



Towers

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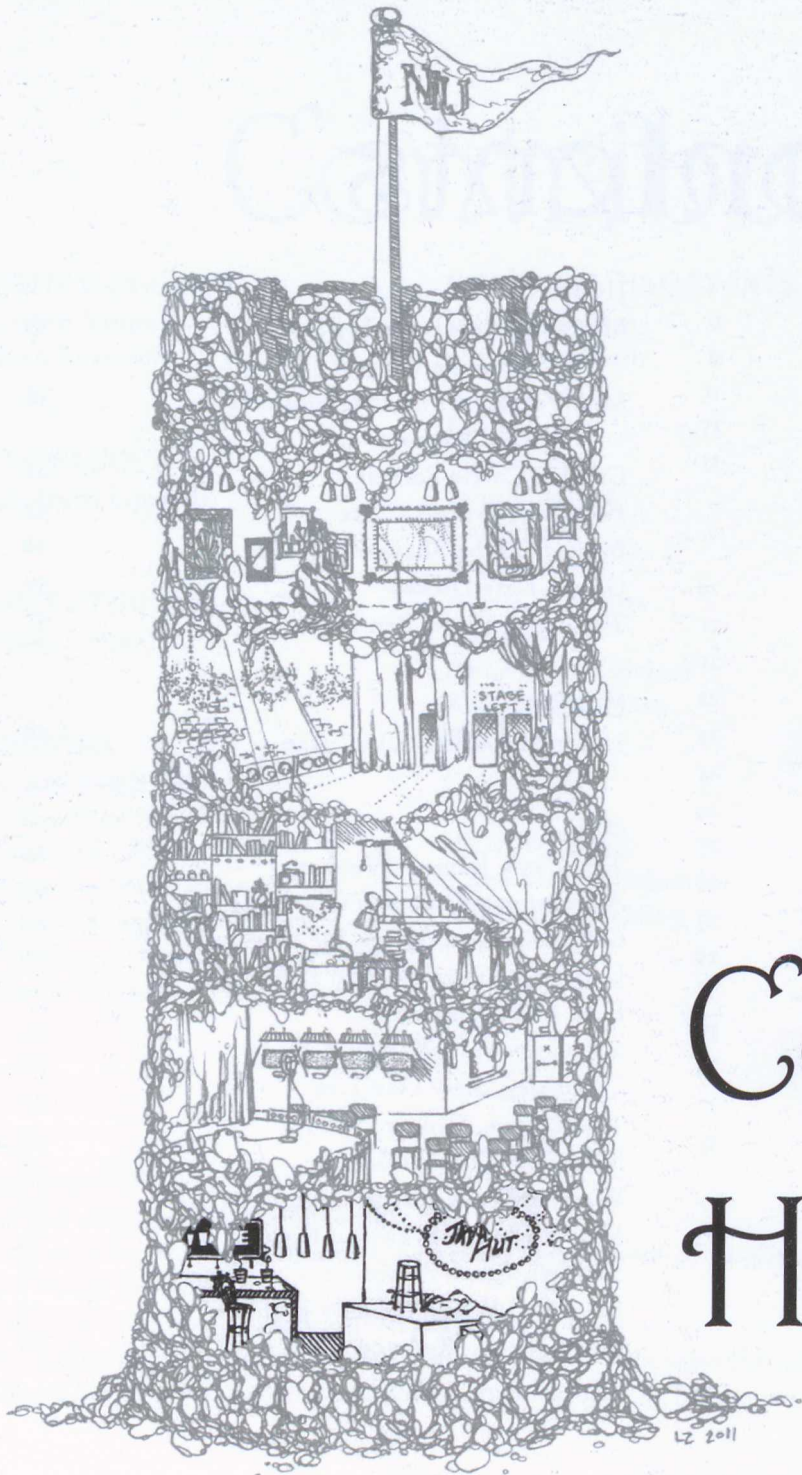
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Coffee House

A Feeling of Rising

John Lindblad

Officers Shoot Man in Church Daycare.

The ink is bold and black. Rain hangs from a sky the color of newspaper. I had to park two blocks from City Hall, the heart of Rockford, because the goings-on hadn't left me a spot open. Making an umbrella out of the local section, I stepped ankle-wet out into the weather.

Splish. Splish. Splish. Cheap sneakers land heavily on the drowning concrete as grit, gum, and bloated worm bodies float by. My socks are wet. Ahead, a crowd of solemn black faces gathered in front of the building is bookended by two police officers, uniforms dark and sharp, guns heavy at the hip, sentry-serious on either side of the entrance. My job as a courier for a construction company- we build roads- has me here daily; I've never seen this. The security seems an inappropriate show of force. The crowd, all black, takes part in a communal silence. Any attempt to stay dry or get out of the weather is absent; they are both resolute and resigned. It is a protestation, an attempt to raise consciousness, a silent howl. I have never seen this here before. Nor have I seen the satellite towers jut skyward from illegally parked news vans. Cyclopean, a TV camera circles unblinkingly.

There's a madwoman.

She's apart from the group, hollering, stamping her feet, a lunatic. Abandoning the quiet congregation, the camera, hungry for the aesthetics of rage, captures the woman as she unintelligibly snort-sob-chokes out indictments on police, pleas to Jesus, and hiccups. She gives the camera just what it needs; silent tragedy leads to low ratings and contemplation. Thank God for the shrieking outrage of the solitary woman, so separate from the solemnity of the others, holding a sign in her shaking black hands depicting a crudely drawn white Jesus; colored in by the Crayola color 'flesh.' This is what News is. There's a Biblical proverb written in bold letters beneath Jesus but it's bleeding in the rain. I don't stop to read it, the rain is falling.

Marc Anthony Barmore, whose criminal history included robbery and the assault of a police officer, was shot and killed while attempting to elude police in the 'House of Grace' daycare inside Kingdom Authority's International Ministries. Officers Poole and North, both highly celebrated and decorated officers, pursued. Barmore was shot an unspecified number of times, but he was shot enough.

I don't know what precipitated his death, why he was being questioned, why he ran from the police, or what went through his mind as the world he knew pooled and congealed on the tiled floor of a Church I don't belong to.

Approaching the crowd, described later that night as a mob by the perfectly coiffed anchor, I anticipate having to force my way through this black-faced barrier, but the wall separates respectfully, wordlessly. I half expect them to crash down on me like the Red Sea. They do not. Between them hung a tangible weight; their grief was absolute.

Rockford is neatly divided by a river into sides, East and West. On the West side, people memorize bus schedules, adults ride children's bicycles, people sit and stare at nothing in particular from stooping porches, strangers sheepishly kick at broken glass that litters the cracked sidewalks asking, "Got a cigarette?" or "Can you spare some change?" They left their wallet at home. They are veterans, out of work. They are locked out of their car. They aren't from around here-where is a bank again? They need. They avoid looking you in the eyes. I don't look either, I don't have to look, I bought the right not to look with a few jangling cents. Street lamps are decorated with stickers advocating programs with names like Ceasefire. This is where Marc Barmore's life took place, this unequal half of a separated city.

My footsteps reverberate against the sleek marble tile of City Hall, echoing briefly up the faux Roman-Greco decor before dying against the vaulted ceilings. Passing through the eye of the protest should've relieved me from the nagging discomfort,

but things have a way of travelling with you, and some things you can't get away from.

Past the line of people waiting, faces downcast, to pay a late utility, is the elevator. I need fourth floor, Finances. Behind me, a storm looms.

Under police escort, a handful of mourners follow. Most are women, middle-aged, heavyset, dressed as if they are going to Sunday morning worship, wet feet falling in unison. The cop escort's shined shoes, black as gunmetal, are out of sync, bursting like thunderclaps as he shepherds his flock after me. As if preordained, the officer stands by my side in front of the elevator. In the reflection of the stainless steel, I can make out the figure of a man, but the image is blurred; the doors are over-polished.

The doors swoosh apart with a mechanical ding and as I step into the elevator, I catch a glimpse of the man in my periphery and recognize him.

Tall and thin, emaciated almost, and black, black as a struck match, he placidly stands next to me and the officer opposite him. He is absent of any outward emotion; smoked glasses cover his eyes. He gives nothing away, and yet something from him falls onto us, or me, something fluttering and familiar, like loss or rage or pride or regret, something close, mixing with the stale exhalations of past riders. He is Marc Barmore's father.

We are shoulder to shoulder, all of us, with me dividing Barmore's father (the old man? Pa? Pop? What did Marc call his father? How can it matter?) and the officer of the Law. Mr. Barmore Sr. is dressed in a loose T-shirt, baggy pants, and a do-rag knotted at the forehead à la slain rapper Tupac Shakur. His eyes are hidden behind the fog of his glasses. His supporters are dutifully lining the elevator behind him.

I am touching him. It would be so easy to just reach up with a tap of my white fingers across his coal-black arm and whisper, "My God, I'm so sorry for your loss." I would have meant it, I think. I would have, but I didn't. He gave nothing away. Reciprocity filled the spaces between us.

The sick feeling of rising. Why was he dressed like that? Like a drug dealer, a rapper, when his son was dead and he was at City Hall? Surely the audience would see him and either be frightened or cluck their tongues; tsk tsk, it's all about the parenting, nothing but the parent, not poverty or society or humanity or anti-American sentiment about a country that

spends more to incarcerate blacks than educate them, or about theories of where a river falls or how ghettos form or individual responsibility versus an obligation to one another. Here, here we see what happens when a criminal has a child, here is the fault. And that's all they will see. Damnit look, why can't you see that you're scaring them? Look! Look!

The black and white thumbnail of his son looked the same, clothes ill fitted, no do-rag but the defiant beginning of an afro, isn't that exactly what a man who gets gunned down by the police looks like?

The officer catches something in his throat, clears it with a hard aspiration, and informs Mr. Barmore Sr. that The Mayor and The Chief of Police will be giving a statement shortly to the media, and although Mr. Barmore Sr. and his entourage (church group? family?) will not be admitted into the stateroom, they will be able to silently watch from behind a partition of glass in a waiting area, where they will be able to hear and see but not question or speak out. This is a matter for the politicians and the media. Mr. Barmore doesn't register the slightest reaction to this.

I wonder if Barmore Sr. hates the cop. The officer is pitiable and authoritative in the glow of the elevator buttons. I wonder if he hates all police officers, hated them long before his son's life was punched out of his body in a hail of bullets, in a closet, in a Church, in front of God and his children.

And who can condemn these officers, these decorated officers, who in the line of duty shot and killed Marc Barmore? Every shred of information on Officers Poole and North points to exemplary police work of heroic proportion. In passing I'd heard a story that one of the men, I'm not sure which, had risked life and limb to save a family, a black family (if their ethnicity is of any importance), from burning to death, and that one of them was nearly crushed to death by the car of an offender who tried to flee custody. I don't know which cop this was either, but I heard he had to jump onto the hood and hang on as the car raced away, like a stuntman, like an action movie, before killing his assailant by firing at him through the glass of the windshield. He is Starsky. He is John McClane. He is a silver screen hero. These officers have been involved in a number of shootings and have never had their valor questioned. The golden shield these men wear isn't large enough to hide behind. The public should never lose sight of that.

Heroes or executioners? Does it matter who is looking? Is reality swayed by the onlooker? I don't know, but these men Poole and North get up and do a job I cannot; they make decisions, real, profound decisions, I could not make. They serve and protect. Me. You. My wife. Everyone. They are highly trained. Day after day they get up, drink their coffee, and stare into our abject failings. They see the horror that threatens to flood our lives and stand in the stream. For us. Like the Barmores, they have families, fathers and sons, people who would come down to City Hall under an obdurate sky to advocate for them, shoulder to shoulder.

What right does anyone have, let alone an hourly-wage construction company runner like me, who struggles with the alien weight of a pistol, who deploras violence without understanding it, who never walks on Rockford's crumbling sidewalks, what right does a man like that have to sit in judgment of men like these?

None. But these men did not die violently in God's house, their sons did not die. What right do we have to judge Marc Anthony Barmore's father, unflinchingly staring at the life he knows, the absences that define it, who refuses to dress differently, whose world is divided by a river, East and West.

In my neighborhood, kids run and holler in the street until the streetlamps come on, parents kiss away the grit of a scraped knee, and the rain gently washes bright chalk drawings away to make room for more. I know it must be true, that some of that exists on the West Side.

A ridiculous ding, melodic and tonal, releases me onto the expansive fourth floor, Purchasing. I chat with Jane, the nice little lady behind the counter who hands me my specs and trades pleasantries, nothing penetrating but so polite and friendly, and linger momentarily in the spread walls of the foyer, the soft noiselessness of the carpeting, the space I occupy and I occupy alone. The narrow room is lined with wooden benches. A window is set adjacent Jane's desk, centered on a glass partition, which is lined with doors at either side in which windows are set. In truth, the openness of the room is an illusion of windows and glass. Drops tumbling from a gunmetal sky tap at the window as if they want to come in. I stab at the electronic button glow and the silver doors part again.

While I step inside and find room to stand in the middle, the only other rider catches my eye.

He is older than me, late fifties if I had to guess, and clean. His suit is sharp and angular, perfect in its fit. It is the classic black on white color scheme; you can tell it's the kind of suit you have to be willing to pay for. His demeanor, his manicured affectations, his salt and pepper hair and easy smile, disarm me. A polite elevator chat, perhaps about the weather, is coming.

Looking into my eyes and smiling, he shrugs. When his shoulders rise, his suit coat rises also, as a single piece, unyielding. I didn't expect that kind of rigidity from expensive fabric. He says, "Crazy, huh?"

God, yes, it was crazy, wasn't it, wasn't it in fact insane, and here is a man, attired impeccably, giving voice to my confusion of the absurdity and deep tragedy that can happen when you stop at City Hall. But this guy, someone's father, someone's grandfather, he understood.

"I mean, what do these blacks think? That you can screw around with the cops? Problem is, they've been handed everything their whole lives, don't work for nothing. A guy that dumb, shooting his mouth off to the cops and running or whatever, a guy like that deserves what he gets. Right?"

I make a sound, a reply, a gurgle in the back of my throat which the well-dressed man mistook for choking. He's patting my back jokingly, kind of holding me in a mishmash of an embrace and a grapple. "Are you ok, kid?"

I'm nodding. "Yeah, fine." As he fired off one last remark at my back, the bell went off. "People just don't think anymore, that's the problem with this city!"

If I had turned and looked back, I know I would have seen his inviting smile sparkling back, the creases of his perfect suit hiding something underneath, something between the shining gold of a badge and the slate of a gravestone. Something there is, but we don't know what. I had a chance to name it and I didn't.

City Hall spat me back out under the falling ceiling of God's creation, over the gray shards of our broken concrete. Everything was gray in between, and the rain fell on Rockford for days, but the sidewalks never washed clean.

Gertrude's Song

Lise Mae Schlosser

Maybe I'm thinking of her because I have started planning the vacation that will take me back along that familiar road and through the town we both knew. Or is it that I am planning the vacation because I've been thinking of her? I guess it really doesn't matter which inspired which. I'm taking the trip and will think of Gertrude along the way.

This is the woman who sat at the next table from my grandmother at the nursing home. She would have been just another grey-haired commoner if it hadn't been for her daily habit.

"What day is today?" Her voice had ragged edges. She would raise her cry above the cacophony of the room. "What day is today?" It was a plea set to tune.

It usually wasn't long before I had a reason to get up from my seat at the table. My grandmother would want more coffee or need me to replace the spoon that fell to the floor from her frail grasp. I would excuse myself from her side with a kiss on the cheek and head to the next table along my way.

When I leaned close to Gertrude, I could smell the same powder that my grandmother had kept in the china dish in the bathroom where I found moments of glamour under the heavy ceramic lid. I would sneak to the bathroom and make movie-star motions to pat my nose with the soft pink puff. I always imagined I could emerge unnoticed, but my grandmother could hardly miss the matte sloppiness. No, my nose no longer shined, but the evidence was all over my face. This powdery memory mixed with the smell of muscle cream and denture paste to complete the perfume that was Gertrude.

"Gertrude, it is Tuesday." I was careful to annunciate the words close to her soft, droopy ear, accentuating the syllables of the day.

"Tuesday, you say?" She drew the vowel sounds out like taffy and never glanced in the direction of her oracle.

"Yes, Tuesday."

As I left her side and continued on my appointed task to retrieve

coffee or spoon, Gertrude's song changed. "Today is Tuesday." There would be a short pause. "Today is Tuesday; tomorrow is Wednesday." Her rhythm was solid and predictable, polished by the perpetual ritual.

The chant would continue until something interrupted Gertrude. A nurse's aide would set the plate of food in front of her. Her dinner companion might decide he was finished and excuse himself from the table. An awkward cohabitant might knock her chair with a walker or cane. And she would lose her place.

The busy room would suddenly seem silent as her voice disappeared. But it wouldn't be long before she would begin again. "What day is today?" Her memory interrupted like her recitation. Some days a grumpy man across the room would try to shout the answer back to her. "It's Tuesday, you silly woman!" Not uttered close enough to her, the answer eluded Gertrude. She would continue asking the question until I - or some other similarly sympathetic member of the company - would set her back on the syllables of her song.

"Today is Tuesday; tomorrow is Wednesday."

The refrain contains all that was good about those early times in the nursing home when my grandmother, on some days, might still hold a conversation or call us by name. Her hair was still teased and sprayed into a familiar shape each week. She would still feed herself even if we had to sometimes cut the food for her. She would still sass and tease, complement and criticize. She would still kiss me goodnight and hold my hand until she fell asleep. She was still Geraldine during those days we shared with Gertrude. And the question "What day is today?" holds all of that within its short syllables.

Gertrude's warm, soft hand reached for my elbow in the hall one night after I'd left my grandmother. "We have to leave now," she urged. "We need to go to Menominee."

Early in my days of visiting the nursing home, I learned that joining the residents in their world was easier (and often more

fun) than trying to try to drag them back to our world.

“Gertrude, dear, it’s far too late for us to go to Menominee tonight.” From my childhood family vacations to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, I knew Menominee to be at least a six hour drive north of where we were. “I’ll come back in the morning; we’ll leave then. What do you need in Menominee?”

Gertrude pulled on my elbow until I knelt beside her chair, my face level with hers. She looked around to be sure nobody would hear what she was about to disclose. “I need . . . I need new stockings.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed a little and was rewarded with a disapproving stare that attested to Gertrude’s history as an elementary school librarian.

“And where will we go for those?” I recomposed myself as precariously as a second grader with the giggles.

She named a department store that I suspected had been closed for years.

“Well, you better get to bed, then, Gertrude. We’ve got a long day ahead of us if we’re going to go tomorrow.”

She solemnly nodded in agreement, laid her hand on my shoulder and gave it an unforgettable squeeze. As she looked into my eyes, I wondered if she knew it was all a charade. Did she know I was lying and appreciate my playing along? Or had she really believed we would leave in the morning? Either way, I only hoped that she had gotten some measure of comfort out of the pledge I broke before I made it.

Next month, I will pack my car with a few changes of clothes, my laptop, some books, and my cameras. I will drive for about six hours until I see the sign for Menominee. I will only pass through on my way to somewhere else, but I will find the remains of the town center and look around for what might have once been a department store. I might park; I might get out of the car. I don’t know.

But I do know that whatever day it is when I get there, it will be a day to remember.

Bad Skin

Jerene-Elise Nall

My senior prom was a bust. I bought, with money earned from working a relatively degrading part-time job as a shampoo girl, two tickets to the prom at eighty dollars apiece; one was for myself, and the other was for my date. My date took his ticket and my best friend to prom. I took my ticket and went alone, dolled up and inwardly resentful.

I was eighteen, and recovering quite remarkably from a battle with cystic acne. I was all the more shining and smooth in the face from the fight, which lasted the better part of my junior year in high school.

Although I went to senior prom minus one date, I managed to leave plus one. I wore an electric blue dress constructed from rayon and tulle sometime in the 80's, which I purchased off of Ebay for thirty-eight dollars. I spent the rest of the money I had saved for an expensive dress on my first tattoo, which I wore much more proudly than I wore my coveted vintage dress.

And now, five years after I thought I had beat it for good, my acne is back. I am almost 22. The first crop of zits as a junior in high school had lasted just shy of a year, but it had, by some miracle of harsh chemicals and feeble, misguided prayer, cleared up before senior prom. The medicines prescribed by my dermatologist had worked, but the pills, which I was to take twice daily, had hurt my stomach the entire time. I took them anyway and chased them with bland food and gallons of water. Looking nice was my first priority; the health of my stomach lining was, for better or for worse, much lower on the list. After all, nobody could see my stomach lining.

After I had done my time imprisoned by cystic zits as a teenager, I thought I was in the clear. As is the case more often than not, I was wrong. Acne hit me again, quite hard and quite mercilessly, during my second year of college.

I saw a local DeKalb doctor by the name of Dr. Budz, who explained that hormones were to blame and that he'd do

what he could. He prescribed me the latest strain of FDA-approved cream. The topical treatment dried out my skin and made it flake off around the zits in whitish haloes of crust, making the reflection of my face even more difficult to look at in the unforgiving florescent light of my tiny bathroom.

"Give it time," Dr. Budz told me. "It will improve. Your skin must get worse before it gets better."

Even worse than the flaking, however, were the side effects that the first round of prescription pills caused in my body.

These pills, which were some breed of amoxicillin, wreaked even more havoc on my system than those that had tore my stomach lining to acid-eaten bits my junior year of high school. To avoid the digestive upset caused by these earlier experimentations with swallowable acne-fighting antibiotics, Dr. Budz had (unbeknownst to both him and myself) prescribed a medicine to which I later had a horrible allergic reaction. It happened to rear its blotchy, burning head while I was fooling around with the pretentious owner of a well-groomed beard and listening to some unbearable strain of noise rock on vinyl at his vegan-friendly abode in Jefferson Park. I first mistook the burning sensation between my legs for some strange manifestation of desire brought about by marijuana and the drone of those indecipherable records, until I looked down and noticed the raspberries of an embarrassing rash that had materialized suddenly along the seams of my pale skin.

The train ride to Elburn from Jefferson Park is close to two hours; the drive to DeKalb from Elburn, about twenty minutes. When your crotch and armpits are inexplicably and ceaselessly burning, however, it feels more like twenty-two hours and twenty minutes. I spent the train ride half-stoned and twitching noiselessly in my sticky pleather Metra seat, and the car ride scratching myself shamelessly

and swearing, with the windows wide open to let in the cold air.

By the time I arrived back at my apartment on Greenbrier, my throat was beginning to swell. I immediately took an ice-cold shower, and another after that, and phoned Dr. Budz. It was during that panicked conversation that we both realized I had what appeared to be a relatively dangerous allergy to the medicine he had prescribed.

He told me to counter the reaction with a heavy dose of Benadryl, and to drink plenty of water, and to immediately cease further consumption of the medication. We scheduled an appointment for later that week.

Needless to say, continuing with the amoxicillin was out of the question. The only other viable option was minocycline, the medicine that had made my stomach burn mercilessly years earlier, but Dr. Budz and I agreed that stomach pain was, at the very least, easier to counteract than an allergic reaction, and therefore the better and safer option. So, my stomach hurt for a long time, but my skin was, after a few months of pill-popping and cream swabbing, clear again.

I enjoyed the recovered clarity of my complexion immensely. I hardly wore makeup. It was all very liberating. I felt like I had years earlier, before I had even begun to know the shame that a pimple could cause, back when people used to compliment and even envy my skin.

Once, during those glowing days of youthful, unblemished cheeks and forehead, even before the pizza-faced pain of my junior year of high school, I had gone with my best friend to visit her wildly and stupidly hip love interest at his unsurprisingly bland place of work, our local Bed Bath and Beyond. He looked misplaced there; a slender, dark creature that floated like a shade among the bright bedding while seeming to leak avant-garde all over the cheap, shiny linoleum floors. Outside of work, he often dressed in drag.

Upon meeting me, he had stroked my cheek. "You have the skin of an angel," he said to me in a lisping whisper, raising one thin eyebrow and dragging one pale, polish-tipped index finger slowly down my blushing face. He had followed my jaw line to its conclusion, stopping just shy of the cute though somewhat cartoonish dimple in the center of my chin.

"Nice meeting you, too," I said, taken aback and slightly

alarmed by his cool, uninvited touch. From that point on, I found myself actively avoiding him in any and all social situations, making it a point to leave before he arrived and arrive after he had left.

I was extremely relieved when, a couple of years and a couple of affairs later, my best friend made it clear that she was no longer interested in him.

"Forget Omar. He was sort of weird anyway. He wore a lot of makeup," I said.

I don't think she saw him stroke my cheek in the middle of Bed Bath and Beyond over two years prior to her renouncement of the guy, but between the time he had stroked my cheek and the time he had finally hurt Mary's feelings for the last time, he had done enough damage to her and to a handful of other friends for us to both be repulsed by him without any of the added weight of the guilt that sometimes rises in cultivating an unwarranted dislike for someone. But for me, it had always been (and always will be) the basically harmless and arbitrary cheek-stroking incident that cemented my distaste for Omar.

Not long after that, my zits sprang up from the flowerbeds of my cheeks and forehead like unchecked, pus-filled dandelions, and I have always wondered if perhaps he had sensed me recoil at the touch which he surely meant to be oddly charming and had cursed me somehow. I realize how silly that sounds, but when a tall, dark man wearing red lipstick strokes your cheek in the middle of Bed Bath and Beyond, it's only natural to come away from the encounter feeling a bit out of sorts.

When, only a few months later, partway into my junior year of high school, my breakouts started, I hadn't been too worried. I had been blessed with a peaches-and-cream complexion my entire life; I figured my time as a pock-marked teenager had come at last, and that I would wear my pimples a half a dozen at a time with as much dignity as I could muster, remain calm, and take my minor breakouts in stride. I only began to worry when one morning, upon inspection, I noticed that the swatch of forehead and face that my heavy, darkly dyed bangs usually hid was completely covered in red, bulging zits, looking absolutely pregnant with pus though unwilling even upon applying a heavy force to either side, to release their pressure-cooked

payload of whitish, bacterial goop.

I tried over-the-counter scrubs, creams, and washes supercharged with salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide. I drank more water. I refused pizza and chocolate. The pimples got worse.

One day, at the height of my embarrassment, I walked into my father's bedroom and asked him point-blank, "is it that noticeable?" I had spent half an hour in the bathroom frantically covering them up, with my older brother banging down the door and cursing me for having set up camp in the bathroom yet again. I was already on the verge of tears.

"From far away, no. No one will notice," my dad said. I ducked out of the room crying and my day no longer went as planned. He was just being a father; he didn't know how much I hated how I looked.

"We will get you in to see the dermatologist," he said, when he finally realized how much I had begun to loathe myself entirely, for my hate had moved far beyond my skin. "They will fix it. It isn't that bad."

That week, I visited the dermatologist, who diagnosed me with a condition that he referred to as acne vulgaris (a cringe-worthy diagnosis, indeed), also known as cystic acne (he had topped the ruins of my ego with that cherry of an alternative, as if it would somehow make the diagnosis sound a little less ugly; it didn't). He took pity on my crusty, hopeful face and wrote me out a few prescriptions, which we tacked on the bulletin board in the kitchen to counteract our family history of forgetfulness.

"Acne vulgaris?" my older brother laughed and read one of the Rx papers out loud as he walked through the kitchen, munching on a greasy taquito. "Your skin is vulgar!" I told him to shut his nasty trap, that his skin was vulgar, and for that matter, everything else about him was, too. He didn't care, because he was a twenty-year-old boy at the time, not a teenage girl; clear skin wasn't something everyone had told him he needed.

And now, as a woman in my twenties, my skin, after giving up the minocycline against doctor's orders, is vulgar once again. I'm no longer the self-loathing, petulant teenager I once was, and the state of my skin is not nearly as painful now as it was then, but it still bothers me. As much as I will it not to, it still matters.

"I don't see it. I think you are beautiful, and I don't see one pimple," my boyfriend told me when I asked him if it made me any less attractive. But I see it.

I wash my face two, sometimes three times a day. I scrub and rinse and moisturize. It keeps getting worse. I know that soon, it will be very bad. Soon, I will have a hundred-year breakout. I can feel it under my skin; it itches and crawls like some tiny species of weird beetle.

"If people are judging you by your skin at this age," my roommate said to me one evening when I was particularly sulky, "they're not acting like adults. People aren't looking at your skin, now. Maybe in high school they did, but not now. They're looking at you."

I know that's true, but I still burn my face with chemicals every morning and every night. I wear makeup more often than I'd like to. I apply it in the morning, and then reapply it in between classes. I cover my face first with moisturizer (enriched, of course, with salicylic acid), then foundation, and then powder. Then, I cover it with my hair. It makes my face sweat. I'd like to pull it back, but the thought of doing so makes me a little nervous still. I don't let many people see my skin the way it really is.

Only now, I don't take pills, though I've considered getting more. I could go see Dr. Budz again. My acne is, after all, vulgar; he'd agree and write a prescription, which I would have filled and begin taking the same day. It wouldn't be hard, and it probably wouldn't cost much, either.

But I haven't gone back, and I don't think I will.

I'm still insecure. I still have bad days, and sometimes I want to fill the bathroom sink with salicylic acid and dunk my entire head into it when I look in the mirror and see that my face is spotted and splotched with yet another litter of bumps and scars. I still stay up past my bedtime occasionally, carrying out mildly panicked rituals involving masks, steams and scrubs that, in some corner of my sleep-deprived brain, are absolutely crucial to perform for the health and beauty of my skin and will most definitely eradicate my acne.

But the difference now is that, after my minor meltdowns

surrounding the state of my face, I can put down the tweezers and the Clearasil, take a step back from the bathroom mirror and say, "What the hell are you doing? Stop torturing yourself over this."

When I was younger, I couldn't do that. I had to drag myself through those painful, obsessive skin care rituals without being able to even fathom, much less see the truth that's always been right under my blackhead dappled (though relatively pretty) nose.

There are tons of ways to be beautiful that don't require perfect skin; there are so many that I haven't discovered them all yet. But I have discovered enough of them to get by, at least for the moment.

Smile often. Be kind to others. Focus only on what you can fix, on what you do have control over. Flaunt what you've got, and never try to hide what you fear people will see, because I can almost promise you that they will end up seeing it even more quickly that way.

Simply put, do the types of things that beautiful - truly beautiful - people do, because the people that hide behind, and eventually become nothing but, a nice-looking surface with nothing beneath but a shallow vat containing the sludge of an underdeveloped sense of self are more vulgar than my skin, your skin, or anyone else's bad skin could ever be. It's common knowledge that, if left untreated, a vulgar heart caused by a mean spirit spun from fear of the world beyond comfort zones, and a shallow mindset born out of a failure to explore what life really has to offer, can and will kill you slowly from the inside out. And I can tell you first hand: even the most vulgar skin, if left untreated, can strengthen a person from the outside in.

Waiting

Jessica Volkering

All I remember is Nana answering the phone with a voice that was both stern, yet quivering. She went only a few feet into the adjoining living room off the kitchen, where my brother and I were sitting. She listened to whoever drew the short straw that morning at the hospital tell her the unbearable news. Even in the face of death, her angelic qualities showed through; she told the man or woman "Thank you" at the end of their conversation and hung up. Imagine, thanking someone for informing you that you have breast cancer! She turned to Grandpa, tears already streaming down her face, and said, "It's cancer, Daddy". Whatever happened before or after this moment that day is blurred together. I know I called my mom from my car on the way home to tell her, but even that seemingly significant phone conversation escapes me. My family has all kinds of cancer in it: breast, brain, ovarian, prostate, you name it, we've got in on our tree, but I'd never given it much thought until Nana was diagnosed.

I felt the need to cry, compelled to cry. The situation seemed to call for it, but the tears would not extricate themselves from my suddenly wide eyes. I wasn't even conscious of scratching my chest when the little thing jumped out at me. I set the book down I had only just begun to read and picked up a piece of paper. Maybe if I wrote down what I was feeling, what I actually felt, how I was supposed to feel might follow. Those damn doctors! I already told them a year before where the tumor was, but they clearly had not felt the need to listen. They told me swollen ducts were common during women's menstrual cycles but I was not on mine. I think that's why it was so overlooked years ago. Suddenly, exhaustion swept over me. I could no longer think of anything; my mind was possessed by my inevitable fate that was soon to ensue. I should have made those appointments. Well, too late now.

Even as they stood there weeping, embracing, I could

not fully comprehend what was happening around me. All I could manage to piece together was Nana...crying...hugging...I went over to her hesitantly and put my arms around both her and my grandpa. I think she forgot I was there, because she looked almost surprised when she saw me. I want to say I consoled her but I can't remember. I just know my brother and I were ushered into my car and sent on our way with a first-hand experience that was likely to infect anyone that came into contact with it.

I was in the shower when I felt it, the little bump that would change my life. I was living in the freshman dorms and the community shower on the all-girls floor was something you wanted to get in and out of quickly. I remember standing under the water flabbergasted. I didn't think something like that could happen to me. My fibro adenoma, otherwise known as a benign tumor that I hadn't even noticed, was in my right breast. The little lump I found in bed unconsciously remains in my left; this is the one I found a year ago. I hadn't noticed the tumor literally five times the size of the other one in my left breast because I was so preoccupied by it, I didn't think to check my right. How foolish I must have looked to the doctor who gave me a breast exam the morning following my discovery.

"Do you feel that? It's pretty small but it's there."

"I'm more concerned about this one."

"Holy shit! I hadn't even noticed it!"

Over the next couple weeks, x-rays, ultrasounds, and an unpleasant biopsy determined I did not, in fact, have cancer. I was advised to get the tumor in my right breast taken out, however, because it was growing and would have severely distorted my breast had I not. My other lump had not drawn such attention, and essentially was either overlooked, or ignored entirely. Everyone was preoccupied by my big lump, even me. The biopsy was the most unpleasant experience of my life, but don't tell my mom that.

I will never forget the look on the nurse's face. She knew what procedure she would be assisting in that day, but she hadn't known how old the patient was; she wasn't expecting an 18-year-old. I stayed awake the whole time; they just numbed the area surrounding the tumor. I laid on my back with my head turned left and stared at a screen that showed what they were doing. The gun that removed sections of the fibro adenoma had a thick needle with a core in it; every time they took a sample, which was 7, was tormenting. I couldn't feel the sections being cut from the tumor, but I could feel each shutter from the gun against my breast. My mom sat behind me in a chair and though I never saw her, I knew she was crying. I remember a single tear leaking from my eye and I thought, "What a cliché." I always turn to humor in situations that make me uncomfortable.

The months following her diagnoses meshed together. They caught it early; stage one, the best (ironically) to have. I think this was when my faith in God really started to waiver. I cursed him for treating someone so kind and selfless so poorly, and demanded he take this ailment from her. Though she is, for now, cancer free five years later, I am almost ashamed to say my faith is still wavering. Nana had a mastectomy and was lucky enough to evade chemotherapy and radiation. I remember visiting her in the hospital after she had it done; seeing her so weak but so resilient melted me. I started hyperventilating and had to sit down before I passed out. Her close encounter with death only makes my impending confrontation seem that much closer.

Nature vs. Nurture

Kirsten Grimes

My father would pick me up from preschool during naptime. I was such an anxious child, afraid of my own shadow and obsessed with pleasing everyone around me. I could never sleep by all those kids, I would cry and cry until one day my teacher finally told my dad that I was upsetting the other kids, and I never had to stay for another naptime again. He'd walk into my classroom like Superman, scoop me up in his arms, whisk me away to his office just down the street, and I would be in heaven. His secretaries were always so nice to me, so patient. My father is an architect, and there was nothing I loved more than watching him sit at his drafting table and draw. He would let me dig through boxes of sketching supplies and play with his old blueprints. I would unroll them across the floor and try with such concentration and effort to mimic the perfect lines his hands had created. On the very best days, my father would take me to his job sites and show me his incredibly beautiful buildings brought to life. The smell of drywall and wood shavings still brings me to a place of peace and serenity. He'd let me hammer a nail, wear a hard hat, and walk around with his clipboard while the construction workers laughed as I pretended to be the boss.

My parents did not get married until I was four. They were high school sweethearts, but when my dad went away to college, my mom ran off with a man named Jeff to Wyoming and got pregnant. She came home soon thereafter, and moved in with her mother. No one knew she was pregnant with me until eight months in. They say when a woman wants a baby so bad she can mimic the symptoms of a real pregnancy. Apparently the opposite is also true; when a woman is in such deep denial, her body will not adjust to make room for her child. There are no smiling pregnancy photos of her, no paper maché castes of her belly, and she was the only person to ever feel me kick.

I was born with a broken collarbone. In my baby pictures,

I look like I have a little chicken wing because the doctors had to pin my arm to my other shoulder. My grandmother and my uncles were present for my birth, and my father soon followed. My parents love to tell the dramatic story about how my dad was on an airplane about to take off for a business trip when he got the call that my mom was in labor and had to stop the pilot and get off. I can only imagine the disbelief he must have felt running through the airport, considering he had no clue my mother was pregnant. I'm not sure how much of that story is true, but it's one of my favorites and I love to believe it. Who doesn't want to picture their father sprinting down the runway of some airport desperately trying to meet his bouncing baby girl?

I don't remember being told that my dad was not my biological father. My parents saw some professional to find out the best way to tell me, so it had always been something I just knew. It has been such a powerful force in my life, knowing someone loved me so much the moment I came into this world, with absolutely no obligation, even after all the pain and hell the woman who created me had put him through. It is a love I will never understand: unconditional, non-judgmental, and often undeserved. The contradiction between being wanted so badly by my father and so little by my mother has haunted me my entire life. I think he has always tried to make up for the lack of attention I received from my mom. Her indifference infuriated my father and therefore he showered me with love. She didn't know what to do with me, so most of the time she stayed away. When she was around, I knew to mind my own business. Her moods were impossible to predict, and I was constantly afraid of being caught in the crossfire of one of her breakdowns. I was this life that needed and wanted and cried and yelled, and frankly, took up too much space. When she was gone, an emptiness built up inside of me that I tried to fill with perfection. Perfect grades, perfectly

clean room, perfect body. I thought that maybe if I could become the ideal daughter that she would wake up and realize that she needed me as much as I needed her.

Sometimes she would let me sit in the bathtub and watch her get ready for an evening out with my father. I never saw someone so beautiful. Her hair was magnificently long, down to the middle of her back, and as thick as wire. I would watch, mesmerized, as she twirled each gorgeous auburn strand around her curling iron, until smoke would start to rise. Soaking until my toes and fingers pruned, I'd stare at the absolute art form that was applying her makeup, each stroke so planned and perfect. She would look at me in the mirror and wink, then blow me a kiss. Her perfume smelled like lilies, soft and delicate. When she was done she would come to the tub, wrap a warm towel around me, lift me out of the soapy water, and kiss me on the lips, leaving her bright red lipstick behind. I would stare at myself with her mark left on me, praying I would one day be so beautiful.

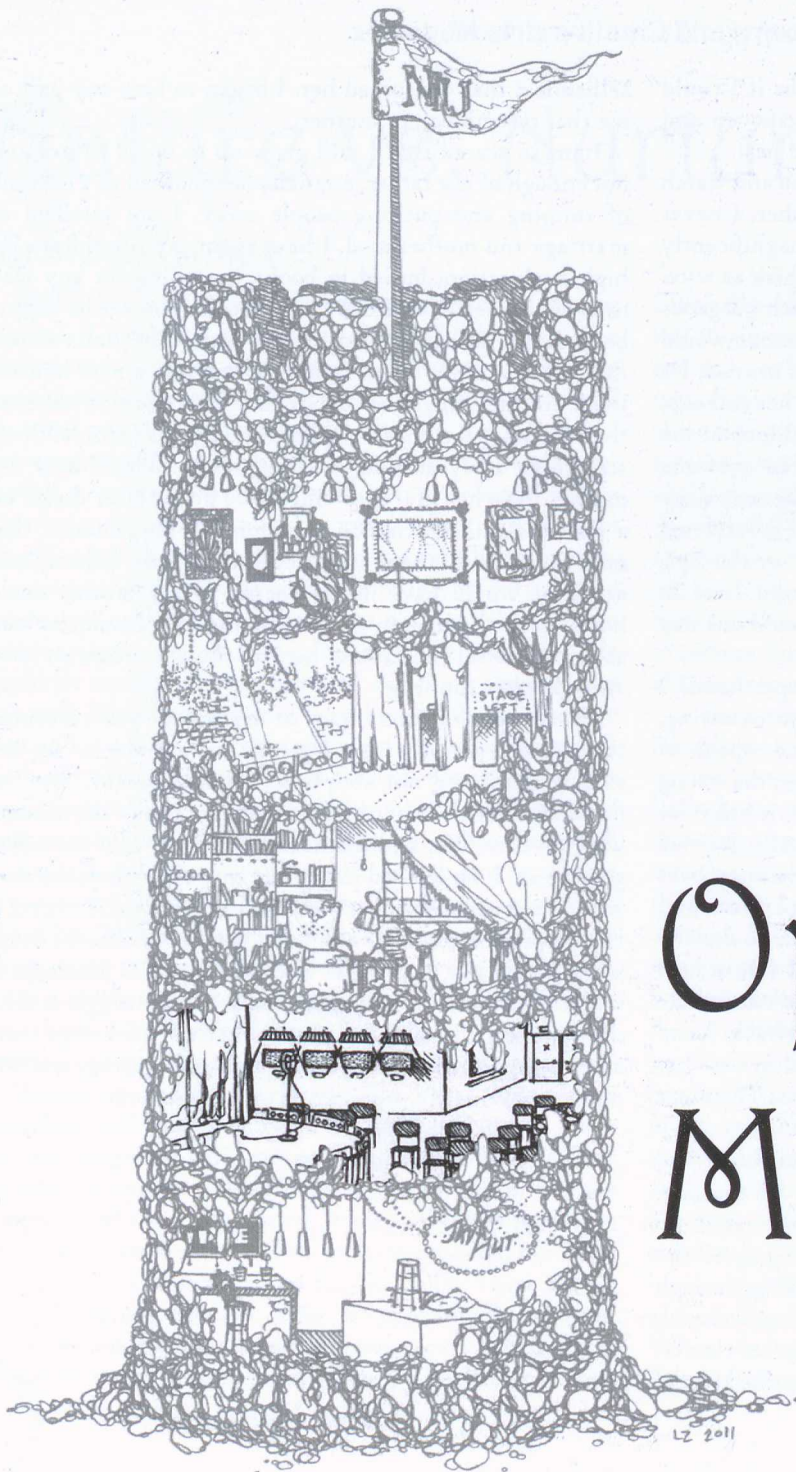
Nature vs. nurture, which one has the upper hand? I love my mother. She is a force of nature: intoxicating, beautiful, and deeply passionate, but violent and capable of irreversible damage to those who dare to cross her the wrong way. As a child, I overcompensated for her erratic behavior with my obsessive compulsiveness. I eventually learned that I would never reach perfection, and my anxiety over this consumed the majority of my adolescence. Now as I grow, I see more of her in me. I have a tendency to destroy good things in my life, especially good men. I fall in love quickly and out even faster. I seek out men who remind me of my dad, kind and good to the core, but inevitably I end up bored, and I run. After each failed relationship I see her staring back at me in the mirror, blowing a kiss. The more I fight her, the more she consumes me.

My parents got divorced when I was seventeen. I had spent so much of my childhood afraid of her leaving me, but when she finally did, I was relieved. With her out of my life, I could breathe. She had this way of taking up all the oxygen around me. In her presence I was walking through smoke, holding my breath and keeping my eyes closed. When she left, I put the fire out and started to see clearly. Instead of wanting to impress her, I became repulsed by the

selfishness that consumed her. I began to hate any part of me that resembled my mother.

I am so scared that I will grow up to be all of her and not enough of my father, eternally condemned to a lifetime of running and pushing people away. I am terrified of marriage and motherhood. I have spent my life thirsty for higher education, buried in books, searching for any way to avoid domesticity. I can't say that she'll never be happy, because she is happy a lot of the time. She finds a new thrill, a new man, a new hobby, a new job, a new house... these are the things that excite her. There is this old man that is always sitting on the floor in Casey's General Store scratching away at dollar lottery tickets. That's how my mother lives her life; throwing away dollar after dollar on a one in a million chance at happiness. I wonder, if that man saved up all the money he spent on lotto tickets, how much he would have in his pocket. If my mother could have learned to look in the mirror and love herself as well as the beautiful life around her, maybe she wouldn't have spent her life running.

I have spent the better part of my college years learning to forgive my mother. As I get older I am able to see her as a woman, and not simply as a failed parent. She has flaws that I will never understand, but she is the woman who gave me life, and the need for her to want me never goes away. I am blessed in the fact that my father, the man who raised me without any obligation to do so, is my rock. He keeps me grounded and pulls me back from the ledge when I feel like my world is exploding. His kindness is unmatched by any I have ever known. My struggle is with the genetics. The blood that runs through me comes from a volcano; powerful, dangerous, and unforgiving, and I'm not yet convinced I won't erupt at any moment.



Open Mic

Isolated Insolence

Connor Rice

Student bodies will suffice
as meaningless sacrifice
for selfish violence;
a weak compliance with antiquated urges.
More bullets than teachers,
less thought than preachers
to call out the creatures
that watch from the bleachers
and wait for their turn to burn in newsprint,
recognized;
immortalized.
Humor has been weaponized.
Jokes hang dead in the air
like their topics.
But we can't face another day where blood runs red,
skies run grey,
tears run fast.
So, we run away.
Laughter cuts some
like the gunfire it "warrants."
Abhorrent, really.

But what can you expect?
Tied down by finances,
GPAs
and romances.
Counting bodies like the classes
until graduation
is a major frustration
for spectators spent
like the shells on the ground.
The "isolated incident"
is so commonplace,
that I have to
smile
to keep the frown
off my face.

Inner Lantern Split Jade

Emily Ann Wilkins

So in love

One minute sure

The next, doubt

Never sure what is good or bad

Road signs are passed without notice

Everything slips away

Then comes back retaliating

Nothing is right

Yet everything is right

Explosion of intensity that never leaves

Unexpected tenderness that melts the soul

Fear prevents baring it openly

Bold and brave when indecisive

Reason yet to be discovered

Touch has a whole new meaning

Crying doesn't mean sadness

But effervescent joy

Incandescent love

Brad Churchill

Endeavors can no longer be numbered, becoming
transitory, inconsequential

Right step, wrong step, a step

Out there, in here, not knowing where

Attempting, a tempting cancellation

Pages flipped, run, don't run, it does matter

Distaste for a seemingly necessary belonging

Finding reassurance within unknown sound

Comfortable, not comfortable, more comfortable

Ripped by a call for concentration in multiple vicinities

Enjoyment is something to be intensely and constantly
explored

One's confirmed suspicion being dealt with

The search is everlasting

Knowledge? Interest? Gratification?

Hoping this is the correct road

Discovering strictly, what is wanted?

Filled with difference and indifference

Sifting, just sifting



Stained Glass

Linze Griebenow

My frustration grows
We sit here in the dark
Motionless
Except the bubbling of numbness
The inhaling of paralyzers
That we're so prone to crutch upon
I wanted to talk tonight
My tongue pregnant with confession
Overdue, underdue, overdone
But you didn't read my notes
I plastered them all over my face
All over the words I didn't say
The looks I didn't give
The touch I never laid upon your hand
I was greeted with stained lips instead
Common place now
No judgment attached
But clear disappointment and deep silence
Pervaded the space around my head
And left the air thick
With my overt display of brattiness

Over the subject
Terry with me
If no other time but tonight
Terry with me
Rather you invite me over
A gesture I knew would be offered
Part of the scheme that lurks in my gut
The guilt of success cramps
Promise not to bother
You don't
But you do
Walls rebuilt
I think I'll go home
For good
Change my address to a location
Even I can't find

Pre-She

Jerene-Elise Hall

sometimes i
miss my loneliness

my loneliness had
order; it was
she who added cleanliness
she who added light and loveliness
it was she, who like the sun over Siberia, rose

to greet me upon waking, walking miles
along my bleak double-mooned horizon
to meet me where the ocean and the sky
came together and flat-lined

and now as if running to meet her
in my flat backyard
the breeze wafts
freely thru our linen sheets

the clothesline is hidden as its
ghosts bob and weave
and the wind loves her as
she loves me

but sometimes i miss
my loneliness

it smelled of nothing
and had no color

An Hour a Day

Ashley Lee

Walk--
Walking. No march--
Marching.
To the beat;
Beating.
Hear the Cadence--
Pulsing--

Life:
The eagle, globe, and anchor--
Retired
Marine.

She sits staring; waiting miserable--hour after hour, confined to a
bed on wheels.
Stark and swift are her nurses in action. They have no time to
chat.

Bum bum bada-da-dum
Da dada-dum-da
Bada-da.

Looking up--looking in
Touch on the cheek
Brush down her arm
Stroke of his face
And fingers link.

Glorious

Jared Moore

In the twilight of opposing desire, coarse
Is the man who feeds upon the heart
Of his fellow. Ideas of truth and warm
Tidings fall to anguish at the beat
Of war drums cascading down hills of blood.
Let all men hear the sound of their terrifying music!
At night, I hear the battlements aflame with music!
Roughened men gather 'round and sing coarse
Songs, offering up sacrifices of spilt blood
To their gods of war. An unforgiving heart
Is theirs, thumping in rhythm to the beat
Of feasting vultures' wings, on a day so warm.
For who can count the number of warm
Mothers forced to hear the funeral music
Time and time again? The furious beat
Of death's cold stare grinds coarse
Against the tender strings of the heart
Of each soldier, waiting to spill their last drop of
blood.
The sky turns red with the drip-splatter of blood
As the murderous descent of destriers warm

To the plains. In preparation, the heart
Spikes, and the glorious hum of music
Begins again! Powerful is the sound of coarse
Swords slashing and shields cracking in steady beat.
But all glory to the man who can beat
Them all! He follows the beautiful trail of blood,
Created from his magnificent weapon. Coarse,
He treads the ground and counts the warm
Corpses left dead by his orchestration. His music
Soothes his own, but cleaves all others' hearts.
For who can stand against him? His heart
Stands alone! The tumultuous beat
Bears down on the remaining men and music
Pours forth from victorious throats. Blood
Drips from open wounds and warm
Songs spring forth from an arena so coarse.
The music of battle is found in the victor's heart.
So purely coarse, it offers no regret. The beat
Of his blood is proud, never to grow warm.

The Rose

John M. Price

Amid the blossoms on the hill
A rose outshone the rest
Redder than flame and petals soft
To eye or hand a beauty far the best.
Sunrise paled and perfume staled
When her glory they reflect
Such grandeur brush cannot contain
And no poet could suspect
'Twas the strength within not the glow without
That held her firm and fair
The beauty for gaze was fragile enough
Like a vision dreamt then tossed
The storm did come, and the wind did blow
And every petal was lost
The stem did bend, but did not break
The roots were deep, and her soul was bold
The rose stood on as bare as stone
No outward beauty to behold
Through countless ages, conflict, and blood
Oft warriors have sought
For one, one tenth the courage with

This stalwart blossom fought
For 'twas the strength within not the glow without
That held her firm and tall
With time your infants bare their own
With time a heart will mend
And so too the rose did bloom anew
Her petals shone again
But not the red that topped the flame
No, now golden as the sun
Like angels sweet and music dear
Her warmth had just begun.
All eyes beheld and lips remarked
"Far fairer than before"
For strength within not glow without
Marks true beauty more.

My Goddess

Michael Schmidt

My Muse above

Hear my cry

Speak on my behalf

So my words can fly

Oh, Goddess of mine

Torment me not

End this suffering

Of eternal rot

Relentlessly you prey

Like Actaeon the cursed

The hunter now the hunted

I stomach the ache

Give up on you

I say to myself

Your sophistry, lure, and innocence

Oh, how it drives me so

Aphrodite the allurer

Seduced by your call

Infatuated with you

My Goddess of deceit

Never will I let you go

Never will I pretend

Never will I hunt again

Never will the obsession end

The Trade

Jennifer Rocky

(Why do I always come back Here?)

Here reeks of stale intercourse;
scents of dead fish and rotting meat
fill my bleeding nostrils.

There is no bed to lie upon;
just dirty streets lined in icy bricks.

Clammy flesh towers over me.
“Don’t!”--a short-lived thought.

Here drips wetness from
semen, sweat, saliva, sewage...

Here converts me to numbness.

Sometimes Here demands silence;
I’m gagged, tied, or orally overwhelmed.

Here also demands vocal sounds:

“I want to hear you scream!”

I quiver out a frail sound.

Scabbed knees from jerking movements.

Hands with reopened crimson cuts
credited to these jagged bricks.

I couldn’t stop him even if I wanted to.

Perhaps I couldn’t stop myself even if I wanted too.

My blond hair, streaked with coagulated semen,
nauseatingly dirty.

Profusely disgusted with myself;
but I know what Here means.

He flings the payment at my feet...

Sometimes a needle filled with delicate nectar
Sometimes a miniature bag of powered heaven.

The Trade takes place Here.

(Oh, that is why I always come back Here.)

The Old Mariner and the Not-So-Old Clerk

John M. Priez

I went down to the wharf to see all the ships,
And I found an old man eating fish and some chips.
He just sat there and chewed and looked barely alive,
And the gulls all thought, "If we wait, we shall
thrive."
He was grizzled and stunk and 'twas hard to tell, son
Where his wool cap left off and his beard it begun.
And I thought he looked cold, and I thought he
looked sad,
And I wondered if life had treated him bad.
Then he coughed, and he wheezed and he hacked up
some phlegm,
And I had my answer right there and then.
So I looked away, and I tried to pretend
That surely he had some kin or some friend.
As I looked away at some tired old ark,
I saw a young man with a smile disembark.
He carried some ledgers, I thought him a clerk.
I thought him many things, like a tight snob and a
jerk.

He saw not the old man, he saw not far nor near,
His eyes were in search of something quite dear.
Without a flare or a signal of sorts
He was attacked by a legion of many cohorts.
It elated his already bright cheery mood,
And I knew in a glance, they must be his brood.
One grabbed his leg, and one grabbed his cuff,
And one small one gave him a bite in the duff.
They would have pulled him right down on the pier,
But the woman arrived and planted some fear.
With a clap of her hands, she laid down the law,
And I thought her the loveliest I ever saw.
The clerk must have agreed for he kissed her quite
hard,
And it lasted much longer than sagas by bards.
They finished their kiss, and they made a mad dash,
And their coach sped away with a flick of the lash.
To their home, I thought, they sang their bright way.
Some place quite warm, and happy, and gay.

And I still thought him tight, and I thought him a
schmuck,

But I had to defer to his own brand of luck.

Then my gaze fell again to the tired old gent

And I found he was staring at me with intent.

And he cleared his throat, of what, I know not,

And he said, "I know what you're thinking, you
snot."

"Why that tired old fool. To be left in his piss.

Where's his child, and his lass, and his epic-long
kiss?"

"No I don't have a home. And I don't have a fire.

And my only friends are those that I hire.

But I've been 'round the Horn, and I've seen the
great gale.

And I've seen men do time in the jaws of a whale.

I've seen terrible, magical, wondrous things,

That your clerk only knows in the songs that he
sings."

"I know what I've had, and I know what I've lost,

And I know my adventures have had a great cost.

So save me your pathos; your well-meant emotion.

My saga's been played on the stage of the ocean.

So please leave me alone, and get on your way,

For I think that I'd like to die this cold day."

With that he curled up and he let close his eyes,

And I did not wait 'round to see his demise.

As I left, I saw him pull up his torn blanket,

And I still wasn't sure if he cursed or he thanked it.

And what about me? What path choice to come?

I knew just what I wanted....a large pint of rum.

Relinquished

Katelyn Sherman

I can still remember it faintly, the beating of my
little but broken heart.

The sky becomes black as velvet, and I am afraid, but
I look to the moon.

Trampling through the corpses lying in this
graveyard,

I dream of somewhere, someplace I use to adore; my
ocean.

Sand between my toes and the tossing of waves
before the nightmare of my cancer.

Now, all I see are crucifixes and the shadows of men
still stalking to murder.

Where is my redeemer to save my lost soul in this
corruption?

Is it fair for the divine to cease the beating of my
heart?

For why has the light disappeared and been
swallowed whole by this cancer?

They say that the light can be sudden, and that only
the righteous ones can view the magnificence.

As I am departed, I would have rather dived sinking
to the bottom of my ocean.

The water is so much more bearable, and I seek no
serenity in this graveyard.

The dead, discombobulated in their uncontrollable
nature, roam this haunted graveyard. I feel as
though they did not deserve their slang of malevolent
murder.

I close my eyes, and I lift my head to the imagery of
my sanctuary, my ocean.

I lurk for the hope deep inside of my motionless
heart.

As I sob in my treachery, I wish I could go back and
battle off my cancer.

All that I am is obsolete, just like everyone else
buried in this damned graveyard.

When the trees are bare here, the branches cringe at
the moon.

I wished for anyone restless to abduct the men who
caused my murder.

Depth can be quite clear that wickedness could never
withstand my ocean.

The rapture of the waves would have swallowed my
cancer.

Euphoria used to radiate in the aquatic and in my
pulsating heart.

I see gaiety no more, but only grim, of the spirits
surrounding this graveyard.

In a perfect state of mind, I could touch the rim of
the moon.

In my memories, my mind will lead me back to my
distant ocean.

In a perfect world, my fate would not have led me to
my murder.

I am and I will always be bounded to this gruesome
graveyard.

The requiem presented by the living will morn, then
I will have to accept
my new reality from the bottom of my little lifeless
heart.

The Gardener

Joshua Green

Garrisons married to politics

On the death bed of freedom

Do unto others, do unto others I shall

Devils in the trenches

Easily deployed

Struggling to ask them

Trying to avoid

Religion, or regret

Of any lost souls

You are the bullets

Using us to fire

Seraphims laughing at Michael's prize

Dragging through the human dirt

Uncovers the red, red daffodils

Cut the weeds

Oh, oh but too deep!

Fertilize, fertilize, fertilize

With blood

They're growing bones here

They're growing bones here

And I am the ground



The Line

Gary Sooter

Group! Attention!

At Ease!

Today I have a lesson for your retention.

You must always keep in mind,

That there is fine line

Between hard and retard.

And you should never cross it.

I won't lie, when the temperature drops I put on a jacket.

I will carry forty pounds of crap in the sack strapped to my back.

But for a clean pair of socks I'll carry forty-one.

I will eat food you wouldn't feed a stray dog.

But I'll be damned if I don't have my salt and pepper.

I will march all day and all night to fight till the battle's won.

But I'll then go a bit further for a comfortable place to sleep.

And I will be there when that sun rises,

Shedding its mid-August heat on the broken, barren desert

landscape,

And I will still be there the same day when that sun sets,

And I will never forget the men and women who gave their lives!

Who gave their lives for what?

These eyes will never forget,

Because these eyes can never forget.

I will suffer sleepless nights as I fight the nightmares

Only to drink myself stupid just to get through the day,

And lie to my family and friends saying

I'm okay.

It's okay.

There's things I can never forget.

But worst of all are the things I can't recall.

In my time I've crossed that line,

But I'll never forget it,

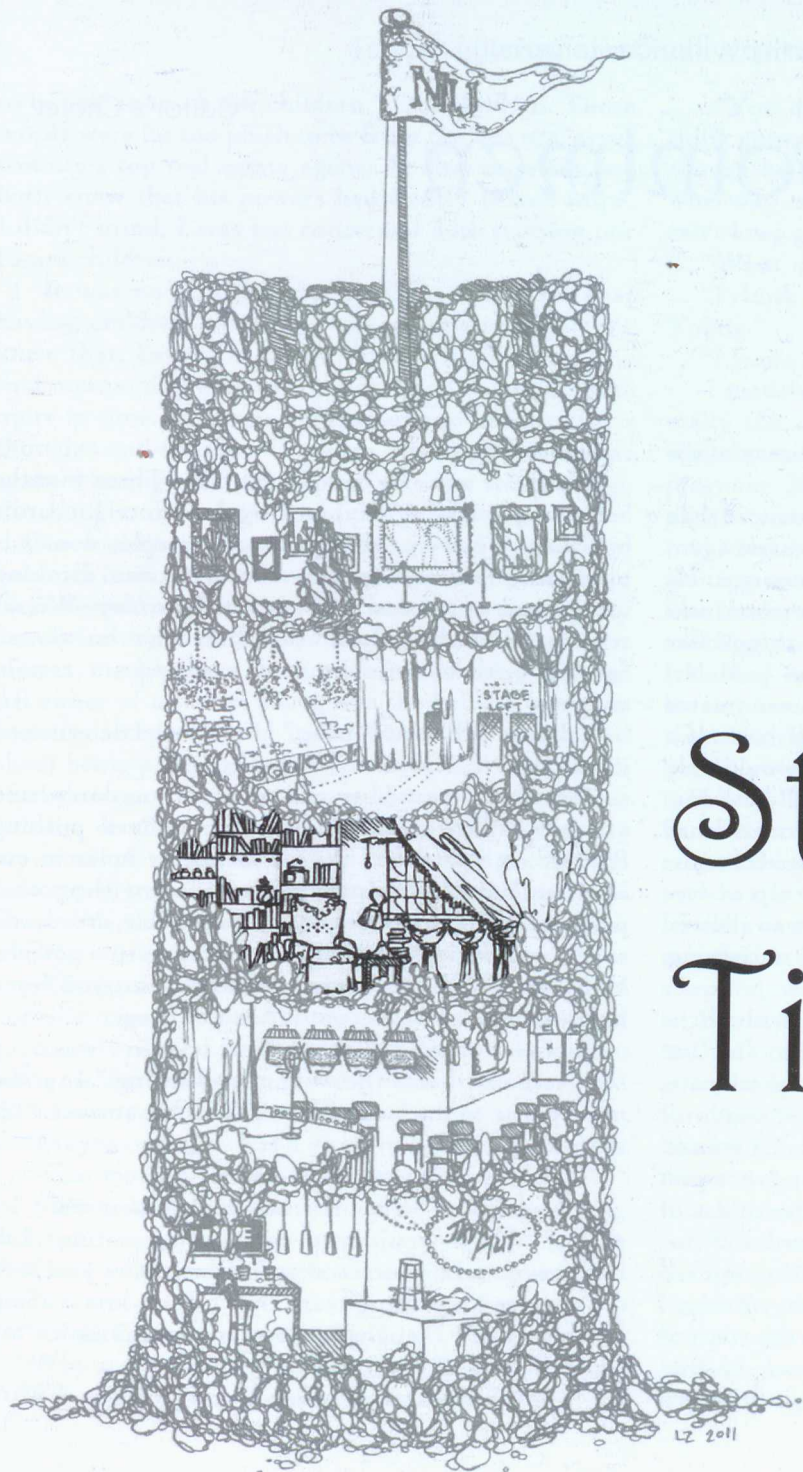
And when the temperature drops I will still put on a jacket.

Venaflaxine 225

Linze Griegenow

And so it begins
When seemingly meaningless nothings
Evolve into day-swallowing fits
Of ill temperament that spiral
Away from everything that they're worth
And yet, this bold, bootstrapped side
Of confidence is all in spite of and serves as an effort to
Defy that which you don't even know
Burdens me to the degree that it does
How unfair for you
How unfair for me
Though still the cyclical properties that I contain
Are limitless in deed and violently repetitive in my life
To the excruciating point that
I cannot bring myself to offer the sensibility
Of good sound, mind, and reason to follow my actions
However, I can procure a thousand miles of justification
That are as dusty, paper thin
As the leg I have to stand on when it comes
To self-honesty and mental regulation
So when I confess:
I'm ashamed of the mirror when it bears
The face that knows these admissions of guilt

And yet remains vigilant and still
Unnerved and numbed to the self-serving
Oppression I order for myself
In the guise of berating you
How truly unfair
That those around me
Listen ignorantly to the narratives and lacerations of
Scathed and skewed perception of reality
Which are of my own particular brand
Such inconsistencies, such lack of continuity
Can surely be forgiven though
By those willing to forfeit the truth of the matter
For the hope there may be unleashed potential
Likened to the folly of all humankind
And it's obsession with deities:
Beautiful figures of false promises
As I am,
I mean it.
Though, it is debatable to the weight and severity
Of what the significance of my word is
To trust me when I pray I mean something
Is to believe the hunger in a lion's eyes
Has nothing to do with you.



Story Time

My Disappointment in My Son

Amanda Kramer

Our wedding day, regretfully, was the climax of the relationship we had planned to last forever.

As a young couple, Richard and I were no more than average, I will admit. He was the top real estate agent in Carver County, and I worked in insurance. He was tall with dark hair and darker eyes, a muskiness following him always. We fought over things like who let the toaster sit out and who paid last for dinner. When I would say that he never treated me up to my expectations, he would call himself a modernist, and warn me that equal rights would only come when women actually wanted them. I'd call him a misogynist, and we would go back to dinner. I had no doubts that the smile, which always stretched its way across his smug and sarcastic, yet sculpted face would one day drive me to insanity. But I swallowed his bite like a shot, and the burn became satisfying, comforting, really.

Back then, I justified our relationship with cliché sayings comparing us to things like fire and ice. "Really," I would say, "we are both so passionate, it's disastrous sometimes"--my desperate words of justification. I knew it. Everyone knew it. Of course, like most women who consider themselves over a past relationship, I have caught myself, in the midst of a weaker moment, looking back at Richard and me, completely hung up on the better times. What a wicked way a woman works, as Richard might say. Truly, I wish I could censor these thoughts, force the truth of our relationship to show itself in its dark entirety. But, my yearning for a fake, happy relationship of the past

can be unforgiving.

Maybe it was not completely fake. Three months before our wedding day, two weeks before Richard's birthday, we were sitting on our purple, donated-by-pitying-family-members couch. I was drinking tea, he had a rum and coke. It was Saturday. We sat separately, but happily. I asked him what he wanted for his birthday present, and expected no certain answer.

"I don't really know, babe." He smiled. I determined it was sincere, and therefore pushed on.

"Really," I paused to add effect. "You don't have anything? That sucks I guess." I enjoyed pushing Richard. It was a way for me to fill the holes in our love, and it doesn't help that once you are with another person, day and night, happy and miserable, drunk and sober, you begin to develop these clandestine powers. You create a channel into their thoughts, you learn how to manipulate an emotion out of them.

Richard turned his face to mine.

"Actually, I was thinking of something." I turned in response to the lack of hostility in his answer. "Ice skates."

That was all it took for me.

"Ice skates? What the hell makes you want ice skates? When would you ever go ice-skating? I've never even seen you ice skate! What, have you been on a secret ice-skating team that I don't know about all this time?" I laughed an attempt to minimize my foul mockery of my fiancé.

"I loved ice-skating when I was younger. I want

to be able to teach our children.” Our children. Those words were far too plush to be from the lips of Carver County’s top real estate agent. At that moment, we both knew that his powers had clearly beaten mine. I didn’t mind, I was too concerned with naming our future children.

It was no untold secret to Richard and me that having children would not save a relationship. We knew that. Everyone knows that. Actually, from the first mentioning of our future children on, we became more in tune. We were sympathetic to one another’s thoughts and feelings. We were interested each other again. Having children did not save our relationship, the thought of having them did. We grew up.

Our wedding day was everything I had wanted it to be--once it was over. A wedding was never something I had desired or fantasized over much, too many petty details for my taste. If I had known what was to come after it, I might have taken the time to enjoy it more. All either of us cared about was the baby it was now socially acceptable for us to have. We fantasized about being pregnant within the first three months of our marriage, that way we could announce it to our families on Christmas. Richard even started cupping my stomach when he hugged me from behind, and I wrapped my arms around myself when I went to sleep. We were beautiful parents-to-be, even without a baby.

Christmas came and passed. It really was an unrealistic goal, we told ourselves, a nice thought, but good news is good news no matter what holiday you tell it on. After Christmas came Valentine’s Day, and then Easter, and finally summer.

“Maybe one of us has a vitamin deficiency.”

“That wouldn’t make a difference.”

“There has to be something we’re doing wrong, Richard.”

“Have you been taking those prenatal vitamins you got?”

“Yeah. Every single morning.”

“Why are you getting pissed at me? I’m just asking.”

“I’m not pissed at you, I’m frustrated.”

“You don’t think I’m frustrated too? You don’t think going to work everyday, listening to people talk about t-ball games and dance recitals makes me sick? The way we’re living right now is unhealthy. We can’t keep guessing like this.”

“What if there is something wrong?”

“I think we should make an appointment with Dr. Young.”

“I guess we have no choice.”

I made up excuses for Richard’s sake, saying that really the reason why we weren’t getting pregnant was the stress we were going through trying to get pregnant. If anything, I would say, the tests would give us peace of mind.

Maybe it was the sterility of the white-walled waiting room, maybe it was the abundance of words like endometrial biopsy and hysterosalpingogram swirling through my head while the doctor spoke, but I blacked out for most of my fertility testing. When we received a call back for the results, we were told to meet the doctor at her office. We walked in holding hands, awaiting our fate.

Surely, Dr. Young said, our problems were common. In most cases, they could be overcome. Really, it was remarkable, our circumstances, she told us. Not one of us was the issue, we both were. With us both having fertility complications, the chances of conceiving were minimal at best. When she handed us a pamphlet on adoption, we knew the reality of our circumstances.

We walked out the doors separately, noses pointed to the floor, hiding our humiliation. A fertility clinic, you would think, should be a haven. But walking through the waiting room we felt the stares of Mother Nature’s other victims, judging us, frantically, desperately, hoping our failure would in some way secure their chances of success.

When you tell a person they are infertile, it is life changing. When you tell a woman she is infertile, it erases her identity. Even though I was not considered completely infertile, it made no difference to me. I could not touch my stomach without picturing a barren, empty cave, inhospitable to any life. It pulled

me out of my shell as a woman. I became a person, just a person.

Richard could not touch me at all. We didn't talk for three days. On the fourth day, one of us mentioned adoption, but it was too late. The final string that tied us together had been pulled. He filed for divorce two weeks later.

Today I am remarried. My husband wakes up every morning, brews a pot of coffee for us to share, writes me an "I love you" on our kitchen chalk-board, and then takes our eight-year-old son, Chad, to school. He works at an insurance agency, the same one I used to work at. That was where we met. His pride is in his family, especially our son. Chad has his father's light, curly hair, and green eyes. He is affectionate, and sympathetic, and gentle, and caring, and amazing. He is everything a mother would want her eight-year-old to be.

But sometimes, when I let my mind wander into the most starkly captivating, disgraceful places, I think of my son having the dark hair and the dark eyes I first fell in love with. I wonder if my love for him is limited, and if he will ever cease to be a reminder of what was, and what could have been.



Mr. Wellington's Missing Moustache

Paul Ramirez

The day began like any other, until Mr. Wellington lost his moustache.

It happened at the Café Pemberton, a cozy spot nestled along Chesnutt and Alleyway. It was a quaint café, dark on the inside, with blue and white striped umbrellas clustered around the outdoor seating. A rusted metal railing enclosed the café, adding to its rustic, charming veneer. Mr. Wellington, on this most unfortunate of days, arrived at the café, as he always did, at precisely eleven o'clock.

He sat down at his usual table, a pleasant spot, facing the peeling brick wall of the neighboring building. With legs crossed, and suit jacket unbuttoned, he unfolded the daily issue of *The Chronicle* and proceeded to smoke a cigarette. After a moment he was supplied with a small cup of black tea and two biscuits. He smiled politely before returning to his paper. Then, the most peculiar of things occurred.

Mr. Wellington took a sip of tea and was immediately struck with the oddest sensation. For a moment, he froze, his head slightly cocked as if in deep thought. Upon his second sip of tea, he almost dropped his cup. There it was again, the strangest sensation! It was a peculiar coolness that tickled his upper lip in a way which deeply vexed him. Finally, he slowly extended the tip of his forefinger to his upper lip. Horrified, he retracted his hand as if he had touched a hot stovetop. His moustache! It was gone!

In disbelief, Mr. Wellington immediately touched again where his moustache should have been to find it indeed missing. Dismissing all sense of gentlemanly

etiquette, he abruptly dropped his newspaper in shock, letting the napkin which had been neatly folded over his trousers drop to the ground. Where could his moustache have gone? He tilted back his saucer and likewise squatted down to lift up the white tablecloth but his search proved fruitless.

"Can I help you?" The voice came from a waitress who had apparently noticed his distress.

"Yes!" he replied frantically, trying his best to remain calm. "I seem to have lost my moustache."

The waitress stared at him, speechless. Then, a hand suddenly went to her mouth. "Oh, dear," she gasped. "Are you quite sure?"

"Quite," he replied, his eyes flicking nervously over her shoulder. An elderly couple who had just been seated cast quizzical glances in their direction. "Were you the young lady who served me a minute ago?" Embarrassment colored his cheeks--in his current state he couldn't even remember his waitress' face.

"Yes."

"Do you remember seeing me with my moustache?"

The waitress' face twisted in reflection as her face grew a faintly darker shade of pink. "I do not believe so." Her words stretched long and thin, and Mr. Wellington knew she couldn't remember either.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," he said suddenly, lifting himself with the haste of a man possessed with worry. "Perhaps I left it at home." The waitress nodded embarrassedly, wishing him luck as he flew from the café.

Mr. Wellington knew, of course, he hadn't left

his moustache at home. That very morning it had rested comfortably upon his upper lip like it had every morning for the past ten years. What he couldn't surmise was how it could have vanished from his lip without his noticing. The only thing he could think of was to retrace his steps. This he did urgently, for who knew what could happen to an ownerless moustache alone in the city. He passed Pontebury Park, the bus station, and even redoubled his search when he arrived at his flat, but still he was unable to find his missing moustache.

Afternoon rolled around, and the September sun began setting behind the stacks of apartments. Shadows crept across the small courtyard, and darkness soon flooded his flat. Consumed with his search, he had forgotten to turn on the lights. He could hear a train in the distance as he collapsed in a rather uncomfortable leather chair. The day had been a nightmare--perhaps he was dreaming. He fancied this thought and thusly went straight to bed.

The next morning, Mr. Wellington arose in bed with his heart beating faster than it ever had. He rushed to the large oval mirror hanging over his dresser and nearly collapsed with dismay after seeing his reflection. A rumbling groan escaped his throat--a noise similar to that emitted by a fatally injured animal. Where could his moustache be?

The disappearance shook him dearly. Without his moustache he felt like a part of him had suddenly been torn away. He dressed quickly as a new idea suddenly came to him. He briskly walked down the street and around the corner as people bustled about their usual morning routines. After a short while he found himself in front of a three-story brick building with large rectangular windows.

"I would like to speak to the constable," he said. He had entered the police station and addressed a stout man who sat behind a rounded reception desk. "I assure you the matter is most urgent."

After hearing about the moustache's disappearance the stout man rose from his seat and motioned for Mr. Wellington to follow. "Right this way," he called,

shuffling down the brown carpeted hallway. They entered a small, brightly lit room, where a haze of cigarette smoke hovered like a storm cloud ready to break. After two or three minutes of waiting, a balding man with a saggy face appeared in the doorway. A cigarette dangled loosely between his lips.

"Mr. Wellington?" he asked, with one eyebrow raised. "I am the station's sketch artist. I hear you have a missing moustache."

"Indeed," Mr. Wellington replied, folding his hands in his lap nervously.

"Are you quite ready to begin?" the man asked. He sat down in the chair behind the desk, and picked up a pencil which he had pulled from his coat pocket. Mr. Wellington nodded.

"Very Well," the man replied. "Please describe, in as much detail as you can, what your moustache looks like."

The question was expected, yet it struck Mr. Wellington quite queerly. He had never particularly examined his moustache before, and now that he was on the spot, he found it rather difficult to describe something so intimate and dear.

"Well," he began, "Typical moustache really--"

"Please, Mr. Wellington, as much detail as you can."

After a little more thought Mr. Wellington replied, "Brown whiskers. Covers up the front lip. Fairly wide. Extends out to the corners of the lip. Whiskers are bristly, a bit spotted with grey--"

"How much grey?" the man asked. "Every detail matters."

Mr. Wellington thought it over. The balding man waited patiently, lighting another cigarette as he did so.

After several minutes Mr. Wellington spoke. "One hundred and four...or so."

"Are you sure?" the man asked.

"Quite so."

After a few minutes the balding man displayed his sketch, much to Mr. Wellington's delight. Of course the shading around the upper whiskers was off, but

it was quite similar to his moustache. With renewed hope Mr. Wellington returned home. Days passed, hours grew longer, minutes slower, and there was still no word of his missing moustache. A depression grew inside him, and like cancer it spread until he felt utterly hopeless. He cast an old tablecloth over the oval mirror in his flat, for without his moustache, he couldn't stand looking at his reflection.

For the next seven days, Mr. Wellington refused to leave his bed. Life without his moustache wasn't worth living. He tossed and turned during the day, barely slept at night, and only ate when his nervous maid implored him. On the eighth day of his voluntary confinement, his maid, Beverly, entered the room as she did every morning, with a silver tray topped with a cup of tea (which he never drank these days) and lightly toasted crumpet. Just when her mouth opened to say good-morning, a scream escaped instead. The silver tray crashed to the floor and Mr. Wellington jumped straight out of bed.

"Ms. Anderson, are you quite all right!?"

The maid nodded her head vigorously, a smile creeping unto her face.

"Sir," she exclaimed, handing him the empty silver tray, "It's a miracle!"

Within its reflection, Mr. Wellington saw the dearest sight his eyes had ever beheld. His missing moustache had returned.

Cicadas

Carrie Forrest

The magicicada cassini, or seventeen-year cicada, begins its immensely long (for an insect, that is) lifespan with an adult female, recently mated.

Adult cicadas are, as far as insects go, utterly harmless. They do not bite, sting, or cause undue threat to vegetation. They are not venomous, and there has been absolutely no evidence of them transmitting any sort of disease. A single adult is an imago; multiples are called imagines, and they are about average-sized for insects.

Adult females will cut v-shaped slits in the bark of young twigs and lay their eggs. After several weeks, the eggs hatch, and the young-- called nymphs-- fall to the ground. Their survival technique against all the numerous predators that enjoy eating them is a technique referred to as 'predator saturation'; there are simply too many nymphs for the beasts of the forest to possibly manage to eat enough to put a substantial dent in the cicada population. Their sole duty, at that point, is to race underground-- as deep as a foot or more-- and feed on the juices of plant roots as they remain completely immobile beneath the loamy soil of the forest.

They also compose possibly the most beautiful poetry in the known universe.

The only human being to discover that was far from human when he did. Due to an argument he found increasingly difficult to defend to himself, he was, in fact, a medium-sized red oak tree.

He had been aware of it when the female cicada had clumsily cut a slit on a new branch of his, but it hadn't exactly hurt-- trees, after all, do not exactly have nervous systems. He was aware that, had he been human, he would never have been able to stop screaming when she laid her eggs. As it was, he noted it with the curious detachment with which trees viewed

themselves. The time until the eggs hatched passed in a sort of dreary blur, mud-colored watercolors dragged lazily across a page, and he felt them drop off and hit the ground around his roots.

Though he was equally aware when they began feeding on his roots, it took him a very long time to realize that they were communicating. Chemical and electric signals to each other, a form of biological telepathy... it was perhaps a year into the seventeen-year cycle before he could understand what they were saying, and tentatively responded.

They reacted to his greeting with slightly confused joy, a swarm of pleasant welcomes and interested queries, and within the week (the conversations were constant, but relatively slow) he was talking to them.

Oh, what a relief-- what a breath of fresh air-- it was after nearly four years, inert and isolated from any sort of sentient being, to talk to someone! Even if the someone was a colony of insects living parasitically off of his roots, they were definitely intelligent, and creative.... they created odes to the dark dampness of soil, short humorous verses to each other, long, sad songs of the future they could not comprehend. His own efforts were less lovely than theirs, clumsier, but they tolerated it with politeness and compassion for their friend, and in time he got better-- still not to even the same level as a cicada neophyte, but certainly good for a human.

They discussed philosophy and the odd state of sentience in which they found themselves, and asked him eagerly about what it had been like to be human-- to walk around in the light and move things with his hands, to taste and smell and see instead of just hearing and feeling. They asked him to identify the sounds of things that moved on top of them, and he tried his best-- a roe deer, a rabbit, a boy and his dog

on a hike. They laughed in delight when he informed them that the sound above them was a pair of humans on a picnic, and expressed wistful longing to try such a thing one day, though they knew they could not.

As years passed, they metamorphosed underground, commiserating with each other over the discomfort of molting to fit their new forms. He found himself able to sympathetically join the conversation, as new growth of bark and leaves left him feeling strange and barren. Still, though, they maintained their sense of humor, making jokes and laughing at them, and with their help he found himself not minding, so much, the indignities that came with being a tree.

Years passed and he grew to love them more than he had ever loved his family. Indeed, he started to think of them as one; as he did they came to bask more in his company and like him more for who he was than his relative novelty. They wrote poetry and song in the strange tune of chemicals, the odd humming thrum of the world above rushing past them as they did, and talked and laughed and sang and, for the first time in his existence, he found himself honestly grateful to be a tree-- after all, if he hadn't been, he would hardly have met such excellent friends.

At the start of the seventeenth year, the atmosphere between them grew slightly foreboding. The cicadas quieted down, to a degree, apologizing for doing so-- "I'm sorry," said one of them ruefully, "I'm just so hungry and tired, for some reason. Maybe it will pass."

It didn't pass, and soon the others found themselves complaining of exhaustion and hunger-- he couldn't feel hunger, anymore, but as they ate he could commiserate with exhaustion. They were apologetic, but he told them to help themselves-- "I hardly need to grow any further, and you need to keep your strength up, if there's something going around."

Things grew increasingly quiet as the year went on, and finally, in early summer, one of them spoke up for the first time in two weeks.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, I think I will go up."

"Up....?"

He felt a deep rustling and murmurs of agreement, until there was a great symphonic hum of chemicals and noise both-- "Up, up, up, up!" The ground rumbled as he, in panicked confusion, pleaded with them to stay. But they were beyond listening, scrambling for the surface. "I think I shall go for a walk," came one last vague signal before there was silence.

It was then that he remembered that the seventeen-year cicada, after dwelling underground for seventeen years, rushes to the surface in a mass exodus of dull exoskeletal grubs-- he felt those who had been his old friends climbing up the bark of his trunk, splitting from their exoskeletons and stumbling out, wetly glistening wings and soft shells not yet hardened, wings still green, and falling clumsily from the branch to land on the ground and wait until they could mate.

It was a several-days long realization that the adult cicada lives for just under a week, mates, and dies.

A great rush of loss hit him square in where his heart might have been, and with a great rush of branches and a horrible keening groan like an old tree falling over, he found himself lying on the ground, human, crying his eyes out and covered with the shed skins of the seventeen-year cicadas.

Purgatory

Bridget Crasø

I worked in Purgatory for three years. As an Agent, I had the most menial job: I completed paperwork for Newlydeads. Name. Social Security Number. Weight. The person signed, I stamped and notarized it. Everyone passed through. Christians, Jews, Atheists, Zealots. It didn't matter who you were or what you believed, we shuffled everyone to paradise.

Except for me.

Lost paperwork kept me from Heaven. If your forms got lost, like mine, you worked off the misplacement. Work hard and you would be rewarded.

And I worked hard. I never messed up. Process fast, get on with the next. People were always waiting. People were always dying and people were always waiting.

A clear separation existed between the dead and the damned. A thick glass wall stood between with a slit big enough pass forms back and forth.

And they could remember. They remembered life and loved ones, who they were and how they died. I didn't.

I couldn't remember anything. I only knew my name, Celia Hervet, and now. A blessing, they told us. Would you want to sit in Purgatory and replay your life? I didn't and I was content.

Giles managed the Agents. His office sat behind mine. If I took a moment, which I never did, I could hear him talking to the Head. The Head managed him--a man who ignored us unless we made a mistake or worked too slow. He wore a dark suit with crisp seams and had a blank face. Make a mistake and those high polished shoes stormed out the elevator and into Giles's office. His face reddened and veins pulsated underneath his white skin. He'd scream and barrage all of us, but mostly Giles, with an endless tirade. We'd sit and submit to it. When he finished, he'd warn that next time, there'd be serious consequences.

During these times, I'd find myself tracing the lines of the tiles of the floor. And then I'd find a shoe. Then I'd catch the hem of charcoal pants. I'd move up the leg to a slate grey

shirt. Five white buttons, a pressed collar, and then eyes. I'd stare and the figure became Giles. We'd meet eyes for a brief second.

We'd look away before anyone noticed, but in those lingering moments, something stirred within me. In Purgatory, you didn't feel emotion. We worked. We didn't remember. I didn't feel anything for him. Not even interest.

It was like a quick smell or a flash of color. It reminded me of something from long ago. Déjà vu. The more I tried to grasp onto it, the more it fell apart, until I couldn't remember what I was thinking about in the first place.

Purgatory. It was a hell of an existence.

His name was Sam. Bits of brown and yellow chunks filled his beard and his clothes hung of his thin frame. He came from the front of the line that snaked through the office. "Is this Heaven?"

"No."

"Do you live like this?"

"We don't live."

He placed a filth-ridden hand on my desk. Blood peered out of the cracks in his hand. He gave off a pungy odor of urine. "How many floors are in here?"

I never ventured outside this office. The Head had to come from somewhere. "What's your social security number?"

His yellow eyes swept the room. "This is boring."

For the first time, I looked through the glass and saw painted white walls filled with plain tan desk. The grey tile flooring sat in straight lines. I smelled stale air. It left a dry taste in my mouth.

"Social security number."

He squinted jaundice eyes. "Why do you need that?"

"To process your death." I blinked. "Otherwise you'll be stuck waiting."

"I ain't waiting." Sam's sneer showed brown sockets of tar and spit instead of teeth. "I didn't live my life waiting. I'm not going to live my death waiting. I'm not going to die."

Story Time

"You don't have a choice."

"Don't you remember your life?"

"No."

Sam slammed his dirty fists. The pound echoed. Newlydeads looked up from the floor. "I'm not ready to die!"

I snatched away his form. My voice stayed level. "You don't have a choice."

"No!" He launched himself across the table and thrust one hand into the hole. His fingers grazed my skin. A spark shot between the two of us. "I'm not ready!"

Sam picked himself off the table. He grabbed the chair hoisted it into the air. My heart froze. The chair soared through the air.

Warm weight grabbed me and yanked me out of my seat just as the chair shattered the glass. It landed with a crack inches from my feet.

Security tackled Sam. A cut covered his right eye. He kept screaming. "I'm not ready to die. I've got time!"

Security dragged him to the elevator. We could hear screams as the elevator moaned to a start. His voice disappeared up the shaft.

"Are you alright?"

I looked to the hands that pulled me back. Giles. "Let's go to my office."

I felt a strange thudding. A faint tapping that started at my toes and ran to my thumbs. It was something new. Something alive.

Giles offered a cup of lukewarm water. "Some people can't accept death." His office was small, just large enough for a desk and bookshelves filled with binders. A single manila folder with worn edges sat on his desk.

"He was set on it." My voice sounded small "What happened to him?"

Giles opened a binder to a random page. "Samuel McEllen. Drug overdose, two weeks ago. He probably wandered around before a Collector got him." Collectors sought the dead and brought them here. Budget cuts limited their staff and we were getting more late arrivals. "It wasn't your fault."

I wanted to say something, but didn't know what. I looked at the floor and ceiling and anything other than him. I still clutched Sam's form. "What should I do with it?"

Giles took it. He smoothed it out and opened the file on

his desk. He looked inside. Warmth came to his face. Not a smile. Just a slight change in color. He shut the folder and placed Sam's form on top.

"I guess I'll get back to work."

Giles stood as I stood. "Don't let him get to you," he said. He held the door open. When I passed, our hands just barely met. My knees fluttered.

I called over my shoulder, "Don't worry, I don't remember much." When I looked back, he was looking at the folder.

Everything was back to normal. I tried to process other Newlydeads, but couldn't think straight. I thought about Sam, but he'd morph into Giles and back again. I'd look up and see a smiling, Heaven-bound Newlydead and couldn't stand the thought of another. I took a break. Giles didn't look up. He was still staring at the folder on his desk.

The elevator was a plain brown room with no buttons. I stepped inside. It jerked to a start, but I couldn't tell whether it went up or down.

Why couldn't I go to Heaven?

The elevator shuddered and stopped. The doors opened to a small room with concrete floors and brick walls.

I stepped out and the elevator slammed shut behind me. The light bulb popped on, creating wild shadows on the floor. A thick slab of metal and a dull brown knob made a door. The black lettering above said "BASEMENT."

I pushed my weight against the door. It budged enough to let me slip in. The lights whimpered on, revealing rows of shoddy aisles of steel cabinets labeled by year and name. 1965 A-Adams. 1972 Jac-Jen. I opened one and pulled out a folder and recognized the form as the one I'd spent the last three years staring at. But underneath were other papers. Health records. A detailed list of hopes and dreams. A chart with accomplishments and failures. And a final sheet, with the single phrase "Admitted to Heaven."

I searched for my year and name. 2008, Hen-High. I flipped through files. Hert. Herten. Hertton. But no Hervet.

My heart twisted.

"Are you snooping?" A sly, old voice asked. A woman with white hair and translucent skin leaned against the cabinets.

"I'm not snooping. I'm looking for a file. Someone misplaced it."

The woman laughed. It started deep in her stomach and

twisted through her throat. "Things don't get 'misplaced' down here. I'm not a government institution." She laughed again.

"If you're missing a file, it's over there." I followed her long thin finger to the back wall. "Unsolvables."

"Thank you." I stepped down the long floor. I could feel the woman's stark blue eyes square on my shoulders like two needle sharp darts.

I found my file. Hervet, Celia. Death Date: August 23, 2008. Cause of death: Blunt force trauma. Slipped in the shower at the Y.

My life, spelled out in black ink and white paper. I poured over the pages of things I'd forgotten. I forgot I wanted to be an exhibitionist when I was thirteen, or that when I was eight, my friend stuck a worm in my ear.

I flipped to the final page. Instead of "Admitted to Heaven" there was this:

Collector: Jan McCullah

Agent: James Giles

Subject unprepared for Heaven. Lost Paperwork. Work as Agent until prepared.

No admission to Heaven. Purgatory until further notice

The strange throbbing began again. I sunk to the floor. My head hurt. I fell to the cool cement ground.

I closed my eyes and remembered.

Three years ago, I hit my head on the floor. Bam. Lights faded in and out. My last thought was, "I really hope my towel didn't fall off." I lay on the freezing tile while the world faded.

A woman with white hair appeared. She helped me up and handed me my towel. She patted my hand and told me there would be no more pain.

She helped me stand. We walked down the halls of the Y, passing people who did not see us. My head no longer ached.

When we pushed through the doors of the Y, we came to a giant atrium. The ceiling soared a hundred feet. Everything was so clean and airy. The warm woman hugged me and told me I was going to Heaven, and directed me to the elevator.

I stood in the elevator. I waited. When the doors opened, I entered a white room with lights buzzing overhead. A security guard told me to empty all my pockets. A man called "next" and I went to his desk.

"Name?"

"Celia Hervet."

Air conditioners hummed. I grew cold. My fingers, in particular, went numb. And my nose. Rigor mortis was settling in, I thought, a silly thought that made a silly smile spread across my face. I tried to focus on what was being said. "Social security number?" Another thought occurred in my head.

"Are you lonely here?"

He looked up. "What?"

"Are you lonely?"

He straightened. "No."

"You look lonely." I smiled again. "You really are cute."

"Thank you." He looked at the paper. Poor guy, I wanted to reach across and hug him. I pushed my arm through the slit and grabbed his large hands. An electric shock passed between us. He lurched back. He took the paper and folded it in half. "You don't need this."

I froze-- my whole body was dunked in ice water. I tried to grasp at the ideas that fluttered into my head.

"I'm sorry," I slurred.

"Why?"

"I think I hit my head."

The world went black.

I opened my eyes and the woman's wrinkles appeared before me. "Fall, did you?"

"Slipped." I struggled to stand and she offered me her hand. It was warm. Heat came pouring back into my system.

The knowledge that I wasted three years of my after-life because of Giles came flooded my senses. I felt rage. I felt sorrow. I felt things I forgot I could feel. I passed the woman and stormed to the elevator. The doors opened automatically and I stepped in.

I wanted to kill him. I didn't know if he could die, but damn it, I was going to kill him.

I went back to Admissions. I saw Giles in his office, rubbing his temples. I whipped the door open. "You!"

"What?" He looked surprised.

"Where is it?"

He knew immediately. "I'm sorry." He handed me the file. I snatched it from him. I opened it and glanced quickly--it was the form I needed.

"Why did you keep this?" I spat.

"It was a mistake." He slid into a chair. "It was a big mistake. When you came in here three years ago, and you smiled at me, I felt—"

"Alive." I answered. "You felt alive."

"Do you know how long I've been here?" He looked up, his eyes showing the wear of an ageless existence. "Fifty years."

My anger faded. He couldn't have been over thirty when he died. I slid against the wall. "Fifty years?"

"I was the hardest working Agent. Do you know how they reward you? More time. More years. More Newlydeads." Giles ran a hand through his slick hair. "It was something new. And I thought...if I kept you here..." He said no more.

"You've been here fifty years? They just keep us here for eternity?"

"Forever."

"This isn't right." I shook my head. "I'm not staying here. I've got everything I need. I don't need to stay here."

"You don't have to." Giles looked at me. I saw the sadness etched there. "You can go."

"What about you?"

"I don't have a form."

"Oh."

We sat in the office, separated only by a glass wall from everyone else. The dead and the damned.

"I can't go back," I whispered. "I've got to get to Heaven."

"What are you going to do?" he asked sadly. "Jump out a window?"

"I don't know. I'll go to the Head. I've got all my paperwork."

Giles stood. "I can't stop you."

"You can come with me."

He sighed. "It's better than nothing."

We went to the elevator. The doors opened and we entered, arms inches apart. I almost reached out to grab his hand.

"When do we get off?" Giles asked.

"It knows."

The door opened to a hallway lined with windows and plush red carpeting. To the left was a plain door with a dull knob. To the right, a grand door with vibrant wood grains.

"Heaven's got to be behind the nice door," I said, turning to the right. The carpet was so thick it felt like wading through a

marsh. A voice snapped, "Enter!"

The glass office walls were curved. It felt like floating on a cloud. The Head sat behind a desk. "What do you want?"

"I want to get into Heaven." The Head's head lifted. Pale translucent skin hung off his bones.

"You?" his voice came out in serpentine slivers. "You're in Purgatory."

"I have my paperwork." I handed him my file. He didn't look at it. "I can go to Heaven."

He tapped his fingers on the desk. "You think you deserve Heaven?"

Carpet moved underneath me. "Yes."

"It's just paperwork." He stood, his body towering over us. "There are man-hours and filing issues. You processing Newlydeads makes things move smoothly."

"Giles's processed for years. Hasn't he worked off his debt?"

The man glanced at Giles. "He's another matter."

"I was wrongly denied access into Heaven. There's no reason I can't go."

"I know about you." I looked closely into the glass and it showed the vision of Giles and me, standing in the middle of nothingness. "You had Samuel. Are you worried you'll be punished?"

I shook my head. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"What about Giles?" The man showed rows of yellow teeth. "He's why you're here. Should he have consequences?"

Giles spoke. "Can we focus on Celia?" My name. I hadn't heard it spoken in three years.

"If you got into Heaven today, how long do you think Giles should wait?" The Head's voice slithered across the air. A hundred years? A millennia?"

I felt Giles stare—the heat radiated against the back of my neck. "I don't know."

"Should he go at all?" The Head smiled. "Keeping you here was selfish."

My voice wouldn't work. "I can't blame him."

He sneered. "Procedure hasn't been followed. You'll get into Heaven when I say so. There will be serious consequences for what you have done. Get out of my office. Now"

The room shuddered. The door opened, but I refused to move. Giles grabbed my arm but I pulled away. "I am not

leaving until I get into Heaven.”

The trembling stopped. “Giles? Leave.”

Giles hesitated. The man darted a horrid look at Giles. Giles squeezed my hand before leaving. “Are you stupid?”

“I want to go to Heaven.”

“Heaven isn’t an open door. I decide who goes in and who goes out.”

“But it makes no sense!”

The Head’s nostrils flared. The man stood and walked around his desk towards me. “You don’t matter.” Fifteen feet away. “All those forms you filled out? Meaningless.” Ten feet away. “No one needs to tell you their social security number to get to Heaven. Nobody needs anything.” Five feet away. “Do you know how I determine who goes to Heaven?” His voice was in my ear, his breath hot and stale. “I flip a coin. And your coin didn’t come up. It had nothing to do with Giles. I decide.”

I stood there, shaking. I clutched my skirt to keep my body upright. “You’re wrong.”

The man shook his head in disgust. “Get out of here. Go back to your desk and your pathetic existence. Sam?”

I didn’t recognize him at first. His face had the new expression of nothingness. His eyes were white and his hands were clean. There was a white scar over his right eye. “Take her back to Admissions.”

Sam reached towards me and grabbed my arm. I almost pulled back until he grasped down hard. Torrents of pain rushed my body. I hadn’t felt pain in three years. Sam pinched down harder until my knees collapsed and I slunk down. “Go back to Admissions. You will never get into Heaven.”

Sam dragged me out the door. Giles was waiting by the elevator. “Celia?”

I finally pulled my arm away from Sam’s grip. The door knob to the left flashed.

“Don’t you remember?” I asked Sam “Do you remember your life?”

Sam stared straight on. “I don’t remember anything.”

“Nothing?” I asked again. “I remember you.”

He squinted. I edged closer to Giles. For a moment, I saw a bit of recognition. But it passed quickly in his eyes. “No, I don’t.”

“You said you weren’t ready to die yet.” I heard the ground

shudder beneath us. “You wanted to live. Do you remember?”

Sam closed his eyes tight, as if the memory was beginning to form. But he shook it out before it materialized. “I don’t remember anything!”

“Sure you do.” I heard the elevator ding on the floor below us. I grabbed Giles’s hand and took one slow step backwards. Giles looked at me like I was crazy, but he didn’t let go. “You had dirty hands, remember?”

He looked down. His fingernails had been scrubbed. “I sort of remember.”

“Really? Try really hard now.” My heart thumped in my chest. One. Two.

The mighty elevator doors opened wide. Three. Giles and I both jerked forward with our arms stuck out. We pushed into the elevator. “Go!”

Our hands split and we ran to the left. I heard Sam struggle to stand. The hallway elongated and warped. It was a horrible bad dream where you run but the door dances just inches ahead of you. We were sinking in this marsh. “Is that Heaven?”

“I have no idea!” If we could just make that door, we would be free.

Another door opened and slammed shut. “Hervet!” I halted and turned. The Head stood miles away, but his eyes burned through the distance. His body charged towards me. Liquid ice shot through my veins and froze me to the spot. I couldn’t move.

“Celia!” A warm hand grabbed my own and pulled me forward. We ran down the plush carpeting, the thud of footsteps echoing in every ear. I craned my neck to look around. The old, dark figure in the hall went faster. His figure changed. He was the Head. The old lady. Sam. It was reaching out for me. He consumed the hallway into a dark shadow. His fingers were on my shoulder.

The door clicked. “Celia, come on!” Giles ripped open the door and the hallway filled with burning light. The man’s image was blocked from view. It was just Giles and me.

I turned and witnessed Heaven. And I saw that it was good.

Bruised

Tasha Shawver

One day, you'll see all your dreams come true. You'll rise to the top of all your issues. For now, though, you are in pain. The pain shows on your face like a little black cloud that follows you around. Today you wore your bangs over your eyes to hide the bruise, but it can still be seen. It's hot outside yet you are wearing long sleeves. It's obvious that you are hiding more bruises. Why do you let him treat you like this?

It all started three months ago. You started acting strange and began to avoid all of your friends. You used to be the cutest couple in the school but now you seem so miserable and he became so mean. He tries to hide what he does to you but we all see it. We try to tell you to leave, but all you tell us is how much you love him. He promises to stop but he never keeps his promise.

Three months later and hiding the evidence has become routine for you. Today will break your routine. We are swimming in gym class today and you couldn't find a way out of it. As the class dresses into bathing suits you argue with the teacher to get out of swimming. She doesn't crack. Slowly you make your way out of her office and head towards the stalls. They are all full and the teacher is rushing you to get changed.

You hide in a corner to change. I watch your face as it pleads with me to stand in front of you to keep you covered. I do as you ask as I casually stand in front of you and talk. You ignore my words and focus on keeping your marks hidden. Your bruises are known to me but your cuts are not.

"What happened?" I ask you. "Is he cutting you now?"

"No," you respond as you look away in shame.

"Then who did this?" I demand to know. You cower away and wrap the towel around yourself so that I

cannot see your wounds anymore.

"I don't want to talk about it," you say.

You walk past me trying to avoid eye contact. You should know it won't be that easy. Your path is blocked and I put my arms around you. At first, you push me away but eventually I feel your body shaking and I know that you are finally releasing all that hurt. We stand in the locker room as you cry. The other students have left and are waiting by the pool. You need to cry and let it all out so I stay with you as you do.

The teacher walks out of her office to head to the pool. She comes up behind us and asks if you're alright. You jump in fear. He would hurt you if he knew about this. When you jump you lose your towel and the teacher can see your multi-colored body. New bruises have formed over healing ones making an array of colors. She also sees the cuts on your thighs. You try to run but my arms are still around you. The teacher tells us to stay put and for me to make sure you don't leave as she goes to command the students to wait for her.

You glare at me, your eyes full of hate. If I hadn't of stopped she never would have known. You pull away from me but I still won't let you go. I know you are mad at me but it is what is best. You can't hurt yourself because he hurts you. The teacher comes back and phones security. When he arrives we are escorted to the guidance counselor where we meet with her, the principal, and the school nurse.

At first you refuse to speak. Fear fills your face as you think of what he will do to you when he discovers what happened. After much coaxing, you finally admit the truth of your situation. You talk about his anger and his lack of self control. They ask me what I know and I say what I've witnessed. After a few hours, you had finally told the staff everything. They called him out

Story Time

of class and called the police. At first you were afraid but I held your hand and let you squeeze your fear into me. The police take our statements and pictures of your bruises as evidence. You hear his yelling from another room and tremble in fear. We tell you that he can't hurt you anymore.

He walks by in cuffs and you turn away. You don't want him to know it was your fault. He begins to shout at you.

"You stupid little bitch. I loved you. I'll get you for this. The moment I get out, I'm coming for you!"

The police usher him out and you burst into tears and bury your head in my chest. I felt your fear and I hold you close to me. Your tears soak into my shirt and your nails dig into my arms. A few remaining officers promise you protection from him. They make a promise of a restraining order which helps ease your mind a little. The counselors set up a schedule for you to come see them and talk so that you can get through this situation. You beg for me to go with you and I agree. The counselors nod in agreement and you breathe a sigh of relief.

For weeks you will improve and I will always be at your side. When he gets out I will be there to carry your fear. You will become stronger for this. Eventually you will find someone better who will actually treat you as you deserve. It takes you a while to stop cutting but I am there protecting you. When your dreams come true, and I'm there to see them, I will smile and we will both celebrate.



Ghosts

Kate Dickey

It was during that distant spring, when we still rode bikes, ran, fell and showed off our scraped knees, that old Mrs. Hockenbury died alone in her house. She had been a decent enough lady, but in the fast-paced world of boyhood, we had no time for small talk or tea. To us, she was nothing more than a blur sitting on a tidy porch as we raced down the sidewalk. It seemed that our parents felt similarly, and if they didn't, they grieved silently while watching Saturday Night Live and enjoying microwaveable dinners.

We were soon busy concocting dreadful stories of how Mrs. Hockenbury had died (Jimmy swore he had seen her lifeless body swaying from a noose in one of the second-story windows, while Casey told all of us that he had overheard his parents saying that she had been horribly butchered by a madman with a knife). This naturally led to stories of how the old house was undoubtedly haunted now, and gave us the idea to dare each other to sneak inside in the hopes of running into the old woman's ghost.

Before these adventures had time to play out, an SUV had made its home on the street in front of the house, and was soon accompanied by a more temporary guest - a moving van. We watched from our bikes down the block as a couple and their two children, a boy and a girl, began unloading the truck. We couldn't tell from that distance, but the boy looked to be our age, and his sister much younger. The whole family seemed mousey, quiet and simple, traits highlighted by drab wardrobes and dusty brown hair. We wondered where they were from, but, being young boys at the time, soon lost interest in the matter and rode off into the woods behind our neighborhood. We were content with playing in the creek and looking for frogs.

By the end of that week, the drab family had settled into their new home, and the children had begun to venture timidly out-of-doors, playing with their toys in the front yard and glancing furtively at us when we glided past on bikes or ran down the street during a game of football. The

boy we had noticed earlier and thought to be our age was actually a good deal younger, but almost as tall as the rest of us, and seemed the most eager of the two to join in our games. We pretended not to see him until his mother offered us homemade cookies and lemonade one particularly hot day in June, and suggested that Elias ("Was that really his name?" we thought, raising our eyebrows and suppressing sniggers) fetch his bike from the garage and join us on a ride. Our faces fell as his lit up, and we sullenly agreed.

On the ride, Elias talked excitedly of how much he liked his new home, his sister, his parents, and how much he missed living in the country. He was awkward and gleeful and didn't know when to stop speaking, and we'd speed up and try to lose him, or make him stop to catch his breath, so at least he'd shut up for a minute or two. Perhaps it was from living the wholesome life of a country boy, or, as he happily informed us, from riding a bike almost since he could walk, but Elias never fell behind. On occasion, he even passed us, though we dragged him through only the most rugged and hilly areas we knew of. All the while his high-pitched, breathy voice followed us. He breathed hard with exertion, occasionally let out a squeaky giggle, and we would roll our eyes and speed up again.

From that day onward, Elias considered himself our friend. He either ignored or was deaf to the insults and names we flung casually at him, and never retaliated, although we could see in his face from time to time that some of the remarks stung. We used vulgar language regularly, hoping our uncouth suburbanite mannerisms might scare him off, or offend his parents if he repeated them at home; but we weren't to be saved by his parents, or ours, and Elias continued to follow us wherever we would go.

We began to really hate him. He would show up on our doorsteps and ask our mothers politely if Jimmy or Casey or Kevin could play today, and we would feign illness or slip out the back door when our parents came looking for us. If

we took off early in the mornings to hide in the woods, he would ride his bike out after us and find us in one of our many regular haunts, which would then become his haunts, too. At one point, we all thought Casey went a little too far when he broke and finally told him to “get the hell out of here, you ugly son of a whore,” but Elias remained civil and resolved the matter by disappearing back into that dusty old house for a couple of days. On the third day, we saw him step out the front door, taking in the humid summer air with a smile as he did so, and then it was business as usual, and he decided to be our best friend again.

Sunday mornings were our only respite from Elias’ constant pestering - he and his little sister and parents would drive to a church several miles away, stay for several hours, and return in the early afternoon. These few hours quickly became the most valuable time we had, and we spent it together, glad to have the morning and lunch free from Elias. Naturally, we also spent this time gleefully slandering him and his family, so perhaps it’s unsurprising that we soon found ourselves thinking up ways to get rid of him. They were almost all fanciful and joking - we were boys, and our imaginations were cruel and vast. We delighted in making up horrid stories about our neighbor, and we had found that it helped us get through the week. It was after many weeks of this, in the dog days of summer, when we came up with something really wonderful. The moment it was spoken aloud, we looked at one another and silently agreed that we had to put it to action.

We waited for a day when Elias’ father was at work and his mother was out grocery shopping to carry out our plan. It was simple and crude, but we found it beautiful, and we felt a rush of Freudian pride in coming up with it ourselves. We all remembered when, months ago, Mrs. Hockenbury had died somewhere in her house, and we also remembered the hours we had spent coming up with terrifying stories of how she had passed on; and now, it seemed, was the time to bring one of these stories to life. We had chosen one of the less fantastical versions, one Casey had devised, hoping it to be more believable and, therefore, scarier. Our plan was to convince Elias that Mrs. Hockenbury’s ghost roamed the basement of the house, while one of us (we had voted for Jimmy, as he was the biggest of us and best suited for the

job) snuck behind the house and went through the cellar door. When the rest of us crept downstairs, Jimmy, dressed in black and wearing a mask, would leap out, screaming, and grab Elias from behind. At the very least, we had been hoping for a pants-wetting and some crying, hopefully followed by a “No, no, don’t hurt me” of some kind, and, if luck was on our side, several angry phone calls from his parents to ours later that day, forbidding us from coming near their son.

When our day finally came, Elias was at home watching his little sister (whose name we could never remember), whom he refused to leave unattended. We conceded to the possibility of having a witness, thinking that, if it came down to it, terrorizing her, too, might further convince their parents that we were not fit playmates for their children.

So we made ourselves at home on quaint, beige furniture as Elias set down the book he had been reading and glanced at his sister, who was watching television with rapt attention, oblivious to her brother’s guests. We started off with plans of grandeur, telling him we were planning on exploring a new patch of woods soon, after Jimmy got better (we told Elias he was sick today, and hadn’t been able to join us). Casey made a point to appear anxious and uneasy, and when Elias offered us drinks, he declined, stating dramatically that being in this house made his stomach upset.

“Why’s that?” Elias wanted to know, eyes round and curious. We hid triumphant grins under somber expressions. We had him.

As we delved into a suspenseful and gory description of Mrs. Hockenbury’s death, Elias’ eyes grew ever rounder and ever more shocked. By the time our tale had been told, he, too, looked anxious, and more than a little uncomfortable, and was silent. We grew impatient for a response, and prompted him by asking if he had ever explored the basement where this grisly event had supposedly taken place. He replied that he hadn’t, now looking more anxious than ever.

“Are... are you sure a woman died down there?” he asked, voice wavering, and we reassured him, again and again, that she had, and that all the proof he needed was down in that basement. We coaxed and wheedled for several long minutes before Elias agreed to accompany us the cellar, and, before doing so, told his little sister to stay put in front of the

television. She mumbled that she would, but didn't turn to look at us as we left the room and headed downstairs.

Once downstairs, we found that it was a maze of old boxes and newspapers, all of them decades old, probably belongings of the house's previous owner that Elias' parents hadn't had time to clear away yet. Yellow light poured from bare bulbs overhead, making us all look sickly and gaunt as we slowly navigated the dark cellar. We talked little as we went along, wanting Jimmy to be able to strike in absolute silence, which he did, suddenly and with a shriek, startling all of us - with the exception of Elias.

Elias let out a yell and pushed Jimmy off of him, who, surprised, lost his balance and tumbled backwards onto a tall pile of newspapers, knocking over every issue of The New York Times published between 1950 and 1954. Elias was breathing heavily, and his mousey hair was covered in dust and cobwebs. We stared at him, unsure of what to do, as Casey helped Jimmy to his feet.

Tears began to streak Elias' faces as he screamed at us, telling us that he was sick of the things we did to him, letting out all of the built up frustration and anger that had accumulated and intensified over the last couple months. He stomped and threw his fists in the air, and we could only continue to gaze on, dumbfounded, as the kid lost control, slurring words and leaking tears and snot as he continued to screech and swear.

As we were coming back from the shock of his outburst, he leapt at Casey, telling him he would kill him for calling his mother a whore all those weeks ago, and clawed and spit at him as Casey struggled to throw him off. Unsuccessful and terrified, Casey threw a fist into Elias' gut, and the boy stumbled backward, winded. That should have been the end of it, and it might have been, if those newspapers hadn't been underfoot. But all it took was a misstep and Elias was slipping and falling backwards, surprise overwhelming his face before his head collided on the solid concrete floor with a heavy, wet crack. Then his eyes were vacant and staring unblinkingly upward, and we fell back in shock as blood pooled under the boy's shattered skull.

The funeral service was short, and to our surprise, his parents didn't seem to be angry with us - we had just been playing, they said, as though reminding themselves more

than they were us. It wasn't our fault.

It wasn't our fault.

But we felt it, all of us, aching in our stomachs weeks, months, and, yes, years later: Our only physical reminder of that summer. We knew we had done something terrible, that it had been our fault, and that the lie that Elias' parents had told us would burn along with the guilt inside us for a long time. It was something by which we were now bound together - not our love for baseball, or shared distaste for curfews and vegetables, or age, or any other facets of boyhood that now seemed so shallow and unimportant. And, all these years down the road, some of us have coped better than others. We know for a fact that Casey still wakes up in a cold sweat some nights; he's called both of us in the early hours more than once.

If we agree on anything from that summer, it's that it was the year that we were no longer able to be children. We tried to return to our games of football and throwing rocks in the creek, but everything and everywhere - the woods, the street we lived on, our bikes - reminded us of what we had done, especially the old Hockenbury house, ever a solid, hulking mass halfway down the block. We shared a new ghost between us, one we couldn't bear to mock, or tell stories about, or banish from memories or dreams from that now-distant summer. And that was something that truly scared us.

The Acting Shade

Ben Hill

Along a busy street in a particular city sits a bookstore. The street is in need of repair and the nearby train tracks make a horrible racket. It is the sort of area that makes you want to bury your head in your shoulders and walk faster to wherever you are going. But if you were to look upward this particular October day, up to the streetlight just across from this concrete stage that is the courtyard in front of the bookstore, you might notice one of the wonders that calls this city home; the Acting Shade.

The Acting Shade is a creature of shadow smoke and mirror. Grey is his color...but not the dull, matte gray of the city. No, the Acting Shade wears his grey the way a king wears his purple, vibrantly, flamboyantly and with a sense of gravity. However, the Acting Shade is also a stylish beast, and accents his grey with bits of deepest crimson, and the black of the blackest black tie.

In appearance he seems human enough...handsome features and devilish smile beneath his gray and crimson fedora. His eyes, if he has them at all, are obscured by this wonder. His cape is of the shimmering grey that is his and his alone. It wafts behind him dramatically as he flies or stands or crouches. Grey too is the dinner jacket beneath it, which, in theory, tapers down into black pants and shoes so dark you can't even see them against the shadows of his cape... but that would, again, assume that he has legs and feet like you or me. But the most important thing on his person is his cane...for with it, all his mischief is done.

The Shade's cane is more like a wizard's staff than anything else; though it is far too stylish for that description. Five feet long and just under an inch thick, the Shade's cane is lacquered a glossy black and highlighted with gold. And at the top of this wonder sits a cylinder of the same...black and gold polished to a

high society shine. At first glance, you would think his cane a large mallet like something from Nickelodeon. But then, why would there be those levers and dials? Why would the head tilt on its neck the way it does? And why does it glow with that ethereal light from within? Ah, but that is for the Acting shade to know and you to find out.

From his perch on the lamppost the Acting Shade's eyeless face gazes upon the people walking to and fro on their way to far more interesting places than this crowded sidewalk. None of them notice him, despite his dapper appearance. He sniffs for potential among the masses, and finds none. He sneers at them; stupid worthless peons deserving of their self-inflicted misery. If they cannot provide him with sustenance, what good are they? His gaze moves up to within the bookstore; where people sit in ones and twos sipping coffee and reading trash. These people are just as bland as the folk outside. But what's this? Within the bookstore window there sits a balding businessman chatting with a colleague about some experience he had not a week ago. The Acting Shade's nostrils fill with a scent of equal parts good steak and priestly incense. Potential...it's there. The businessman has it--and all the Acting Shade has to do is draw it out. His mouth twists into a devilish grin as his nimble fingers flip the levers of his cane and with a flourish he pulls the master switch.

Light explodes from the cylinder atop his cane like a cannon; falling upon the businessman like a sign from God. The spotlight is on him now. What is he going to do with it?

Almost imperceptibly the cadence of the Businessman's voice changes; it becomes richer and more animated. He starts using his hands to emphasize the important parts, and even changing his

voice to impersonate the other characters in his story. He tells of an experience down on the bad side of town where he was accosted by a panhandler who bullied him until he threatened to call the cops. He tells it as a comedy with lots of pratfalls and bad accents and sweeping hand gestures. The businessman knows the spotlight is on him and he is going to use it.

The Acting Shade imbibes the story like haute cuisine. It was fairly well told and even quite funny in some places, but as it winds down the Shade's attention wanders. There must be other sources around here somewhere, better ones than this. He slams down the master switch of his cane like the final strike of a judge's gavel...and all the way across the street, the businessman hears the sound. The spotlight is gone, and with it, his belief that he is the most important person in the room.

The Businessman looks around sheepishly. Everyone around him bears an expression of pain. Who was this loudmouth to interrupt their nice, quiet cup of coffee? One man, shocked at the businessman's degenerative use of accents, has actually gotten up and left. The Business Associate is also shocked; he's known the Businessman for years and he's never done anything like this. He shakes his head and tells the Businessman he should take a vacation...soon. The Businessman, for his part, nods and buries his head in his newspaper. It is unlikely he'll be telling any more stories today.

But the Acting Shade does not care about any of that...he has found more potential. Walking down the street is a mousy young woman with one of those newfangled music-y things locked in her head. The Acting Shade's own ears can hear what she is listening to just as well as she can...and it likes what it hears. She's listening to an old Broadway tune...one that takes the Acting Shade back many years. And even better, she's walking in time with the music! The Acting Shade's mouth twists into its devilish smile as nimble fingers race over the levers of his cane. Finally he flicks the master switch and light explodes forth like cannon-fire onto the girl, just as she enters the

courtyard.

The girl feels the heat of the light on her back as the thought occurs that walking in time with the music simply isn't enough. She could be dancing--like those commercials. But she just hunches her shoulders and keeps walking. No one wants to see her dance, and if she tried she'd just make a fool of herself. It would be far better to keep walking and let this silly notion pass. But the light remains fixed on her, and unconsciously her feet respond. Step, step, slide step. Step, two, backstep...The girl stops herself before she 'kicks,' despite herself. She shakes her head violently and yanks the small headphones from her ears...there was no way she was going to start dancing in the middle of the sidewalk.

The spotlight follows her until she vanishes around a corner; where it, of course, cannot go. The Acting Shade snarls from its perch. The only thing he hates more than a lack of potential is wasted potential...and that girl had it in spades. He sighs to himself and considers packing up for the day. He's still hungry, but it would never do to appear a beggar--much better to starve a short while and find better pickings somewhere else.

He slings his cane over his shoulder and prepares to take flight, but as he does a faint whiff of potential enters his nostrils. It is subtle, like the smell of cedar on clothes long stored away, but too tantalizing to ignore. But where is it coming from? Not the bookstore, surely, far too many critics and too little talent. A car perhaps? No, the shade could still smell it, and even in noonday traffic a vehicle would be gone before the shade got more than a whiff. A pedestrian, then...but which one?

The Shade scans the crowd, looking for peculiarities. There aren't a great many people wandering about. But the scent was so faint, even that seems an overabundance. Office workers, panhandlers, a policeman, a few family types with children in tow, all are present, none of whom what the Acting Shade seeks. The Shade leans forward and sniffs like a bloodhound--where is that confounded odor

coming from? He ought to have just taken flight and forgotten this whole mess. But, turning up his nose at Potential just because it isn't easily mined is the height of tackiness, and tacky is definitely something the Shade is not. Besides, sustenance is not the point; it's the principle of the thing.

A movement in the crowd and suddenly, the Shade sees what he is searching for. Peeking out from behind the shadow of the crowd is a young man in all black. Not the pointless spike and chain studded black that had come into fashion some years ago, but the black of stage hands and mimes. Now on some that could look pretentious (which was why the shade switched to grey in the 50's) but on this kid, it looks natural-like he is just being prepared for fate to hand him a role. The Acting Shade considers the boy. There isn't much to him other than good taste in clothes and the reek of Potential. But, since The Shade has spent all that time finding him, he might as well get what he came for. Nimble fingers fly across the levers and dials of his cane before a beam of concentrated light singles out the poor lad from the crowd.

The young man stops dead in his tracks as the spotlight shines down on him. What is this sensation? He looks up, squinting slightly in light he shouldn't be able to see, and locates about where the Shade is perched. He points to his chest and mouths, "Me?" in an almost reverent terror.

The Acting Shade almost falls off the streetlight in surprise--it had been decades since someone noticed him and he had almost forgotten it was possible. He flaps about absurdly trying to regain his balance but long years in the theater manage to save his dignity and make it look like this was all part of the show. He regains his composure and waves the boy onward like knowledge of him is expected. The boy is now the most interesting thing on the street and he shouldn't waste this opportunity by asking stupid questions.

The young man looks to the left, and to the right. What should he do? He snaps his fingers a few times trying to come up with an idea. He cannot dance, and even if he played an instrument it is not with

him. That left talking...or singing! Wouldn't that be a sight--someone just breaking out into song in the middle of the street? It is so absurd he has to try it. All he needs is a song that doesn't need music to sound good; something a cappella. Ah-ha, perfect. He opens his mouth and the first notes "For the Longest Time" by Billy Joel come forth. The boy smiles as he gets more into the sway of things. It is a good song, and darn it if he isn't going to try and do it justice.

The potential rolls off this boy in waves and the Acting Shade basks in the performance. He has a fair, if untrained, voice and his eagerness is refreshing after ingrates like that girl. But even such a rare treat as a Natural Talent can only entertain so long, and the boy can only carry a quartet so far by himself. By the end of the second verse his voice starts to falter. The novelty of the experience is wearing off and the people who had stopped to stare are now off again on their merry way...leaving the boy and the spotlight to languish.

But then the strangest thing happens. From somewhere that can only be described as "stage right" a mousy head peeks around the corner to learn where the music is coming from. The Shade sees her as she takes one step, then two, toward the crowd but scoffs the ingrate and proceeds to ignore her. The girl however, doesn't care about the Shade's disdain--she is too fascinated by the boy who is, at that very moment, doing the very thing she could not. If only she could be like him somehow. She edges forward, mistaking the pounding in her chest for nervousness. Get closer, she tells herself, before the rest of you realizes what you are doing and bolts.

She flinches as the young man turns toward her... and beckons her forward. His song speaks of miracles and need, and he wants her to help complete it. As she walks towards him, she starts singing the bridge almost without realizing it. Her voice is soft but grows in strength and by the time she steps into the golden light from the Shade's cane, they are singing a full duet.

The Acting Shade is flabbergasted...never has he

seen his spotlight shared before. It was unnatural, unprecedented; but oh was the potential savory. The two flavors blend together like gin and tonic and today the Shade will drink heartily. But so caught up is he in this new sensation that he does not even notice the doors of the bookstore opening...or the stream of smoke issuing forth from the back of his cane.

The Businessman, long forgotten and feeling drained from what was supposed to be a nice break wanders outside to gawk at weird performance art happening on the sidewalk. It really is cute; boy meets girl over spontaneous musical number, but he feels it lacking. Then again, he heard the song when it first came out, and without all the little flourishes it just isn't the same. He chuckles to himself as the idea to join in hits. Eh, why not? He's already made a fool of himself today and this certainly isn't going to make things any worse. He begins snapping his fingers on beat and throwing in a few baritone notes where he remembers them going. He hopes they won't mind.

They certainly do not. The snapping spreads around the audience like wildfire, and singing is picked up by the braver members of the audience. And with each snap and each note the Shade's cane fizzles and sparks all the more. The Shade awakes from his drunken revelry and panics. He grabs at levers, presses at buttons and twists knobs, but all for naught... something is happening and the Shade can't stop it.

As the final verse of the song begins, three small "pops" are heard from within the mechanism of the Shade's cane, and the light flickers once, twice, before dying out completely. But just as suddenly, with a snap and a hiss, the light is back--brighter and wider than ever before. The person-sized spotlight is now a stage-sized beacon, and everyone in that little courtyard is under the same spell. They all start singing--not out of compulsion, but because they want to. The voices are myriad, and mostly mediocre to poor. The harmonies are dreadful and the timing sucks...

But it's the most beautiful thing the Acting Shade has ever heard.

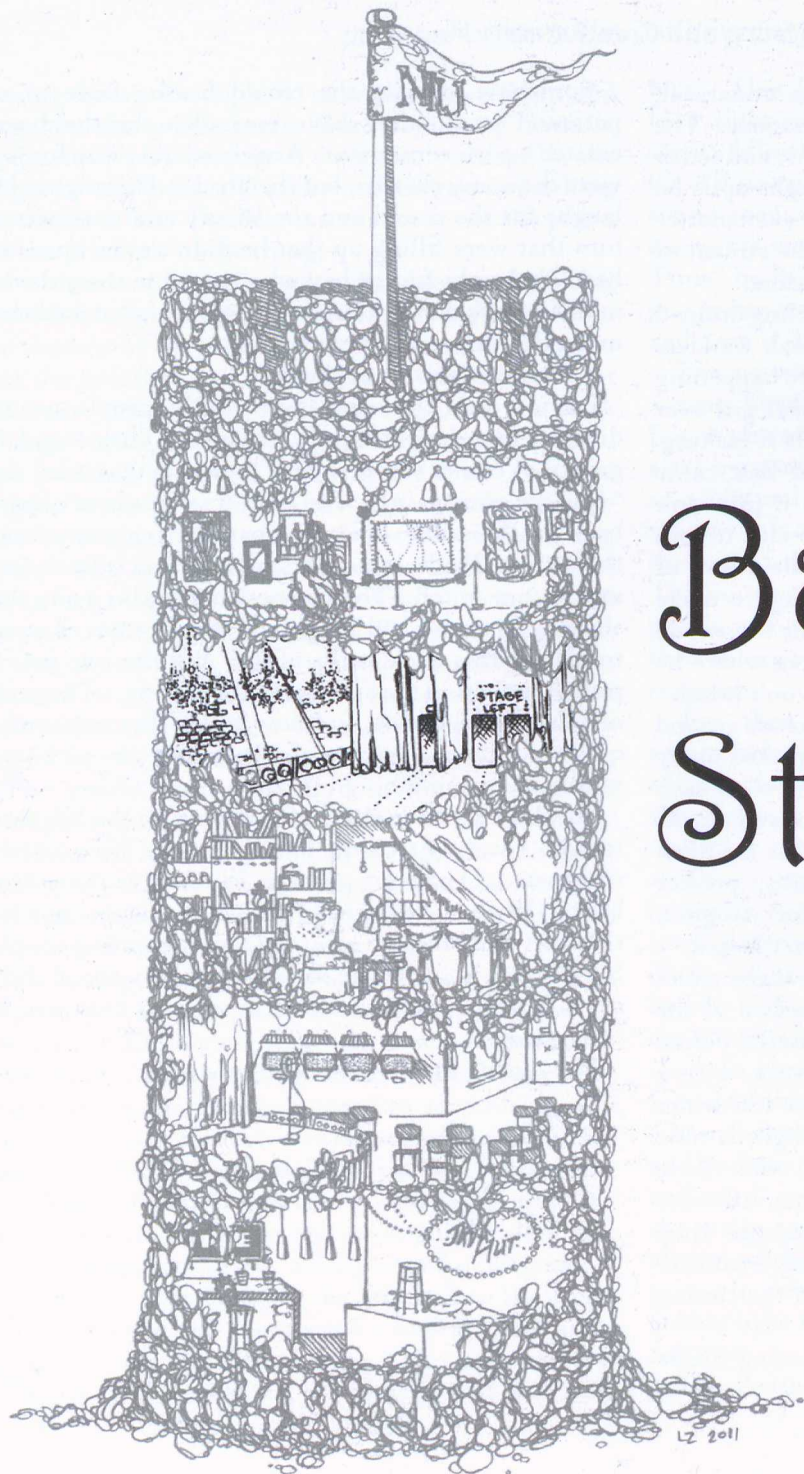
Somehow, despite the crowd having little to no potential at all, they have crossed a threshold and created a perfect moment. Angels would weep for joy, were there any present, but the Shade? He laughs. He laughs for the sound and the beauty and the parts of him that were filling up that he didn't even know he had. He laughs for the boy who started it, the girl who joined him and every single person in that crowd that made this moment possible.

It truly is a perfect moment.

Far too soon the song ends and the people around dissolve into laughter and applause. They stand in groups of two or three, saying "how fun that was" and "who are you again?" The conversations break apart, back to their lives and destinations far away from the Acting Shade--but with a new spring in each step and a story to tell. The businessman walks away too, shaking his head and laughing--they are never going to believe this back at the office. But the two young people remain in the spotlight, just talking. They talk of music, and names, and how weird that was, and a quiet spot the girl knows of where they can pick up a sandwich or something.

The Acting Shade shuts off his cane for the last time today. For the first time in a long time, he is sated--truly sated. And now, perhaps, he can give something back. With a flourish he hoists his cane onto his shoulder and takes off after the newly forming couple. He doesn't know what so interests him about these two...but he's fairly sure their upcoming chat will be interesting...

The Acting Shade will make sure of it.



Back Stage

Under the Sink

Calvin Coran

Characters:

Emily, female, 33

Pat, female, 33

Setting:

A small apartment.

Time:

Night.

PAT enters through a door, laughing, in the middle of a cell phone conversation. She goes about the business of finding and microwaving a pre-cooked box of broccoli and pasta and cleaning a dirty dish from the sink. At one point, she momentarily opens a small door underneath her sink to retrieve a dishrag and fails to notice EMILY curled up inside.

PAT

Well, something like that, anyway. (pause) No. Actually, I just got back. I just got—went through the door. Uh-huh. Thanks anyway. No, are you kidding? It's like one. Right. No, it's okay. You want to talk about it? Come on. (annoyed) I do not. You always say that when you're pestering me about somethi—you're not pestering me, I'm just pointing it out. (pause, then, defensive) Nothing! It endears me to you. (pause) Okay, don't take this the wrong way—I am not terminating anything—don't take this the wrong way, but have you...yes? (in reaction to an uproar on the other end) That's it! That's all I wanted to ask. Well, it's not like you share any of the details with me. (pause) I didn't say "meds," I didn't even

finish the—you knew what I meant. (pause) Well, yes, it's because you're acting a little weird. (pause) Of course I don't. Do you want to talk in the morning? (small pause) You know what I mean. Or, I don't know, just whatever it takes to get you down again. You're a little up. (pause) And that's wonderful, but it makes talking to you a little... (gestures: "weird") No, not—you keep putting these words—okay, so just chill. (pause) So do that. So do just that. (pause) I didn't say anything; that was your idea. It's great. Why aren't you doing it? Mm-hmm. Call you right back.

She beeps the phone off, then rapidly beeps it several more times to make sure. Then, into the phone:

You schizo.

She goes and sits down on a large beanbag chair made up with a blanket and pillow as if it were a bed and turns on a small TV sitting on a chair. She has left her phone on the counter by the sink.

PAT

(to herself)

"It's not you, it's me." It's not yooooou...it's meeeeeee. (face wrinkles; she's revolted herself) Guh.

VERY SLOWLY, the door under the sink begins to open. EMILY peeks out, notices the phone, and slowly retrieves it. She closes the door as slowly as she opened it. A few moments later, a pop song begins blaring from under the sink: a ringtone. PAT jumps up and rushes to the counter just in time to see

EMILY hastily replace the phone and disappear back behind the door under the sink. PAT'S hands fly to her mouth. She backs up, stunned, and turns to make for the door, but then stops—she needs her phone. Turning, steeling herself, she lunges forward and grabs the phone. Examines it. Frowns. Then, to the door under the sink:

PAT

What'd you do to my phone? This isn't my background. I don't like autumn.

EMILY

Yes you do, come on.

PAT

What? I didn't...

EMILY

I said, "Yes you do."

PAT

Come out. How long have you been there?

The door under the sink opens—out clambers EMILY. She and PAT are dressed almost exactly the same and have the same hairstyle. She remains crouching, wide-eyed, like a squirrel.

EMILY

Don't call him.

PAT
(dazed)

I—I have no intention of... anything of the kind.

EMILY

That smells very good.

PAT

Hm? (remembering her microwaved dinner, she goes to it) Oh, yeah. It's... it's really gross. (EMILY rises slightly) You can—feel free.

She goes back over to EMILY and places the meal on the floor. Slides it toward her, then backs up. EMILY dives into it with barely hidden enthusiasm.

PAT

I think I might have another one.

EMILY

No, that's it. Last one.

PAT

Do you, do you want something to drink?

EMILY

That Mountain Dew would be awesome.

PAT

What?

EMILY

Bottom shelf, behind the pancake batter.

PAT opens the refrigerator, to which EMILY is referring and, to her wonderment, sees that she is exactly right. She does not retrieve the drink.

PAT

That's Stan's.

EMILY

He quit, right?

PAT
He put his mouth on it.

EMILY
(derisively)
Eww. Come on.

PAT
How do you know Stan?

EMILY
We're engaged.

PAT
What?

EMILY
Our one-day anniversary should be approaching.

PAT
What are you—what?

EMILY
Don't call him.

PAT
I'm—does he know you?

EMILY
Yes. Don't call him.

PAT
Why didn't—okay, wait, just wait. Can I sit down?

EMILY
Be my guest. There's a chair. Can you put down the phone?

PAT
(backing up and sitting down on the beanbag chair as EMILY cautiously rises) I'm going to die.

EMILY
(very carefully)
Not... exactly. Can you put down the phone?

PAT
I'm not calling anyone!

EMILY
It's just, you keep fondling it like that...

PAT
I'm not fondling it! (putting the phone behind her) Look! I put it down! You happy?

EMILY
Okay.

PAT
Why did you change my background?!

EMILY
I like that one.

PAT
I hate it. (grabbing the phone and fiddling with it) I want my snowmen back. And I want to know what the hell you're doing here and how you got in.

EMILY
You have to promise to be cool.

PAT
I promise to be cool.

EMILY

You have to really, really promise to be cool about this.

PAT

I do. Shoot.

EMILY

I don't know how to put it.

PAT

Cool. (picks up the phone) I'm going to call the police. Freak out or whatever you want.

EMILY

What happened to your duck ball?

PAT

What?

EMILY

You know, the squishy ball, the one that looks like Donald Duck, but it's totally not because you got it at Six Flags so it's just... a duck in a sailor suit?

PAT

You came here for a stress ball?

EMILY

Just, where is it?

PAT

Stan's got it. He needs it until he finishes his play. Or the two plays he split it into.

EMILY

He's done with it.

PAT

Hm?

EMILY

Well, actually he split it into six plays and he decided to develop one of those into its own little thing.

PAT

That's...

EMILY

A little disappointing, yeah.

PAT

He was really building it up as this huge thing.

EMILY

Yeah, it's a one-person play. Uh... it's called "Schizo."

PAT

What's it about? (small pause) A schizo?

EMILY

Yeah, kind of. It's about his girlfriend. She's trying to decide whether to call him and dump him.

PAT

(indifferently)

About what?

EMILY

They have kind of a dumb fight. And she's really confused and everything, but then he calls and says he's sorry, and she's like, "Aww," and they get back together.

PAT

This took him four months to write?



Towers Literary and Creative Arts Magazine

EMILY

He started over a lot.

mean, does this, do you relate to this? Do you—do you...
(considerable silence) Oh my goodness.

PAT

It better be really something.

EMILY

I know. But listen, he didn't—

EMILY

It's the worst play I've ever seen.

PAT

(backing away hurriedly)—Don't! Get away from me!

PAT

Well, th—what?

EMILY

You need to calm down.

EMILY

I've seen it over twenty times. It's the worst play I've ever seen.

PAT

You—stop—go back to, go back to—go back there! (grabs her phone)

PAT

How is that...?

EMILY

Don't call him!

EMILY

Well, that's... that's the thing.

PAT

(dialing) Stop it! I need to—you just stop.

A few moments. Then PAT suddenly becomes very alarmed.

EMILY

It's not Peyton's fault!

PAT

You mean— (gestures to herself, then to the room.
EMILY nods. PAT'S alarm turns to indignation)
That fucking—he put me in his stupid play? His
stupid—all that time he was—this? What a
fucking...(goes to microwave meal box, picks it up)
This was his idea? This is gar—he's got me eating—he's
feeding me garbage!

PAT

Don't even—who's Peyton?

EMILY

Pey—Stan. It's not Stan's fault.

PAT

He even lied about his name?

EMILY

It makes you relatable.

EMILY

He didn't lie.

PAT

Oh for... yeah, because he's so good at relating to me, like—I

PAT

Wait a minute—what’s my name?!

EMILY

It’s Pat, come on.

PAT

What’s your name?!

EMILY

Emily. (short pause) Your name’s Emily.

PAT

Emily. Like his cat.

EMILY

He thought it’d be a cute sort of... joke.

PAT

(sinking onto the beanbag bed) He hates my fucking guts. I’m living in squalor, I lose hours of sleep because he just has to talk to someone, I feel like I’m losing my mind over him... and it’s, it’s like, this is his, his big tribute to me or something? How can you watch this?

EMILY

I know exactly what you’re feeling, really...

PAT

What am I... what am I supposed to do?

EMILY

Why are you asking me?

PAT

Well, didn’t you come to—to rescue me, or—you know, I don’t know, take me back with you?

EMILY

We so can’t do that. Not even a—no.

PAT

Seriously?! (growls in frustration) You’re just like him. No wonder you’re his real girlfriend.

EMILY

Don’t... don’t say that...

PAT

(trying not to cry) Is Boston’s “Peace of Mind” still my favorite song?

EMILY

It’s okay.

PAT

Do I like black and white movies?

EMILY

You’re—I mean, you see the value of them.

PAT puts her head in her hands. EMILY approaches her.

PAT

Why did you come here?

EMILY

I... I felt sorry for you. For me. I’m—we’re...

PAT

Really pathetic. (looks up, composes herself, turns, and watches the TV screen) What can we do?

EMILY

I can bring you some better food. There’s some microwave macaroni and cheeses that are pretty good.



PAT
Okay. *EMILY quickly sits and looks over at the TV.*

EMILY
And, you know, our phones are the same now. *EMILY*
So, anything good ever on?

PAT
Change it back. *PAT*
Shh.

EMILY
All righty. *EMILY nods. Some moments, then: Blackout.*

PAT
I don't want to be like you. *END*

EMILY
Okee-dokee.

PAT
Some granola bars would be excellent too. The good kind.

EMILY
No problem at all.

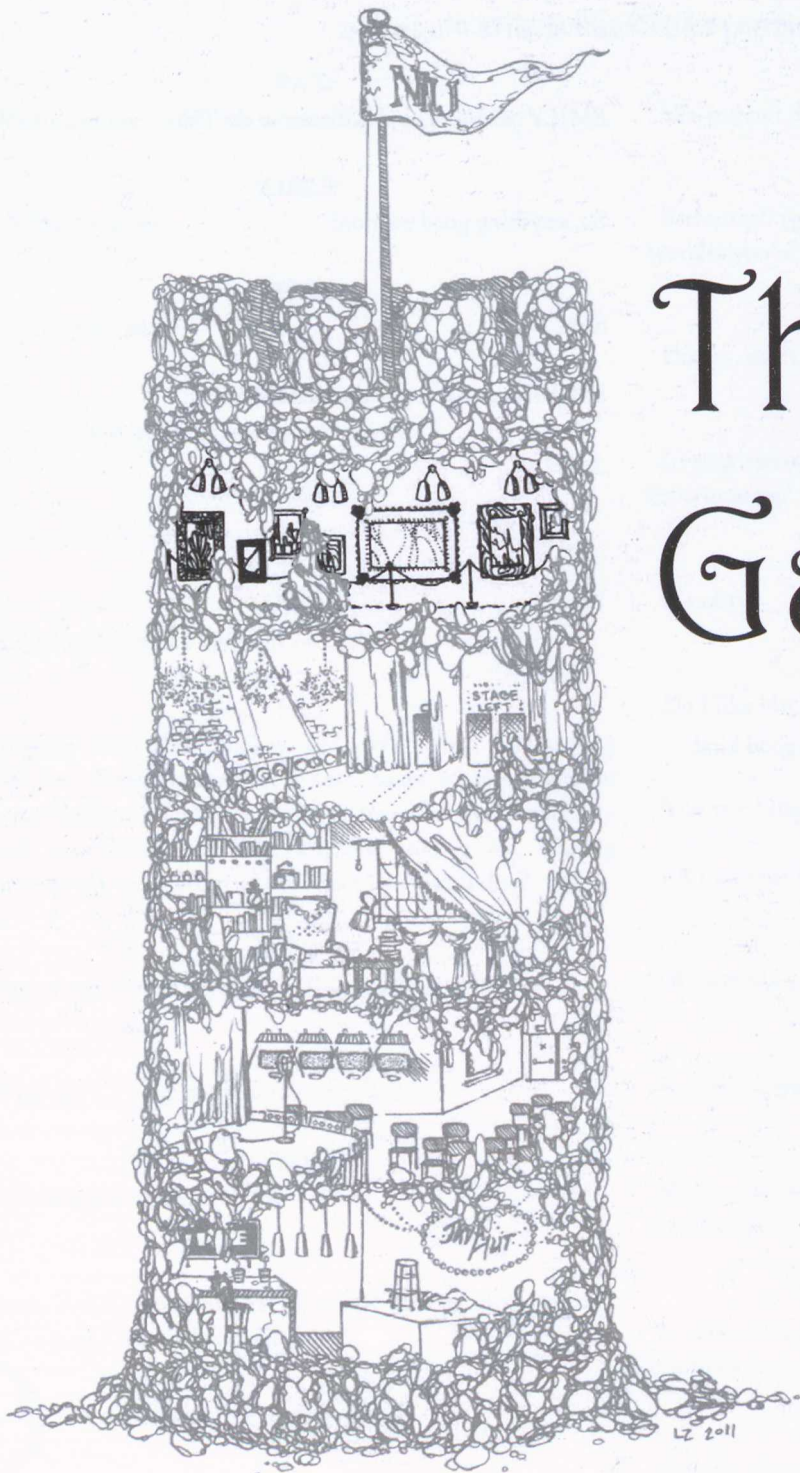
PAT
Don't look at me like that.

EMILY
Wh—how?

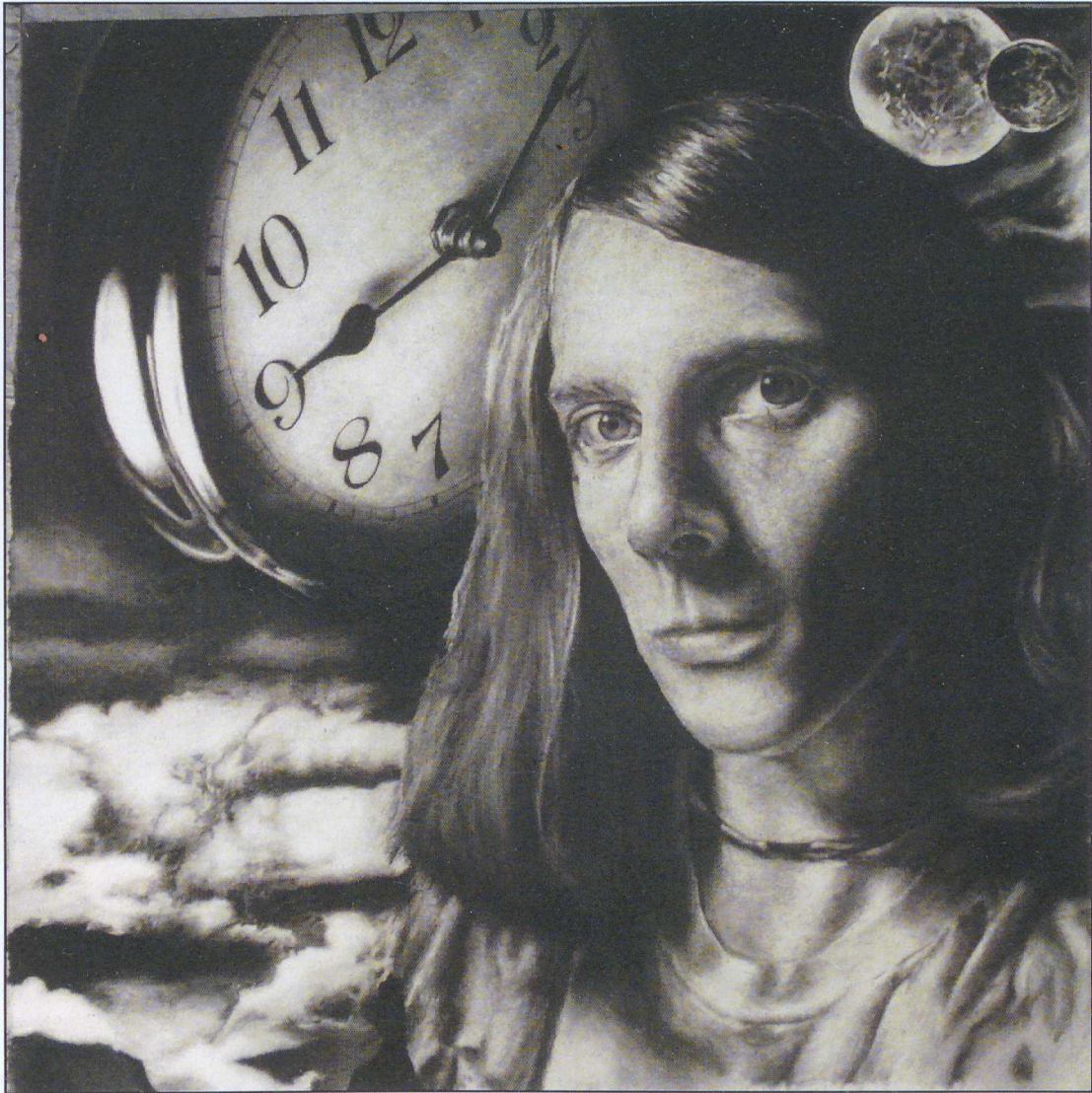
PAT
Like, down like that.

EMILY
You're sitting.

PAT
So sit or something.



The Gallery



Time Clock

Johnny Weisser
Charcoal

Gallery



Autodestruct

Gallery

Liz Graehling
Verithin and Acrylic



Joe Durling
Digital Photograph

California Coast Sunset

Gallery



Untitled (Oculus)

Karen E. Murphy
Porcelain Clay and Glazes

Gallery



Confrontation

Lise Schlosser
Digital Photograph

Gallery



Flora I-III

Agnes Ma
Sterlin Silver and Found
Objects

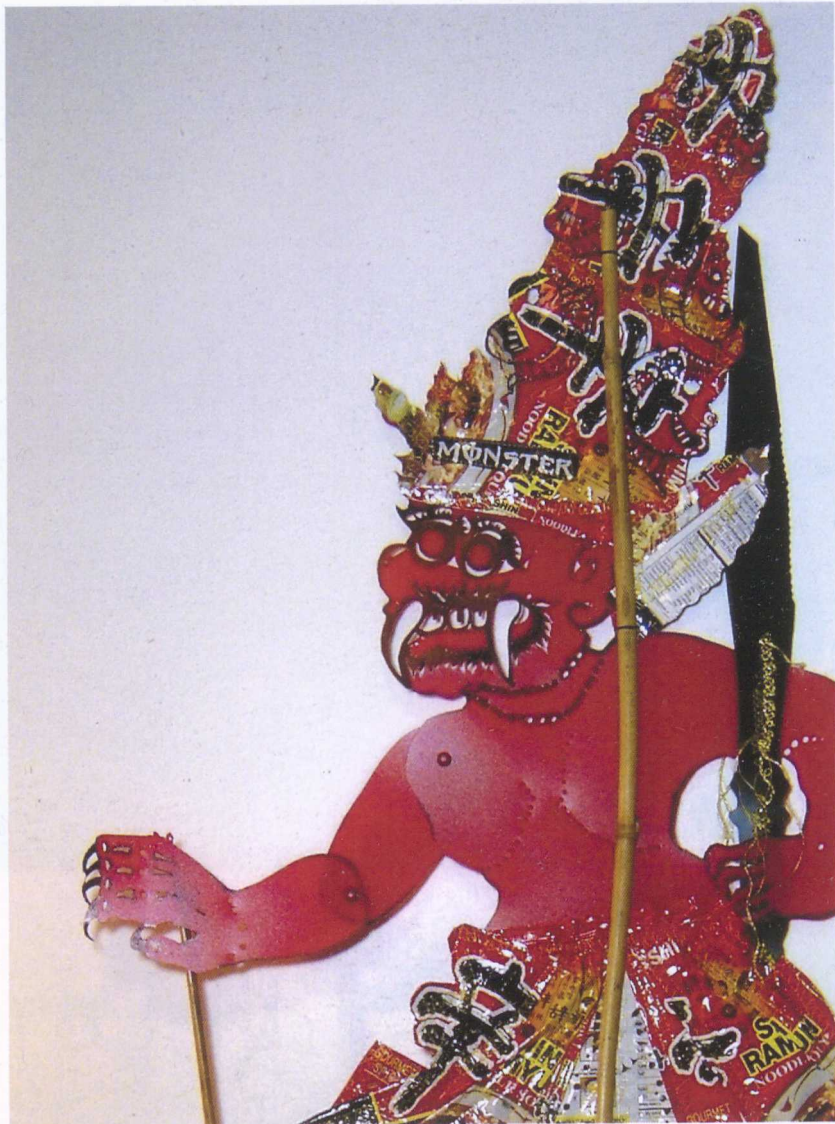




S.R. Collection I-X

Agnès Ma
Sterlin Silver and Succulent
Plants

Gallery



...is coming

Siew Lian Lim
Found Objects



Gallery



The Fallback

Ginger Hoegsly
Multimedia

Gallery

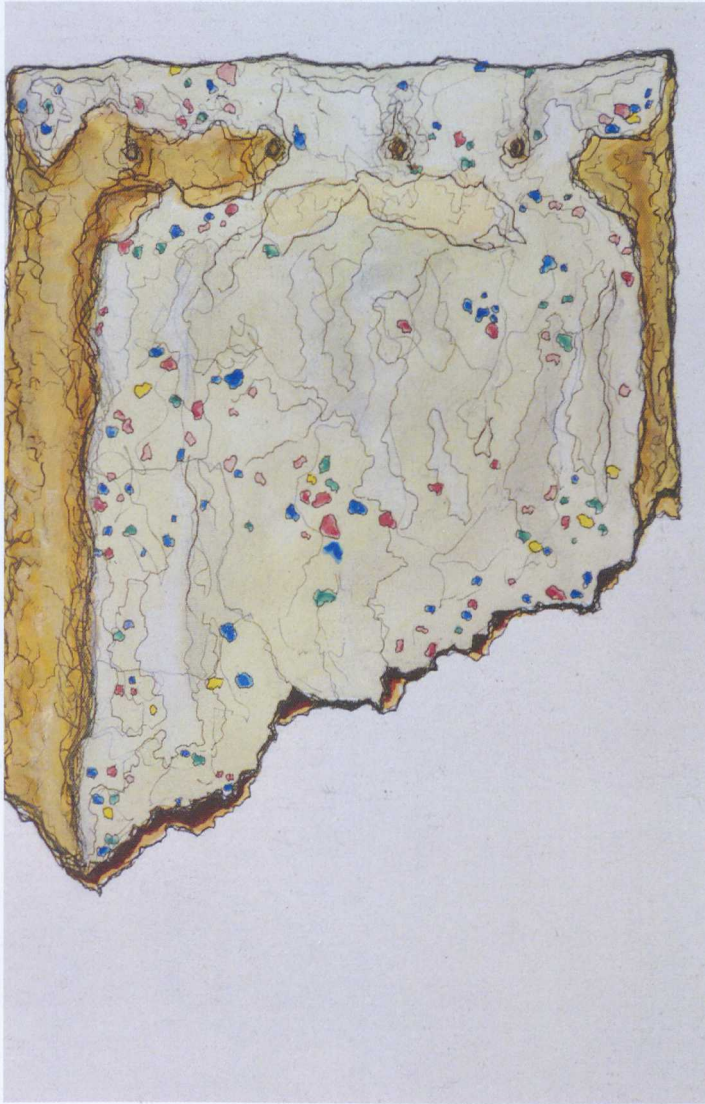




Niku Shop

Gallery

Dan Heskamp
Lithograph



Devon Harriss
Acrylic Wash and Micron

Working Man's Pastry

Gallery



Meet Me in Israel

Gallery

Devon Harriss
Acrylic Wash and Micron





Still Life

Sarah Adomovicz
Nupastel and Soft Pastels

Gallery

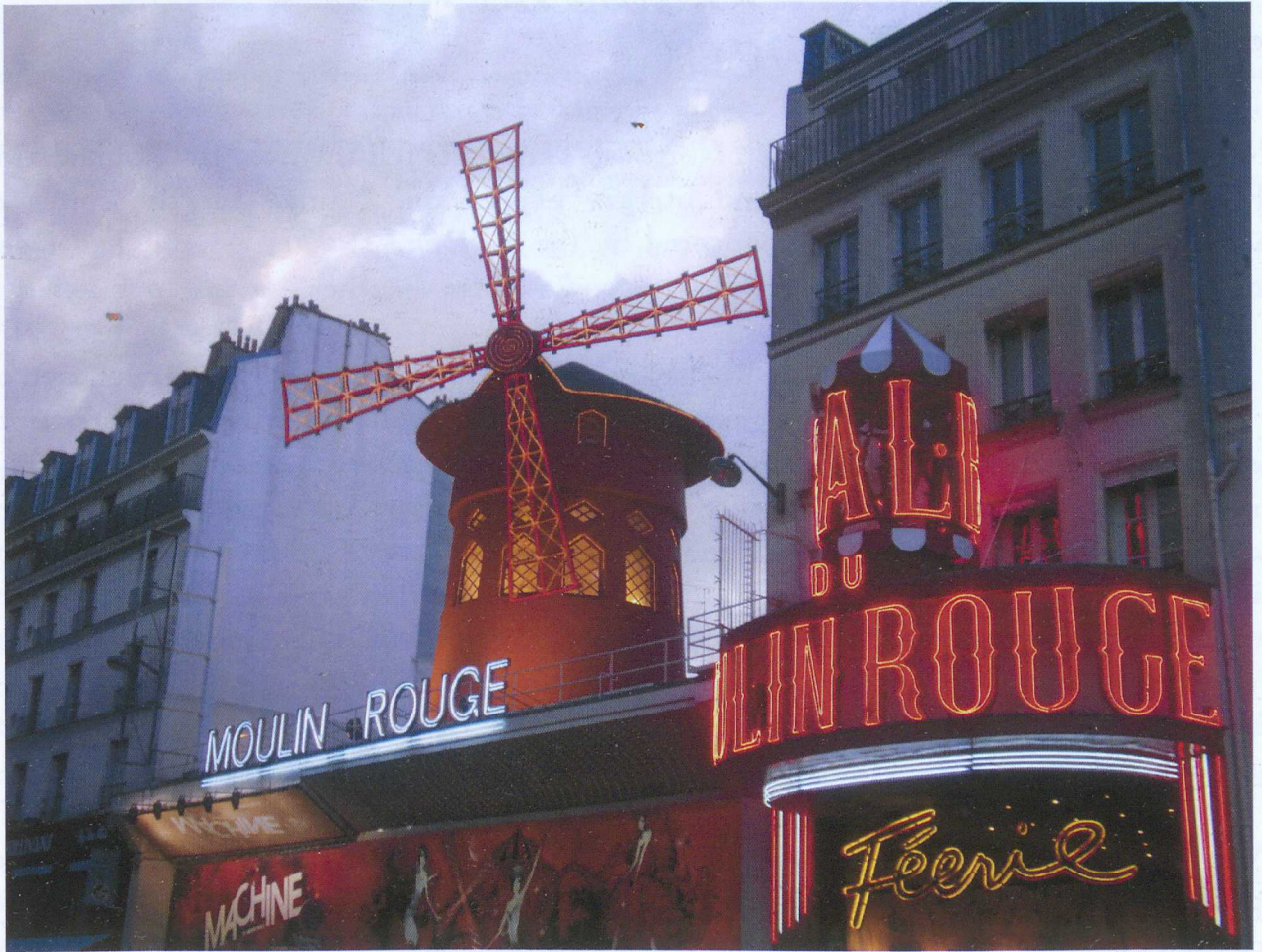


Emily Franklin
Digital Photograph

Existential Wisdom

Gallery





Moulin Rouge

ReAnne Palmer
Digital Photograph

Gallery

History of Towers

Towers was founded in 1939 when Northern's students felt the need for a publication through which students could find literary expression. Named for the spires of Altgeld, *Towers* was originally sponsored by the Xi Delta chapter, Sigma Tau Delta the International English Honor Society, and Nu Ita Pi, the journalism fraternity.

Its content, creative material such as poems, short stories, and essays, were chosen on a selective basis. Until 1941, the magazine was printed annually, but wartime restrictions rendered publication impossible through 1946. In 1947, the pre-War tradition was revived and *Towers* began to receive funding. Many other changes occurred as the teachers' college developed into a university. Student art was added with Volume VIII. By the late sixties, control of the organization shifted from the Xi Delta chapter to the whole of the student body. In the past, *Towers* has received an honor from the Associate Collegiate Press rating the magazine All American. Throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties, the magazine grew and changed as the students and the times changed. Since 2010, *Towers* has collaborated with the Theatre Department and added drama to the magazine's genres.

We would like to give an extra thank you to NIU PRISM for their efforts in co-sponsoring an Open Mic night to supplement *Towers* funding; NIU Document Services for their continued enthusiasm, support, and assistance with the magazine; Dr. John V. Knapp, Editor of Style, for his supportive ad; and the NIU community for their support throughout the year. Without these groups, and those of you who continue to support our efforts, *Towers Literary and Creative Arts Magazine* could not continue to thrive as it does.

Caitlin Yimøt and Evan Syverson
Co-Editors

Style is a proud supporter of Towers

Style is a quarterly journal that publishes articles that address questions of style, stylistics, and poetics. These submissions may include research and theory in discourse analysis, literary and nonliterary genres, narrative, figuration, metrics, and rhetorical analysis. In addition, *Style* also now welcomes contributions employing the new psychologies: cognition, bio-evolutionary psychology, family systems, and human development. Furthermore, the editors will be pleased to consider submissions on pedagogy generally as such relate to the teaching of literature and the humanities. Contributions may draw from such fields as literary criticism, critical theory, linguistics, philosophy of language, rhetoric, narrative, and composition studies as well as the varieties of psychologies and pedagogies.

Style also publishes reviews, review-essays, surveys, interviews, translations, and reports on conferences.

Style is published four times a year by Northern Illinois University.

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