered a house Joel had walked by every day.
“My mom’s not home, mind the crap on the floor,” Sean said as he fished a key from his pocket.

Sean’s room had a peculiar smell, perhaps of algae. Clothes, athletic equipment, and action figures littered the tortoise shell carpet. Near the windowsill of his room was a bubbling green aquarium rife with floating water plants. The humming filter was surely overworked, but a few blackish-gray sucker fishes were doing their part to clean the interior. At Joel’s feet was a folded spiral-bound notebook on which a crude picture of a ninja had been drawn.

“That’s a picture I drew,” Sean said as he picked up the notebook. “I kind of suck at drawing, though. You said you liked to draw in your bio-poem. What do you draw?”

Joel hesitated. “I like to draw war scenes.”
“Cool, so do I,” said Sean.
“I have a story behind mine, though,” Joel said.
“What’s it about?”
“It’s . . . it’s a secret, and I don’t like to tell people about it.”
“Why not?”
“I mean, what if people would make fun of me?”
“I won’t.”
Joel hesitated once more. So far, he could still count all the people he would share his world with on one hand. He always hesitated when that number was about to expand.

“Well, it’s about this war that’s set in the future. These two armies run the world. The good guys are called the Yellow Jackets and the bad guys are called the Vipers. And they have monsters, too. And mutants. It’s, um, really complicated.”
“Cool. What do the monsters look like?”

“They look . . . I’ll show you.”

Sean flipped to the next two empty pages of his notebook and set it on the floor. It was the best way to draw, anyway. Not at a table, but on your stomach. And Joel still felt more comfortable with lined paper than blank paper. The spiral of the notebook was their dividing line. Joel had one half and Sean had the other. And so another war was illustrated. Joel only needed to make a few jagged lines across the paper to represent various levels of a cliffside. Then he would populate these levels with stick figures, arm his figures with guns, and draw tanks or monsters crushing the opposition on both sides. Sean was busy with his own, but when he looked up to see Joel’s, albeit upside down, he was quietly awed.

“Whoa,” he said. “Hey that monster looks kinda like the one Godzilla fought after he killed the giant moth . . . you know the dragon thing with three heads . . . ?”

“Ghidrah,” Joel corrected offhandedly.

“Wow, you really are good at drawing. I suck. My brother draws really, really good, though. He even draws better than you. He does lots of D&D pictures.”

“D&D?” Joel said as he looked up. “My mom said that was a satanic game. My sister used to play it with her friends before we moved, and she didn’t like her doing it.”

“It isn’t satanic,” Sean said, puzzled. “Has she ever played it?”

Joel just shrugged.

“If you want to know why we moved? he said softly.

Sean nodded.

“Okay,” Joel said again. “You have to promise me you’ll never, ever, ever tell anyone at all. Never.”

“I promise,” Sean nodded.

“Our house was haunted,” Joel said.

Sean was silent.

“Sometimes,” Joel said, “my mom said she heard footsteps of kids running around and up the stairs, long after I was asleep. Sometimes she heard them giggling. My sister heard them too. She thinks they might have crawled into the closet in my room to hide from a fire or something and died. We never checked the records of the house though.”

“I believe you,” said Sean. “What’s there not to believe?”

“We moved for other reasons too. The school my mom taught at had to cut back on music.”

He’d expected Sean to say more, but Joel buried his head back into his drawing.

“Hey,” said Sean, “I could talk to my mom about taking us down to the woods sometime. I think maybe Friday.”

It was late afternoon when Joel returned to his home. Slipping in through the screen door, he saw that his mother was already home and
giving a lesson to an older student on their baby grand piano. She barely acknowledged him, but he understood. Joel couldn’t look at the chipped out-of-tune instrument without thinking of the immense difficulties the moving boys had in transporting it off the truck and through the door. He wondered if it was worth the effort, for whenever his mother would play for her own personal pleasure, it could be heard through the paper-thin walls of their floor.

Throughout the rest of the tiny living room, the bookshelves, chairs, and tables were in their places while the books and decorations were not yet out of their boxes. Even as it was, this new place was much too small for what they owned. Haunted or not, Joel liked the old house better.

Joel headed into his room and shut the door. Placing his backpack against the door he looked through the boxes in his room, searching for one book in particular, and finding it wasn’t too difficult. It was a green leather-bound book, nearly as thick as his Bible and with pages just as thin, except what was within was of even more value to him. The title was long and impressive: *The National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians*. Half the book was beautiful photographs, while the other half consisted of detailed maps depicting the ranges of each creature. Joel thought it must have taken years to write, and whoever wrote it was surely a genius. He thumbed through it reverently, wondering what wonderful creatures he was likely to find in the woods on Friday. It was a mere five days away. He could hardly wait.

Georgia was down in the south, and in warmer climates, there would be more amphibians. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to find a real live newt in its natural habitat? Beth was a Japanese Fire-bellied Newt he’d bought in a pet store, but around here Joel figured he’d find the Eastern Newt, the greenish-yellow creature his guide book referred to as *Notophthalmus Viridescens*. He’d seen pictures of them in books before, and their fabled red-orange juveniles known as efts, but never actually seen or caught one in the wild. His tank wouldn’t be empty forever, he was sure of that.

Friday afternoon Joel followed Sean home. He was excited, and well-prepared for the trip. He had brought with him a pair of large white buckets that once held ice cream, yet they seemed sturdy enough to hold anything. He wished he had a large fishing net, but the only one he found in the house was a pitifully small hand net for scooping fish from a tank.

“I don’t see my mom’s car,” Sean said, “and my dad doesn’t get home ‘til later.”

“What’s that mean?” Joel asked.

“I’ll see if my brother’s home,” said Sean. “Maybe he’ll know.”

Joel was worried. After stepping in and setting their school material down, Sean decided to knock on his brother’s door, which was adorned with a Buck Rogers poster.

“Uh oh,” Sean said putting his ear to the door. “I think he’s in there with Valerie.”
“Who’s Valerie?” Joel asked.

“His girlfriend,” said Sean. “He never lets me in when she’s around.”

Joel crinkled his nose. There was a very peculiar odor coming from the door that smelled like burned leaves. Sean knocked on the door. There was no answer, but he could still hear activity within.

“Tristan?” he called.

The door opened, and there stood a tall and lanky creature with hair a diabolic shade of red. He was shirtless, his aura otherworldly, and in his hand he held what looked like a crude cigarette. A girl, who Joel presumed to be Valerie, was lethargically standing behind Tristan, somehow looked terrifying. Her lips were full, her cheek bones were high, her eyes were sunken, and her whole face was framed in soot-black hair. As she skulked and sneered at them, she reminded Joel of his sister in a sense. He imagined that under the folds of her over-sized jacket she had claws, and hidden within her baggy jeans was a tail.

“What the hell do you want?” said the red-haired creature.

“Where’s Mom?” Sean asked.

“She called before you came back. She’s not coming in ‘til 8:00. Dad’s not coming in ‘til 10:00 either, so I’m not supposed to let you out.”

“But . . .” Sean said in dismay, “we were supposed to go to the woods today!”

“We can still find a way in. We’ll be back before then, though, I promise.”

“No dice, Sean,” said Tristan.

“What . . . ? If you don’t let us go I’m . . . telling mom you guys are smoking that stuff!!”

“No, no . . .” Tristan said as he held up his arms between the two. “All right, time out. There’s got to be an alternative. Look, okay, fine, go out and do whatever you want, but you have to be back here by 8:00, got it? If you come back any later, I swear to God, I’ll kill you.”

Sean nodded.

“Fine,” Tristan said. “Be back early, and I am not kidding about that.”

Then he shut the door.

“How are we going to get to the woods?” Joel whispered.

“I don’t know,” Sean said, “but we’ll find a way.”

“I really don’t like this,” Joel said as Sean opened the gate to Mr. Houston’s yard.

“His pickup truck isn’t in the driveway,” Sean responded. “He can’t be home.”

Joel shook his head. The yard looked empty and desolate as always, and that horrid dog wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Still, though, he didn’t want to risk it. Was a trip to the woods worth risking the wrath of an angry dog?

“What about Draco?” Joel asked.

“I’m sure he’s inside.”
As Sean stepped into the yard, still holding the fence gate open, he beckoned for Joel to follow. Joel shook his head.

“C’mon,” Sean said. “We just climb over the fence on the other side and we’re there.”

“Can’t we go the long way around?”

“No, it’d take too long,” Sean said shaking his head. “We have to be back by 8:00.”

Joel nodded meekly. He didn’t like the idea of entering Mr. Houston's yard, and he was still scared to death of that dog. But he chose to step through, and Sean closed the gate behind them. As they trekked across the green and brown grass, Joel could see clear evidence that Draco frequented this yard - the droppings, dog toys, and paw prints. Sean pointed to something in the corner, where the fence had fused with a lifeless tree stump, but before Joel could ask, a horrible, petrifying bark tore through the air.

Running from around the corner of the house was Draco himself. He stopped and stood still this time, staring at the two intruders. His posture was stiff and commanding, his head was held aloft and his ears attentive, making him look like a black statue—an Egyptian jackal. His muscular limbs were poised as springs about to be set loose. And there was no way out.

“Oh shit, what do we do now?! We shouldn’t have come here. Let’s . . . let’s go back . . . !”

“Run,” said Sean.

“What?!”

“Run!” Sean said again.

He grabbed Joel’s shoulder and pushed him toward the fence. The two of them ran in divergent directions but with the same goal in mind; reaching the other side of the yard. As Joel burst toward the fence, Draco followed, trotting lightly, but with a fierce guttural growl he gained speed. To Joel’s horror, it was him the creature was after.

He panicked as the dog neared him, seeing the ropy strands of saliva dangling from his mouth. Sean jostled up the rusty fence as fast as he could, the bucket’s handle over his shoulder. Joel could see him landing safely on the other side as he jumped up to grab hold. He needed only to reach the fence before Draco. Joel threw his bucket over the fence, and as he bolted upward he felt the dog’s iron bite clamp his foot. Joel had his hands over the top, his arms gripping one another through the links of the fence, and his left leg was nearly over, yet his right foot was in Draco’s mouth. The demon was firm in his defiance, his four black feet planted squarely on the ground. He was not letting Joel leave. Joel tried to tug away, but it was to no avail. He gripped the top of the fence as hard as he could, tears forming in his eyes. He couldn’t believe this was happening.

Then he heard Sean whistling. He whistled loudly for a few moments, until Joel could feel Draco loosening his grip. When his foot slid out of Draco's mouth the dog barked madly and made futile attempts to leap over the fence. Joel was in the process of swinging his legs over the fence, yet when he tried to
drop to the other side, his shirt became caught in the sharp rusted projections. He screamed in rage at first, and quickly raising himself to the top of the fence to untangle his shirt, he cut his forearm in the process. When Joel finally hit the ground, he noticed the cut was bleeding slightly. It wasn't too bad, though. Not enough to stop him. There was no turning back.

“Are you okay?” Sean asked.

“I think so,” Joel nodded.

They stopped a moment to stare at the barking Draco, now rendered impotent by his barrier.

“I hate that dog,” Joel said.

“He wasn’t that hard to outrun,” said Sean. “You should exercise more. Don’t you play any sports?”

Joel shook his head. “When my dad was still married to my mom, he tried to get me interested in baseball. He got me a bat, a ball, a mitt . . . you know, everything. He even took me to a game at a stadium once. But I hated it. It was boring. I’ve never really cared for sports. I suck at them anyway.”

“Well, baseball’s boring,” said Sean, “but soccer and basketball are awesome. You should really practice some more, anyway. You’d get better. You have to.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone’s going to be involved in a major fight at least once in their life.”

“How do you know?”

“Watch the news.”

Joel was becoming even more disgusted by Draco’s barks. The dog was foaming. But now that he had made it to the other side of the fence, he wondered how they’d get back. Or where they were going. The woods stretched onward ahead, on a sandy path littered with brown pine needles and pinecones. They picked up the buckets and went.

The trees were majestic and awesome, yet for the most part they did not look climbable. Some of the lower branches were cloven long ago, and to Joel their odd stumps looked like the noses of immense porcine faces. He imagined their upper branches would grab him if he ventured too close. Perhaps the ghosts of the ancient dryads were angry. A good distance away the backs of fences, yards, and other homes could be seen, reminding them that civilization wasn’t too far away. In an impossibly high branch in one tree Joel spied a wooden platform.

“Hey, I wonder how anyone could climb that,” he said. “I don’t see any ropes or steps or anything.”

“Me and my brother made tree houses like that in North Carolina,” said Sean, “and they were even taller than that. And that’s a short fall anyway. I once knew this kid named Brent Brown who climbed a tree and found a beehive. Then he said ‘I want some honey’ and went ‘bam’ and punched it. He jumped all the way down.”
Joel laughed.
“Did he get the honey?”
“Yeah,” Sean said, “but it was a short fall for Brent. It was, I dunno, maybe forty feet.”

The path took them downhill and away from civilization, yet they veered from it to check some irresistible fallen logs. Logs, rocks, and boards were like treasure chests to Joel, rewards for trekking through the forest. Turn them over and you might find wonderful things amidst the soggy leaves and dirt. He found only a few small things; the tips of giant fat worms racing under the dirt, black beetles, tiny red centipedes, and huge slimy leopard slugs, but no salamanders. If he were to find any, they would be a squirmly lung-less variety, and even they were absent. He was disappointed.

But the path was still in sight, so they continued downward, until they came to a shallow creek at the bottom, or perhaps the end of a creek. A mossy concrete wall was imbedded into the hillside, and protruding from that wall was an enormous pipe that spewed water into the creek. Joel and Sean found their way onto the sandy delta of the creek and examined it. The water was clear in one area, with a rocky bottom, yet a few feet nearby it was a nauseating orange. Not only was it thick and stagnant here, the surface shined a rainbow hue as if it had gasoline in it, too.

“This place is polluted!” Joel said.

“That’s awful . . .” Sean said as he surveyed the creek. “But I don’t think all of it’s like this. Let’s follow the creek and see where it goes.”

Joel was worried. Whatever amphibian life was lurking in the woods or waters, he was sure the pollution killed it, but he trudged on along the banks and scanned the creek as he passed.


He held up to Joel a rather formidable looking creature. It looked like a lobster, except it was smaller, perhaps only three or four inches in length. When Sean held it closer to Joel, the creature raised its massive pincers in defense while its jointed limbs flailed about.

“He’s harmless!” Sean said.

“I don’t care, just keep him away from me,” said Joel.

“Isn’t he awesome?” Sean asked.

Joel nodded. He had to admit, even the crayfish had a certain fearsome beauty. Sean handed him a bucket, and filling it with shallow creek water (he made sure it looked as clean as possible) he dumped the crayfish in. Not exactly what he was looking for, but it was interesting nonetheless. Then he went back to carefully combing the rest of the stream. Sean examined another bank with his bucket, crouched and waiting.

“A SALAMANDER!!” he shouted.

Joel rushed as fast as he could with the crayfish in his bucket, but to his confusion, there was none in sight. Sean had shot his hands into the water but came up clenching only leaves and mud.
“I saw him right here. He was really tiny.”

“Keep looking,” Joel said. “Maybe he’s still here somewhere.”

They looked around more, but it was futile. Joel’s disappointment grew. He wondered if Sean had made the whole thing up, or if he was exaggerating (did Brent Brown really fall forty feet?). Hours went by as they continued down the creek and the two saw nothing at all. They succeeded in catching another crayfish, which was slightly larger than the one they had already and ruddier in color. Underneath her tail she carried a dozen or so black eggs, but the more the boys progressed through the stream, the more frequent and unremarkable the crayfish became. Then Sean found another salamander.

“Look!” he shouted. “Another salamander!”

“Where?” asked Joel. “I don’t see anything.”

Sean grabbed his shoulder and pointed into the creek.

“Right there. See him?”

Joel stared for a minute, and there it was! It was a tiny salamander too, and it was nearly the same color as the sand and mud at the bottom of the creek. It had a delicate build, a disproportionately large head and tiny, feathery gills under the neck. It was surely a larvae of some type, though he couldn’t be sure which.

Joel crouched near the water and clasped where the creature was, but alas, when he lifted his hands to take a peek at what was within them, it was only water. But it mattered little, for when he looked over toward the other shore there was another salamander, and this one was a little larger. And another one, in an even deeper trench of the creek. Joel smiled in awe.

“There’s baby salamanders everywhere,” he said, “and this creek’s so polluted. We have to save them.”

A few hours later up the creek, both buckets were filled. One held the two crayfish, while the other one held three salamander larvae. They proved difficult to catch, but not impossible. Joel loved looking at the larvae. To him they were innocent. He wondered when they would shed their gills and develop lungs, and when their skins would change to the brilliant hues of their adult counterparts. They succeeded in catching an adult, too. This one they called “Daffy,” and it was even more beautiful. It was a long-bodied and long-tailed creature with a gray belly and three dark stripes; two along the sides and one down the back. Joel was puzzled because he wasn’t sure what type this was, but he would surely identify it when he got home.

“Got another one,” Sean said as he approached with his hands clenched.

He let his hands lose into the bucket, and out wriggled another fully-formed adult salamander. This one looked different from the other one they had caught. It was mottled and gray in color, and far more robust.
"I think that's a Dusky," Joel said.

The two watched their captives swim around in the white bucket. Joel smiled. Even though they had yet to see where the creek would take them, he had caught more than he ever imagined. The grass became taller as the creek progressed, and eventually the muddy ground caused Joel to nearly lose his right shoe again. The insects were making their presence more known, but there at the end they saw where the creek led. Beyond the ragweed, cattails, and tall grass they could see a large pond. The sun shined brightly across the water and outlined many black gnats and mosquitoes dancing across the surface. Where duckweed covered the water's surface, Joel saw the globular eyes of a bullfrog peering out from under. The chorus was just as he had heard it from his house: the deep jug o' rum from the frogs, the buzz of the cicadas, and the chirping of crickets.

And the sun was setting.

"Joel, do you have a watch?" Sean asked.

"No, what time do you think it is?"

"I don't know, but I'll be dead if I don't get back soon."

"All right . . ." Joel said, though his heart was still in the pond and the creek. He stood there staring at the water's surface, but as Sean urged him on, the two followed the creek back to the concrete pipe and worked their way uphill through the woods. It began to rain slightly on the way up, but by the time they reached the fence to Mr. Houston's yard, it stopped entirely and the sky was already beginning to dim. Joel forgot that only a few hours ago, he was scared to death of a dog when climbing this fence. It still worried him, but Draco was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Houston's pickup truck was in the driveway and the lights in his house were on, however.

"What about Draco?" said Joel.

"I think Mr. Houston took him inside. We'll be fine."

Joel smiled and nodded this time. It was better to trust Sean, for if he hadn't, he would never have caught five salamanders. They gingerly climbed the fence, careful about both buckets, and quickly made their way across the yard with notice from neither Mr. Houston nor his dog. When they arrived back at Sean's house, they saw that although the sky was already well darkened, his mother's car had yet to arrive.

"Thank God," Sean sighed.

Tristan opened the door for both of them.

"7:14 and Mom's not back yet," he said. "Come in."

Joel was quick to find his backpack once more as he was let into the house, but as he was about to leave he realized he was still holding both buckets. He didn't care much about the crayfish, but he couldn't bare the thought of parting with the salamanders. He wondered if Sean felt the same way.

"Sean, uh . . . do you want to keep any of these guys? It's all right with me if you do . . ."
“No, keep ’em,” said Sean. “They’re all yours.”
“No problem. See ya tomorrow.”
Joel waved goodbye as he left toward his home, excited.
When he slipped through the screen door this time his sister was there watching T.V. but, eager to situate his new pets in their tank, Joel rushed toward his room.
“What are you doing?” Aspen said.
“Hey, take your shoes off, Mom’s gonna be pissed if you track mud on the carpet like that.”
“Ah yeah, almost forgot.”
After Joel removed his shoes, his mother called him to the table to eat. He was hungry, but he ate very little. Almost immediately afterwards he rushed to the bath. While in the tub, Joel submerged himself like the bullfrog, thinking of nothing but his heavenly creatures. Once back in his room, it was already time to sleep, but he spent the next hour finding the gravel for his tank, the artificial plants, and the hood. He still wasn’t sure the crayfish would be good companions for the salamanders with their sharp pincers, so he kept them in the bucket. He made sure the water in the tank was relatively shallow and put in a big rock to provide shelter and surface. Once the salamanders were added, he marveled at them for a while on the other side of the glass, smiling until the corners of his mouth ached. He couldn’t believe he moved to a place like this.
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