

Towers

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This issue is dedicated to Jacob Zuniga
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Rebecca Neuschaefer for "Seperation Anxiety"

Nonfiction

Christina Gilleran for "Colleen Just Means Girl"

Poetry

Jessica Kiney for "There is a mechanical whirr"

Art/Photography

Lauren Hansen for "The Shape of Infatuation"

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Separation Anxiety

By: Rebecca Neuschaefer

Act one scene one.

Character enters from stage right.

Calm, collected. No, scratch that. Tense, in a hurry.

Clumsily dropping personal belongings as she goes. In a truly clumsy way, not theatrically clumsy. All charming female leads these days are clumsy.

Let's throw in a stumble or two. How darling. Okay, now we've crossed the stage...something has to happen before we're behind the curtain again.

Attractive, yet equally clumsy young man enters from stage left. No, no, too obvious. Too clichéd. This cannot be predictable.

This is life we're talking about.

Okay, how about an out-of-control tractor-trailer, hurtling with incredible speed towards our protagonist, soon to become our victim. Lo, we've only just begun to know and love her! Why God?! Why?

It's been done before.

Maybe she finds a briefcase full of money, a blood stained corpse, an alien spaceship, the long lost twin she never knew she had but always felt existed, a half-eaten but still delicious burrito in the trash can, something, anything, PLEASE!

And before we can come to a decision she's back behind the curtain.

What a terrible performance. She won't even bother looking at the reviews in the paper tomorrow morning. But let's imagine for a second that, by some modern marvel of theater, the audience can observe as our leading lady continues on in this, her day-in-the-life. Get on the bus. Innocently, unassumingly look for a seat, knowing all the while you'll be standing. Standing like a fool, fresh meat in the middle of the gauntlet. Feeling the eyes burn into your skin, through the muscle, through the viscera, through the guts and organs, through the bones, through every atom, proton, neutron and electron of physical existence and into your very soul. When you stand like that, in the center of everyone, they all become superhuman. Their eyes become x-rays, demolishing any façade, any barricade you may construct at that very moment or have spent years constructing. It makes no difference. They've got you now and they'll have you know it. It's useless to struggle against their newly realized powers. You are merely primordial putty in the gigantic hands of a cruel universe.

So, she's on the bus.

She braces herself by slightly spreading her legs and clenching all her muscles. This is the only workout she'll have all day...not counting the trip home, of course. Okay, they're moving now; it's just a matter of time. Just as long as she doesn't look directly at anyone she'll be fine. Whatever you do, by God, don't look at anyone! You're just begging for it then.

This is the worst part of the morning, the worst part of city life: public transportation. Yes, yes, it saves the environment, no dealing with stop and go traffic, yadda yadda. These public transportation advocates fail to mention the germs...and the invasion of personal space. All the grubby fingers on this bus couldn't count the number of times her personal bubble has been not just invaded, oh no, but burst wide open; her guts practically spilling out onto the unsuspecting passengers. Oh great, just what this bus needs, more germs. It's like riding in a Petri dish with wheels. Maybe she'll sell that slogan to the Chicago Transit Authority. That money ought to buy her a nice, used car to putt around this city in. Goodbye bus! Goodbye elevated trains! Goodbye cruel world!

Act one scene two.

Ultimate Destination.

Character stumbles off bus and takes a deep breath. Wheezing, dizzy, recovering. Counts back from ten, and she's okay!

This part of town strangely resembles the place where she caught the bus (in an effort to save on scenery). Buildings, construction, the occasional man begging for change, a chalk-outline of a human body peppered here and there. Much like the background of an old cartoon, where they just keep using the same one over and over again. Routine can be comforting to her sometimes. SOMETIMES! Glances at her watch, 8:33. She's got some time, and that means it's latte time. As she passes the newsstand she casually glances at today's front page and feels her legs go numb. There is a large picture in the center of the Tribune. A large, color picture. A picture that will no doubt be shown on television when Peter Jennings does his recap of 2004 in December. As she stares at the picture of these children in Russia, lying on the pavement, covered in their own blood after being senselessly massacred, their mothers crying over their little bodies in shock and agony, in anger and terror, the letters that make up the headline swirl around it like cream in coffee, like leaves in an eddy. It becomes a blur, a horrible blur of ink and newsprint. Her hand moves to her abdomen and she can somehow feel its still relatively new presence under her flesh.

She makes it to the alleyway just in time to vomit, hoping to God her tears aren't smudging her mascara. Antibacterial wipes in her pocket, she pulls herself together in no time.

Hmmm, she thinks, as she whips her head back around and does her best cat-walk strut down Clark Street. She straightens her glasses and adjusts her purse and briefcase on her shoulder as she makes her way to the coffee shop. You work that thang, you sexy minx.

Act one scene three.

Coffee shop of horrors.

Despite the rapid-fire questions from the barista, she somehow orders a decaf latte. She must remember to add acclimating herself to coffeehouse lingo onto her to-do list. Sure, right after she learns French and Portuguese, masters quantitative physics, volunteers at the soup kitchen and joins Habitat for Humanity. Nervously she waits for her coffee while, of course, everyone stares at her. They all must know what is taking place inside her, not only inside her belly but inside her brain. They're all just sitting in judgment. Oh how easy it is to sit upon your throne and cluck your tongue and say 'shame shame, we know your name...we've got your number.' What a terrible decision she's made, rather, about to make. Is her mind already made up? Deep breath. She does her best to look unaffected, cool, confident; despite the fact that the rest of the coffee house patrons are playing judge, jury and executioner today. She taps her foot, playfully pulls at her chewing gum, twirls her hair...but in her disarray she somehow manages to get the gum caught in her hair. Jesus Christ. Now she's casually, unaffectedly yanking the fucking gum out of her hair. Act natural. Nobody's looking. Yeah, right. So far, it's a perfect beginning to a perfect day, just another to add to her memoirs of a perfect life. How could she ask for more? Suddenly and without warning the scenery changes. The audience is magically whisked away to the cozy suburbs of Chicago, 35 miles due west of the city, 20 some-odd years ago. Our heroine is a toddler, crimson face contorted by her confused sobs. Tiny hands pressed against the car window, struggling to get one last look at her father as her mother speeds away from the home her child knew and loved. One last look. She wipes her nose on the sleeve of her pink and white sweater and faces forward – no more tears, no more words. As her mother races toward freedom, her baby finds herself farther and farther from innocence, from safety, from babyhood. The carefree life that all little ones are entitled to. She grew twenty years in the span of those twenty minutes. This is the cross she will bear for the rest of her existence. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, the mousy-looking barista squeaks

out 'tall decaf latte' from behind the counter. Welcome back to reality. She hastily grabs it, gulps it and swishes it around, despite its burning temperature, to remove the taste of vomit from her mouth.

Act two scene one.

The workplace.

She throws herself into her task chair. There is something initially relaxing and comforting in the confines of her cubicle. A feeling of safety, of conformity. We're all the same here; there is nothing that sets us apart, except the occasional framed picture of family or friends on the desk. Or in her case, a small poster of a cartoon cat, holding onto a tree branch for dear life, the caption below reading, "Hang in There" in yellow, block letters.

Glance at the clock, 9:02. Yes, she is one of the very few who likes her days to drag, to go on forever and ever. She knows what she has to go home to, especially these days. An empty, dark and cavernous apartment filled with echoes and shadows and question marks, expensive vases and designer sheets. A leather couch to sit on alone, a queen size bed to sleep in alone, all the while trying to choose Column A or Column B, Door #1 or Door #2. Big money! Big money! No whammies! C'mon trip to Reno! And suddenly we're revisiting that fateful day. Kleenex in one hand, cordless phone in the other, glued to her right ear. Each sound from the receiver came like an unexpected siren in the middle of a calm, quiet night; unnerving and almost painful, where it feels like your skeleton jumps inside your skin. Her mouth couldn't close, her eyes couldn't focus. She stared at what might have been the sink, at the strip of plastic that had been dropped inside it, at the two blue stripes that had appeared on said strip of plastic. "Get rid of it." he grumbled; as though it were an old pair of shoes that were falling apart or a loaf of bread past its expiration date. He had said it matter-of-factly. His voice was cold and detached, he was an old pro. She had to concentrate to breathe.

Get rid of it.

So she said what any other self-respecting, professional female of the new millennium would say in these circumstances: "Okay."

"I'll send you a check." And with a click and a dial tone, he was gone. Was it really that easy for men these days? With a flick of the wrist, the person on the other end of the line was gone, along with any responsibility they might have had for the life that might be growing inside that person. A life that the man had donated part of himself to create. But could it be considered life yet?

Hang in there.

It was her office telephone ringing that snapped her back into reality, suddenly

and urgently. But she was glad to be back from that horrible place. Although she was really just trading one for the other. 9:45 am. Where had the time gone? Her grip on the receiver the same as her grip on her new reality: sweaty, shaky, reluctant. She was doing everything for two now...hell, she could barely do anything for one. Moms were strong, sure, omniscient and omnipresent. She was definitely not mom material. There was just no way she could be mom material. She was too young, too selfish, too weak. Most moms, it seemed, always appeared to know everything, to have a handle on every little thing. Not her mom, of course, but most moms she met. "Where are my shoes, Mom?" "Oh, they're downstairs in the den behind the curtain and under your backpack." Most moms could almost give a latitude and longitude. How could she do that? She can't even balance her own checkbook.

A baby now would mean giving up nights alone watching television and drinking Pinot Noir. A baby now would mean headaches, backaches, diaper bags and maternity leave. A baby now would mean covering up all electrical sockets and rejoicing after bowel movements. A baby, well, that's a life sentence. She's just not cut out for this, right? There must have been some kind of miscommunication within the universe. It's been a mistake; a great, big, cosmic mistake. A baby has been placed into her womb by accident...she's just a temporary incubator. She'll just make a few phone calls and this whole fiasco will be put to rest once and for all. Then they'll all have a good laugh about it over brunch or cocktails.

Phew. Much better. 11:14 am. Whoops! Tsk tsk. Back to work!

Act two scene two.

The bus...again.

Despite her efforts, the workday just flies by and now, 'tis just a fond memory. Slowly she walks to the bus stop and savors the time alone, but not completely alone as she is in her apartment. This is the kind of alone where you are surrounded by people, but not the kind of 'surrounded by people' that takes place on the bus. There's no indecent contact here, no risk of infection, just a quiet bustle. She feels her calmest at these times. All this movement, there's no time to think or question or worry. Just movement.

Back on the bus she decides to focus her attention on something new and positive. She's tired of agonizing over these recent events. She needs a break. She relaxes her muscles a little and allows the movement of the bus to sway her body back and forth ever so slightly. She forces a facial expression that just might be able to be perceived as a grin. This isn't half bad. Maybe she's just too uptight most of the time. She decides to really go out on a limb and

check out some of the other passengers. What the heck, she's feeling wild today. She sees an old woman with what appears to be a plastic bag covering her sparse, salt and pepper hair. She's got a couple grocery bags and a frowny face. Her knee high hosiery is rolled down almost to her ankles, and not on purpose. They must be just as tired as she.

There's a young lady with a maroon backpack, fishnet stockings and jet black hair. It can't be her natural color, she's far too pale. She has a ring in her eyebrow and a frowny face. What's with these people and their frowny faces? She's liking this change of pace. She scans the bus and spots a good looking guy, maybe late teens, early twenties. Longer, sandy blond hair, but not too long where it looks unkempt. He has piercing green eyes, a square jaw and a messenger bag. He's facing her direction but looking intently out the window. She feels instantly attracted to him. Is it his rugged good looks? The idea that there may be a soft, romantic side to contrast his robust, hyper-masculine appearance? Or maybe she's just desperately lonely. She looks at his white t-shirt and ripped blue jeans and back again at his face and lips, which were now curled in a smile. He had seen her drooling over him. This is the very reason she keeps her eyes to herself on public transportation!

Lucky for her, the next stop was his and she watched, relieved as he turned and made his way to the exit. He had something written on the back of his shirt. It was hard to make out from her vantage point, but she shifted a little and squinted a lot and finally was able to see it. The good looking man's t-shirt read: CHOOSE THIS DAY in big, bright red capital letters. She read it; sat back in her seat and ruminated for a bit before she felt the familiar urge to be sick. It took all her strength to fight off the wave of nausea that hit her as though it were an anvil and she was Wile E. Coyote. It was all she could do to sit and watch helplessly as the road runner laughed and dashed away in a cloud of dust; never to be bested, never to be caught.

Act three scene one.

The Apartment.

She drags her feet, walking as slowly as she can back home. It's one of the saddest parts of her day. She spends the precious hours of the morning and early afternoon as an apparition; disappearing into the routine of the everyday, among the throngs of conformity and consistency. Just another speck of paint in an impressionistic work of art, another extra in the big budget action film that is life nowadays. She plays her role, recites what little (if any) lines she may have, plays her role, recites what little (if any) lines she may have, move this way, make this face, and cut! But at home, well, that's another story. No

director shouting instructions, no cameras rolling. Just her. Her alone with her thoughts, fears and skeletons in every closet. Speaking of closets, she's gotta get those things cleaned out once and for all...

She drops her stuff by the door and removes her shoes. She makes her way to the couch in the living room. She sits and stares blankly for a while, her mind completely empty for a few cherished moments until she begins to recount the events of her day. She reluctantly remembers the young man from the bus - what his shirt read - and found herself resenting him, the nerve of him. Who is he to tell her what to do? He doesn't know her, he doesn't know her situation. Really, how does one go about making a choice? It's not that simple. Not just this one, this choice that consumes every part of her, every minute of her days, but any choice at all. What's for breakfast? Which color socks? Which route to work? Shaken or stirred? Every decision, even the tiniest and seemingly most frivolous can dramatically change lives. What unbelievable pressure. Every day, tragedies occur because Phil chose to leave the house at 8:02 as opposed to 8:04. So why must this choice be different? How in the hell can we classify this choice as life or death, when in actuality, each and every decision, conscious or subconscious, can ultimately lead to a life or death situation. Each can make or break. The unfairness of it all just knocked the wind right out of her, as though God himself just upped her in the guts. Life...it used to have promise and meaning. Now it was just an empty piñata. And somebody made damn sure to beat the living hell out of that piñata. Once its contents were spilled, its dignity and will to survive crushed unmercifully and unrecognizable, the culprit left it for dead and rejoined the rest of the party guests a hero. The room is suddenly spinning and getting brighter. Couches, armoires and end tables are being replaced by guests in party hats, children and adults alike. Scented votives and pillars are being replaced by birthday candles on a big yellow cake with white frosting, 'Happy Birthday' written in cursive, purple frosting. Most kids had their names written on their cakes in big letters, but not her. It was cheaper that way. She can hear kids laughing and playing together, moms talking amongst themselves in hushed tones and despite her tender age, she knew it was about her. Their exchange peppered with tsk tsk and other such motherly disapproving euphemisms. She also heard her mom calling for her to come blow out the candles in her angry voice; wax was dripping onto the frosting, dammit. She was huddled behind the couch, hugging her knees, wiping her tears and her nose on her purple party dress and she was not about to come out, cake or no cake. Earlier while playing with the other children, an 'expensive' vase fell and broke on the cheap vinyl flooring. Her mother had a conniption in front of all the guests, in her usual neurotic fash-

ion. She would spout off things that her child would not understand, being a child and all. But one word rang loud and clear, even in her tiny, naïve ears: mistake. She had heard it pass through her mother's lips enough to know the meaning behind it. It was a mistake having her, or it was a mistake to bring her here, she should have left her with her deadbeat loser of a father. She heard it enough that rarely did it bother her, and never did it bring her to tears like this. But now, all her friends knew, despite her unremitting attempts to hide it, her Mommy didn't even want her. She wanted just to melt away into nothingness, like the candles atop her birthday cake. She tried and tried, but to no avail. In the meantime, cake was served, eaten hastily and guests hurried out the door to escape the tragic awkwardness that was the relationship between this odd mother and her unfortunate daughter.

Act three scene two.

The Apartment still, but later on.

Her eyes were closed so firmly that her head was pounding. All these ridiculous flashbacks can be hazardous to one's health. She unclenches her fists and tries to relax her muscles. Shake it off, baby. Let's get back in the ring and fight the good fight.

Pulling her hair back into a ponytail she stumbles her way into the kitchen, so clean it's almost sterile. That's how she likes all aspects of her life, antiseptic, uncontaminated, anodyne. Funny how sterility is her thing and here she is as fertile as Mesopotamia. Fucking irony.

Mechanically she heads for the liquor cabinet. At stressful times like this, hell, at anytime at all, a bottle (or two or three) of wine would calm her nerves and quiet all the shouting going on in her brain. Some have called that alcoholism. Bah, humbug! The entire population of the world is on Prozac or Cipro or Benzodiazepine or something. She just goes the over-the-counter route. As she grabs for the corkscrew, a smile slowly spreads over her face as she remembers she'd be drinking for two now. Alcoholics prefer to drink alone. She'll just put water in her wine glass. As she sips her tepid water, imagining it's a long, tannic Cabernet, she has a quick daydream of a belly out to there, feeling a kick and a contraction, water breaking, an hysteric rush to the hospital, giving birth to a bouncing baby something or other...and then what? Once it's born, that child will just be lost to her one way or another; one more item on the menu swallowed up by an insatiable world. It's like spending so long meticulously preparing a delicious dessert only to have the guests devour it all before you could even have a taste of your masterpiece. Your blood, sweat and tears went into the making of that dessert and now it is no more,

amongst the swollen bellies of the greedy houseguests. Is that what it is like to have a child? Is that why her mother took no time to nurture her? To love her? To coddle her? The fear of this world stealing her away. Separation anxiety. It's hard to miss what you never really cared about. Pure genius.

Although she's spent the better part of her adolescent and adult years trying hard to repress memories from all those years ago; every once in a while one of these memories will struggle against the current, like a determined salmon, and find its way to her consciousness. At times like these, on quiet nights alone, the burdens of this world don't weigh so heavily upon her shoulders, and worries and fears aren't whirling dervishes in her mind. Although these times are few and far between, they still are. At times like these, if she tries and tries and concentrates real hard, she can remember, ever so faintly, a fond memory from a lonely place some call childhood. She was small, so small that memories from this time aren't clear images, just smells and feelings, maybe colors here and there. She can't see the face, but she can feel the arms holding her, rocking her to sleep. She can smell the sweet smell that was her grandmother, like cinnamon and apples and arthritis cream. She can hear a warm voice, but she doesn't understand the words that are spoken. She feels safe and happy. A feeling so rare, so extraordinary for her but yet so easy to sink into, to lose herself in. Growing up she would remember this sensation and treasure it. She got older and older and it faded further and further until it was something to be searched for. Hard to find, maybe, but certainly not gone for good. She would remember it tonight, swirl it around, enjoy it and dissect it the way she would a brand new wine. Picking apart its bouquet, its flavors, appreciating them independently and then how they come together to form a final product. Wines, like people, generally improve with age. Her situation certainly had.

Act three scene three.

Bedtime.

All these thoughts and memories and feelings were culminating into one big headache. No alcohol and no cigarettes certainly weren't helping the situation. Glance at the clock: 11:10 pm. She'd better turn in soon or she'd be dead tired in the morning.

She splashed some water on her face and quickly brushed her teeth, anxious to crawl into her bed; though she didn't expect to fall asleep very quickly. She tucked her pillow between her shoulder and her head and covered herself with her down comforter. It wasn't doing its job, she certainly didn't feel comforted. She slowly drifted into a troubled sleep, a sleep riddled with tosses and turns. Dull nightmares and vivid dreams interspersed throughout. In one

of these nightmares she is running away from her home as fast as she possibly can. In front of her clear, blue sky, but behind her a war zone. Bombs are exploding and flames are spreading and she knows her whole family is back there, consumed in the horror, but still she keeps running.

And in another, she's in a vast expanse of blue sky, crystal clear as far as the eye can see. She is flying amongst a family of large, beautiful, majestic birds, their bodies sprinkled with unimaginable, unreal colors. A compelling feeling of tranquility accompanies them on their flight. Soon, the terrain below them changes from earth to shore to ocean and the family finds themselves encapsulated in twinkly blue. As they continue to fly further and further away from dry land, she begins to feel nervous. Birds should keep close to the shore, they're just asking for trouble otherwise. Further and further they go and she starts to become frantic, her wings are feeling weaker. She looks around and notices the rest of the birds remain calm and don't even glance in her direction. While she falls to the ocean, the once bright blue sky darkens, and as the tip of her wing disappears into the abyss, the rest of the birds turn around and head back home.

Act four scene one.

The next day.

Character enters from stage right. Pensive, thoughtful. Detached from her body, she moves with purpose. Each step has been carefully planned as she maneuvers through the masses. She lays a hand on her abdomen and looks skyward. She darts off to the bus stop.

And before she can come to a decision, she's back behind the curtain. The rest of the birds turn around and head back home.

Adrian Amaretto

By: Miles Pfefferle

A few tables away a divorced mother eats with her adolescent son. I can see the stress in her skin by the way she sits with that tension seizing the wrinkles on her face. Her skin around her body is tightened, as if a vice is mounted on her back and is slowly turning, slowly constricting the flesh, not as soft and lovingly smooth as it used to be. It's been hardened by pain, worn by divorce. I can tell by the way she dresses now she's not seeing anyone, and that sometimes she cries when the day slows down and she's by herself at night. Maybe the tears play folly until she's in her car. Her repressed tears might just be waiting to fall into the coffee that I seem to be brooding over like a God. Maybe they wait until she's in her nightgown and sitting in bed with a good book. She doesn't cry for one specific reason, but for her son, for what her family used to be, for her life. All she really wants is to know her son, but he's more like a boy who just happens to be sitting at the same table as her in a checkerboard Steak 'N Shake on a checkerboard Friday night. They continue to sit there in between long bouts of awkward silence as a small puddle of conversation drips upon their table from a coffee-colored ceiling tile. I bet they just came from the movies.

A waitress who looks like she's part of a museum exhibit refills my coffee and I'm transfixed on the infinite darkness of my caffeine-water. The small bubbles pop quickly in the weight of this heavy air that's been squeezing the skin on my sleeves all night.

My thoughts sink toward the puddles that the treads of Converse and worn down souls are sure to have brought in. I'm invisibly sitting next to her. Sure, take the kid to the movies and then for a late bite to eat. Is your bonding time with your son for the week going as well as you had planned? Don't get me wrong. I'm not mocking you. I'm hurting for you. I'm hurting with you. All you want is connection. Don't worry, one day he will too.

I ignore the girl sitting across from me as she speaks and I watch the delicate clouds of silky whiteness breach their way to the top of the mug. It's diner coffee, so even the sugar is crap, but at least the mugs are classy and make me feel like a detective. They always brew it too hot, though. I prefer it near room temperature or slightly warm. I haven't checked if I need a refill yet. I'm far too distracted. I can see her anxious breath slowly and steadily

streaming out as pressurized as she is. She's the mother that loves him so much and exemplifies love without ever having to know what love is. She doesn't want to lose him. She doesn't want him to hurt, but she can tell by his silence that she doesn't even know this boy, doesn't know how he hurts, doesn't know quite how to get through to him, not anymore. She wants him to really know she loves him and cares for him no matter what. She'll keep trying. She'll take the opportunities. Things always change, though. Maybe he'll get in trouble at school or with the cops. Or he'll start habitually smoking pot to put a glossy coat on the void within him where his parents used to be, where family used to be, where growing up still had a chance. Maybe he'll get depressed or even suicidal. Maybe he'll never even know why. Then he'll go on to live with dad, perhaps mom. He might not ever remember tonight. He might not ever care. One day he could wish that tonight never happened, that she would never have tried to love him. More likely than anything his parents will be replaced by the Internet and a rusted television. Together they will teach him all they know about all the things his parents were supposed to teach him about life, love, hate, sex, growing up, responsibility, religion, etc. I don't know where they're going now, but I hope it's home.

Red

By: Dave Halvax

Ugh. I feel like shit.

This headache is the product of one of my many habits, but I can't seem to remember to which I owe the compliment. It's been three days since I've seen the world without this haze. Acidic glare everywhere. Agony. There's no other word that can better describe my current disposition.

My eyes continue to stare down at my hands, but I know she's still here. She's sitting across the table from me. It's a classy joint; waiters in tuxedos and greasy hair.

The Red is everywhere.

Everywhere.

Though, I'll admit, the walls beside me are a keen shade of maroon (but I've got my eye on you), and the table before me is covered in white. Regardless, save those few exceptions, everything has been lost to Red. All of it. Red.

I glance at the drink in my hand. The crimson liquid tastes awful, but at least I taste it. I haven't completely lost myself yet. I think.

Oh, how I've struggled with the notion:

If "I think therefore I am" is as solid a base as any, how much water could it hold? I've interrogated the phrase in my mind for days, all to no avail. It's not talkin' much.

But what does it even mean? Can I think myself out of existence? And what exactly is the significance of the verb, "to be?" How can one be, or not be? When you think about it, isn't it all simply perspective? And, if "you" are nothing more than the bundle that is "your" thoughts and inclinations, what then of your surroundings?

Am I the only one to exist then?

But no, I'm being selfish.

Plus, that doesn't make any sense.

Oh, here it comes. Frustration. It rides down my fingers, and suddenly, I find myself gripping the white tablecloth for dear life. After all, it is the last thing I can see that isn't Red. But, I mean; I guess I could try my luck with the walls. If I really had to.

Her mouth is open, moving. Oh, how I used to love those lips. But

no, those feelings, the warm sensations in my chest, have long since gone. Singed, it seems, by the satanic Red. She is speaking, somewhere, but not here. Here, her mouth moves, and nothing more. I cannot hear her words, all I can hear is the choir. Funny. I didn't know until right now that there were two choirs.

She going, going, gone. Too much Red now; there's no saving her. Well, I mean to say, I can no longer save her, for myself. I'm truly alone now.

My heart is beating faster and faster. Sweat trickles down my forehead. I see the pinkish drops fall past my eyes; it's like a horrific waterfall.

Oh no.

It's getting to me.

Worse. It's all over the table.

No, No, No!

I've gone, but worse still,

I've taken someone with me.

Trans Am

By: Ryan Catherwood

There is something wrong with it. Once I'm out on the open road, kicking up to speeds that would land me behind bars in the small towns to which the car is usually confined, it becomes obvious that there is something wrong with my Trans Am. Anyone would notice it now, the rumbling and the noises and the overheating. I turn the radio on so I don't have to hear the sounds coming from the engine. Then I turn it off because I'm afraid of what I'm not hearing. I'm afraid it's getting worse instead of getting better. It should be getting better, finally stretching its legs out here, but it isn't. It's getting worse, and the scariest part about it is that if it breaks down now, there's no one for miles and miles to ask for help. Even if there were anyone, I'd probably be too afraid to ask.

It's the middle of the night and I'm rolling over acres upon acres of identical farmlands. In between the occasional farm house and barn, even the land itself seems lonely. I haven't seen another car on the road in almost an hour, which isn't surprising. With the land as flat as it is and on such a clear night, the horizon seems impossibly distant and reminds you just how big the world is. At this hour, how many people could possibly be driving around? In a world so big, there's plenty of room for everyone to be alone.

I'm not on a highway, but an equivalent degree of back road hypnosis is setting in. Despite the lack of alliteration in the term, it is just as effective at nearly putting me to sleep. I haven't slept in days and I'm exhausted. I'm forgetting to smoke the lit cigarette in my hand. I'm yawning. When I yawn, I let out a groan and start mumbling gibberish to myself just to keep awake.

"Just to keep awake while I'm driving. Driving my Trans Am.

"Trans Am.

"Trans I am.

"I am trans.

"I do not like you, trans I am."

I stop talking because I can't really stand to hear it anymore. I hate my voice more than anything else. I guess I hate it because almost anything else that I don't like can be changed. My voice can't. Every time I speak, strangers' eyes suddenly find me, faces momentarily contort, all of them curious and surprised and terrified. After seeing that look, I barely even breathe much less

Speak again. When I do speak again, I speak quietly.

I take a deep drag from my cigarette and then poke it through the cracked open window to let ash drift off into the night. A gray misdirected clump falls onto the black fabric of my skirt and I try to brush it off lightly so it won't leave a mark. But it will. Even though there's no one in the car – or for that matter anywhere around the car for miles and miles – and thus obviously no one to see me, I take a moment to smooth out the wrinkles in the skirt and straighten my red tank top. It's cold, goose bumps rising all over my arms, so I pull on my leather jacket.

When I discard the finished cigarette, I have nothing else to do with my attention but focus it on the dashboard. The heat gauge with the needle drifting dangerously high. The speedometer likewise. The fuel gauge, unfortunately, rebels against this trend. The car is as tired as I am. There's almost no gas left in the tank and I don't have much money to buy more. The money I have, I wish I could spend on food, but I can't. The car needs gas. The tank wasn't full when I left, but it was much closer to being full.

A little further to the right is the check engine light glowing a pale red. This doesn't concern me nearly as much as the fuel situation. It doesn't concern me at all by now. The check engine light has always been on. I've never driven the Trans Am without the check engine light on. I suppose, if I had the money, I'd take it to a mechanic. But I don't, so I try to ignore it. The car runs, however poorly, and the check engine light isn't telling me anything I don't already know, which is simply that something indefinable, but nonetheless real, is wrong with the car.

I suppose I'll never know for certain when the problem started. I have to concede that there's the chance that whatever is wrong with the car really only began the moment I started driving it. That from the beginning, I had made some terrible error that I have continued to make every time I sit behind the steering wheel. But I don't think that's true. More likely, maybe, is that the car has been mistreated by a previous owner, before I could control the circumstances in which the car was driven and stored. Somehow, though, I don't think that's true either.

I have a strange suspicion, impossible to prove, that the check engine light has been lit since the car first rolled off of the assembly line. Whatever faults or defects this car has have been with it since its construction. Since its conception. An original sin waiting for a baptism that never came.

Just like people, dating all the way back to Adam and Eve. Adam was the first human being, if the Christians are right. Though Eve was the first to sin and was the progenitor of the Fall, didn't the original sin have to be present in

Adam? Eve grew from Adam's rib; woman was born out of the body of man. She was inside him all along. She and whatever sin and discord came with her. I wonder sometimes if Adam ever sat where no one would hear him and cried and lamented that Eve existed at all, wishing she had not been present in him at his creation. I think that some nights, alone in his bed and dreaming of a lost paradise, he did. Other nights, though, I think he must have simply lay silent in wonder and awe at the miracle of her. That she had come from him. Woman born out of man.

I wonder if miracles ever happen anymore.

My mind is wandering too much and I'm not paying enough attention to the road. I try to snap out of it and focus on the twists and turns of the line of pavement dividing corn and wheat. I do my best to put all my attention on what should be the relatively simple matter of getting from one place to another. Traveling, though, is rarely as simple as it seems.

I once read a story about the state of modern civilization, encapsulated in the symbol of a single group of very strange people. In the story, to travel from one place to another symbolized the advancement from one stage of civilization to the next. It seemed profound to me at the time, but it probably wasn't.

I glance over to a book on my passenger seat – a collection of American Short Stories. There are several bookmarks in it and I know that one of them rests directly at the start of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." I giggle for a moment; I've heard that when Heimngway was a child, his mother had him wear dresses.

"Hills Like White Elephants" is brief and lacks almost any plot and the ending is rather vague. Frankly, I don't like it. Nevertheless, it earns a bookmark. According to a teacher I had long ago – I can't remember her name – when the story was first published in the early twentieth century, it didn't get much attention. It wasn't until many years later when someone finally looked at it and said that it was in fact a story about a young couple deciding whether to get an abortion that everyone took notice. Strange things happen.

Strange noises get my heart beating faster. The engine is protesting against the speed I want out of it. All the driving tonight has been hard on it, and it wants to quit on me. Maybe this whole trip was a bad idea, but I had to make it. I should have expected that the car's condition would get a lot worse on the way. Maybe I did and that just didn't stop me.

The car's condition has never been good, obviously. The funny thing was that no one ever seemed to notice it but me. To anyone else who rode in it with me, it seemed the car actually ran quite well. The check engine light was near the edge of the display, conveniently and (it sometimes seemed) almost

decidedly hidden from the passenger and indistinguishable from the other lights on the dash to anyone sitting in the back seat. The little rumbles that occurred were only detectable to the person whose foot was on the gas pedal and whose hands were on the steering wheel. The sounds, everyone told me, were perfectly normal. But they weren't. I always knew something was wrong.

If anyone were in the car with me now, they would agree. Now, it would be impossible to deny that there was something wrong. The trip had simply made it big and noticeable, but it was always there and, even before the trip, it was always getting worse. It was just getting worse slowly and unnoticeably while I drove it around my home town. I can only hope and pray that when I get to where I'm going, I can finally stop and turn the engine off and the little warning light will go out and never light up again.

That might be too much to ask.

With a small stroke of luck, I see in the distance the lights of a gas station. I pray that there's a coffee machine, as the Trans Am and I both need fuel. I pull over and up to a pump, eagerly stepping out of the car and stretching my legs. The inherent pleasure of stretching your legs after hours and hours of driving is slightly diminished by high heeled boots, but it still feels good. I brush my hair back from my face and step inside, my heels clicking and clacking on the linoleum. The attendant at the counter looks up and gives me a nod of greeting. I fill the largest size of the Styrofoam cups with coffee and walk to the counter. The attendant's name tag says Onion.

I put a twenty dollar bill down next to the register and then pull out exact change for the coffee. I don't say a word. I simply smile politely, and, just as politely, Onion tells me the pump is ready. I walk outside into the chilly night air and in silence, I pump my gas. Halfway done, I'm already dreading finishing, dreading getting back into the car. I'm looking in both directions on the dark and empty road and I'm afraid to get back on it. I've been driving too long to go back, but I don't know if I can make it the rest of the way.

I finish pumping and replace the nozzle, and then I lean back on my car and for a long time I don't move. Eventually, the door to the gas station opens and Onion steps outside, looking at me. I'm afraid for a moment. I'm not sure if it's just me or if a lot of women feel this way, but there's a strange sense of vulnerability to wearing a skirt. Something about having nothing between my legs but nylon makes me feel helpless. Despite that my car is right here and I could be gone in a fraction of the time it would take the attendant to cover the distance between us, I feel as if out here, where there's no one to see, I am alone and Onion could do anything to me and I would never be able to stop it.

Onion doesn't do anything, though, except sit down on a bench just outside the door and light a cigarette. Suddenly, I dread the attendant much less than I dread the road, and I know I can't simply stand here. So, drawing a cigarette from my purse and lighting it with the little purple Bic I bought before I left, I make my way back toward the building and sit down on the bench.

Neither of us says anything for quite a while. We simply sit and smoke in a perfect silence. In this moment, I feel the strangest thing. As scared as I was just seconds ago, I now want to talk to Onion. I don't even care about my voice. I want to tell this gas station attendant everything. Suddenly, the smoke starts to take on that strange and unpleasant taste that it sometimes does when I'm crying or when I'm about to cry. I smoke it anyway, unaware in this moment of how my face must look. My cigarette is about half gone when finally the silence is broken.

"You okay, honey?" Onion asks. "You don't look so good. I mean... you know what I mean."

"I'm not okay," I tell the attendant. When the whole world is just two people, there's no point in dishonesty anymore. I'm looking off at the road when I say it so that if that look of shock and surprise is on Onion's face, I won't see it. Somehow, though, I don't think it is.

"What's wrong, darlin'?" Onion asks. "It's okay, you can tell me."

"I..." I begin, not knowing how to finish. Finally, I simply admit in barely a whisper, "I don't have any idea where I'm driving to."

Onion makes a thoughtful sound. "Well... How'd you get here, then?"

"I don't know," I say. "I've sort of always known I had to go, it just wasn't until tonight that I worked up the courage to do it."

"If you've always known," Onion starts, "it sounds to me like you know where you need to go."

"I guess I do," I say.

"So what's wrong?"

Quietly, I tell this stranger, "It isn't that I don't know where I'm going. I know where I'm going... I just don't know if anyone will be around when I finally get there."

Onion lets this sink in. We both do.

"Were there people around where you left?"

"Yeah. Lots of them," I say. "My family."

"Then I guess there's just two things you can do," Onion says. "You can go back where you came from and back to all those people. Or, you can keep going, and wherever you get to, if they really love you, they'll be right

there with you.”

I finish my cigarette and stub it out in the ash tray.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess so.” I’m not exactly filled with confidence by Onion’s words, but somehow, they at least force me into the understanding that I have to get back on the road and go one direction or another. Sitting and waiting won’t accomplish anything.

So I stand and walk back to the Trans Am. Even after I get back in and start the car and the check engine light comes to life again, still I sit for a long while and think. I think about what Onion said, and I think about the things I know.

If they really love me, they’ll be there with me.

That would be a miracle.

I wonder if miracles ever happen anymore.

That might be too much to ask.

Sam Hall

By: Jacob Zuniga

The first rule of The Man is that you do not think. You can never think. Individual thought only interferes with The Job, and there is no crime more terrible than interfering with The Job.

Sam never thought. He cared for his job more than anything else in the world, felt that without it he would be meaningless, and so he followed The Man's laws as if they were the laws of God himself. Thou shalt not think. Thou shalt not ask questions. Thou shalt not stray from the norm.

His arms did not ache as he stacked the boxes, nor did his body feel the wear of his work. He had been at The Job so long that it had become an ingredient of his substance, and the body did not tire with the mundane and ordinary. He stocked shelves without boredom, unloaded trucks without turmoil, stacked boxes without ache. He was living out his life as millions around him did each and every day. He went to work, he went home. It was the story of his life.

The Shop was located off Highway 27, which ran straight through downtown Winifred, Nebraska. It was a homegrown, home-operated grocery that was the dream of Sam's idol, Mr. Hughes. Mr. Hughes had built The Shop with his own two hands, as well as another of his businesses in town, Bill's, the local hardware store. Sam looked upon Mr. Hughes as most look upon a superstar; to Sam, there was nothing Mr. Hughes couldn't accomplish. Highly successful, highly talented, and a pristine member of the community, Mr. Hughes engulfed the entire spectrum of what Sam imagined it took to be a happy person. He had believed this when he applied to work for Mr. Hughes, had believed it when he dedicated his life to the well-being of the store, and still believed it now.

Now was The Pit, a small storage room behind the register. Sam was to unpackage the cigarettes and candy and arrange the animal and pop products by size and brand before Mr. Hughes returned. It wasn't a hard assignment, although Sam didn't mind hard assignments. He felt that the difficulty of his work only allowed him to show his true colors.

The first rule of The Man is that you do not think. Sam couldn't help himself with this one. He didn't ask questions when given a job, and always did the same thing every time, but felt that asking someone to not think was impossible. He would find himself stocking canned soup and wondering why

people from his country could invade a country oceans away and try to impress our own beliefs upon them. It didn't make sense, he thought. If somebody believes something, somebody else shouldn't kill them because of it. They were born into their belief, and don't know any better.

Sam didn't understand Vietnam. He didn't understand Johnson and Nixon, even though everybody was talking about them. He didn't understand Washington or Cuba or Ho Chi Min, but he found himself spending countless hours restocking the milk and eggs or unloading semi-trailers thinking about them. What he did understand was music. He understood Hank Williams and Johnny Cash very well. Sam could hear a song playing softly from a little transistor radio in the back on Tuesday and think about it for a whole week. He breathed music. It consumed his mind like nothing else could, and he broke the first rule of *The Man* with great pride. "What's wrong with expanding my own mind?" he asked himself.

Now, however, music was not on his brain. As he set the box of dog food down and headed for another, he glimpsed the open door leading to the counter. He couldn't help but take in her luxurious body, and it erased all other thoughts immediately from his mind. The protrusion of her hips through her slacks, the plump firmness of her buttocks stretching the fabric taut, the simple crease right below the cheek as she stood neatly packing products for customers. He realized he was staring before he could help himself, and hurriedly took another heavy box into his arms. This was why the first rule of *The Man* was you do not think. He had started thinking, had indulged his mind in unpure thoughts and desires, and it had forced the halting of *The Job*.

He worked fast, unpacking the boxes and removing the bags of food, but he couldn't help himself. When he cut the tape from the box, she danced in front of his mind's eye. When he carried the bag to its pile, she smiled curtly at him and winked. When he grabbed another box, her hands were trailing to the buttons of her blouse. He couldn't help but peek at her again and again as he worked. She held his attention with firm force, and while his body toiled, his mind dreamt. Her hands were trailing to the buttons of her blouse. He couldn't help but peek at her again and again as he worked. She held his attention with firm force, and while his body toiled, his mind dreamt.

He knew it was wrong when it happened, knew that he would regret it forever while it was going on, but still couldn't help himself. Just like he indulged himself in thinking while on *The Job*, he indulged himself this one pleasure of life. He had never known her intention when she cornered him after work one day, had never suspected her wanton sexual curiosity. And, apparently, he had underestimated his own urges. He had never looked upon

her that way, had never seen her for more than a co-worker, but with her in his arms, he saw her for what she truly was. She whispered in her ear that he was her best, her favorite, and had every single time after that initial confrontation. Her back would arch and spasm, her body convulse against his, and he would watch her unfold herself from her pleasure with such happiness because he had pleased her. She would stare into his eyes, kiss him, and tell him he was her best. Her favorite.

She whispered it in his head, and he shuddered. Thou shalt not think. He tried to push her out of his mind, and grabbed a bag too hard, ripping the top threading. He caught it before it fell and splattered food all over the floor, instead gently placing it off to one side. On his return trip, she was leaning on the counter, her backside even more apparent. He let himself fall into her devilish embrace, and continued on The Job.

His dream was simple to the common man, yet transcended all that Sam could fathom. No matter what his mind pondered, it always returned to this, his fantasy, his obsession. One day, after he had learned the secrets of success and happiness from Mr. Hughes, he would leave Winifred, Nebraska and embark on a great journey. He would travel the road, embrace the country just as Cash had done, and experience the great expressions of human experience. He would cry and grow and love and die, and upon his return, he would take her into his arms forever. They would live in happy peacefulness, and he would have the best of both worlds. He would own his own store, be his own boss, love his own woman. He was sure that Mr. Hughes would smile upon his years of hard work and dedication and gladly pass his shop and daughter on to his most faithful employee.

She screamed. He dropped the box, unsure if this interruption was in his head or reality. She was no longer by the doorway, and he reacted. With three terribly long strides he was at the doorway, jumping out of the Pit into the small space behind the counter. The glint of a revolver was waiting for him. "Don't move if you know what's good for you," one man said briskly, pointing his gun at Sam's chest.

Two men stood on the other side of the counter, one directly opposite Sam, one farther into the store with his gun aimed at Molly.

"Do what they say, Sam," Molly said quickly.

"Shut up!" the second man screamed, jabbing his gun towards Molly. Something new boiled in Sam, something he had never before experienced. He felt like lunging at the man, taking his gun, and ramming it into his eye socket before pulling the trigger. He had never before had such violent urges, and before he could act on impulse, his own gunman took charge.

"Where's the safe, kid?" he asked quickly.

In 1966, Mr. Hughes had gotten into a car accident, and the entire store was on edge. Nobody knew if he would be okay, or what the consequences would be on his health. It was the first time Sam could remember being under intense stress. No longer was his mind flooded with random thoughts or wonderings. He couldn't even enjoy music. All he could think about, day after day, was Mr. Hughes lying in bed about to die. Finally, in his intense despair, he studied. He memorized labels as he stocked detergent. He memorized the order the spices were arranged in. He mapped the entire store with his mind, all to escape reality.

His own gunman was a gruff man, middle-aged, donning a ragged flannel shirt and dirty jeans, with what appeared to be a day gray beard coming in hard. Molly's gunman was of the same age, similar appearance, although cold and steadfast. Sam saw the quiver of his own gunman's hand as he held his gun, saw his eyes dart between the two hostages and the door, saw the corners of his mouth twitch as he stood. Joe and The Killer.

"You can help us out or you can get a bullet in your brain," The Killer said loudly. The click of the hammer being cocked brought Sam back to life. They were robbers, thugs as Mr. Hughes called them, and he searched his mind for anything his boss may have said about the store being robbed.

"It...it's in the back," Molly sobbed. Sam glanced at her. She was quivering, her back pressed tight against the wall, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Well, you're gonna show me where it is, aren't ya?" the Killer said again, smiling.

He thought, his mind racing, his brain taking everything in. The clock read 2:13 P.M. The headline of the *Daily Chronicle* read School Board Meeting Tonight. The Killer was wearing dusty work boots. Joe was sweating. Mr. Hughes was standing in the backroom, sitting on the back bumper of a semi as Sam unloaded cartons of cereal.

"Never had to deal with theft," Mr. Hughes said, taking a swig from his coffee, "and I'm damn glad we haven't. Don't wanna have to punish some young brat for stealin' chewin' gum or anything like that."

"Yes, sir, that's true," Sam replied as he set down his crate on the concrete. "Don't know what I'd do, though, if we ever got robbed," Mr. Hughes continued. "Don't think I could let somebody just walk out of here with all my money."

"Understandable," Sam commented.

"What do you think?" Mr. Hughes asked. "Would you let some thug

"Damn right you wouldn't," Mr. Hughes laughed. "I'd chase the thugs out if I were around when it happened, and I'd hope that somebody in charge would do the same if I was out."

"Come on, move," The Killer said, pushing Molly towards Sam and the doorway to The Pit and the back office. Sam blinked, his mind and body switching from years ago back by the dock doors to this tight little space behind the counter, and he reacted. Molly stumbled toward him, The Killer walking behind the counter toward them. Sam caught her in mid air, swinging his body around as he did, his arm extending, his muscles taut and powerful. The Killer raised his gun to fire, but had been taken by surprise. Sam's arm swung fast through the air, hitting The Killer along the side of his face, smashing it into the wall beside him. His skull thumped dully against the wood, and he fell flat, bits of plaster stuck in his cheek.

"Don't move!" Joe shouted, stepping back from the counter and cocking his gun, which was again aimed at Sam. Molly was clutching his arm tightly, sobbing. The Killer was sprawled at his feet, unmoving, and energy Sam had never known was coursing through his body. It was better than after he pleased Molly, better than after he finished a really difficult job for Mr. Hughes.

"Don't fuckin' move," Joe said again, the gun wavering between Sam and Molly.

"What's all this noise?" a voice said from the sky, and Sam was relieved. Mr. Hughes appeared from The Pit in an instant, peering about with a smirk before finding Joe standing in front of him. His face went slack and his arms shot up in the air.

"Don't fucking move!" Joe shouted, quickly wiping the sweat from his eyes and swinging the gun between his three hostages.

"Take whatever you want," Mr. Hughes said calmly, "but please, leave everyone alone."

"Shut up!" Joe shouted, again wiping the sweat. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Look, mister..." Sam began.

"Sam, you stay out of this," Mr. Hughes interrupted.

It was a direct order, and he should have obeyed. Maybe it was the power he felt in his arms, or maybe it was the uniqueness of the situation, but Sam felt compelled to disobey.

"Mister, you don't wanna hurt nobody," Sam said quietly.

"Sam, shut up," Mr. Hughes said, more assertively.

"Come on, just leave us alone and you can walk right on out of here and nobody gets hurt," Sam finished. Joe blinked at him, his gun steady on Mr. Hughes. Sweat dripped from his face, and Sam could see it running through

his mind. He could see the papers naming him a hero, could see Mr. Hughes awarding him for his bravery, could see Molly's smiling in the dark and rewarding him for saving her life.

Again, a scream broke his daze and forced him back to reality. The Killer had his back against the counter, his arm wrapped tightly around Molly's neck, his gun lodged against her temple. Plaster and paint was stuck to his cheek, and bits of blood oozed from an open gash. Mr. Hughes hiccupped and stepped back. Sam stood stock still, unable to realize why he hadn't reacted when The Killer had jumped up and took his love hostage.

"Pete, you alright?" The Killer asked.

"Y-yeah," Joe stammered.

"Please..." Mr. Hughes began, but The Killer was already facing Sam, his face full of delight.

"I told you not to fuck with us, kid," he said, hiding behind Molly. Tears were rolling down her cheeks in fast succession. "But you couldn't listen, could you? Now how we gonna make this right, huh?"

"Please..." Mr. Hughes whispered, barely audible.

"Shut up!" Joe shouted again at him, pointing his gun at the owner. Mr. Hughes again raised his hands high in the air and hiccupped.

"Should I kill her for your outburst?" The Killer asked, and it happened. Molly sobbed. The Killer grinned. Sam lunged forward, his hands pushing past Molly's body, searching for The Killer's. The gunshot rang out loud and true. Blue smoke filled the small space, and Molly screamed. The smell of burnt rubber flared, of hot metal and blood, and it was over. The Killer was staring at Sam, his eyes wide and surprised, his mouth inches away from Sam's face so that Sam could smell the hot filth on his breath. The gun had fallen to the ground, and The Killer stood limp, held up against the counter by Sam's hands, which had tore through The Killer's chest and were grasping the edge of the counter. Sam pulled back his hands, and the body fell quickly to the floor, hard and still, two large holes in the chest pumping blood quickly onto the floor.

Joe stood rooted to the spot, his face unbelieving, his body unmoving, the gun at his side. Sam looked at him, and then to Mr. Hughes for guidance. His boss was fixed with the same horror that had stung Joe. Sam couldn't understand. He looked down at the bleeding corpse at his feet, at the blood-stained counter, at the trembling Molly curled up on the floor crying. All stared at him with a look of utter disgust and horror.

"Sam, now, just wait a minute," Mr. Hughes began.

"What the hell is he?" Joe screamed, re-aiming his gun at Sam.

“Just calm down,” Mr. Hughes said loudly, and Joe fired at Sam.

The bullet hit his chest, tore neatly through his button shirt and flesh, and he felt no pain. He stared down at his own chest, at the hole in his shirt, stared in disbelief at his own body just as Joe did. Where blood, bone and flesh should have seeped, a thin wire protruded. Sam took his shirt in his hands and ripped it off with ease. There was a gaping hole in his chest, several inches in diameter, with shards of metal and bits of wire protruding from his flesh.

“What the fuck?” Joe screamed, backing away from Sam, his gun quivering in his hand.

“Just calm the hell down!” Mr. Hughes shouted, and Joe fired again. This time, the bullet hit Sam’s shoulder, and he heard the familiar clink as metal hit metal. Sam jumped the counter faster than humanly possible, his fist smashing into Peter Floybeck’s face before he had even lowered his gun. Pete’s nose was pushed straight back into his brain; the force of the punch lifted him off his feet and left Sam’s knuckles imprinted on what had been a human face. He landed with his head in the door, the glass shattering around his bloody skull.

Sam stood over his kill, staring down at his bloodstained hands when Mr. Hughes managed to jump the counter and onto his back. Sam, in reaction, threw him off and onto the ground. He pushed himself away quickly, and Sam saw the fear in his eyes.

“What is this?” Sam demanded, holding his hands out for all to see. “Wh-why don’t I bleed?”

“Well, uh...we’re all like that,” Mr. Hughes began.

“Daddy!” Molly exclaimed, appearing from behind the counter. “The least we can do is tell him the truth. He won’t remember anyways.”

“What truth?” Sam exclaimed.

Mr. Hughes glanced at the dead body lying in his doorway, and sighed. “Sam, you’re not like the rest of us,” he said solemnly, returning to his feet. Sam stood frozen, unable to understand. “You’re not made like the rest of us.”

“What?”

“Sam,” Molly said quietly, reaching for his hand, and then dropping her own.

“You’re not human,” Mr. Hughes said, looking Sam square in the eye. “That’s why you don’t feel pain. That’s why you could take a bullet like that. You’re a machine, Sam.”

“No. No, it can’t be,” Sam said quickly, the world spinning before him.

Blood was spilling out onto the floor around Joe. Molly was searching him, studying him, her eyes wondering over his face.

“But it is, Sam.”

It can't be," he shouted, backing away from them both. "I work here. I have a home, a...I have memories."

"Do you?" Mr. Hughes asked. "How can you tell?"

"Sam..." Molly whispered, her lips trembling.

"Sure, you work here at The Shop because we own you. But do you really go home at night? Do you have a home you live in?"

"I had friends in high school, people I talk to that I grew up with..."

"Memories that were programmed into you for authentication," Mr. Hughes finished. "You work here for me during the day, and at night we shut you down and leave you here until the next day."

"No, it can't be."

"You do the same thing every night. You go to the bathroom. You eat a can of soup and drink a glass of water. You read a different chapter of the same book, and then you go to bed. Why is it always the same, Sam?"

"Please, don't let it be true."

"Fact is, you're just another part of this store working for me. You're not human. You don't do human things. You can't, because I own you."

"No!" Sam shouted. "I think, I dream. I love," he said, stopping to stare at Molly. He could see she was in pain, could see the turmoil in her eyes.

"Do you think I want my daughter tramping around with God knows who?"

Mr. Hughes asked, stepping behind Molly and placing his hands on her shoulders. "It cost me plenty extra to make you fit for intimacy, but a father's mind at ease is well worth the money."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, wet tears splattering her shirt.

"No. No, no, no. I don't believe it," Sam said, backing away until his butt hit the counter.

"There's nothing to believe," Mr. Hughes said, "because it's the truth. I own you; you are mine. You saved my store today, and I thank you, but for our safety and the well-being of this store, you'll never remember that you did."

"Please," Sam whispered, wanting badly to feel as Molly did, wanting badly to fall to the ground as dead as the men he had killed.

"Goodnight, Sam. I'll see you tomorrow."

.....

The first rule of The Man is that you do not think.

Usually, it had been a simple rule. The Job always came first, no matter what, and Samuel was fine with that. As long as he could please Mr. Hughes, he was happy.

Still, when one was in the backroom dock unpacking droid fuel, it was

hard not to think. Lift, move, set down soon became too much for the brain to handle, and Samuel quickly found his mind on the road. Sometimes he'd ponder politics. He didn't understand the craze for space property. Sure, people were moving there in groves, but what was the point. He was content with his job at the store, with his life as it was.

The commercial broke, and the voice sang out from the tiny speaker as if it were an angel calling from heaven. Mr. Hughes was a fan of classical music, and couldn't resist the old turn-of-the-century rock music. "A hundred years old and still kicking," he would often joke. He would sit in his office mulling over papers, and as Samuel worked in the back, he would indulge his brain upon the wisdom of a past generations.

The Smashing Pumpkins passed unto him the wisdom of man. He was a worker at a local grocery store, and although he was dedicated to his job, the classic band only fueled his great dream. One day, he would leave his place. Mr. Hughes would thank him for his years of hard work, and Samuel would leave the only place he had ever known and set his life in the hands of God. Maybe he'd go to space, or maybe he'd visit the ruins of California. He heard that one could stand on the coast of Nevada and still see the skyscrapers of the ancient Metropolis sticking out from the ocean. He would let himself fall into the world, let this soul experience the raw emotion that the old singers had spoken to him about, and then return to live out his life. Despite all he had here, the Pumpkins had told him the truth of the world, and he found it impossible to resist thinking about his dream. Despite all his happiness with his current lifestyle, he was still a rat in a cage.

"Samuel, you back here?"

"Yeah, over here," he said, setting the drum down with a thud.

"Oh, there you are," she said, appearing from behind the stack of drums and boxes. Her uniform fit her fit physique tightly, and it made him leap with wanton pleasure. "Do you think you can restock grocery when you're done here?" she asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I think I can," he replied, rocking on the balls of his feet.

"Good," she said, stepping close to him and placing her hands on his hips.

"Then, maybe before we pack up we can, I don't know, see what's left to do back here," she said, licking his neck softly. He shuddered, and then she was gone, winking over her shoulder as she disappeared. He sighed, and returned to the droid fuel.

He felt that maybe the Pumpkins had been wrong about one thing. He still believed that he could be saved.

There is a mechanical whirr

By: Jessica Kiney

There is a mechanical whirr about you
Your fingers, digits; our chemistry, inorganic
Last year I spent a long time wondering
Why your programs were not responding
Could it have been a problem of low memory?
I gave up and gave you the hard reboot
And after waiting for a few tense minutes
You came back online. Really—I
Can't figure out what language you're
Coded in—but I try to reach you anyway
 The green of your eyes glows
Like a monitor left on in a dark and
Empty room
—So much of who you are—I fear for you—
Because what happens when the
Very last server crashes? When all
Your data—beautiful and so intelligent—
Dissipates into pure digital ether?
When there is nothing but a virtual
Vacuum left—when there should
Have been a man?
Honestly, not just an electric current
Through some cleverly placed metal
But a real man; which is what
You are—including the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—

Tonight Might Not Even Exist

By: Henry Kraemer

Do I remember last night?

My memories never flow linearly, there is no story

I'm cuddling with the girl upstairs, cute, blonde, short-haired with a long little face and a little voice that giggles at my words

I'm sitting with her and the drunk that followed her home, a sunken eyed puppy spewing out loneliness and arrogance, all a blanket for what he may be thinking underneath, I can't tell, the night has gone on too long

I'm walking home, talking to myself, thinking to myself, wondering what might be the answer to my own sad listlessness

I'm seeing other majors, other theatricals with wanderlust, gambling with the night hoping for whatever distraction the booze might provide, for me it just slurs it all together

I'm sitting, telling yet another new friend about whatever new crush I've decided will put my life back together, though it hasn't really fallen apart, part of my adolescence is optimistic pessimism. My new confidant, a shaggy-haired indie-boy actor, a year older than me who knows this girl, is letting me know how understandable my infatuation is, or might be if I really have it, I never know anymore.

Am I in an alcove? Am I on stairs? Am I dancing, like I said it all flows together.

Apparently Dave Matthews is a really good band. I haven't heard them, but this is my opinion because it's making the little drunk Irish chick happy, so I might as well keep the conversation going, she doesn't listen to jazz, no drunks listen, they don't communicate, they throw words down at me, I do the same thing.

Dancing is grand, I'm doing it, I'm never stopping.

I keep wanting something new, something different, something that I see real, nobody else seems real, they're all lost in a haze of their own new personality, the persona that blends it all together, that ultimate Buddhism of consumption, when you want everything, but the outcome makes no difference.

I can't get into that shit.

The strobe light turns the night into another black, white and grey dream that promises no end but tomorrow, but while I can't imagine tomorrow, I never

take my eyes off it, it never gets a chance to come any closer.

There's a girl with a ring in her lip, it looks infected but I can't tell her that because you know, what would she think of me and my honesty then it's not polite and I don't want to risk making enemies.

Changing music gets me screamed at, people have devotion to their songs apparently.

I'm discovering the brilliance of my curly-haired compatriot the man who breathes in the beat that I breath out and breathes it back with as much fire as I put down and who references Nietzsche in stairwells when faced with the dark nothingness of life but who loves everything and kisses the girl with the lip-ring on the forehead in pre-coital sweetness, who professes fidelity to an ex-girlfriend but keeps thinking about the prospect of tonight's sex, it's ok, lady, he's bright.

I'm swilling on the amber foam of a Rolling Rock beer, of a cheap glass of liquor that I shelled out somebody else's money for who I'll pay back when he comes to, but until then all I have to think about is downing the brew that doesn't feel right, that keeps popping back into my throat when I push it down, I don't know why I want to drink, why I want to be a drunk when I'm doing everything else is, but sober, but I still pine for the well-known mystery that the drink holds, the possibility of something new, of some reliable change, it's supposed to get less bitter but it never does, it keeps punching my throat with some instinctive response to stop, I have to put down the glass, lest my heart and soul comes back to haunt me, my body never lies.

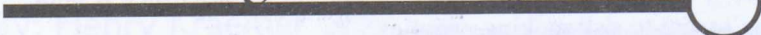
I'm looking for Mary, Mary the girl above, whose spirit and qualities I spread throughout the land, filtered through my own enamored opinion, whose invisible fairy wings flap in my face from distances, who creates a divine wind to follow when her happy child face grins wide teeth at my excited sardonia and waves.

Is there anything new here? Should I be pissed off that I'm disappointed, or shouldn't I have expected this long ago, knowing that I was going to see it all happen tenfold, for I have seen it happen for ages and parties never change.


I remember the theatre party, where I lost my mind and flung my liquor giddiness onto Mary in bouts of abstract compliments with indecipherable words and obvious intentions.

Tonight might not even exist.

Watching a train pass



By: Samuel Samorian



I must say, I love this time at the railroad crossing,
Watching the trains roll by.
The snow-covered steel chugs along the brown-red
tracks, and
I feel at ease with their peaceful solitude.
As the red lights flash against the reluctant snowfall
easing its way
Down to earth, I wish I could stay in this moment
forever;
But the bars rise. The last end of the train passes, wav-
ing goodbye until we
Have the time to cross paths again and say hello.
I wait for the lights to expire before driving across the
tracks, the humming of
My love still strong.

Plea

By: Andrea Edl

One day
along the shallow shores of Lake Cedar
the wind whispered my name
ever so
softly
into my ear.
I felt
that the sky was sharing some thoughts
So I waded waist deep
eyeing the sky.
Again the wind whispered
a silent symphony of syllables
floating to my ear.
A murky blue
up to my neck
begins to wash away the want.
You sadly swim away in silence.
an echo of your beating heart
begins to
fade
away
leaving me lonely.
Crests of waves
wash over my head
the wind whispers my name
to you,
but you're gone...
and only the echo remains.

The Shower

By: Monique Davis

As I close my eyes the darkness overcomes my stress. I breathe deep and listen to the pure sound of my rain like shower fill my senses. I breathe again, only this time slower. I concentrate on the massaging motion of the rough water beating down on my back. The warm droplets of water seem so inviting and seek to touch every crevice of my body. It hurts my scars at first but then I welcome the pain that nurtures my soul. What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger I think to myself. I open my eyes and plunge back into reality as I watch the red stained water spiral down the shower drain. The collection of full steam from the now hot stream of water clears my sinuses but hurts my bloodshot eyes. A tear streams down my face as I bite my lip. I softly cradled my tired body with red water stained arms as I hear his voice outside my shower say, "Baby don't be mad, I'm sorry and I mean it this time!"

Folding

By: Christine Haskill

I fold my body over like paper
fold it over once
and twice:

A paper box
then a star
a swan
and a heart.

I fold my body like silk robes
of long ago
like the one my aunt gave me at graduation
tattered
worn
it smells of old earth
it smells like dust.

I fold my body into your arms
wondering if I concentrate hard enough
if I could feel them
I can't see them,
I never have
but they are there
you promised they would be.

I fold my tears into the handkerchief of my grand-
father
he is gone,
the tears are gone,
his presence remains
though the handkerchief folds differently.
He kept it in his pockets
and would pull it out from time to time.
He used it to wipe his nose
I use it to wipe my eyes.
It has been washed several times,
folding my tears into nothingness.

I fold the memories like notes, like sentiments
I stuff them into my back pocket.
I use them to remind me of love
and perhaps it is memory that gives us hope.

Fulfilled

By: Angela Carter

The leaves begin to rust
on the ends of their branches
something in autumn
makes me always love you
we've hardly said enough
walking cracked sidewalk paths
all afternoon
since you showed up at my door
without flowers like i had imagined
she has your name
did she
roll it gently in flour
so maybe it won't stick
i'll never ask
just mention how
you seem taller
she has your heart
sealed in a locket i can't find
buried deep down beneath
smiles i don't understand
be careful now
you might catch me
crying
just so happy
once i watched you laughing
an auditorium absorbed into you
and i thought
in five years
man
the hearts you'll break
the heart you'll break

If Ever

By: Jessica Kiney

If ever there was a moon, or a sun, or a blue sky
If ever there was a day that the tall blades of newly green grass
Bent down in genuine genuflection to the omnipotent breeze
If ever there was a space between them, so beautiful, so full of life
That the sky, in weeping, produced such exquisite memorials
To the constant ache that comes (embodied in cream and fluff and)
When everything that is thusly held together, must not touch;
If ever I could understand how much the day and night must love each
other
To spend an eternity wound together, wholly dependent,
But never kissing, only tasting,
The brilliant orange path that each lights to one another
The sky's capricious face stained red with those lover's tears,
The forgetful and jealous day dispels the night with a word
And she retreats to the sanctity and gray of the moon
Foolish may it be for her to believe that time may suspend its ruthless
cycle
To allow the death of same sky, sun, moon, cloud and prairie grass
So that she may at last embrace him, to whom she is tidally locked;
If ever you were to grasp me in your sea-stained spiritless glance,
If ever I was to look away

What once to me

By: Caleb Medearis

What once to me had seemed a gift
What once to me had seemed a gift-
or so then I surmised
lingers now as malady
'twas infirmity in disguise
It's that secret that the Skies had held,
but forgiven are the Hills
who edified the Orchards
in a gesture between friends
The derivation of acquiescence
unto thee Daffodils
dissemble, Oh! you sirens
ancient wisdom revealed
So I say What be thine emolument?
my Narcissistic inquiry-
A reservation in the Sacred Prison -
Immortality

Bench

By: Jacob Zuniga

Last weekend I planned a party.
I planned it; sat down and strategized
And said we'll do this.
Why did I do that?
It goes against everything I stand for,
And yet I hunger to bite into it again
I've caught a disease and it is my cure;
Hook me up and let it flow
Through my veins like poison and out my eyes like lightning,
Out my mouth like water, out my ears like rhyme,
Let it pour from me like words from the poets hand.
Let me be he who sees the world as letters and sells naught
But thought,
For he goes home sleek and satisfied of who he is
And I sit here in the rain, questioning, among the screams of my peers.
Rescue me sweet wine from this nightmare—
Sweet angel, tell me why.

Since when can a test tell us who we are?
I know who I am—at least I'm pretty sure I do....
I'm that person everyone comes running to when they've got a problem
Or wanna have a good time cause everybody trusts me
But lord knows I don't think or have feelings or needs or desires
So when I want something and try to conceptualize it in words they all
Think I'm crazy and run away scared and unabashed.
I'm supposed to sit down and answer someone and they'll tell me
Who I am and what I should do with my life.
Since when have numbers been the keystone of our society?
I don't care about how much money I make or how many girls I bring home—
All I wanted was to write my book and hold her close to me
But she ran and jumped off the bridge so now I'm sitting here
Dying in the rain getting drunk all the time and running down alleys that
I never wanted to see but chose to just the same.
Everything's coming to an end and they keep saying I got to make up

my mind but I don't want to cause then things will have to change and change
Always fucks things up (but it's not like things aren't fucked up right now).
I don't know what I want to do with my life anymore,
I just don't know and I've come to a point where I don't care because
Whatever I do I know I can never be what they want me to be.
I can't become electronic signals conveyed from giant dishes in New York
Into every home in America.
I can't become perfect can't be perfect don't wanna be perfect but they want
me to
And they won't accept anything but perfect.
I tried to give it all up this one time and let fate take over and be with her
But she wanted perfect too so fuck her you know I can move on and do a lot
better
But words are just words spelled w-o-r-d-s so I went and got fucked up and
slept on it
And that was two weeks ago and when I see her I feel this void in my chest
where
The bullet ripped through me on that awful night during spring break when she
said
The words that dug my grave man I never knew it could hurt so hard feeling
nothing
It's like I'm dead you know like I'm a fucking walking corpse and it's weird
Cause when she talks I wanna answer and when she laughs I want to inhale it
But I can't just like I can't go and write my book-cause THEY need something
structured
And civilized you know what fuck you man you want precision and all this
bullshit
That doesn't exist don't you see that the world started before 1960 I can't go
into
That much detail on this paper and fuck you what do you care you're just a
lonely
Old shit who doesn't know anything about our world or the shit we're going
through.
You wanna know what really bugs me?
I look around and I see all these people who could be somebody who could go
out
And change the world because they're just great intelligent beautiful people
But they lack ambition and knowledge and a drive to excel and go places no
one

has ever been before so they settle for third place and back seats and all this
shit

That means nothing but makes them feel as if they're part of something bigger
And more beautiful than they are and they never quite realize that they're sit
ting on a broken

Down bus heading for the ditch they never realize that they're about to smash
their

Faces against the seat in front of them and never grow old and see the sun rise
And hold their loves against them in the cold of the night.

I scream wake up everybody and see where you are and what you're doing but
they

Just don't hear me and I took one aside and told her who she was and she
stared back

Blankly and afraid and now when I'm drunk I sit back and wonder if I'm still
on

The bus in the back sitting there giggling as we all head to our demise.

I wanna change the world but the world won't change me won't open up and
let me change it

So I'm destined to sit here I guess typing away trying to define something that
doesn't

Exist fighting a fight that shouldn't be fought but its because society needs to
Make up something for us to do and all the asylums are full and I'm not stupid
enough

To go to prison but too controversial to let into Hollywood cause lord knows
I'd make some Jap

Film that everybody loved but nobody saw and some kid sitting in the rain in
an alley

He didn't want to go down but chose to all the same would watch it and it'd
Inspire him something awful

Till he went and got drunk one night and read the communist manifesto and
then all those

Hard years of American democracy would be down the drain cause some
lowlife

Had the balls to dream big and dare big and smoke big and see where it all
ended up.

This is reality:

I'm gonna work my ass off for four years in a fucking prison that everyone
calls schools

and I'll never sleep and never eat and never dream except the sleep that they
give me
And the food that they give me
But if they try and force their dream down my throat with doctors in coats
swirling around in
The red light and clamps on my mouth I'll push and purge and die choking
instead of dreaming their dream.
I'll work my ass off and get all the numbers they want me to get and do the
things they
Want me to do and never have fun and never see life and never sit outside
when it rains
Or stare at the sky on the hill and become part of the grass as it moves in the
wind I'll go where
They want me to go and take what they want me to take and I won't be able to
breathe but
I have to because the sun is always over the next hill and the wind is always in
my face
And I'll never marry because I'm not PERFECT and I'll never find Shambhala
because I'm not
PERFECT and one night Tiresias and I will sit down and unlock the chains
and put in our eyes
And write the words that never've been read and say the things that've always
been said
And tell the tale that should always've been told because that's the story ev
eryone needs to know
And I'll die in a cave in my second best bed unable to move accepting death as
part of life
A being utterly and absurdly naïve because I've never lived loved or seen what
I've written about.
This is the cold winter's night that we're all born into the snow that we all lay
naked upon
And freeze to the bed of frozen earth that becomes our home and we lay shiv
ering waiting
For a dawn that never comes.
Just give up gentle sirs and accept the night and go to sleep
The dawn will never come so just go to sleep
Why must you flail out in the night and go to sleep
Do you really want some pain just go to sleep
Don't you realize that some Harvard prick will wine to mommy and daddy and

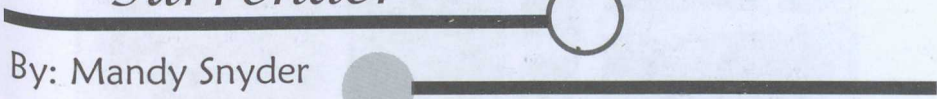
get in


Cause they're alumni and he's guaranteed privilege and prestige and all the
money he could want
And he doesn't have to prove himself 'cause of his name and rank so he goes
through life saying
I'm Marvin Rank the cocksucker.
Go to sleep motherfucker cause you're never going to be PERFECT you're
never going to see the sun
And the hills are uncountable and the days are extricable and PERFECT
doesn't exist in this
Frozen wasteland Elliot was right we're all going to die when London Bridge
falls down
Go to sleep just lay back your head and go to sleep and when we're all dead
just go to sleep
We'll lay in your bed now go to sleep those thoughts in your head will make
you sleep
Like sackloads of lead just go to sleep we'll sink down with Ted and then
we'll sleep
Sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep we'll drink like a fish when we're all
asleep
We'll laugh and we'll cry when we're all asleep
We'll smoke and we'll die we're almost asleep
Castration and smoke just close your eyes
We're all going broke just close your eyes
It's PeRfEcT you shit now stop your lies
Take one last hit and close your eyes

Coming down now and it's just not that much fun.
Once you've seen the sky you want to sit up there like an angel and watch the
world,
But sooner or later everything comes down.
At least, that's what that hooker told me back in the day.
I can shoot up and toke up and tip back as many glasses as I want but it still
won't help.
I can't recreate the past or go back and change the things in my life that
messed me up.
I don't even know if I am messed up.
All I know is that today I have to make a decision about what I want to do
And where I want to go

And I have to decide if I want to take everyone with me and die trying
Or dream big dare big smoke big and leave them all behind
My friends those I love and admire and that one girl that won't let me be
I'm pretty sure you can't get rid of ghosts, and that's what she is,
A ghost from my past coming back to warn me and remind me.
I refuse to go out quietly.
I won't die down like embers in the night; I'll rage like an inferno until some
one
Takes notice and acknowledges all that I have done.
From here on out its balls to the wall and big ideas galore.
Burroughs and Ginsberg smoked themselves stupid and look how far they
went...
Imagine what could happen if we all refused to pay taxes...
Imagine what could happen if Lenin was right...
Imagine what would have happened if she had said yes and let me hold her
tight...
I wouldn't be here right now.
You wouldn't be there right now.
What a grand world it would be.

Surrender



By: Mandy Snyder 

I wait
[my heart exposed]
for the day
[or night]
when you will
[willingly]
surrender to my
[helplessly devoted]
love

Wishing Willow

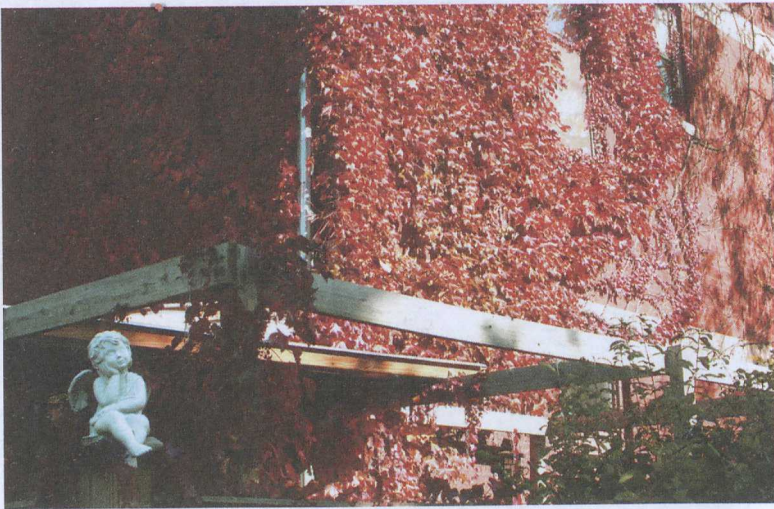
By: Carrie Boop



82"x76" oil painting on 24 individually stretched canvases.

Conubialis

By: Miles Pfefferle



48"x32" digital photo

Lighted Path

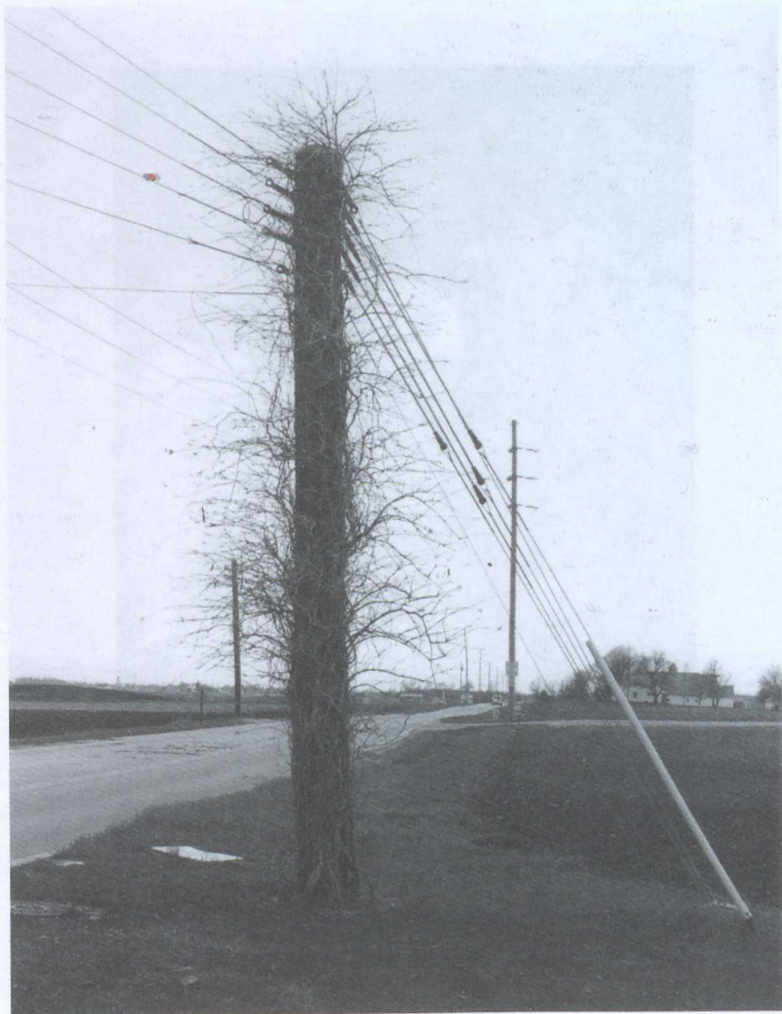
By: Drew Moody



Digital photo

Wired

By: Linda Tri



Black and white photo

München Hauptbahnhof



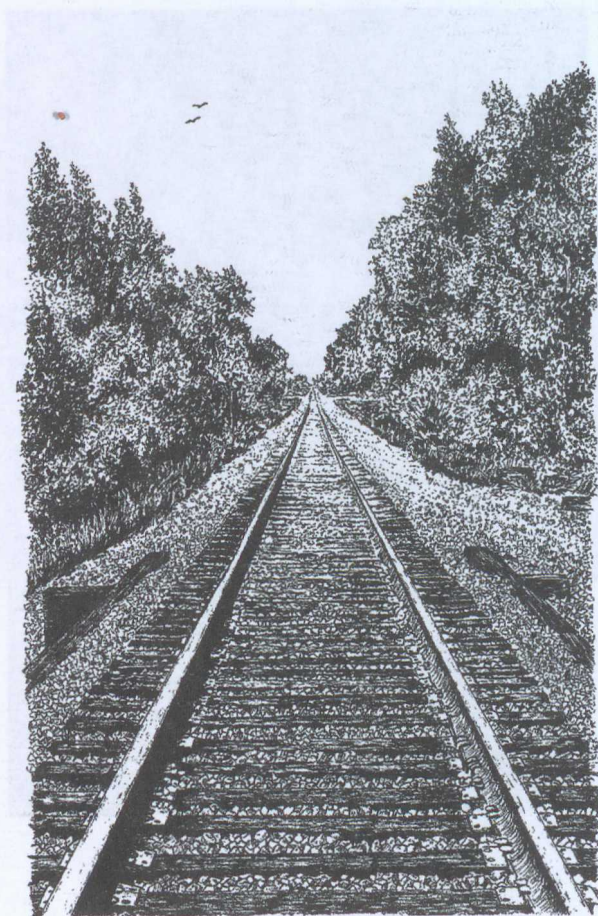
By: Paul K. Greene



Black and white photo

The Tracks

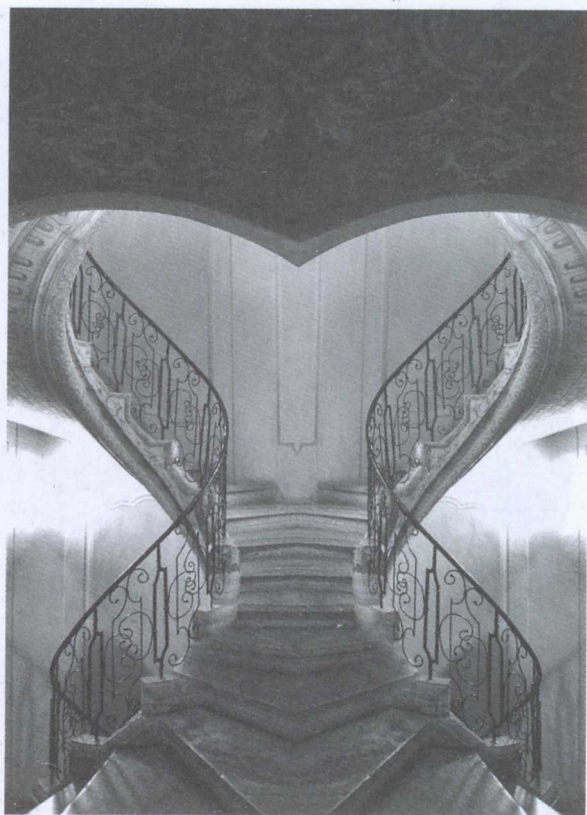
By: Heather Klotz



Pen and ink

What Lies Ahead

By: Thomas Graff



Digital art

The Fifth Column

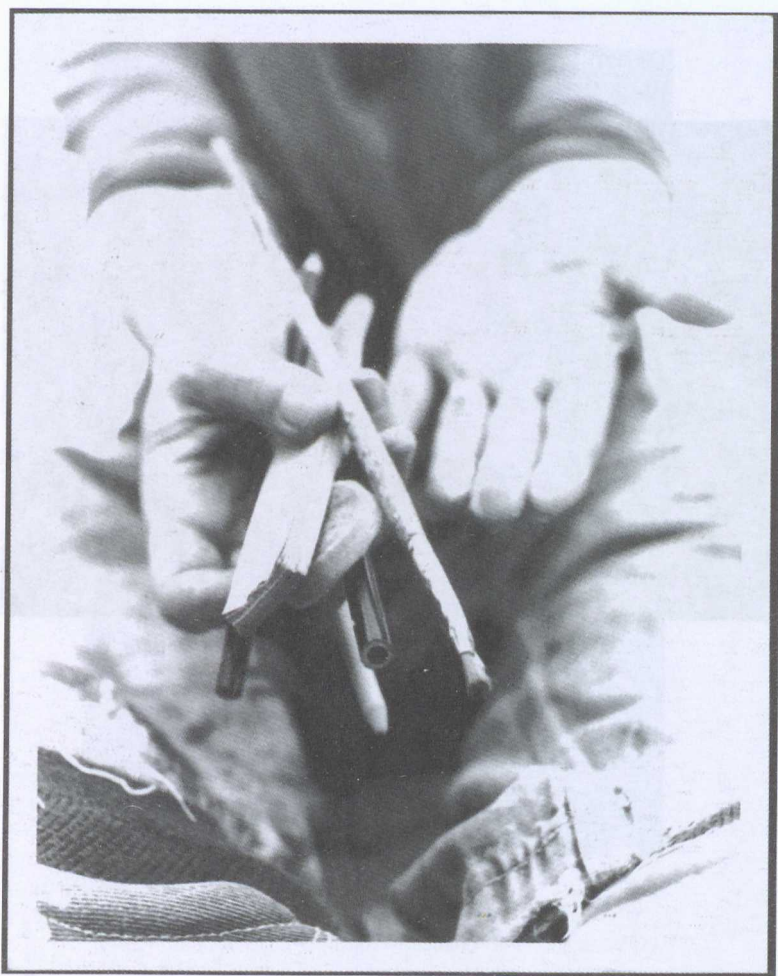
By: Miles Pfefferle



48"x32" digital art

Let Me Teach You

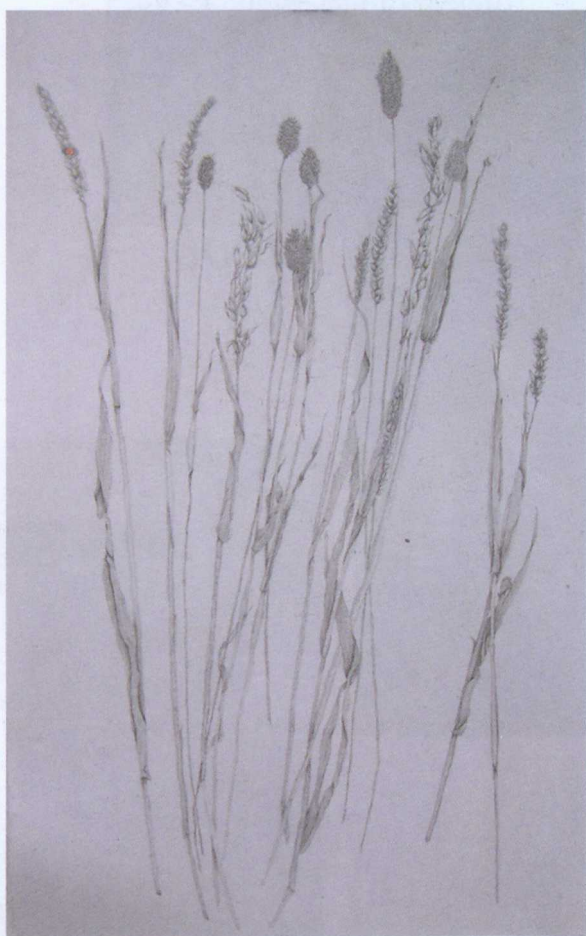
By: Thomas Graff



3.23"x4" black and white photo

Weeds

By: Carrie Boop

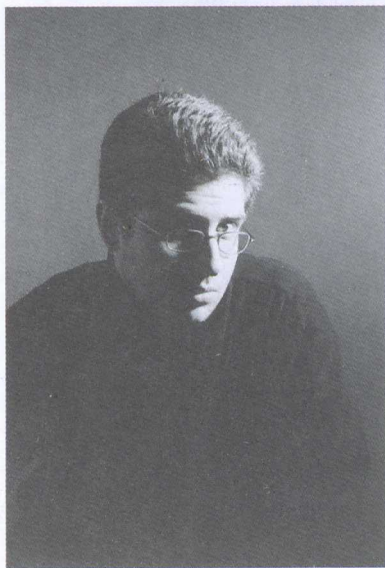


18.5"x30" graphite on paper

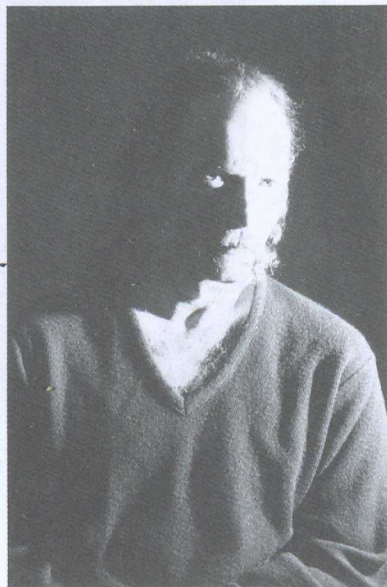
Re-Prints

By: Linda Tri

Towers sincerely apologizes for incorrectly labeling these images in last year's issue.

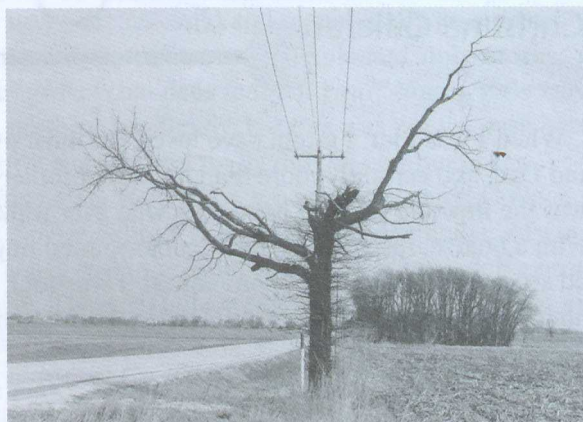


Jacob



Al

Metamorphosis



The Hand

Colleen Just Means "Girl"

By: Christina Gilleran

When I was four, I might have loved her most of all; maybe more than Mom and Dad, and certainly more than my little brother, Nick. Colleen McCourt was the first and the best babysitter who ever walked into our home. She spoke with a hoarse, raspy voice, had double-jointed fingers, and could make Kool-aid stream from her nose upon request. I was four, she was fourteen, and my mother was twenty-four--a trio of women, each separated by increments of a decade.

Colleen lived just down the street, at the corner of North Fourth and Chicago. Our town, Maywood, was a working-class suburb of Chicago, and held all kinds of occupants. There were old and young, German, Polish, Irish, Italian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Black families assembled in its turn of the century homes. They all went to school and to work and came back home every day, often without leaving their ethnic groups. They seemed to live in pockets. Even the young and old often avoided each other.

Colleen's parents, Emily and Joseph, had five children. Colleen fell somewhere in the middle, age-wise. Her older brothers were rough and loud. They were always called by their nick-names, Big Joseph, Pajamas, and Noodle. Her little sister, Carrie, was delicate and perfect, like a miniature porcelain doll; a doll who brought home straight A's and cleaned her room without being chided. Colleen could have been the favorite of her father, but he, a hulking Irishman with black hair and heavy eyebrows labored all day and drank all night, so he rarely noticed his children. He sat, most evenings after work, in a rust-colored Lazy-Boy staring at the knotty pine paneling in the McCourt family room. The room had Venetian blinds and was attached to the north side of the house--it was always so very dark in there.

Emily, a small, birdlike woman, was a wiry, red-haired tempest, quick in her movements and quick with her tongue. She plucked about the neighborhood like an irritated kitchen-hen. Emily McCourt was exceptionally clean, clean in her house, about her body, even in her crisp, clipped words, but she stunk with a true fierceness. She had the most singularly awful underarm odor ever encountered. Occasionally she would stop by our house to borrow a cup of sugar or gossip about the "changing neighborhood". When she left, my mother would open all of the windows in the house to air it out. Hours later,

Dad would come home, sit down at his chair for dinner, and ask if Emily McCourt had been over today, he thought he could smell her over the scent of Tuna Casserole. Emily bragged about and doted on her rough boys, delighted in delicate Carrie who was a dream-child and would really go somewhere in this world. The name "Colleen", Colleen often explained, only means "girl", "my mother named me 'girl'. What does that tell you?" Young girls may often villainize their sainted mothers needlessly, but this was not the case between Colleen and Emily. Emily and Colleen really did not communicate.

It was no surprise then, that as she became a teenager, Colleen sought other female company. To my delight, she sought it at our house. My mother did not work; she was a stay-at-home mom before there was such a term. In 1970, she was just a wife. Though Colleen regularly babysat for us at night, she began to drop by during the daytime to help the stay-at-home mom stay at home. My father would leave for work at eight in the morning and Colleen would be there by nine, all summer long.

Looking back as an adult, maybe it was because my mother was the youngest child in her family, that she began to act as an older sister to Colleen. Maybe it was because she was a young, isolated wife living on a street crowded with babushkas and hausfraus, who frowned suspiciously from behind their pruning shears at my stylish mother as she walked me and pushed my brother in his enormous-wheeled stroller towards the Cock Robin for square ice-cream cones. For me, I know I adored Colleen because I only had one rotten brother; I imagined her as my very own big sister. So, once Colleen started day-camping with us, we would all traipse down to the Cock-Robin together and chatter all the way back with our square ice cream cones melting in the sun. We chattered so much, the old women became invisible.

Every day Colleen and my mother would sit cross-legged on our gold shag carpeting for hours, playing records and smoking cigarettes. They had a tall stack of 55's and 78's. Mom's old 55's were also called singles because they held only one song, well actually two, one good and the other just a hanger-on. They played the old stuff first; Sam the Sham, The Ides of March, The Yard birds, then they moved on to the albums, Jesus Christ Superstar, Bachman Turner Overdrive, Three Dog Night. They slurped from glass bottles of Coca-Cola and sang along to each song, while I ran through the house with a blanket around my small, bony shoulders screeching, "Jesus Christ, Super Star, Who in the hell do you think you are!?" I imagined I was being chased, chased to be caught and crucified. They just laughed, lit another Doral, and set the next record into place.

About an hour before Dad was scheduled to come home, Colleen and

Mom would turn the big rabbit-eared TV on and tune in Mr. Rogers. This was supposed to lull Nick and me to sleep. Since he was two, he was bored into slumber before the trolley even arrived at the land of make-believe, but I stayed up, watched Mr. Rogers, and watched my mother and Colleen vacuum, dust, empty ashtrays, and whip up some macaroni and cheese or fish sticks. Sometimes Colleen would stick around and have dinner with us, but usually she left just before Dad got home.

I can still hear him walking in the door, "Wow, Ginge, (my mother's name is Virginia) looks like you got a lot done today." He wasn't kidding. Dinner was on the table, and the house was clean. It would have irritated his military soul—he had recently come back from Vietnam and was now working delivering heating oil to Gary Indiana—to know that we had sat around listening to music all day. But he didn't know, and we all happily ate fish sticks with ketchup and drank red Kool-Aid until Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* came on.

As Colleen, and all of us, got older, she spent more and more time at our house. She borrowed clothes from my mother to wear to parties, they did her hair and make-up together, and she told Mom about all of her boyfriends. She would look quite beautiful, sitting on our dusty, green couch with her shiny-black hair ironed straight. Rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed and decked-out in my mother's maxi-pants and silk blouse. Nick called her "my Cow-leen" and like to tell her she was "booteeful," which made her let out a raspy laugh and show her deep dimples.

She liked high heels, really high heels, and staggered around, crushing our old, gold carpet until she perfected her "high-heeled walk." In-between records and girl-talk with mom, Colleen always did tricks for Nick and me. She sat in the corner chair and looked us straight in the eye, "Watch this, I'll make my fingers all the same length" and then like magic, her fingers adjusted themselves into a straight line. For an encore, Colleen could bend her thumb to her wrist, dislocate her shoulder or wiggle her ears. And if it was a nice day, we would sit out at the splintery picnic table and she would make milk or Kool-Aid come out her nose. She refused to do it with Coca-Cola though.

Colleen also taught us songs, the kind of songs kids really want to learn. No sweet lullabies or churchy hymns, but useful ditties like "You Should Never Laugh When a Hearse goes by" and "Greasy, Grimy Gopher Guts." We were spellbound.

About the time I turned six, the time my mother turned twenty-six, and the time Colleen turned sixteen, she came to our house in tears. She didn't want to play records, walk up to Cock Robin, or spurt Kool-Aid from her nose.

her nose. She and Mom talked in hushed whispers, one high and nervous, the other low and raspy. They shooed me away from every room they were in and sent me outside to play. Alone.

I couldn't put anything together at the time, but I later learned that Colleen had come to tell my mom that she was pregnant. And not just that, her boyfriend had "taken off" and not only that, her mother was going to kill her.

Mom went with Colleen to tell Emily the news. She came back alone and pale. Emily insisted on abortion, Colleen balked, and then completely refused. There was talk of "ruined lives," "sluttiness," "disowning," and an air of general mayhem had descended. This state of affairs continued for many days. But then Mom and Dad and Colleen had an epiphany. We would adopt the baby. My parents could afford it, though barely. Dad had wanted more children anyway, and Colleen could come and see the baby whenever she wanted! And I! I might get a little sister, Oh Joy!

In this current time, the new millennium, we quickly think of dangers with this type of plan-legal and emotional dangers, but in 1972, love and peace had thrown a comfy blanket over the younger generations, so happy plans were laid.

Colleen puked at our house, and lay on our couch looking quite pale and thin, but she still showed her smile dimples and she talked and talked about the baby.

It was only a few weeks later that Colleen missed her daily visit. Mom was sitting out on the screened porch with the crib they had bought at the Hayward's garage sale. She had a wire brush, Brill-o pads, buckets and lemon oil spread across the floor. She had just begun to remove the old, tattered bedding, when Colleen called. Her raspy voice was hoarse, and she sniffled and choked as she told Mom she was in the hospital; she was having a miscarriage. Sixteen and alone, she lay in that hospital bed. She talked for over an hour. Mom tried to soothe her, but she was inconsolable. Emily refused to come to the hospital, though Joseph came and Colleen was glad of that. We sadly dragged the crib to the basement so Colleen wouldn't see it the next time she came over.

When she recovered, Colleen began to spend more time in the city. There are many small cities in northern Illinois, but the city is always Chicago. She told Mom all about the music she heard in the bars downtown, and about the guys she liked; guys who rode motorcycles. One day, she brought over a K-tell compilation album that included her new favorite song, "Brandy" by Looking Glass. She said that song made her cry-so it made me cry, too.

On a Saturday afternoon Colleen brought her new boyfriend to our

house. They pulled up on a shiny motorcycle. He had a big, big moustache, and looked just like the lead singer from Three Dog Night. I expected him to break into a rousing rendition of "Joy to the World," but disappointingly, he never did. Claude was French-Canadian, he had a dashing accent and was pretty friendly. We all packed a lunch and took a ride to Thatcher Woods to picnic and play Frisbee. They rode his rumbling motorcycle and we cruised behind them in the old car while Steely Dan sang out from the dash board, You go back, Jack do it again, wheel turning round and round...

It was a great old seventies summer day, but Dad didn't like Claude, and on the way home, he switched the radio off and told mom that Claude was a snake. It did eventually turn out that Dad was right, and Claude slithered out of Colleen's life rather quickly, only to be followed by many other such reptiles, often mustachioed, often on motorcycle, never again with a French-Canadian accent.

Emily had stopped speaking to Colleen during the pregnancy, and showed no sign of resuming contact. Colleen began to avoid our neighborhood altogether, staying with friends and hanging out in the City. Mom never had a phone number to contact her, so we would just worry about her until she called or dropped in. When she did, it was like she hadn't been missing at all. She hugged us, laughed, gossiped and complained about Emily. Sometimes Joseph would see that Colleen was over and he would shuffle down the street to our house to see her. Emily never came.

As time went by, we saw less and less of Colleen. She did come to my first communion. There was a snake with her, but I don't remember his name. She came into the clubhouse where we kids were eating communion cake, and delighted my cousins and friends with her gross tricks and songs. She sat in there with us for at least an hour, leaving the snake with the adults. I wanted her to stay all day, but she said she was on her way somewhere else and asked if I had heard the new music from the Billy Jack Soundtrack. I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but I said yes anyway, and she seemed pleased. In a few minutes, she was blasting away on the back of a motorcycle, holding tight to some guy.

We didn't see Colleen again for five years. I know she called Mom sporadically. I think many of the times she called, she was in trouble of some kind. And I think my mother sent her money sometimes. Actually, in retrospect, I'm pretty sure of that. The next time I saw her, Colleen just dropped in on our household one summer day in 1981. We had moved to a rural community about forty miles away from our old house, but she knew where we were. There she was; dressed in tight white pants, a white halter top, and black

high-heels. Her hair was cut to shoulder length and flipped about glossy and smooth. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes bright. She held out her hand to us, "Look, look, I'm getting married, just a civil ceremony, but I am getting married in Wisconsin next month, can you believe it?" A nice, sparkly, diamond and gold ring glittered in the sunlight. Colleen and Mom cloistered themselves in the living room to talk. I tried to sit in and listen, after all I was thirteen, but they kept sending me away to do things, so I'm sure I missed all the good stuff. Colleen was very excited about getting married, and not only that, she was going to have a baby! She laughed and laughed. When she got back into her car to leave, she asked me what music I was listening to lately. I said I had just bought a REO Speedwagon album with my allowance money. "REO? I know all those guys, I used to hang out with them in the clubs in Rockford and Chicago; I can't believe you're listening to them now, freaky!"

She used to hang out with my favorite band? Now, she was undeniably the coolest person in my world.

The next time Colleen came to my house, I was up in my room, hiding from everyone. I, myself, was sixteen and pregnant. I felt embarrassed and didn't want Colleen to know. But of course my mother told her, and she came pounding up the stairs. She sat up there with me for a long, long time. She talked about everything but my condition: music, hair, books. Finally, she went back downstairs and sat with Mom in the yellow kitchen. I crept to the edge of the stairs so I could hear them. "She'll be OK, she's a good kid, and besides, she's got you guys!" Colleen laughed. But then she told her own news: a divorce. Her two-year-old son was being awarded to her soon-to-be ex-husband because he had made accusations of alcoholism. She cried and cried at the kitchen table. I cried along with her from the top of the stairs. Finally, the crying stopped and I heard a two liter of Coca-Cola hiss open. I came down for a soda, and we sat and talked about the old neighborhood and Emily, who was sure that the divorce was something Colleen could have prevented.

Colleen didn't leave until Dad came home; she said she wanted to say "hi" to him. She didn't tell him any of the personal stuff, but he probably noticed her tired, red eyes and the lank way her hair was hanging over her t-shirt.

We all stood in the driveway, waving as she left. She waved back and squarely backed into our big Maple tree. There was a sizeable dent in her Malibu, but she just pulled forward and tried again. She missed this second time, but deviated in the other direction, ending up in a ditch, which caused her to drive through our neighbor's yard before she could get back on the road. She just kept waving.

In 1988, I was living in my own tiny, cheap apartment. I couldn't af-

ford an answering machine, so took a while for Mom to get in touch with me. She had to catch me between work, daycare, and sleep. Eventually she did, and she told me Colleen was dead.

“What?!”

“It happened two weeks ago, Emily just called me this morning.”

“What?!”

“She had just dropped off the baby (a seven year old baby) at her ex-husband’s and was on her way to see Emily and Joseph.”

“What?!”

“Oh, they had patched things up when the baby was born, anyway, Emily says they heard the sirens from the house, and she knew instantly that it was Colleen, somehow she knew, and when Colleen didn’t show, and didn’t show, they really knew. Then the hospital called. Massive head injuries, no brain function. Right on Chicago Avenue, she was making a left and some guy blew right through the light-she never had a chance.

“Shit.”

“They unplugged her after the doctors told them there was no hope, brain dead. She’s already been buried. The wake, the funeral, it’s all over already.”

I could hear my mother lighting cigarette after cigarette as she talked, and it sounded like she had been crying for some time already. I didn’t want to talk, not to her, not to anyone. When I got off the phone, I threw up and went to bed.

My mother and Emily began sending holiday cards to each other. They would talk about Colleen in them, how much they missed her. I simply felt that the whole thing was unfair, stupid and unfair! How could Mom be friendly with that woman? Because I never went to the wake and found out late about Colleen’s death, I still sometimes forget she’s dead. The way she used to just pop up unannounced makes it easy to forget. Then I remember and my insides twist.

In 1988, the year she died, Colleen was thirty-two, I was twenty-two and Mom was forty-two. Now I’m thirty-eight, and I wonder what her life would have been at forty-eight. Would she still be communicating with Emily? Would she still be drinking? Would she still be laughing? Would she have finally found a man who would be kind to her? Because I’m not a child anymore, I can look back and see how troubled Colleen was, how unfair life often was to her.

Last year, my parents took a ride to visit Emily and Joseph, who had moved to Janesville, Wisconsin, to be closer to their grandson after Colleen died. Joseph was researching genealogy on the McCourt name and compiling many family photos. When he showed Mom the pictures of Colleen, he sobbed

and sobbed. He can't say her name without crying. Emily's smell has apparently disappeared (maybe it was hormonal?) and she talks about her grandson incessantly. Mom thinks she holds on to her daughter through the child. I wish she would have been that way with Colleen, and I'm sure Emily wishes that even more than I do, but the past is irretrievable and never smooth.

About a month after my parent's visit, Emily found Joseph dead on the couch—a heart attack. She called my mother almost immediately. Mom and Dad went to the funeral and said it was “very nice” in the way people always say funerals are “nice.” They saw Noodle and Big Joseph and Carrie. Mom says that the boys are troubled, that the boys have drug and law problems, but that Carrie is doing very well.

If there is such a place as heaven, and I'm not sure there is, but if there is, I hope that Joseph and Colleen find each other there. I can visualize them walking side by side, two glossy black heads, two sets of bright blue eyes. In my mind's eye they are both young and healthy and smiling. Sometimes Colleen is a child. Other times I imagine her as a babysitter surrounded by children in heaven, sitting in a circle, making her fingers all appear to be the same length and laughing while she snorts Kool-aid out her nose.

Death Cookies

By: Heather Klotz

The number of bicyclists visiting hospital emergency rooms every year is estimated to exceed 500,000.

— Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center.

I just hope I actually make it to an emergency room. The way I see it at the moment, I am going to die and I am the only one to blame. My ability to detect danger and avoid it at all costs has failed me. EMTs will have to scrap my mangled, broken remains off the side of this mountain – all because I decided it would be fun to try mountain biking.

It's not fun. I am in an all-out war in which gravity is my enemy. It has destroyed the operational value of my brakes, replacing any chance of stopping with unavoidable acceleration. Yes, the invisible force of gravity is responsible for the uncontrollable speed at which I am currently falling down a mountain on a mountain bike. A mere trip to the emergency room would definitely be good right now. Anything is better than a body bag.

Funny thing, I never thought about the downhill part of mountain biking. I only thought about the uphill, controllable part, and that was done in a white Ford pickup that looked like it had been beat up by every rock in the state of Colorado. Most importantly, it never occurred to me that once I started, I couldn't turn back. Before I had even finished placing a helmet on my head, the truck was gone. The only way back to civilization was the trail, if one can call this thin strip of dirt and rocks a trail.

Only wide enough for one bike, the trail won't allow anyone to come get me. So, the tempting idea of wrestling my bike to a stop and refusing to go one step further is out of the question. I also have to go fast enough to keep up with the guide, or I'll just end up dying a slower death of starvation and dehydration lost out in the middle of nowhere. There is no "exit ramp" on this ride.

I definitely didn't have any idea what I was getting myself into. It was just a phone call, that's all, a phone call asking if I wanted to explore the Rocky Mountains.

"Please don't do anything where you can get hurt," Mom said.

I tried to reassure her, "I won't do anything stupid."

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. The word runs through my brain like stock figures on

the bottom of CNBC, but it doesn't come out right – even in my own head. The never-ending, bone-jarring bumps keep coming one after the other and now my thoughts as well as my speech seem to be affected. I hear stuuuuuuu-pid, stup---id, stu-PID over and over again. Level ground would be nice right about now.

The International Mountain Biking Association offers six rules to bikers. I know because I was on their website two days ago. Rule number three, the only one I remember, says to “always keep your bike under control.” I want to know who wrote that rule. The only way to maintain control is to bike on pancake flat prairie. Mountain biking is falling down a mountain in an upright position hopefully, staying just ahead of gravity and potential disaster.

“Scott is still at the hospital,” someone said. “He'll be back after they set the bones.”

“What happened?”

“Did he face plant?”

“Was he jetting?”

“How bad is he?”

“What trail?”

Questions fly as people try to get information from the source.

Only one piece of information matters to me, the outsider listening in. He landed in the hospital while on the trail I'd be biking tomorrow.

There is a blur of blue, green, and grey on either side of me. Process of elimination tells me it must be trees, the sky, and other objects native to the side of a mountain, but I'm relying on peripheral vision at this point, so who knows.

What's the point of traveling to a locale like Colorado, renowned for its scenery, if the activities you engage in don't allow you to see it?

I know I have definitely seen enough death cookies – mountain bikers' slang for rocks. The bland color of gravel and other metamorphic rock is embedded in my brain. I am haunted by one particular rock size. Every rock my eyes focus on seems just like the last one - until I could swear I have already passed the rock I am currently looking at.

The rapid rate at which the rocks are rushing by makes me wonder how I can even see them at all. Everything happens so fast – I see a rock and it's gone.

I think I am going to fall, and I don't. I can feel my back tires slipping out again, and my heart stops for the thousandth time today. I haven't learned any special maneuvers - any guaranteed ways to stop from skidding out. There are no “bunny hills” here.

The blue plastic jug attached to my bike contains high-quality H₂O – compli-

ments of the mess hall tap. Of course, reaching down to take a drink would mean taking one of my hands off the brakes, a place they have not left since the first 30 seconds on the trail. My hands, wrists, and forearms feel like it too. I'm pretty sure that if I ever do get off this bike, my hands will be permanently curled around imaginary brakes. In fact, I've had to use my brakes so often that I'm surprised I don't see a little trail of smoke following me down the trail.

Bob jumped out of the truck and started unloading the bikes. He was efficient, evidence of the countless trips he has made up the mountain in his 23 years at the camp.

Minutes later the bikes were standing at attention, waiting for the riders that would make them come alive.

Before he jumped in the truck for the drive down, Bob paused. "Come back alive," he said.

Right now, I would like nothing more than to come back alive, but that is in doubt. I can see it now - my lifeless pile of broken and mangled body parts at the bottom of the mountain - with a very empty stomach.

One thing definitely needed for going down a mountain is a large amount of food. The granola bar and apple I grabbed on my way to the truck burned off hours ago.

The hunger pains clawing at my stomach are easier to ignore than the ever-growing burning sensation in my quads. Before leaving, I was instructed to spend as much time as possible balanced on both pedals, helping to promote more balance. This is physically the equivalent of doing a squat. Squats that last mere seconds can be painful. I was suddenly in the middle of a three hour one.

"Be a little bear."

Max, the camp's resident dog, sat back on his haunches, paws in the air. He radiated anticipation, begging for you to give the command.

"Be a big bear."

Instantaneously, the huge black lab stretched up on his back two legs, growling.

The game was very cute and very effective - in the daylight.

Last night lying in the tent, it was quiet and very, very dark. There was nothing to see, but plenty to hear. I was new - the smell of the night - and an animal was painstakingly investigating all the cracks in the tent, sniffing for every available scent.

As Max prowled around and around the tent he sounded all too much like a bear - until the clink of his tag against his collar gave him away.

I can only imagine what would happen if a bear ran out into the trail in front of me. I'd probably be happy to have found something soft – initially anyway – to run into. A quick apology, and off I'd run, leaving the bear to be amused by the bike I refuse to protect.

I hate this bike. Every bone-jarring thud, hair-raising turn, and split second dance with death is its fault. I contemplate naming it – but even with its special alloy frame, customized brakes, and full suspension front and rear brakes, it doesn't deserve naming.

I couldn't think of a name anyway. Mental fatigue is quickly rising to meet my physical fatigue. I have to plead with my legs and arms now, constantly reminding them what to do; they are done operating on their own. I alternate negotiating, pleading, and demanding, but I'm not doing any of them well. The communication lines between my brain and my body are no longer reliable, and I can feel each reaction coming slower than the last. I'm too tired to be afraid.

In an unforgettable moment, the incessant bumping and jolting stops. I have reached the bottom of the mountain trail and follow everyone out onto a smooth, newly paved road. God bless the man who invented asphalt! For 10 heavenly seconds, I can actually balance on the bike, and I let my hands fall lifelessly to my sides. It hits me that I'm alive...actually alive...and going faster and faster and – Whoa! My hands shoot back onto the brakes in a desperate attempt to slow down – again. My sigh of relief at reaching a smooth surface and my sense of triumph at having completed the trail alive have been completely displaced by terror. The paved road is actually a highway with a steep downhill grade and I am going faster than I thought wheels could possibly turn. I don't know how they are staying attached to the bike! On the upside, there is no need to pedal, there are no rocks to avoid, and I can finally sit on the seat.

I can feel everyone looking at me, waiting for me to say that this bike is fine. To my left, stand six rejected bikes - one with a dirty seat and five with seats that just aren't the right size.

“Just pick one – you'll never sit on it anyway!” someone yells from across the camp.

I tried out three more seats.

For ten endless miles of highway, I hurtle forward. I pass a runaway truck ramp. If only there were runaway bike ramps. I pass an unidentifiable animal that has been flattened on the side of the road. A car passes me. Now I know I am going way too fast because I know that I shouldn't have time to actually see the people in it – especially the little boy waving at me from the back seat.

I shove my facial features into a smile.

Finally, after one last battle with the brakes, I manage to slow down enough to skid off the road onto another trail. My wrists hate me. A mile climb up another mountain is all that stands between me and camp. This is what I had asked for, the slow deliberate pace of an uphill climb. I thought it would be better, but I definitely didn't have a clue what it was really like - again. This is no climb; it is another battle against gravity. This one is interminable, agonizing, and happening in slow-motion. Now my legs hate me too. What the heck was wrong with my imagination? The mental and physical pain of traveling downhill is quickly eclipsed by the absolute torture of trying to move uphill. I know I could end this and get off the bike, walking the rest of the way, but pride won't let me. I have to finish on the bike. There are witnesses. One painstaking wheel rotation at a time, I move forward, but the end seems to creep farther away. Long after continued forward motion seems impossible, I am finally at the camp. I make myself stand the bike up in the rack, rather than letting it slam into the ground.

Walking away, my legs snap back and forth, in disbelief that they are no longer trying to propel me up a mountain. I am off the bike, but I still feel suspended above the ground. I am floating now. It is probably light-headedness brought on by physical exhaustion or lack of food. Maybe it is just the contrast of being still after three hours of continuous movement.

I take a quick inventory - searching for physical confirmation that I have just hurtled down a mountain and crawled back up another. My t-shirt, the one that came out of my bag neatly folded and white this morning, is now an artistic mix of quality mountain top soil and sweat. Its transformation is rivaled only by my hair. Granted, after camping out for the last two days, it wasn't pretty to begin with. But the matted, sweaty mess, evidence of the three-hour war it waged with my helmet, doesn't even remotely resemble the smooth pony tail of this morning. I am no longer a girl - I am a mountain biker. Tomorrow, I am going whitewater rafting.

Scarecrow

By: Miles Pfefferle

An old woman sat in her motorized wheelchair at a four-way stop sign. She was like a quad roller-skate, a rotary phone, or a bicycle. She reminded me of a thousand dusty metaphors. Looking back, the story took fifteen seconds, but I could take fifteen minutes to tell it. And how can I tell it? It sat in the corner of my mind for fifteen hours, just like the old woman sat in the corner of her high school prom. So she sat there. There were lines of cars in all directions. None of them even came to complete stops, they just rolled through the stop or anxiously waited for their turn and then they were off. They never really stopped, and they never really stopped coming. The old woman never stopped waiting. She never even flinched or made any expression. I wasn't even completely sure that she was actually alive. But maybe she didn't come there to cross. Maybe she didn't come there to wait. Maybe she was just watching. She just sat there and stared straight ahead. I know this because I waited in line just like everyone else. I waited in my chair that also has four wheels. Mine is motorized as well. I waited. I watched her. I sat, but I could have gotten up. I don't have to sit in my motorized wheelchair. I could have parked, gotten out, and pushed her across the intersection to wherever she was going. The cars would stop for me. I can, unlike her. I am not paralyzed; things have not changed for me. I could have helped, but I didn't. I watched. I approached. I shifted and drove away, watching her life get smaller through the oily fingerprints on my rearview mirror. An old woman sat in her motorized wheelchair at a four-way stop sign.

Towers

Towers is Northern Illinois University's yearly literary and creative arts magazine featuring all original, unpublished work by students. Towers has been providing student artists and authors a public forum in which to share their work since the 1960's. Any current student attending NIU is eligible to submit work using the guidelines found on our web site. NIU student editors will judge the submissions in their respective genres using a blind format. As Towers is funded through NIU's Student Association and is run on a volunteer basis, the magazine is provided to the community free of charge.

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-The Editors

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