

TOUCHSTONE

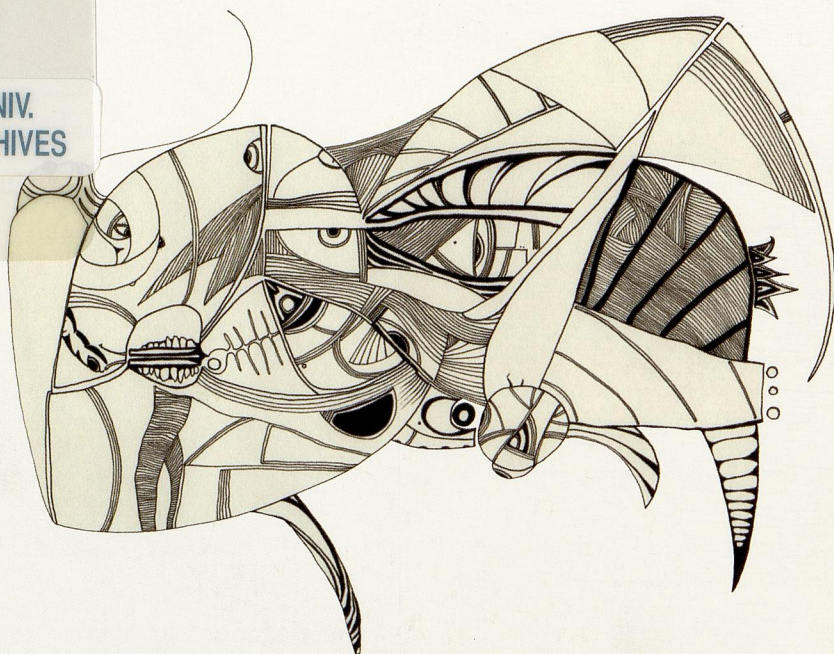
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ENDURANCE

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Kansas State University

Spring 2009

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Artist

Adam Achéy

Faculty Advisor

Darrin Doyle

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{ EDITOR'S NOTE }

by **Chelsea Brimer**

Each year, *Touchstone* is under the guidance of a new editor-in-chief, whose job is to decide upon the goal of the magazine and to oversee that goal to publication. Each editor interprets this job differently; some have a heavy hand in the creative form of their volume, while others prefer to shape and prune what evolves naturally. Previous *Touchstone* editors have chosen central themes for the work they collect, making their volume a touchstone to a particular topic or idea. Other editors open *Touchstone's* doors to an international pool of writers, making their volume a finger on the pulse of the writing world as a whole. This year I chose to accept submissions on any topic from graduate and undergraduate students at Kansas Regents schools – Kansas State University, the University of Kansas, Emporia State University, Pittsburg State University, Fort Hays State University, Wichita State University, and Washburn University. In this way, I hoped to cull excellent work from regional writers. This issue of *Touchstone*, then, represents the best of the Kansas collegiate writing world at this particular moment.

Not surprisingly, in a year characterized by overseas wars, economic crises, industry bailouts, burgeoning national debt, corrupt politicians, and highly destructive weather patterns, the submissions we received were, for the most part, rather somber. In “One Day,” Kate Harland paints a haunting scene of a child living in constant fear of his mother’s disapproval and punishment. Jessica Ulrich’s “Learning” illustrates the painful and debilitating nature of losing one’s love and one’s dreams. Steven Miller’s “Fourth of July in Konya” is a story of power, lack of power, and the fear of being powerless, while Kelsey Vetter’s “Notes to Self” depicts a woman who tries to relinquish control of her life by blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Dianne Wilhelm explores the futility of writing and the frustration of writer’s block in her poem, “Authors Wanted,”

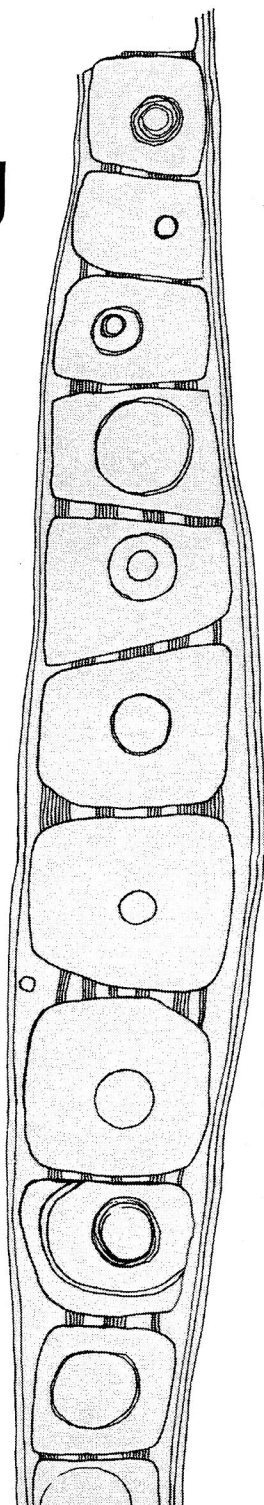
and in “Kansas Hands,” author Kristin Russell describes a farmer who has given up his own dreams in deference to the determined continuance of family tradition.

In addition to their works’ somber natures, these authors – all of whom are K-State undergraduates selected to win *Touchstone’s* K-State undergraduate writing awards – present fiction, nonfiction, and poetry pieces that also share an underlying sense of perseverance. Similarly, the pen and ink drawings of K-State graduate student Adam Achéy are, at first glance, somewhat bleak. However, upon closer inspection one sees rich, organic detail within his stark, black-and-white line drawings. Achéy’s work offers, like the collection of writing in this issue, a sense of determined perseverance through colorless landscapes. But, bleak as these texts may seem, this common thread suggests that life is not as dark and hopeless as one might think. Knowing that we can get through dark times may not seem like a very bright light at the end of the tunnel, but it is a light nonetheless, a light that these works faithfully maintain.

In addition to Achéy’s and our student authors’ works, *Touchstone* is honored to feature an interview with award-winning nonfiction writer Meredith Hall, whose first novel, *Without a Map*, received high critical acclaim and appeared on the *New York Times* Extended Bestseller List. In Hall’s work we find similar tones to those within *Touchstone’s* student writing, but they are so artlessly perfected as to make her tale at once heart wrenching and inspiring. We are truly thankful for Ms. Hall’s time and her work.

Finally, I must thank *Touchstone’s* faculty advisor, Darrin Doyle, for his sincere enthusiasm in helping with this journal from the early days of staff selection through the final copy editing; his help has been utterly invaluable. I must also thank the many people who have come together this year to make this issue of *Touchstone* possible: my fiction, nonfiction, and poetry editors, the design and submissions staff, the many assistant editors who read countless submissions, K-State Printing Services, the K-State Fine Arts Council, and the K-State Department of English. Without all of you, Volume 41 would not have been possible. Thank you.

Learning



Jessica Ulrich

He wore his pants too short – not blatantly so, just enough so that when he strode across campus from his office to one of his classrooms and back, his skinny, white ankles peeked out at passing students from beneath the hem of each leg. He did not do this out of ignorance; years of attempting to gain access into a world more professional than the one he currently occupied had taught him the importance of acceptable dress. Neither was he unable to afford new, better-fitting slacks to replace them. No, he wore his pants too short because it delighted him to see how irritated his faux pas made everyone else – students and faculty alike.

His pants weren't the only unorthodox characteristic he boasted. Thick, green-rimmed, circular glasses magnified piercing, cornflower-blue eyes. Above them, white eyebrows so long they were practically three-dimensional gave him an intense, unsettling appearance, and his long, straight nose and thin lips lent themselves well to the impression of severity he projected. He wore patched blazers over his too-short pants and ghastly, patterned ties selected purely on the basis that no shirt would ever complement them. He disliked socks and therefore wore his brown leather loafers without them, even in the dead of winter.

The faded nameplate beside his door read Dr. Arthur Everett Wainwright, Creative Writing and Literature. At one time, he'd been a best-selling author, sought after as an instructor at this small private college in southern Kansas, where he had been enthusiastically welcomed by the head of the English department – a short, dumpy woman enamored of his early work. Students, too, made a fuss over him, fighting to take his classes, striving to absorb as much as they could from such a promising young writer (then only 35 and already famous) as they attempted to begin their own inevitably-doomed careers. He had been very helpful at first, hoping that a few of his students might pick up their glimmering morsels of promise and transform into something profoundly grand and beautiful, but each and every one of them let him down. Their work was mediocre; they lacked ambition, drive, dedication, and most of all, skill. And so he ceased trying. His enrollment numbers dwindled each year as upperclassmen warned younger students not to sacrifice their GPA by subjecting themselves to his rigid standards and irrational grading system. Even those students who mustered up the courage to test the rumors generally dropped out as soon as they could. Already, only two weeks into the fall semester, 9 of his original 21 students had withdrawn from his Fiction Writing 647 class. Those who remained were either desperate for upper-level coursework, apathetic about failing grades, or ignorantly

optimistic about their ability to work in impossible conditions.

The girl who was coming to meet with him today was one of the latter: Jacey Kemp. He could recall her face fairly well – the high, clear forehead, healthy pink cheeks, small nose, big smile, etc. It wasn't so much that there was anything particularly striking about it; he simply remembered because Jacey was one of those frustrating students who came to class every day, rain or shine, took a seat near the front with planner in hand, and focused completely on every word he uttered, beaming at him when he asked her to read or give a response (which he no longer did, for that very reason). Her attention annoyed him – he wished she would use her class time to draw cartoon monkeys or complete chemistry worksheets or send sugary text messages to her boyfriend like everyone else. But she didn't. She just fixed those round, dark blue eyes on his face and took notes extensive enough to build a rocket ship, had he been describing one. Three days ago, upon receiving back her first paper, complete with an enthusiastically-written "D" on page one, Jacey had e-mailed him, asking if she could visit him in his office. He was required by contract to say yes, so here he was, trapped in this room he hated, surrounded on three sides by bookshelves filled with dusty classics, dustier teaching manuals, and more than twenty Styrofoam coffee cups at varying levels of almost empty, waiting impatiently to get the visit over with and escape this wretched campus.

To Arthur's acute annoyance, Jacey was several minutes late, entering his office just as he decided it was futile to remain for one more moment.

"Ah, Miss Kemp," he sighed, removing his feet from their resting place on the corner of his cluttered desk and placing them on the floor. "Please come in. What seems to be the problem?"

The girl slid her backpack to the floor and seated herself across the desk from him.

"Well, first off you can call me Jacey," she said, tucking a long strand of honey-colored hair behind her ear.

"Yes, yes, I know," he said. "Now what is it I can do for you?"

"Well, like I said in my e-mail, I was just hoping you could tell me what was so bad about my paper."

"Did I say it was bad?"

She tilted her head to the side and raised one eyebrow.

"Maybe not 'bad', verbatim, but I'm pretty sure you called it 'bullshit' in class. Out loud. In front of everyone."

Arthur held up a hand. "I must correct you, Miss Kemp. I did

not call it ‘bullshit.’ I called it ‘horseshit.’”

Her other eyebrow joined the first.

“Is that, um...supposed to be any better?”

“On the contrary, horseshit is worse. Lighter, flakier stuff. Bullshit at least has some substance to it. Your work is horseshit. But I might remind you that I did not discriminate – I called *everyone’s* work horseshit, not just yours.”

“Well, see, that’s what I don’t understand. You made such a big deal in class about every paper being worthless, but surely *someone* wrote something halfway decent.”

“Unfortunately, no.” Arthur shook his head in mock sadness. “There was not one partially original idea among them, and originality was, of course, the only real requirement for this assignment. You can check the rules in your syllabus. In addition to the astounding lack of ingenuity, everyone turned in work with hideously poor sentence structure, stiff dialogue, and, as in your case, pitifully dull vocabulary.”

“Okay...so what do you suggest I do to get better?” Jacey asked, unabashed. “Because you wrote like three comments on my entire paper, and I’m not really sure what to change.”

Arthur sighed. “Tell you what, Miss Kemp...”

“Jacey, please.” That blasted smile! He ignored it.

“...I’ll give you some extra reading, advice from a colleague of mine named Dr. Marshall Rivers.” He pulled out one of his desk drawers, located a packet no fewer than one hundred pages thick, and handed it to her. “Read that, rework your paper, and then we’ll talk.”

Jacey’s eyes widened at the thick sheaf of papers and then flicked back to his face. For a moment she studied him critically, as though she were testing him, feeling with her mind for his weak spots, locating his inconsistencies. It irked him that she could make him feel mildly uncomfortable when normally that was *his* forté, and he made a conscious effort to appear nonchalant. Finally, with an indecipherable glimmer in her eyes, Jacey reached out a hand to take the packet and nodded at him.

“All right, Professor. I accept.”

She had already picked up her bag and turned to leave when a knock sounded on the door, and Cynthia Morgan, the same woman who’d been so ecstatic about hiring him twenty-five years ago, entered the room. She was still dumpy – her graying brown hair worn in a rather plain, unattractive bob, her knee-length skirt wrinkled and faded – but she was no longer head of the department and no longer thought either

They say you're high on criticism, low on construction, that you single-handedly changed their minds about being English majors, and that – this is my favorite – you are a crotchety old man whose greatest joy in life is being crotchety.”

Arthur nodded thoughtfully. “A fairly accurate statement, wouldn't you say?”

Arthur or his work was in any way wonderful.

To Arthur's surprise, Cynthia recognized Jacey instantly.

“Why, hello there!” she practically sang, wrapping Jacey in a delighted hug and then holding her by the shoulders to look at her. “How are you doing, Jace?”

“Not bad!” Jacey replied, giggling. “I nearly forgot you taught here! I'll have to drop by your office sometime to tell you about my summer in Arizona – it was amazing!”

“Yeah? Well that's great, honey. I can't wait to hear about it. I'll see you later, okay?”

“Yup! See you!” Before Jacey left, she turned to Arthur once more and gave him a small smile. “Thanks for the help, Professor.” And she was gone.

With no other reason to delay what he was certain would be a fine confrontation, Arthur turned a carefully polite face to his coworker. “And how do you know Miss Kemp?” he asked conversationally, making quite certain that his bare ankles were in plain view and straightening his hideous orange paisley tie.

Cynthia frowned at him. “She was in my sixth-grade Sunday School class before she went to live on her grandparents' farm in Sumnerdale. And don't think you can distract me from the real reason I'm here. Arthur, you have got to quit being so antagonistic.”

“Antagonistic?”

“Antagonistic, yes. As in, the department gets more complaints from students about your disagreeability than about all the other instructors combined, including Craig Davis, who is clinically bipolar. They say

you're high on criticism, low on construction, that you single-handedly changed their minds about being English majors, and that – this is my favorite – you are a crotchety old man whose greatest joy in life is being crotchety.”

Arthur nodded thoughtfully. “A fairly accurate statement, wouldn't you say?”

Cynthia ignored his comment with pursed lips. “You are more than just incompetent, Arthur, you are *detrimental* to these students. It's a wonder you haven't been fired already.”

“Yes, it is.” He leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands together, gazing up at her. “But you have quite an active role in whether I go or stay, don't you? You're influential, respected. Why haven't you talked to the board and suggested they take steps toward my dismissal?”

The woman sighed and passed a hand over tired-looking eyes. “Because I know the real you is a good man and a great teacher, and I've been hoping for years I might get to meet him in person. But, Arthur?” She paused, waiting until he returned her gaze. “The board doesn't need my input – they've already decided this semester is your last chance to prove yourself.”

Arthur wasn't certain why he was so anxious to leave work every day since home was hardly more inviting. His green, one-story house on Fifth Street was tiny, drab, and unwelcoming, even to someone who had inhabited it for so many years. Most of the light bulbs had burnt out long ago; he'd only bothered replacing those in the rooms he used: the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. Otherwise, he carried around a flashlight at night to keep from tripping over the sparse, mismatched furniture.

He found his mailbox empty this evening, as it was most of the time. No card from an old friend who hadn't spoken with him in a while, no envelope from an editor who had changed his mind and wanted to include Arthur's work in some anthology. The last time he had been published was a few months before his wife, Nadia, had sat him down, explained that he loved his work more than he loved her, and *left* him without even a quick backward glance over her elegant shoulder.

He loathed himself for the way he'd begged her to come back, for the way he'd prostrated himself at her feet, calling her several times a day, swearing he'd do anything...but what she asked for was more than he could bear. She would come back, she said, if he quit writing – if he never picked up a pen or touched a keyboard again for anything more

than scribbling an office memo. This woman, the one whom he had loved for her sharp wit and tender smile, the one whom he had cared for despite her occasional fits of temper and tendency to lose important things like car keys or tax documents, *this woman* wanted him to give up his passion, his pride, his glory, his *life* – for her. She knew when she married him, when she *met* him, that he was committed to his work, and now she was asking him to choose one or the other. Life or love. The more he thought about it, the more firmly he believed that he shouldn't have to make this decision – that it was more a sign of betrayal on Nadia's part than a lack of attentiveness on his. And so he did what she asked. He chose.

Occasionally, when he'd had a glass of wine or two with dinner and was feeling uninhibited, Arthur wondered if he had chosen wrongly. Because after Nadia left, so did his success as a writer – a double betrayal. Fickle publishers no longer clamored for his work – it was harsh, bleak, unfeeling, cold. The world is a cold place, he told them, but they would not relent. One can write about a hard thing without becoming hard, they said, and politely hung up on him. The last stuffy editor who had rejected him in this fashion was the reason his telephone now resided in a pile of splintered plastic beneath a phone-shaped dent in the living room wall, rather than on the doily-covered hall table as it had in previous years.

He tried not to think about it, tried to burgeon his self-esteem with his usual reminders: that he had talent, that many of the greatest artists lived terrible lives and were not appreciated until long after their deaths, that he was strong and needed no tender heart beside him to make life desirable again. But as he warmed a frozen dinner on his gas stove and sat down at the kitchen table to eat with only Hemingway for company, he knew his reminders were slowly but inevitably ceasing to offer him any comfort.

The sun shone cheerfully all the next day, a stark contrast to Arthur's gloomy mood. He spoke less frequently, walked more quickly, and glared more fiercely. He broke five pieces of chalk before he stopped writing altogether, caused a curly haired freshman in his Intro. to Literature class to cry, and discovered that his computer had a virus which could not be fixed until Monday. All things considered, he was less than enthusiastic, upon locking his door at the end of the day, to hear a bright, feminine voice calling out from down the hall.

"Hello, Professor! I'm so glad I caught you!"

Arthur grimaced and took a few deep breaths before he turned to see Jacey Kemp walking...no...*bouncing* toward him, her hair pulled back from her face into a thick ponytail and her blue eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Miss Kemp," he acknowledged. "How are you doing this... *fine* day?"

"Fantastic," she answered, finally reaching him and standing closer than most students dared. "I was hoping we could discuss the reading you gave me."

"Miss Kemp, if you are not prepared to put extra effort into this class to better yourself, then I see no reason why I should..."

"No, Professor, you don't understand," Jacey interrupted. "I'm not trying to get out of the work – I finished it this morning. I'm unsure about some things, though – do you want to go get some coffee with me at the library and we can go over it?"

He was so shocked that he accepted without even thinking about it.

They settled down at a table in the tiny coffee shop called *Caffeination* adjoining Waverly Library – Arthur with a black coffee, Jacey with something disgustingly sweet and frothy – and picked apart some of Dr. Rivers's main points. Oddly enough, Arthur found himself putting more effort into describing how to catch and hold a reader's attention, how to reveal important details about characters through dialogue and scene without simply laying it out in the narrative, how to create a believable universe out of bizarre occurrences. Jacey played with the small stirring straw in her coffee cup and listened intently, her questions and comments showing that she had a fairly good knowledge of writing theory already and was capable of learning more. For his part, Arthur was so caught up in the conversation that he didn't realize until much later that the talk had turned from discussing the craft to discussing himself.

"So why do you do what you do, Professor?" Jacey had asked after a comfortable lull, catching him off-guard.

"I...well, I...well, why do you ask?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, smiling. "Just curious why you chose to teach."

"Hmph. I teach to keep from starving, not because I find any joy in directing miscreants on their pathways to happiness and riches. I am not, in truth, a teacher. I am a writer."

Jacey laughed and rolled her eyes. "Okay...so why do you

write, then?"

"Because I'm brilliant," he answered matter-of-factly.

"But why else?" she pressed. "I mean, do you enjoy it?"

"Enjoyment has nothing whatsoever to do with it. I write because I am the best. Period."

"Well, I write because I love it. I want to spend my life doing it whether I'm the best or not."

Arthur frowned, shaking his head. "Now, that is simply foolish. Why waste your time on something for which you obviously have very little talent?"

"Because...because it makes me happy," said Jacey, ignoring his jab, "and because I can *reach* people through it, you know? Give someone a new perspective about life or comfort them during a hard time. Plus, I'm a big believer in chasing dreams, and I've dreamed of doing this since I was, like, seven and writing stories about talking horses."

"And I'm sure your parents filled your head with fluff about your ability to grow up and be the Queen of England, if you so desired."

For once, Jacey's ever-pleasant expression faltered, and she looked down at her hands.

"My parents...weren't the most supportive people in the world," she said slowly, twisting a small silver ring on her right pinky. "They really didn't think I'd be much of anything when I grew up."

Arthur knew he should probably say something sympathetic, but he feared he no longer knew how to convey the emotion. Instead, he shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. Twice. When Jacey still made no comment, he searched for words to fill the silence.

"Well, certainly *someone* must have stuffed you full of sunshine, or you wouldn't be so overconfident now," he said finally.

At those words, she raised her head from her hands. Arthur was relieved to see that the shadows he'd glimpsed in her eyes had retreated.

"My grandparents helped me a lot – stood by me even when things got tough. And I met this great girl in high school named Lisa who kind of helped me out of the rut I was in." Jacey's face brightened when she spoke of her friend. "Lisa reminded me of how much I loved to write and critiqued a lot of my work. Good thing, too, 'cause some of it was terrible. But anyway...I plan on dedicating my first book to her."

Arthur snorted. "Your first book. The audacity of dreamers. You, Miss Kemp, are young, idealistic, and predictably naïve."

"You, Professor, are old, arrogant, and disparagingly sardonic."

For a moment Arthur just gaped at her; then he felt himself

bristling like an irritated rooster. “Well, I...well, you...” He forced himself to quit sputtering and glared at her. “If you’d use that kind of vocabulary in your writing you might end up with passable work.” He crossed his arms, then uncrossed them because he realized he looked like a stubborn child, then crossed them again because he didn’t *care* what he looked like...did he?

Jacey, for her part, appeared to be doing her best to maintain her composure, but eventually she failed and exploded into unrestrained laughter, collapsing backward into her chair and wiping tears from her eyes.

“Oh, wow, this is fun,” she said, still giggling periodically.

“Hmm? What? What is fun?”

“This.” Jacey waved a hand in a careless circle. “Being here. Hanging out with you.”

“Hanging out?” Arthur pronounced the slang words carefully, as though they might scald the inside of his mouth. “I think you’re mistaken, Miss Kemp. People only ‘hang out’ if they...”

“Enjoy spending time together?” she supplied. “Well, we do, obviously, since we’ve been here for close to two hours. And I’m glad. I really like you, Professor.”

“Oh, come, now. Be logical,” he scolded her. “What on earth is there to like?”

She just gave him the wide, enigmatic smile that he was coming to know so well and said, “Oh, there’s plenty.” And suddenly he felt a sharp, prickling sensation somewhere beneath his ribcage – uncomfortable, but not unpleasant – and he forgot how horrible the first part of his day had been.

It wasn’t as though his whole life suddenly gained meaning after that day or that he began smiling idiotically at students and offering warm praise in place of criticism, but, gradually, Arthur realized he despised going to work less than he once had and felt the cloud of pessimism he sported begin to dissipate. Throughout the next few weeks he met several more times with Jacey to discuss her work, twice at the library coffee shop as they had done before. He had to admit he looked forward to those times – Jacey was so lively and unassuming, and she took such flattering pleasure in talking to him. He learned over time that she was terrible at math, spoke fluent German, and once drove a Chevy Tahoe off a cliff into a lake.

A few of his coworkers tentatively expressed concern about his

relationship with Jacey, having seen them drinking coffee. They warned him about the dangers of becoming attracted to students (especially at his age) and the possibility that all she really wanted was a good grade. And he wondered, for an alarming moment, if he really did have any romantic interest in her, especially when he remembered that sharp, prickling feeling. But he decided with relief that this could not be the case, for he did not spend undue amounts of time thinking about her, and when he did it was not with the jealous possessiveness he had felt with Nadia and one other woman he had briefly dated, but with a vague tenderness, like that which one might have toward the family beagle. As far as Jacey wanting nothing but a good grade – well, if that was the case, she should have learned by now that it was against everything Arthur stood for to show favoritism, and she'd be wasting her time to try to gain it. However, he knew better than to think the girl could ever be so manipulative. Her desire to learn was genuine, he decided, and she was, indeed, improving, albeit not by an impressive amount.

And so the semester continued through midterms and into November until the day that Arthur would later point to as the moment he finally began to learn from his mistakes.

Jacey had stopped by his office unannounced, which no longer bothered him, at least in her case. She looked excited and pretty in a white, V-neck sweater and dark jeans, leaning forward in her chair with her eyes sparkling like sapphires and her cheeks flushed.

"So you know how you were telling me last week to find a writer whose work I thought was really profound and try to emulate him or her?" she asked, her right leg bouncing so hard it looked like it might detach from her body. "Well, check this out. I found one." Settling down into his office chair, Arthur watched as Jacey dug around in her bag. With a flourish, she pulled out a tiny paperback book so worn and faded that the title was no longer legible, and stood up in front of his desk. Opening to a page near the back, she began to read:

"It seems to me that love is not something that blooms in a riot of color for a single, glorious moment in a superficial spring, nor is it the last, blinding flash of light before the sun drops into the ocean." Jacey's eyes glanced from the page to Arthur's face, apparently misinterpreting his white, stony expression for one of tranquility and continuing on with her reading: *"Instead, love is the barest touch of a finger, a stone worn around a neck on a chain, an unexplainable, all-encompassing entity that leaps and lingers..."*

"Stop," Arthur commanded, his voice strained. "Bad choice.

That writer has no idea what he's talking about."

In surprise, Jacey stopped and stared at him.

"But Professor, *you* wrote it," she said, confused. "Don't you remember? It's from your first book! I found it yesterday at The Shelf, and I nearly flipped! I love it, too – it's amazing."

"Then you have deplorable taste."

"Oh no, Professor, I have great taste. This is wonderful! I can tell that even though it's fictional, you wrote it with your wife in mind. The words are so beautiful, and best of all it's so true..."

"No," he said tightly, gripping the thick rubber of his armrests. "No, it's not true. I was wrong. Love leaps and lingers...blech. What rubbish. Love doesn't linger...it strangles, it ruptures, it destroys..."

"Professor!" Jacey exclaimed, looking shocked and almost hurt. "Please don't talk like that! Listen..." She quickly flipped a page to where she had underlined several sentences with a pencil. "*Love is all things at once. It is instinctual, yet logical; a compulsion and a choice, the truest freedom and the greatest gift...*"

"Enough!" Arthur reached across the desk and tore the book from her hands, hurling it into the waste basket. "You silly, stupid girl. What is wrong with you? You have the nerve to recycle my own words, words that I wrote before you were born, that I've done my best to forget, and throw them back in my face expecting me to suddenly change my entire philosophy on life and... and love? Tell me something, Jacey. A year and a half ago you graduated from some decrepit, second-rate high school in a dying Kansas farmtown. What can you *possibly* know about love?"

Jacey blinked rapidly, her forehead creased with anxiety and perhaps a touch of fear, her white-knuckled hands clutching her notebook to her chest. But she did not back down.

"I might not have lived as long as you, Professor, and I might not have all your experience," she said, her voice low and restrained, "but I *do* know about love. I know about love because I've lived without it, and because I've refused to give it, and because I've suffered for it, just like you're suffering now. I can imagine it hurt like crazy when your wife left you. But I also know if you want a life worth living, you could swallow your pride and listen to what I'm telling you."

Arthur felt as though he'd stepped straight into the fiery furnace with no hope of any angel protecting him. He'd never been so furious. "Get out!" he raged, feeling a thick vein pulsing in his neck. "Get out of this office, now! Before I..."

But Jacey had already escaped through the open door, her broken sobs echoing down the hallway, her backpack slamming against her spine as she fled. Arthur just stood there, his chest heaving, his head pounding, realizing that his hands hurt because they were balled up so tightly, though he couldn't remember curling them into fists.

Barely a moment went by before Cynthia Morgan burst through his doorway like a vicious she-wolf avenging the death of her pup.

"What did you do to her, Arthur?" she demanded, hazel eyes flashing.

He drew himself up angrily. "What did *I* do to *her*? She came in here preaching about everything I'm doing wrong – saying she knew more than I do about love – speaking to me about Nadia..."

"Arthur, are you blind?" Cynthia groaned, her hands thrown wide in agitation. "Even I can tell that girl has been a blessing in your life – changed you for the better. And you think she's ignorant about love? That you, in your self-absorbed sixty-some years, know more than *she* does?" She shook her head in disbelief. "Do you have any idea how difficult her past has been?"

"Difficult! That overenthusiastic little candidate for a career in motivational speaking has had a difficult past? What was so difficult about it? Enlighten me."

Cynthia looked as though she wished she hadn't spoken. "It's not really my place to say...I shouldn't have brought it up."

"You're right. You shouldn't have. But since you started, you might as well finish."

"It's her private business, Arthur. I only know because of church..."

"I don't care about her privacy. She invaded mine today. I should at least return the favor, don't you think? Tell me what was so bad about her childhood."

"Arthur..."

"TELL ME!"

"All right!" Cynthia exploded. "I told you I taught her Sunday school class before she left to live with her grandparents, right? You know why she went to live with them?"

Arthur swallowed and shook his head, suddenly uncertain he wanted to hear. Cynthia took a deep breath and continued.

"She went to live with them because her dad had been sexually abusing her since she was seven. Her mother knew about it – finally told the police when Jacey was twelve. Tried to leave him, even. But that man

ignored the restraining order and put a bullet in her head. He killed his own wife, Arthur. And Jacey went to live with her grandparents – as far as I know she gave them the worst time anyone's ever had raising a teenager. Hated them. Got arrested a few times. Drove a Jeep off a cliff..."

"Ahem...it was a Tahoe, actually..."

"Arthur!" Cynthia growled at him. "The point is she's been hurt in far more excruciating ways than you ever have, but she's *moved on*, and she loves *you*. She *does* know more than you, about many things, but you're too wrapped up in your own misery to learn from her."

And she turned from him in disgust, slamming the door behind her.

The final weeks of the semester made the previous two-thirds of Arthur's life feel like a peaceful retreat to Walden Pond. Jacey did not stop by his office to ask about her final paper, did not greet him with the warm smile that he now realized he had taken for granted, did not even look at him in class, instead training those blue eyes somewhere over his left ear. Too miserable to even make others feel miserable, Arthur spent a great deal of time in his office simply staring off into space. He wanted to reach out to her, to apologize, to say he'd been...well, he'd been *wrong*. There. He could admit it. But each time he opened his mouth to ask her to stay after class, he found he couldn't force the words.

Before he knew it, the day of the final had arrived. He sat watching as his fiction class (those who remained) frantically scribbled about techniques and authors in their Bluebooks. His sockless foot tapped in agitation, and he folded and unfolded his hands several times, unable to keep from glancing at the girl with honey-colored hair near the front row. He watched her, too, as she rose to turn in her test essays, failed to meet his gaze, and walked out the door.

"Miss Kemp?" he croaked, but she was already in the hallway and didn't hear him. For two seconds he stared while the door swung shut, then leapt to his feet and jerked it open, stumbling after her. "Miss Kemp?" he called after her. She kept walking. As she reached the exit, he tried one last time. "Jacey?"

Upon hearing her name, Jacey stood stock still, her fingers inches from the door handle. Then, she pushed the door open and left without looking back.

Arthur had just finished gathering his stack of half-graded finals, despondently planning to finish them during the weekend, when a

soft knock sounded on his office door. A ridiculous surge of hope filled his chest. It couldn't be. "Come in," he said quickly.

And there she was, smiling as though nothing had ever happened between them, as though the future was once again an open book of possibilities. Cool relief washed over him, making him almost dizzy. He didn't ask what had made her come to his office now when she had just turned away from him that morning, and she didn't say she forgave him. But she didn't need to.

"I know you're headed home, Professor, but I just wanted to stop by and let you know I talked to Cynthia Morgan this afternoon, and she told me about the advanced fiction class you want to teach next semester. The class...ah...wasn't quite full, so I just enrolled. So I guess I'll be seeing you in January."

Arthur nodded at her. "And you as well." He hesitated for a moment. "Ah...I talked to Cynthia too, some time ago, and she...well she told me about your father..."

Jacey's face blanched, and she stuck a hand in her pocket.

"I...I'm sorry," Arthur said quickly. "I shouldn't have forced her to give me that kind of information, but I was...well... I just want to say I'm sorry. About what happened."

She nodded slowly and let out a long breath. "It's okay, Professor. I'm not upset at you. Just caught me off-guard. No matter how many times I think I've gotten over all the crap in my life, it still hurts every now and then, you know?"

"Do you, erm...need to talk about it?" Arthur forced himself to ask.

"Maybe someday," she said, and he breathed an inward sigh of relief. "I think we've both had enough emotions today to last us awhile. I better go study for my last final, but I'll see you soon, 'kay?"

"Of course," Arthur replied as she turned to leave. "Oh, and Miss Kem...Jacey? I finished reading your final paper this morning." She paused in the doorway, waiting for him to continue. "It's not brilliant, but it's not bad. Something to work with, at least."

The look on Jacey's face was worth the energy it had taken to spit out the simple compliment. "Oh, *thank* you, Professor," she breathed, beaming at him.

He nodded at her, adjusted his tie (brown silk with yellow polka dots), and turned his face so she would not see him smile. •

San Juan: Scent of a Man
by Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

the vision leaving you, first the left eye, now the right.
you wear shades in sunlight; at night, i remove them.
you don't know how to be butch without eyes,
hands only to guide you, scented sound, vibration,
heat and cool, the balancing bones, how to look strong
with a cane/pointer. you try and tell me, try to tell me,
that you try to take everything in now, who knows
when you'll be seeing it again. i want to know if it's
the poverty, want to know if this world can give us
something more than contacts to turn our Augen blue.
perhaps i lose you in the analysis. you tell me,
stay here, enjoy the moment. i close the book, and enter
your arms, my smell reeling you in.

Counterfeit

by Kari Jackson

Spying the car round the corner, she turns –
caught – to tend to the coupons sprawled unaccounted for
on the dining room table. With precision, she picks one,
delicately trims the edges, circles the expiration date
in blue, and places it in the appropriate pile
on the tablecloth, while the late
afternoon sunlight scatters ineffectively
across trampled dandelion shag. Her jittering
foot on a table rung squeaks, unheard.

Familiar footsteps climb the drive, but her quickened
pulse concentrates on the candy coupon between
fidgety fingers. The door latch clicks, yet
she suppresses the urge to twist her head and pretends
the thirty-five-cent sliver of paper is more important,
staring into thin black lines.

She swallows her smile, biting almost painfully
the inside of her cheeks, as a small suitcase and
laundry bag drop just inside the door.

Eyebrows clench, lips firm, head jerks
to focus on the young face, then blurts,

“I thought you were going to be here
hours ago.”

And she places another coupon in a pile.

#7

by Tyler Woods

And when this love no longer needs the limelight,
And darkness no longer looms,
We are content to sit in the wings
and let someone else take the stage.

No direction,
No alter egos,
No one asking why your head
falls to my shoulder.
Or watching my fingertip
trace the slope of your neck
wondering what that must mean.

No need for ovation.
Just two players in need of each other
in love.

Authors Wanted

by Dianne Wilhelm

- i. I went swimming in Lake Michigan once.
The waves there on a windy day
are as subtle as elephants under the carpet.
As I tumbled in footloose submergement,
all I could think was – “Courage!
This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon.”
That night I dreamed I was dying.
In the morning I told my brother, for full five minutes
I couldn’t see and I couldn’t breathe.
He said, “Did you time it?”
(A writer’s block now sits where my keyboard used to be.)
- ii. I think the Muses must live on the other side of the world.
By the time I receive their suggestions,
they’re suffering from jet lag.
I once got up six times after midnight –
The telegram came through piecemeal.
Inspiration is a nightingale
Whistling farewell and tucking head under wing
even as I’m waking.
Discouragement is a storm-tossed raven
with soul-burning eyes, always on duty,
That faithful ghoul.
- iii. It’s been one of those days all my life,
When tall, thin Jones is too slow-walkin’, too slow-talkin’
to save Sweet Sue from the railroad tracks.
Sometimes the vorpal sword is useless against Jabberwocky.
Sometimes the vampire orders garlic bread.
My typewriter keys have been clinging together for days
in the limbo between their individual resting places

and the blank white of an unused page.

iv. Authors Wanted: How to Submit a Manuscript

If there's a light at the end of the tunnel –

It would have to be a train.

The reality of rejection hits like a

hundred thousand

Pounds of driving steel –

The “sorry not a winner” of cereal box tops,

and pop bottle caps,

While acceptance is as elusive as a fading whistle

and pay is a dream across the river.

Guarding Life (or Sanity)

by Molly Hamm

Sit still
for thirty minutes at a time.
Trace the rivers
from left to right,
drawing patterns:
the alphabet
or
 a
 zigzag
on the smooth surface
like they taught you.

Boredom, or insanity,
not really sure –
and who can tell the difference –
comes s l o w l y like a thick paste,
tar, dripping, if it could,
from your head
down
to your
feet.

Pass the time.
The sun sure understands time,
baking down on your back
like it has nothing better to do
than cook your raw skin well-done.
You notice everything:
you're supposed to, they told you,
but to you that means

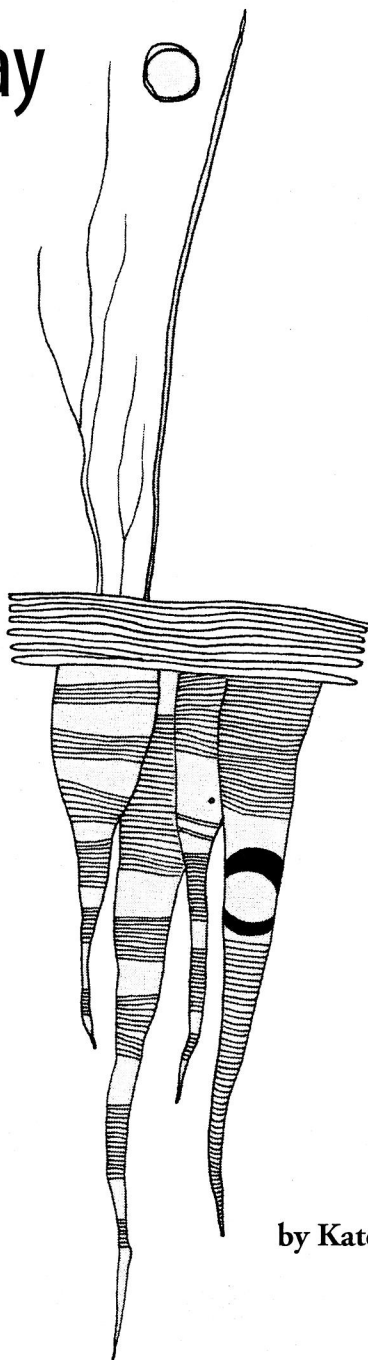
the couple fighting in the whirlpool
the fading pattern of every swimsuit
the 300-pound man on the diving boards

not exactly what they had in mind.

A soundtrack of screaming children
plays, on repeat,
again.
and again.
and again.

nobody would blame you
for going off the deep end.

One Day



by Kate Harland

Miss Cameron says we should keep a journal. She says writing in a journal will help us write in class. I think maybe she is right. She said she won't read it or anything, so don't worry about what we write. A bunch of the kids aren't even going to write now. Billy Darcy said he was just going to write the word "banana" over and over on the page so it would look like he had written something. Billy's kind of dumb, though. Casey Miller says it's like a diary, and diaries are for girls. Lots of boys are writers, though. Most of the books we read in class are by boys. Plus, I like writing. I'm going to write a real journal like she showed us.

This morning I had cereal for breakfast. It was the last of the box, so when I dumped out my cereal, the toy came out, too. It was a little spinny thing Mom called a top. She was angry I didn't know what it was. She said kids these days have too much stuff and need video games and TVs to be happy. Then she glared at me, and when she walked out of the room her shoes made big clumping sounds on the kitchen floor. I think a toy that does nothing but spin is stupid. Maybe a girl would like it. Girls like to spin around and do all sorts of dumb stuff.

I had to hurry and brush my hair and my teeth after that. I made sure to brush my hair away from my face and my teeth twenty times on the top and bottom. Mom says my teeth will rot out if I don't. She says then I won't be able to eat my supper and I'll starve and then I'll die. I like supper, but that's not why I do it. I don't think my teeth will really rot out. Billy Darcy says he never brushes his teeth and he has all of his, and Sarah Prune brushes hers all the time and she's missing her two front teeth. She looks funny, when she smiles at you her tongue sticks through like a worm wiggling out of a hole in the ground. Losing your teeth has nothing to do with brushing. Kids just lose them sometimes, but it's ok. They grow back. Still, I brush my teeth so Mom will be happy. I like her when she's happy. And when she's mad I don't want to be the one who caused it.

Last time I made Mom mad it was because I forgot to sweep the front porch. She came in, and I was in the middle of killing the aliens from Planet Orb, but I knew something was wrong the minute she walked in the door. She shouted at me to turn that "damn game"

off. Mom never cusses like other kids' moms. Just when she's mad. Even if she does get mad a lot lately. She took the game away after that. That was the worst part. The worst part wasn't all the screaming that I couldn't even understand or the cleaning the porch with a toothbrush. The worst part was that I didn't get to finish killing the aliens. Mom took the game out of the machine and snapped the disk in half. In half! I had almost beat that level. Even if I can get the money to buy the game again, I will have to start over.

Anyway, because I spent so much time brushing my teeth and hair, I missed my bus. I walked calmly out the door so Mom wouldn't know I was running late. She hates it when I'm running late. I know I should wake up sooner, but I like to watch the sun come in through the little slats and holes in the blinds before I get out of bed. I like to watch the patterns it makes on the carpet. On the weekends sometimes I use my water paints to paint the patterns in different colors. Well, when I'm watching the sunbeams I don't always get out of bed on time. Then I have to hurry, but it's hard when I have to do everything just right. I wish kids didn't have any rules. I wish we could just not brush our teeth if we wanted and mothers wouldn't yell at us. I bet the other kids would like that, too. Maybe I can get a bunch of kids together, and we can rule the neighborhood like in that one movie I saw at the theater last year. Or maybe I can run away like the boy, Jimmy, did in the book we read one day at school. Jimmy didn't like his mother, either, but I thought she sounded really nice. She made him breakfast with scrambled eggs, and bacon, and toast. Jimmy was dumb to run away.

I never think about running away. Running away is for wimps and girls. Everyone knows that. One time Jake Collins, who was in my class this year, ran away. He was gone a whole two days. Mom told me once that only cowards run away. A coward is like a sissy, someone who is afraid of stuff. I'm no coward. I don't even think about running away. They found Jake at his uncle's house. He went there after sleeping in the park for a couple of nights. He complained that it was cold and wet in the morning. What a loser.

So I was late. I missed the bus. I thought about going back and asking Mom to drive me to school so I could get there on time, but then I'd have to explain how I missed the bus. Mom wasn't hav-

I don't get it. Girls are fun to talk to when we're doing art and they can talk about colors, but other than that I don't get half of what they say about clothes and hair and dumb stuff like that.

ing a good morning, so I did not want to go back. It's only a couple miles to school. It's not far, but if I walked I would miss math. We always do math the first part of the day. Miss Cameron says it's because our brains are still working then. My brain always works for math. Numbers are easy. My brain actually doesn't have much trouble at school. I do okay. Mom says it's because I eat breakfast. Billy Darcy says it's because I'm a nerd. But then he always wants to copy my work.

Billy has trouble with school. He doesn't understand numbers, but he's really good at sports. I'm not so good at sports. I don't think it's right that because I'm good at school but not at sports I'm a nerd, but because Billy is good at sports but not at school he's cool. The girls already love him. They follow him around at recess and giggle when he talks to them. He says it's a good thing. Billy likes girls. I don't get it. Girls are fun to talk to when we're doing art and they can talk about colors, but other than that I don't get half of what they say about clothes and hair and dumb stuff like that. I don't get why having girls around makes Billy cool. Grownups must have come up with these rules while they were coming up with the teeth-brushing rules. Rules are dumb.

So yeah, I missed math this morning. I got a zero. Zeros are not good. Mom does not like zeros. Maybe I can change it to an eight when Miss Cameron sends the weekly reports home. I don't do that to be a liar or a cheat or anything. Mom just thinks I'm a failure when I don't get good grades. I don't want her to think I'm a failure. I try hard in school, but sometimes I don't know if it's enough. Like when I get zeros. Then I'm a failure. Still, I'm doing extra good on this English assignment, though. I've been writing all afternoon. Miss Cameron is right. There is so much to write about in a day. I think I like writing. I like art, too. We drew pictures to-

day in class. Miss Cameron said she really liked mine and I should show Mom and she might hang it up on the refrigerator. I smiled at Miss Cameron and said I would because it's too hard to explain that Mom likes to keep the kitchen really clean, and pictures on the refrigerator make it look messy. Sometimes I wish Miss Cameron were my mom. She's always really nice. Maybe she's just like that in school, though. When you're the mom you have to make rules and be mean sometimes. Plus, teachers have to be nice about your art. Maybe Miss Cameron didn't even like it. Maybe she just had to say she did because she's my teacher.

I had to make dinner tonight. Mom has one of her "outings." I don't know where she goes or what she does, but she spends an hour in the bathroom before she goes. I hate that. I don't always know an hour in advance when I'm going to need to use the bathroom. It's unfair that she hogs it for that long. But she's the mom, so she gets to make the rules. I guess I don't mind making dinner, though. Other kids don't get to make dinner. Their moms make dinner and then make them eat gross stuff like broccoli and spinach. I don't have to eat gross stuff. When I make dinner, Dad and I have cool stuff like peanut butter and jelly or macaroni and cheese. I can't cook much, but Dad doesn't seem to mind what I make.

Tonight he was acting really weird, though. He kept smiling at me funny from across the table. He asked me a bunch of questions and sighed a lot, but not normal questions about school and stuff. He asked about Mom and if she's been mad a lot lately. I told him she hadn't, and that I'd been doing everything right (I didn't tell him about missing the bus this morning). Then he looked sad. I don't know why he was sad. I guess he's worried about Mom. I hope she's alright. I hope she's not sick or anything. Betty Ford's mom got sick last year, and Betty did not look very good. She got thinner and her clothes were dirty. I'm glad I have my mom here to take care of me.

Dad says we might go on a trip soon to see Uncle Charlie. I said that would be fun. I like Uncle Charlie but don't get to see him much because Mom doesn't like Uncle Charlie. She doesn't like Gram and Gramps either, and Dad said we could see them, too. Dad said it was a secret, and we should keep it from Mom. It was going

to be a surprise. I don't think she'll like it, but I guess Dad knows what he's talking about. He said I might even get to miss school. That would be really cool.

I guess that makes today a good day. I can't wait to go see Uncle Charlie and Gram and Gramps. They let me eat junk food and watch TV, and they let me sit in the kitchen and listen to their grown-up talk. I like to talk with them because I don't have to watch what I say. They laugh at all my jokes and don't get mad if I say the wrong thing or forget something.

That's all for today. It's my bedtime. I have to turn off my light before Mom sees. •

Elizabeth
by Kari Jackson

May found her
expecting
 engaged.

No wedding in June.

Clothes in blue and toys
piled in corners
 grew
by day, by month.

“No husband, no home,”
 Mom said.
 No home,
no child.

October taught her
 selflessness
as she chose
her replacement.

Ask the barren
January girl
 where
she’s going.

Arms embrace

nothingness.

 No child,
no reason.

Trying Patience by Kari Jackson

It's a comfortable world –
childless.

I suspect
long hours laboring, grease stuck
to your taste buds, pleased
you.

But then, complication.
You groped for
words, for spare
coins in a uniform
pocket, for the ability
to embrace.

If I tumbled, you let me
hold a single
calloused finger.

I wore your favorite shirt,
saturated with the permanent
scent of machines. I waited,
years, while you watched,
with devotion,
your treasured shows like your life
on a screen, content,

I go. I hear you left me
a note before your shift.

I hear.

Kansas Hands

by Kristin Russell

Picturing the wheat field
just north of the house doesn't
come close
to standing in the soil that
sinks beneath your feet
and running your hands over
chaff on chaff on chaff as
the crows take flight from the power
line across the dirt road.

Each season brings
our attention to care, harvest,
the market. Firm handshakes and warm
hugs overcome the risks
planted through each
seed. We've been here well over a
century.
Settled.
Threshed.
Wind-worn.
Who's left?

What would life be without
the smell of Fast Orange
soap wafting from the bathroom or
the sounds of your nail brush scrubbing
away the dirt and oil?
You said yourself you would've done something else.
Majoring in history didn't give you
those calloused hands.

Wache

by Kelsey Hixson-Bowles

It's only when we talk that I realize
how much I've hidden from myself

How much I've stored away in the
do-NOT-remember-or-else file in the
CAUTION-may-cause-burns cabinet in the
avoid-at-ALL-costs room in the
cobweb corners of my mind

and yet
despite all the warnings
all the screams from the audience
(NO! don't go in there!!)

I venture to *that* corner
enter *that* room
unlock the cabinet
and scour the file
all at the sound of your voice
and I'm plunged into
blissful nostalgia
for that tenttwenty minutes (or however long you have)
and then

"okay, well I should go"
"oh, yeah, me too"
"have a good week"
"yeah, you too"
"k, bye"
"bye"

CRASH!

downpour

instantaneous *JOLT* back to reality

you are there (yes, NEW YORK, I freaking get it)

I am here

we are not together

that's that

it must be

quick!

QUICK!

pass the hot potato

jump the lava

put it all back!

someone's coming

no one's coming

they're here

I'm alone

shit

slam the cabinet

lock the door

throw away the key (I should never have come back)

flee the scene

and forget

Forget!

FORGET!

go numb

(it takes a few days to cool the burns of those hot memories)

and then it happens

I stop thinking about you

I put on that sunny disposition until even I'm fooled

and here is my life

I am happy

but there is always that ache in my chest

(and by now I can't remember what it could be from)

(what's got into me?! I'm a sap!)

as if instead of breaking, shattering my heart

that blow simply set off

a little explosion of emotion that expanded my heart

so now

I see the dying, suffering people of history

the grieving son of present

the execution of an innocent and FICTITIOUS man

and it's all I can do to

keep composure

to NOT stop this body

sit it down

and cry

grieve

for losses I've never felt

for people I've never met

for souls who never lived

my sympathetic and empathetic abilities

have reached SUPERhuman proportions

and I don't know

what to do

with them

Fourth of July in Konya

by Steven Miller

I. Konya

We get off the train in the middle of Konya. This city, where an ancient river once ran strong, is now essentially a desert. As we step off in front of a great mosque, the call to prayer bellows out over the crowded bustling of mothers with slews of children and business men on lunch break. The call filters through a thousand individuals, but not one of them races toward the steps of the mosque, toward the threshold of Allah himself. Instead, they, we, are all headed for the underground bazaars to find our salvation in Western-style suits with the tags ripped off, in European flats and heels priced at mere liras.

Before we came, we read that Turkey was primarily Muslim, about 99%, but didn't realize that everywhere has a good helping of Christmas Eve and Easter Day practitioners, that the level of commitment to spirituality is universal and the love of fashion inescapable.

But as I must constantly remind myself, I am no saint, either. While the girls are trying on dresses for the Kurdish wedding this Sunday, I get my shoes polished for two lira. The shoe shiner mixes the polish to a reddish brown, and, as he smoothes out the leather's many imperfections, I get a tingling sensation in the back of my neck akin to when the woman at the barbershop puts the electric razor at the bottom of my skull. Maybe it's my lack of physical affection since we started this teaching trip; maybe it's just pure materialism. I'd like to think it's seeing something made more perfect, like editing a sonnet I've been working on for years.

One thing is for sure, I like my polished shoes way too much, and the whole walk back to Rukiye's home I'm watching them, seeing this bit of white dirt or a crease that looks a little like a scratch, so much so that I'm almost hit head-on by a bicyclist on a slim sidewalk. Rukiye Saygili is the prize pupil of our English Conversation class, but as soon as we step outside the classroom, she quickly assumes the role of teacher. Though we are technically staying at the guest houses on campus, we have slept here several nights. Inside, I forget to take my lovely shoes off, and she scolds me, holding the shoes behind her back so her mother doesn't see that I made it halfway through the apartment.

Tonight we are going to an English department *soirée* for Selçuk University, the school we are teaching at; therefore, the girls head off to couches and beds to take their afternoon nap, and I send off a few e-mails: one longish e-mail to my girlfriend, Susan, and two shorter ones to writers back in the states advertising my travel blog.

The afternoon progresses as most of ours at Rukiye's do: her mother smokes Turkish cigarettes, 2001s, and we all watch CNN and talk politics until Kyleigh, another American instructor, gets fed up with my rambling idealism and I with her painful specificity, and we just sit silently. Nicolle, the third American in our midst, keeps her conversation to education, her current major back home, very rarely traipsing off into our debates. Today, however, there is not much to debate. On CNN, Ingrid Betancourt is giving a press conference in Paris about her nine-year captivity in the jungles of Columbia, and in an unrelated story, a journalist is reporting from the Syrian/Iraqi border, which is a safe distance away. Two months ago, I would have only thought about how life-threatening his project in Syria was, but now all I can imagine is a group of Syrian hotel workers and local, no-name politicians offering him more food than he could ever possibly eat and speaking energetically about Mohammad Ali and Barack Obama.

When Rukiye's father comes home, the girls disappear as quickly as cockroaches, and I have a six-line conversation with him, which is a record for me, before I break down into English, a language he apparently doesn't know. Every so often, moving our eyes from the television, we almost launch into small talk, but realizing the futility of it, we stop ourselves, and from there we sit and drink Turkish coffee in silence, no common tongue between us.

II. Selçuk

Rukiye lives in Meram, a kind of suburb of Konya, and though the drive to the rectory is brief, it's apparent that the economic climate is varied here in Konya. Some images set against the setting sun: a beggar with his jacket pinned together and a sign around his neck, "I cannot speak, I cannot hear, please help;" a one-armed man pushing his cart faster as car horns bark after him; a burgeoning sense of division. We've been hearing from everyone that Turkey is in a bad situation – divided and economically unstable – but aside from the unemployed teenagers and twenty-somethings

drinking and laughing on the street corners, we've seen very few signs of this.

"The World Bank pays us very well," Rukiye's mother explains. "So you wouldn't be able to tell. But other people are just surviving, really." The Saygilis have joined us for the ride but do not come along to the Selçuk rectory, a huge garden in the middle of the city.

When we get to the rectory, a woman guard wants us to wait. "Nezih Onur," we say. She simply points at a table covered with tiny bits of food stabbed through with toothpicks. "Nezih Onur?" I ask again. She still points. Polite Cultured Society is Polite Cultured Society wherever you go.

"Yok! Yok," she says, as we try to venture past the first big rock. Now we know the exact parameters of our captivity. Not being much of one to idly wait, I sit on the rock and take notes, notes about my polished shoes, about class division, about this stupid party that we can't even join, and here is where I have my first real thought. You know the kind: a scheming thought. Men are carrying trays of drinks. On one is simple cherry and orange juice. On the other there is Raki and water, which looks like milk, red wine, sparkling white wine, Efes beer, and – oh, glorious common link – cherry juice and vodka.

With the tenseness of the situation and the grand language gap, would anyone even notice if I plucked from the wrong tray, the wrong cherry juice? Could I fool everyone all night and get falling down drunk? Maybe. But could I fool myself? And here's the crux of the problem. I want so much to be sober that it's practically impossible for me to get drunk. Though I shouldn't jinx it.

A friend once asked me about her boyfriend who just couldn't stay clean. "Do you think it's just being put in that situation too much? Being tempted?" she asked.

I walked over to my roommate's closet and stuck my hand in. "There are situations," I said. "Obviously." I pulled my hand out to reveal a bottle of white wine. "Now," I held it out. "There's alcohol in the room. Or, at least, now we can see it. If I wanted to be drunk, I would be. I'd start right now. There is no *situation* other than your own decision. To me, this bottle is like a loaded gun. You can tell me to try it against my temple all you want, but I'm going to leave it well enough alone. That's how easy my sobriety is today."

This brings me, however, to another point. While some-

times it is this clear to me, other times I forget entirely, and it takes me minutes of contemplation to remember. Let me just say, Thank God for minutes of contemplation. Fifteen months of being clean and sober, and you're granted the gift of a few minutes' worth of sanity before making those big, terrible decisions. It sounds like so little, but really it's like that quarter-inch or so of fabric they call an air bag.

Coming to my senses, I go on sitting atop that rock for a steadfast twenty minutes and await the Onurs. For a while I gaze over at a couple who seems to be in the same boat as us, only they're helping themselves to the red wine. The guard comes over presumably to check on us but possibly to ask us to leave, but sees the Chancellor start shaking our hands. "Hosh geldiniz," he says. "Hosh bulduk," we reply. This sends the woman guard flittering back toward the gate. And before we know it, the Onurs have arrived.

Mrs. Gulgun Onur is a short woman with a short seventies-style haircut, a British-sounding accent, and a constant smile. She specializes these days in post-modern British literature. She has, on occasion, pointed her students toward Americans like John Barth, though when I brought up Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon, the names ignited no recognition. Before we are too far into the party she introduces two women professors, Nasli and Semal. I tell Semal, who is dark haired and reserved, that I've been trying to bring literature into my classes, starting with very short stories and poems by poets like William Carlos Williams, but it has been surprisingly difficult.

She explains that a lot of Turkish students are weaned from literature even before high school. "There they separate the students into the maths and sciences or literature and the humanities. A lot of your students, doctors, science professors, haven't had to interpret literature in a classroom in a very long time."

We move around the many small, white tables and under the light brown, latticed canopies toward the musicians who are playing light and then somber Turkish folk songs. "If I were you, I'd drink the red wine until I couldn't stand right and just sit up on the grass next to those drums," I tell Kyleigh. "Feel free to take my plan from me."

"That sounds like an *awful* plan," she says.

"Well, it's like I've been telling George," I begin, referring

to the fourth American instructor who has disappeared for the day. "Don't listen to anything I have to say as it concerns consuming alcohol. I can tell you how to not consume it, though."

Without much difficulty we run into one of our students, Ali-Murrat. Ali-Murrat exudes Turkey. He is a well-to-do professor in the Education Faculty, a family man, and a beaming host whenever we head out to his apartment near campus. He informs us that this gathering is not just for English Department lecturers but for all of the lecturers at Selçuk. We try to figure out what the cause for celebration is but only come away with the fact that it's for the whole university.

After talking for some time about teaching strategies, which I know hardly anything about but pretend well enough, Ali-Murrat asks, "What did you teach today?"

"Holidays," I say. "Today is our Independence Day." Congratulations go around. "Well, we wanted a Fourth of July party," I say to Kyleigh. She happily sips her wine in response.

Later: Nezi̇ has left us in the care of one Ertaş, which isn't his real name. Ertaş is also an English Lit. professor, and in the American tradition is a saz – Turkish guitar – toting songwriter. He speaks energetically, putting his arm around me while talking at the girls, mostly about his musical talents. He smells of sweet sweat, but in a country where air conditioning is a yet-unseen luxury, this isn't unusual.

Before the night is over, we must go thank the Chancellor under the main canopy in the center of the garden. "Teşekkür ederim," everyone says, shaking his hand systematically. And then it's "İyi akşamlar," and we go about our business again.

We rejoin conversation with Nasli and Semal. Both women are chiding Ertaş for wanting to take us, though primarily the girls, out on the town. "Wouldn't your wife have something to say about that?" asks Nasli.

"My wife is with her parents on holiday. And she has no say on my affairs."

"And you have none on hers?" asks Nasli.

"Oh no, no," he says. "I most certainly do. I can control her life, but she can't control mine." He smiles broadly at this and pushes the center of his nose back into his face, a gesture I have never seen.

"I wouldn't want to be *your* wife," says Semal.

"In America," I begin raising my foot in the vicinity of my mouth, "we have what're called open marriages." Kyleigh and Nicole look at me with amusement or terror, I'm not sure which.

"Open? What do you mean open?" asks Semal, all curiosity.

"Like..." I look up, but my mind finds nothing but the truth.

"Go on and tell them," says Kyleigh, a genuine Machiavellian.

"Like with partners?" asks Nasli, her face excited with the prospect of liberal American society.

I open my mouth to answer without really having an answer, but then I see it and point out across the garden. "Look," I say. Everybody looks, and their gazes stop there in the distance, for out past the rectory, past the Hill Aladdin with its outdoor torches and nargila café, past the city itself, fireworks are bursting red and blue and white in the early evening sky, and for just that moment I am free.

III. Dive Hookah Bar

Nezih has entrusted us to the care of Ertaş primarily for a ride back to the guest house. We don't drive home, though, at least not yet. Instead, at the enthusiastic urgings of Ertaş, we head out for a kind of night cap, but instead of sipping drinks, we will be sipping nargila smoke, or fruit-flavored tobacco, from a water pipe.

"The place I will take you is very famous in Turkey," he tells me as we wind through neighborhoods that I wouldn't trust my veteran father to walk through at night. It's close to 22:00, and Ertaş is stopping every so often to speak quick Turkish to men and boys leaning on the corners like we're looking for dope. "I rarely sleep before two or three," he adds, confirming my suspicions.

"I've been on *this* hookah run before," I say to the girls in the back but only get worried looks in response. "I'm sure it's not like that," I say hopefully.

After a few U-turns and a little more fidgeting than necessary, we end up at a café that's, well, a little rough around the edges, and then I put the pieces together – eccentric Lit. professor, hole-in-the-wall location even he can't find, practically no lighting whatsoever, and a clientele that stabs us with their eyes but not out of curiosity – we've arrived at the dive bar of Konya's nargila spots.

Before we've even settled into our seats, Ertaş has invited his friend to sit with us, informing us that M. Bay (Mr. M.) will be taking care of everything – three hookahs, tea, coffee, watermelon – because, as Ertaş says, “He’s one of the wealthiest men in Konya.” I, of course, must test this. And so, when he is gone, I ask M. Bay, “Sprechen sie Deutsch?” already knowing that he doesn’t speak English. M. Bay shakes his head, Turkish body language for, I don’t understand. Then: “Parlez-vous Français?” “Je ne parle pas,” his gesture says. Wealthiest man in Konya? I wonder.

For a time we play backgammon and perform our standard “Americans in Turkey” political talk – What about the war? What about Obama? What about Iran? – but then Ertaş sets onto a topic we have been dying to discuss but understandably hesitate to bring up.

“We don’t know the difference, we really don’t,” says Ertaş about Kurdish people. “Kurd, Turk, it’s all the same. They want to work, run for government, anything, we let them. Some of my *students* are Kurdish, and they’re getting the same education, same everything. These terrorist groups,” he says, referring to the PKK, a Kurdistan group like the Jewish Zionists of the 1930s, only less united and more erratic, “they want freedom, but freedom from what? We share our country with them. They *are* free. We sit with them, drinking tea in the daytime and talking, then (some of them) run off to the caves at night. And you don’t know who’s who.”

We don’t tell him what we know, that a little over a week before we arrived in the country, May 28, 2008, Turkish legislation finally passed a law that permitted Kurdish language radio and television broadcasts of up to a full hour. We don’t ask why there were federal judicial cases in 2000 and 2003 concerning the use of the letters “X, W and Q,” which appear in the Kurdish but not the Turkish alphabet. Nor do we ask why it is still considered a criminal offense to fly a Kurdish flag within the country. Part of our reticence is actual politeness, yes, but also we are quite aware that the “Attempted Coup” of three days ago put twenty-one people, including a newspaper editor, behind bars for “ultranationalist” or secularist leanings.

It is complicated for everyone, though. Mrs. Onur informed us at one point that she leaves these racial and political questions completely out of her classes. “Because if one of my students says he is a Kurd and that his people deserve freedom, I have to call the police,” she explains. “And worse, if I don’t, one of my other

students might call them on *me*."

At least there is still a dialogue when it concerns the Kurds. Every time the Armenian Genocide is touched on, we receive a scarily robotic answer: "There was *no systematic killing*," with the last three words stressed as if in conclusion. Such uniformity, we all agree, cannot be coincidental.

"We love Americans, though," says Ertaş. "We have a lot in common, our two countries." He echoes a sentiment we've heard from different people throughout our trip. "Like any country, the government is not necessarily the people." We all nod our agreement.

"The war is very unpopular back home," Kyleigh says, though really it could be any one of us. Three of us are equally quick to distance ourselves from the current debacle a country away.

Now Ertaş is going into lobbyists, how Israeli and Armenian groups control the US government, and M. Bay is settling up the bill. "Well, lobbyists only really affect the Legislative branch." Kyleigh offers an explanation that is immediately lost on our very peculiar friend.

When I try to thank M. Bay, he mutters, "Yok, yok," and points faintly toward the exit. There we convene, Ertaş acting as an interpreter of sorts. M. Bay insists that we must see his vehicles, both high end ones, and asks if we want to "drive fast" in his MG. We agree that we do – what could be the real danger? – and when he goes back toward the café, Ertaş informs us that "His men may follow." We respond with confused looks, so he explains. "M. Bay, my friend, he is big mafia leader here in Konya. But secret, secret. Don't tell anybody," he says placing a finger over his lips. "Right," says Ertaş, and we all climb in.

In exactly one week, give or take a few hours, we will be saying our farewells, our See-you-state-sides and Wish-I-could-stays, and preparing for our flights to Izmir, to Istanbul, to Frankfurt, all under a miraculous crashing sky and the first rain we have seen all trip. For now, however, we race through the residential streets of Meram, still covered in the white soot of fresh construction. For now, we are just holding on.

As we wind up through the mountain roads, I'm reminded of something this guy Vincent once told me adamantly in New Orleans. At the time that I met Vincent, I was working at a kind of mob front outside of Fat City. I wasn't moving anything or offing

anybody, I was just making eggs and crystal burgers at all hours of the night. The store was owned by Vincent's nineteen-year-old niece because she was the only felony-free member of the family (this changed during the course of my employment, but that's another story). Vincent himself had just gotten out on bail and was awaiting trial for a charge concerning his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter. The rumor, one I am inclined to believe, was that the charge was rape. He'd come in all coked up and angry at the donuts he was making, and I more often than not would still be slow and giddy from when a good friend of mine had smoked me up after he got off work. This was the dichotomy of that diner that summer; for every night except the weekends it was just us two.

What Vincent once told me has stayed with me not as a word of advice so much as unadvice. He said (and for this you should imagine a muscular, middle-aged Italian, hammering metal sheets and counters with his fist every so often), "If you want to get a girl excited, take her out in one of those old roadsters, one big front seat, no belts, shakes when you hit fifty, and take her around the mountains driving like a madman! Then she'll know who's in control. They like that. Being controlled."

So I'm reminded of all these things all at once as we careen around the curves and slopes, and as much as I'm enjoying this crazy ride/reverie, I suddenly realize how many teas and cherry juices and coffees I have actually consumed. And for ten minutes I'm transformed into a second grader on a fieldtrip, afraid to ask anyone to pull over and afraid of what might happen if they don't.

"There is the power plant." Ertaş points. "Most of Konya's power is coming through this mountain." That's nice, I think. Dry, dry desert dry, I think. I check my watch, as every helpless man must do, and see that there's just three more minutes until it's back to zero.

After ages of meandering, we finally park at what is basically make-out overlook. I leap, I skitter, I cross the mountain road and find a sign to hide behind. Cars are honking, but I'm oblivious with sweet relief. Finally I look up: it's no longer the Fourth of July, and the sign must say "Caution," because I'm literally pissing on power lines. •

A Wrinkle in Time (and of the Mind)

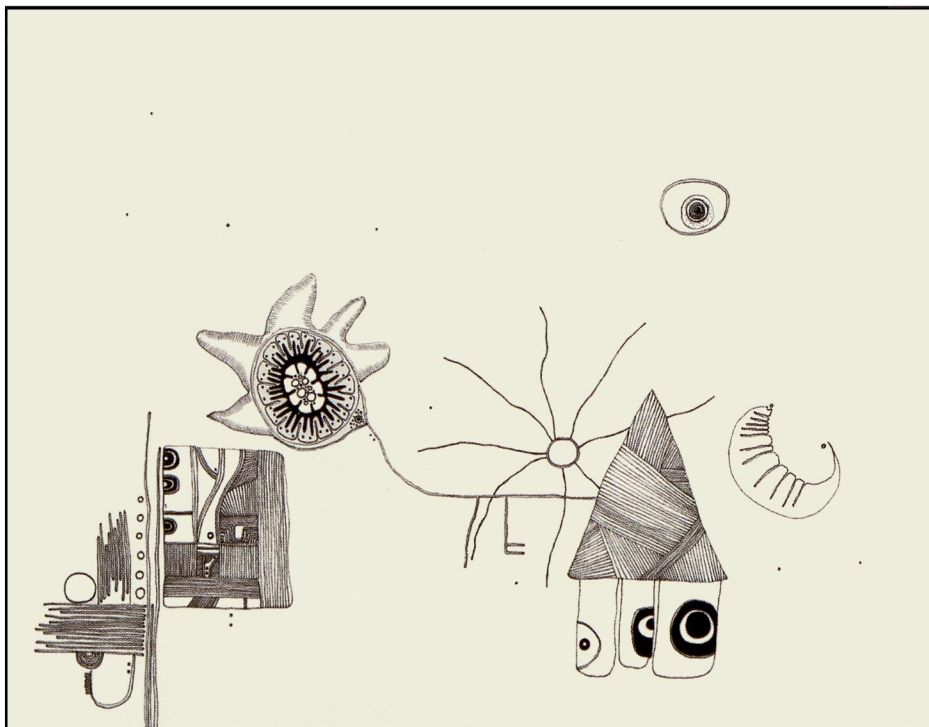
by Molly Hamm

I watched the Rockies disappear in blue shadows
as the straight and narrow road stood still,
moving quickly under the worn wheels of our Buick.
The rolling Kansas plains stretched for miles
in the distance, a light golden brown, the color
of my daughter's bouncing curls
when they were held tight by emerald ribbons.

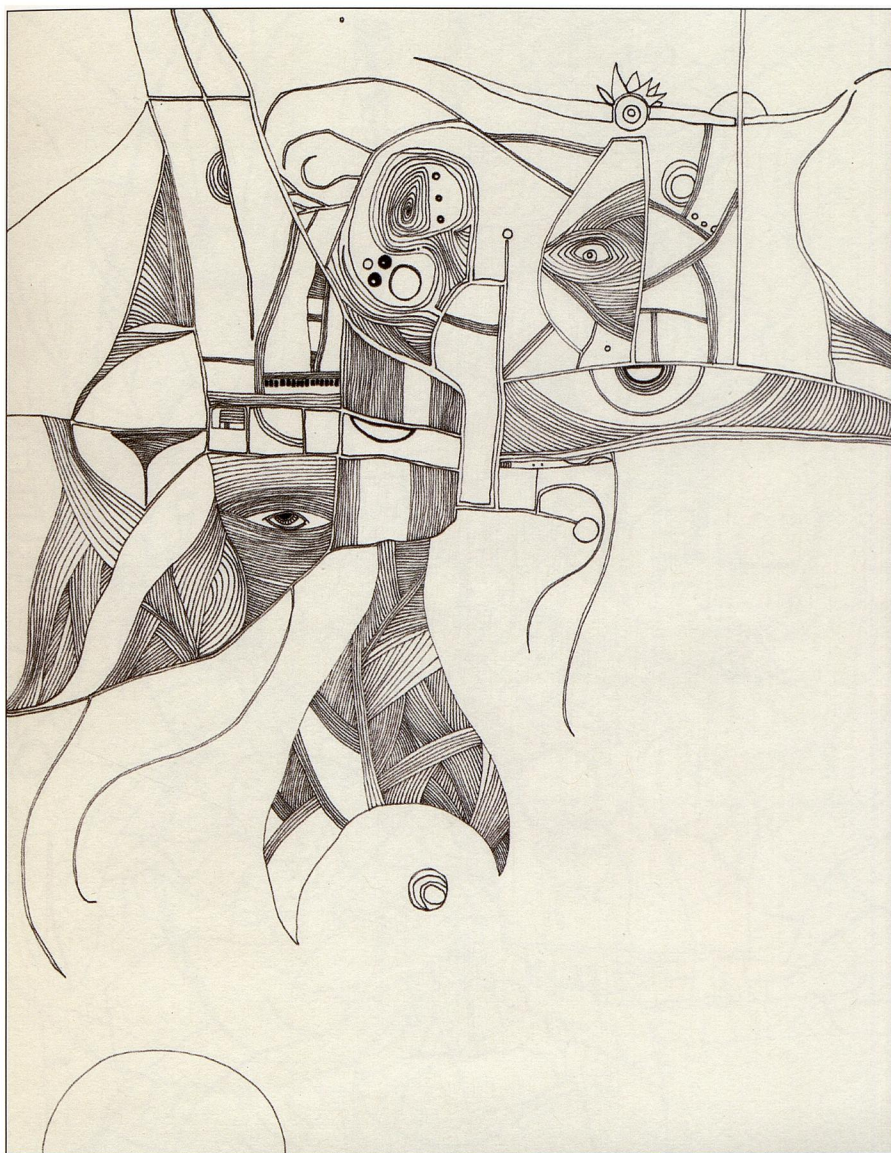
By the time she stopped pinning her hair,
I started to misplace my car keys and tell stories
of the past. When my family started whispering
behind closed doors and phoning medical experts,
I lashed out with a sharp tongue pointed threateningly
at the vulnerability of their good intentions.

I remembered being told that as you age,
those closest to your heart begin to handle you
with the delicacy of a child taking its first steps.
Like overprotective parents, they decided
to move me closer to home under their watchful care.
I'd rather remember the days of my youth
than be scolded for leaving half the groceries
behind at the store. For all they know,
I could have forgotten them on purpose.

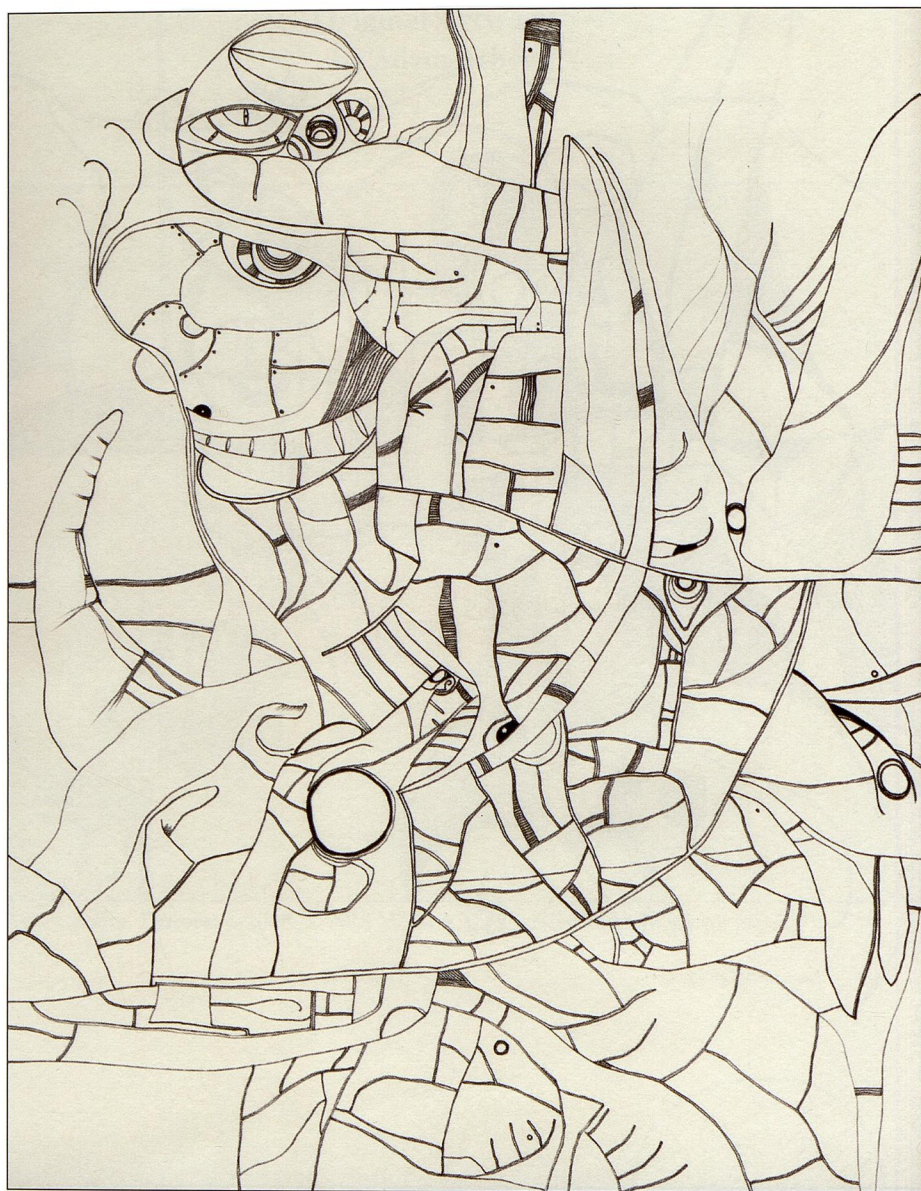
Original Artwork
by Adam Achéy



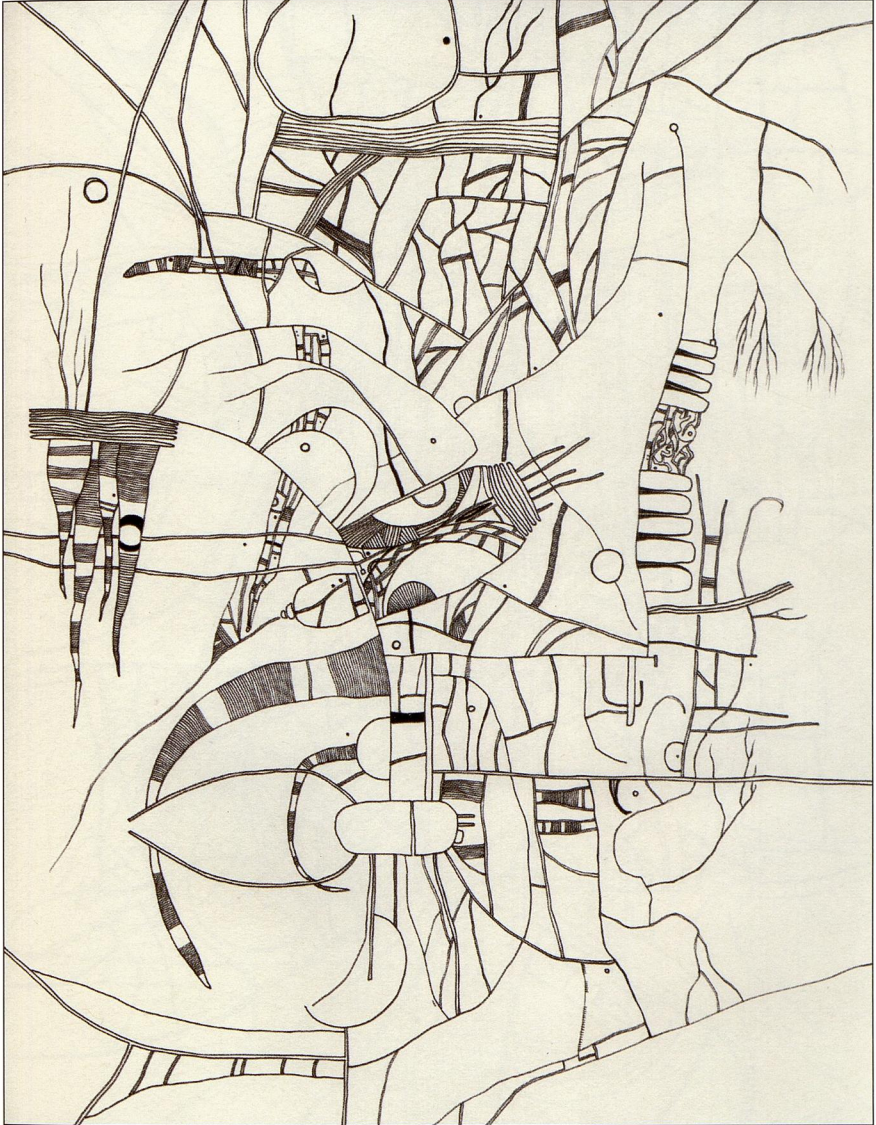
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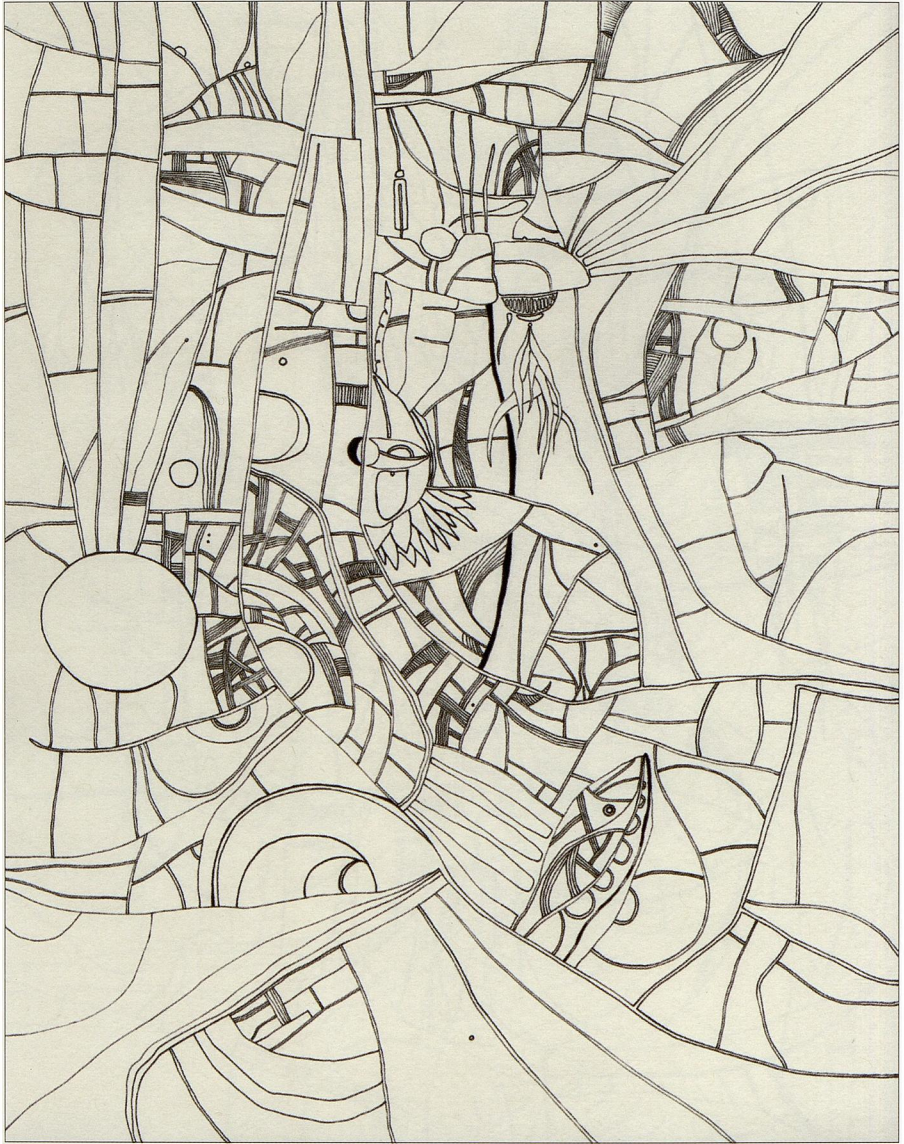
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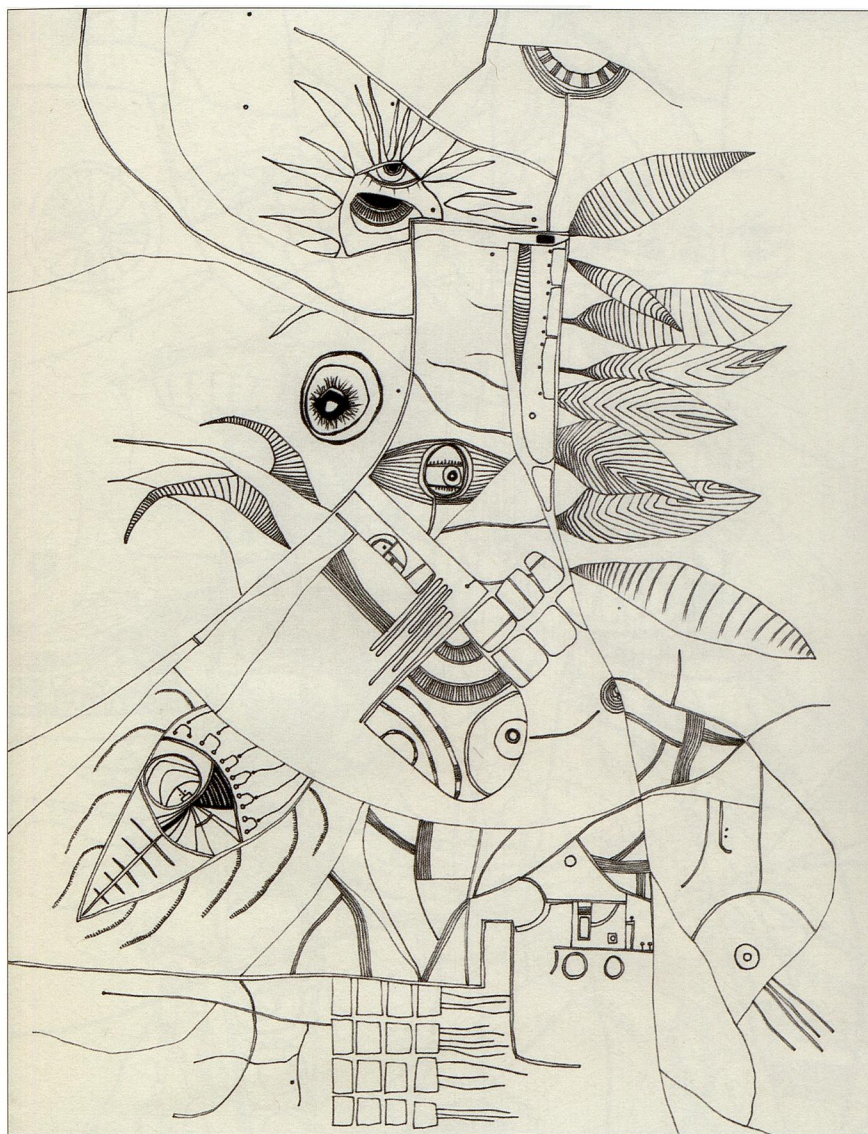
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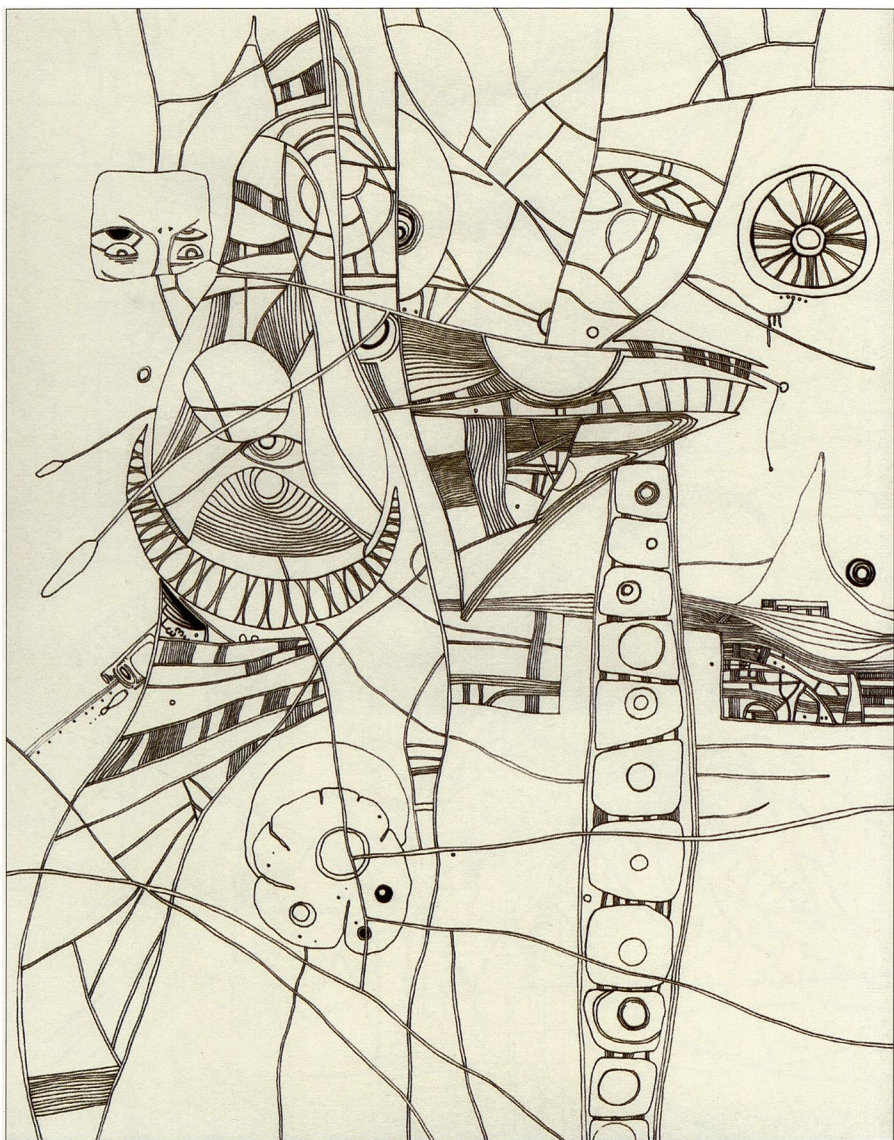
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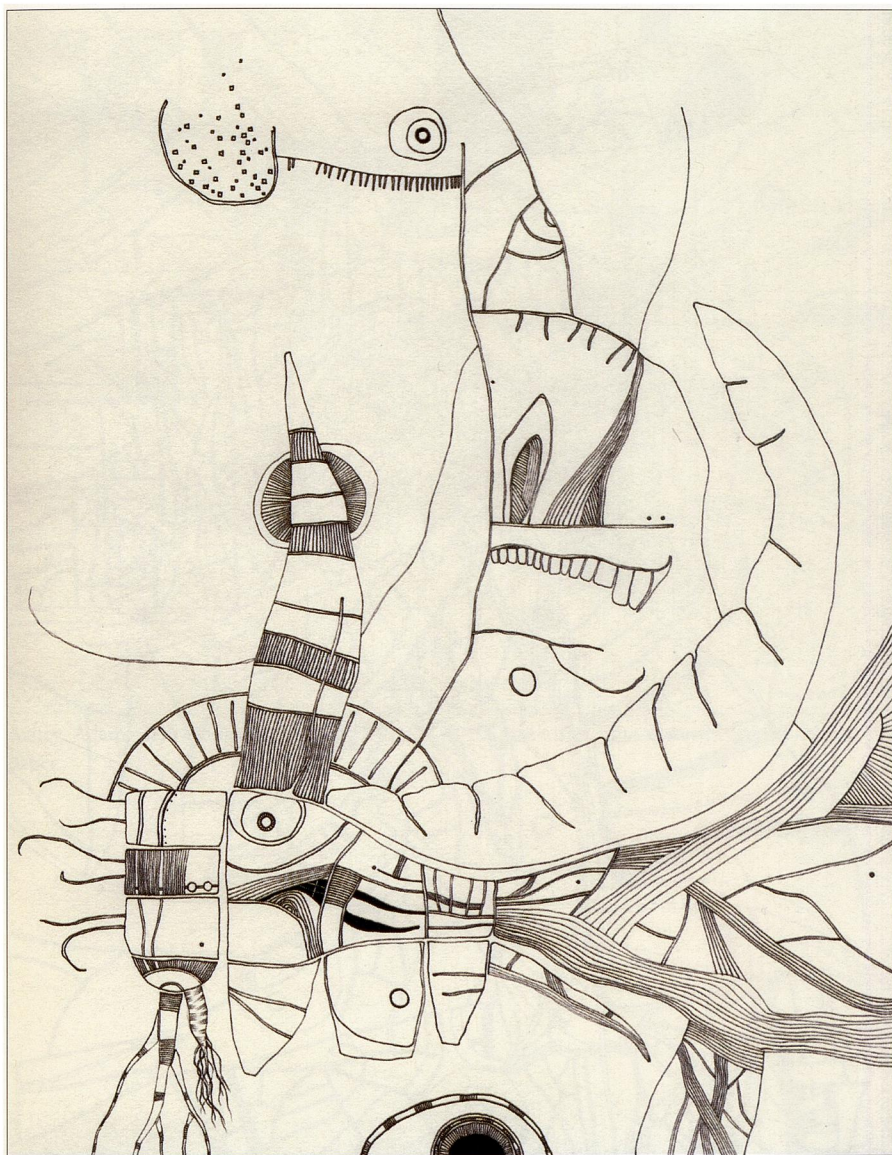
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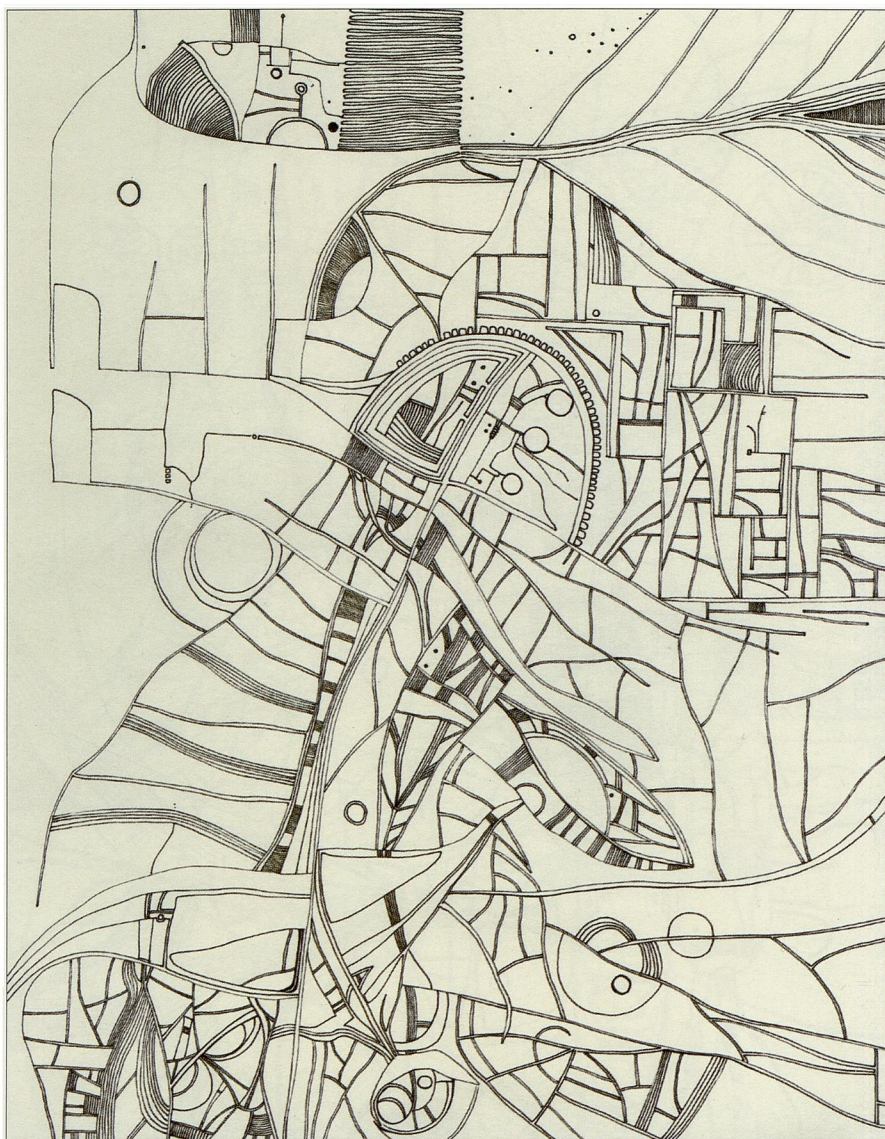
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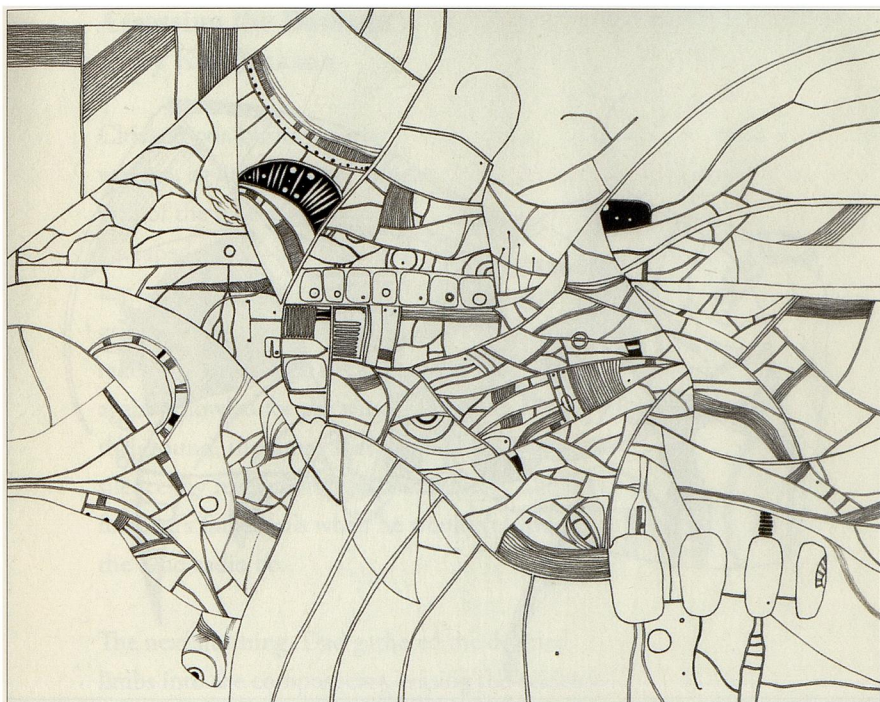
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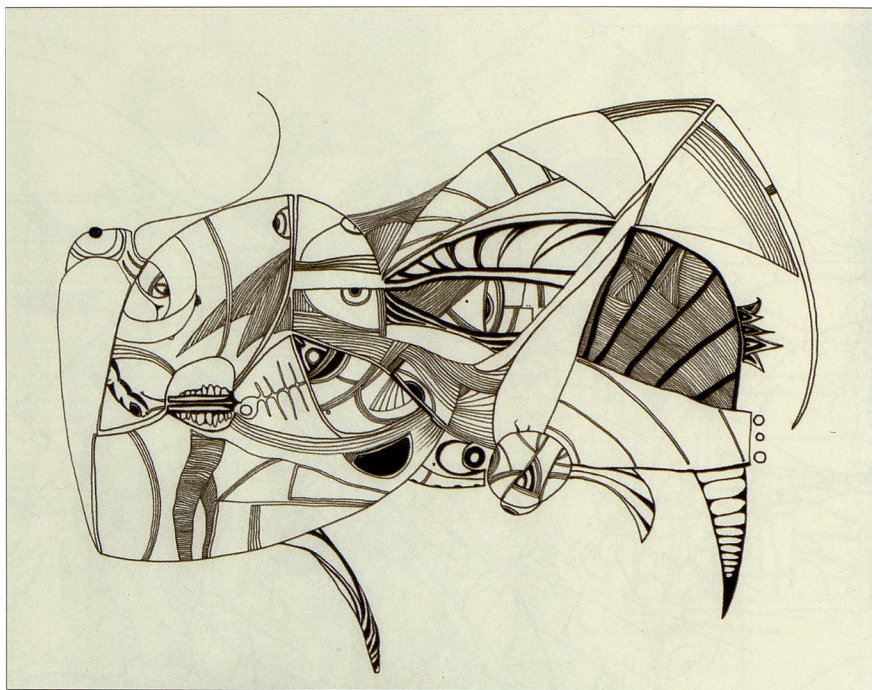
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Assessing the Damage

by Kari Jackson

Chicken pox blisters burst,
wet red, against the cool cement
wall of the basement shower.
I scraped – up – down – again –
my back, squatted – again – with toes
gripping dirty concrete. My fingers, wild,
raked my chest, legs, neck. Outside, sirens –
again – howled for the winds whipping
the ground, the sirens that could not
silence my fevered whimpers – again –
for Dad's fingernails when he wouldn't leave
the dead radio be.

The next morning, Dad gathered the downed
limbs into the compost cart, erasing the evidence
of wind, and admired the rain's work
on his plush lawn.

Six days later, the scabs had fallen off,
and my skin returned to white. Still,
three pale bumps, permanent blisters,
made a triangle on my stomach,
and one, like a welt, marked my side.

Still, after two decades, hundreds of forgotten
tornado warnings, and three cycles
of new cells, the raised scars remain,
evidence of my own furious
fingernails alone.

Ballet in Budapest

by Michael Verschelden

Death will dance for an enraptured audience:
a rise of the heel, an internal trend,

the taut beat of drum skin around the heart.
Each motion an insinuation, a hypnotized

consciousness, influences the widening
ripple, the sequence of the Danube.

Every phrase of the flesh, the limitations
of orgasm, interrogate our gestures.

No helix of uncoiling hips is ever trivial.
The slightest miscue, the acute apex of arousal.

An audience cannot lose their breath without
betrayal, those sudden infidelities of the flesh.

Dali

by Adam Pickert

Clawing at the breaching skin he poisons mankind's routine
Peeling the casing of his egg-like cell his volatile body births chaos
Ripping himself from his encaged womb, the irregularities of his confinement carve its work in him

This prison holds an escape faintly too shallow for liberation
And frustration weakens his feeble attempts as life is sucked from him
This life taken as once the dawn of a new one held its striking promise
And drawing its fangs from its wounded fawn, the boundaries that contain him calm

He quiets his restlessness and brews the boiling waters of his enraging predicament

Their eyes hold him with eternal concern
They keep him at bay with their incessant whispers and falling shadows
He knows the exit but somehow their reigns pull excessively tight
Guiding his spilling heart towards the undemanding reality of his enslavement

To forfeit is not to say he surrenders his dreams
Rather merely his withering body to the tyrants that dispel his uprising
Disobedience would spawn the revolution of brilliance
Yet the unjust limits of those watchful eyes warrant little compromising air

So his life ensues with the suffering chosen captivity
Plagued with the scrutinies of his now wavering sanity
And ultimately misplacing reality for the next generation to reveal and discard

Carson Piercely
by Colin Kostelecky

Two tangled snowy tufts
bounce bounce bounce,
becoming blurs of white
within the flaxen field.

They stop.

At restless rest
they tremble,
as would an idled engine,
gazing back with shaky eyes
at Carson Piercely.

He has been watching all the while,
at the bench,
above his folded paper,
stealing kiddish glances
with his stone-still banker's face.

But now,
some playful insinuation,
an urgent inclination
long dead and buried,
struggles to the surface of his suit and tie.

Onto sudden-sprinting feet he springs,
giving chase to fleeing bunnies
and letting out a hearty laugh which
breaks the stone-still banker's face
of Carson Piercely.

But then,
across the way he sees the mirror:
another benched man
staring,
shaking head in admonition.
And Carson Piercely,
through disgruntled ruminations,
becomes embarrassed,
and regrets.

He crawls away
from the piercing gaze
of the man austere tied
around the neck
and cuffed
around the wrists
and latched
into his pleated pants with belt and buckle,
encased within the suit
like one among a chain gang.

You and Me

by Eli Neal

I have known you,
 but hardly a moment
but that moment, I have felt,
 felt it coming,
 a long way off

in the distance,
like a loc-o-motive,
 plowing through fields and forests
 through the 'burbs
 where I learned what it meant
 to breathe,
through your little town
 with its
 one post office,
 and its one cemetery
and one little girl
 with dreams and hopes
 and a plan to escape
 (all of this)
 hidden
 behind crooked black-rimmed glasses.

Perhaps
 you have felt it too
 all of it building
 and compiling
 gathering its strength
like a boxer
 flinging sweat
 from his brow
 before the final bell

We collapse
on my bed,
you
wrap your
cold little feet
around mine
“ask me a question”
but this time
I don't have one.

As we lay
in our silence,
I feel it
creeping in
like high tide
swallowing up
Everything.

It feels like rain
fallin' off my shoes,
like an April morning,
like beams of sun
shining
through apple blossoms
it feels like coming home.

Your lips linger on mine
so close
your breath is mine
and mine is yours
I try my damndest

to lay still but it never works
I light a cigarette
and plumes of smoke
rise over my bed like fog
over the ocean
And in that moment it clicks
You-me-my bed – even the smoke
All of it
perfection
at least a glimpse of it
I linger in that moment
because in that moment
there is no
blood
running down
palace walls,
no dark alleys
shrouded in shadows
Nothing
simply you
and me
I run my fingers
up and
down
your back
you're already asleep.
I close my eyes
knowing
it
will all
be gone
when
I wake.

Die Geige¹
by Colin Kostelecky

You lie
with naked shoulders on the bed pillows –
your figure firm but sinuous
like a snake.

I glance askance,
unable to forget

that dance we danced in such discord,
those disconcerted steps upon the stage
where you made a fool of me.

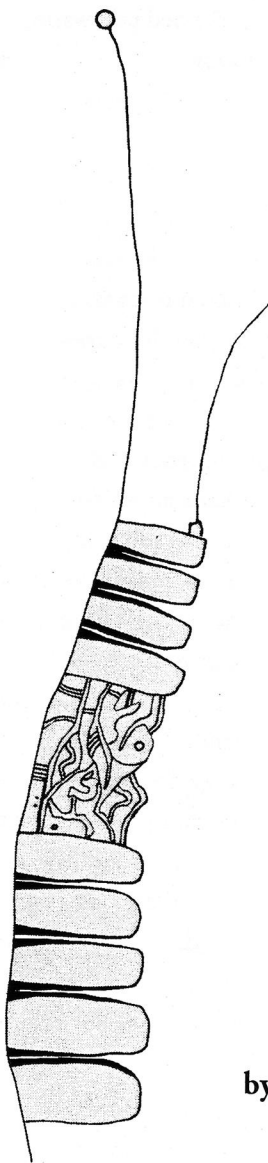
I, sliding hopeful fingers up your neck,
holding you so close beneath my chin –
but you,
you turned away so tense,
only dissonance the sounds
between myself, piano, and you:

then turned the sapid bland,
the zesty dull, the slurs a jagged zigzag,
my bow a rusty saw upon your powdered strings.

And now you lie enticingly on the bed,
and I can only stare dejected,
like one cuckolded.

¹German: *The Violin*

Cocker Spaniel



by Robert Wighs

My cocker spaniel started drinking coffee the other day. Every morning around 6:30 or so she'd be in there. Scratching up the cabinets. Tearing holes in the filters. Spilling coffee grounds and using water that she scooped from the toilet. I didn't drink the coffee. My wife drank the coffee. I didn't plan on telling her.

I didn't think the dog would tell her, either. Not about the coffee. That's trivial. Susie, the cocker spaniel, knew the truth. She knew I was having an affair. She knew it was with the Girl Scout leader. The one that sold the cookies. The Thin Mints.

That's why she made coffee. That's why she vacuumed up her own dog hair. That's why she loaded the dishwasher. But it wasn't always like that.

Liz and I. We used to be happy. I think we were. I know she was. Me, well, I thought she was a great girl. She was the girl that you wanted to date in college. She took time to study for the classes she hated.

"But, Liz, you're never going to need biology! They're just... animals! Really?"

"Don't you have a psychology exam tomorrow?"

"Yeah...well. So? People go crazy and then seek help. End of story."

"Want me to help?" She grinned. Coyly.

Yes, she eventually got me to study. She always got me to study. Little incentives. It always took incentives. More incentives. Less clothes. More living. That's what it was. It was living. Structured but free. Everything was possible. And I'd never loved anyone else. Never. My love for Liz was focused and direct. I did not spread my love around. I was determined to never fall in love outside of Liz.

I mean, yes, I'd been having affairs. Well, sex, but never love. It was different when it was just sex. Sex isn't personal, love is. I loved my wife. I just needed sex. Sex was just a function, a biological need, another link in the chain of life. I wore a condom. When they weren't on the pill, that is. Though, they usually were. It was just sex. I just needed a release. It was only sex.

Women had gotten attached to me. I wasn't fatally unattractive. I learned how to cope, though. I knew how to delete the tape recorder over the phone. I knew not to make false promises. I knew to just keep it focused on the sex. Kathy, Erica, Shawna, Barbara, Erica II, Tiffany. They all knew. It was only sex.

I mean, come on! Susie, the dog, wasn't really even my dog.

Susie did not belong to me, Greg, the husband. Susie the dog used to belong to Myra, the mother-in-law. Susie then became Elizabeth's, the wife, when the Eagle Claw Retirement Home altered its pet policy. Susie the dog peed in the left slipper of Mr. Goldenstein, the aging alzheimer.

"Or was it my right one?"

I liked to talk to Mr. Goldenstein. Never a dull moment.

"You don't remember me, your own nephew?" I almost got a tear to go with it.

"B-But...I...I was never married!"

"I'm your own son!"

"No...that was...No. You. Your mother raised you kids. She did. Not me." He fumbled for his pill. Or glasses. Clumsy.

"Larry, are you telling me you don't recognize me, your own brother-in-law?"

"...Ted?...is that you?" I had to kiss him on the forehead to stay in character.

So Myra was forced to relocate Susie, who took refuge with Liz and me.

"We've been wanting a dog for years. Right, Greg?"

"I wanted a camping dog, not a leaky septic tank."

Cocker spaniels pee a lot. It was, like, a proven fact. And I had wanted a camping dog, but so had she. She thought I forgot all those talks we used to have late into the morning. Tricking her into skipping lectures. Sharing one pillow. Chinese food on our breath, the sheets smelling like sweat. Booze. Cigars. Kisses. Futures. Love.

"So it's settled: you'll get a chocolate lab and name him Luke. I'll get my cocker spaniel and name her Lucy."

"But if we want to go camping –"

"Yes, Luke will come first."

And then she kissed me. Full. Deep. On the lips. That was like a contractual agreement. Chocolate lab first, cocker spaniel second. She broke the contract. She did. And because of that, we ended up with Susie, the third flatmate of Third and Canal #6. Across the hall from the Koreans who got a lot of packages.

At least she secured a job in lower Manhattan. Marketing agency. Stable. It made my life easier. Auditions were just a B or D tram up to Times Square. It did not, however, decrease the dog's peeing. You would think that a dog that did not drink from its professionally customized, glazed, ceramic water bowl would pee much.

You would be mistaken.

It peed when the alarm woke my wife up at 6:15 a.m. It peed when I half-kissed my wife goodbye. It peed when my alarm woke me up sometime around 9 a.m. It peed when I cleared my throat. It peed when I burnt my eggs, cussing at the stove. It peed when I unlocked the deadbolt. It peed when I boarded the subway. It peed when I sorted the incoming mail: keep the equity actors, trash the no names. It peed when I accidentally slid my headshot-résumé into the equity pile rather than trashing it. It peed when I got an audition. It peed when I didn't. It peed when I didn't. It peed when I didn't. It peed when I drank. It peed when I peed. It peed when Liz went to a four-day marketing convention in Las Vegas. It peed when Kimberly, the Girl Scout leader, entered the apartment. It peed when I filled out my name for two boxes of Thin Mints. No, make it three. I loved Thin Mints.

It didn't pee when I crawled back into bed, Kimberly's fingers tracing the beads of sweat and cookie crumbs on my chest. It didn't pee when Kimberly kissed my tongue a third time, tugging down on her wrinkled blouse before unlocking the deadbolt. It didn't pee when Kimberly continued to visit.

"Wow! That's so neat! I've never seen a little puppy cocker that didn't pee!"

"It's not a puppy. Let's just go back to the bedroom."

"Aw, can't we play with her?"

"No."

"But, look, she's taking the cookie box to the trash."

And she was. She had taken the empty Thin Mint container in her jowls. She rearranged and stacked the trash, bottom to top: pizza box, Bud Light box, Thin Mint box.

"She's just incredible! Did you train her to do that, Greg? Or did your sister do it?"

"Let's just go to the bedroom."

Yes, I eventually told Kimberly that Elizabeth was my wife. Not my sister. I was going to do it. Kimberly asked too many questions. *Have you seen the new apartments next to Central Park?* Unanswered questions led to false promises. It just took time.

But, from that day on, Susie's progression never ceased. It went from stacking trash to setting it on the curb. Pawing up the crumbs on the floor. Folding blankets. Making coffee. Deleting certain telephone messages off of the recorder. Airing the sheets. Laun-

We'd go to my bedroom, passing Susie in the hallway. The room would be dimly lit, candles, champagne. Soft music. Clean sheets. Folded sheets. An aired bed. All compliments of Susie. The dog. She'd wink at me as she passed by, walking on her hind legs. Reading the *NY Times*.

dry. Breakfast. Dinner.

Oh, Elizabeth! She thought that I had performed some miracle while she had been away. A Phoenix convention this time. "You trained her! Oh, Gregg, I just knew you'd warm up to her!" She fell in love with me all over again. Echoes of when we first started dating became more and more apparent. E-mail cards with hearts and bears. Numerous text messages telling me she loved me; *good luck at your audition!* Full kisses in the morning. Fuller kisses at night. Sex with my wife. Pure adulterated confusion.

Because I hadn't had an audition for four months. Not for theatre, television, radio, nothing. Idiots. If they only knew.

All my time I spent with Kimberly. Just about every day. 10 a.m., and she lightly knocked on my door. I'd cup her butt and thighs in my hands. They were like turkey legs. Firm, thick, sexy, turkey legs. God, she was good. Uninhibited. Young. Firm. We'd go to my bedroom, passing Susie in the hallway. The room would be dimly lit, candles, champagne. Soft music. Clean sheets. Folded sheets. An aired bed. All compliments of Susie. The dog. She'd wink at me as she passed by, walking on her hind legs. Reading the *NY Times*. She always read it before me. She always slobbered over it. She always ripped it to shreds.

Liz continued to shower me with love. Affection. Hope. "Oh, Gregg! Did you hear that Lisa from work is pregnant again?" She paused afterwards before looking up at me. She was rolling socks on the bedroom floor. Her hopeful eyes had an edge of discernment. Vulnerability. Yes, I read the subtext. Loud and Clear. I deflected. "She really doesn't have much time for the first one, though. I mean. Well, does she?" Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes glazed, and I

kissed her left temple. Lightly. Barely. My gaze went past her ears, through the walls, across Manhattan, and into Kimberly's bed. 6:45 p.m. She'd be showering right now. I had to cross my legs. Susie laughed at something on the television from the living room while Liz unrolled a pair of unmatched socks.

Susie's progression to human was unsettling. She knew I was having an affair. Knew that Kimberly was falling for me. Knew that Liz was falling for me again. Knew that I knew. I knew that she knew. Those eyes. Those damn puppy dog eyes. Puppy dog eyes say so much more when a request for pity is replaced with guilt. I was being guilt-tripped by my stupid dog. Liz's dog! That was not my dog. I never wanted it in the first place. I couldn't even enjoy my affair. It wasn't just about sex anymore. There was a fascination with Susie's evolution. A fetish. No, not a fetish. Those are weird and involve sex and feet. Or animals. At the same time. Weird-ass people. No, this was like a post-fetish. I wanted to see what Susie would do next. It felt like science class.

Regular sex with Kimberly. Susie would read Poe. Great sex with Kimberly. Susie would read Shakespeare. Lousy, but frequent, sex with Kimberly. Susie would read Grisham. Quickies brought on one-act plays. Three hours long brought on Chekhov. Strindberg. The first time Kimberly spent the night while Liz was away at a convention. Seattle? San Francisco? Didn't matter. Kimberly spent the night. Susie wrote a haiku. Blue ink on a slobbered letterhead: "Village Marketing Assoc.":

Love your neighbor; true

Cookies, Evolution, Sight

No sight, spouse not here.

"Oh! Neato! She writes poems?"

"No. Must've been the neighbors. The Koreans."

"Them? Why would they do that?"

"I...They just...that damn dog...Koreans get a lot of mail. Now come back to bed."

I slammed the door, but not before ripping up the poem. And crumpling it up. And cramming it in my mouth, saliva forming it into a ball. I spit it back into my hand and chucked it at the door. It hit the lamp instead. It fell. Broke. Shattered. Pieces. Susie just stared at the damage, head slowly tracing the remains. I glared at her. She winked at me.

Yeah. She fixed it. The fucking dog fixed the lamp. Looks

even better than before. Stupid dog. Kimberly thought she was just the greatest, but I couldn't take it. I tramped into the living room. Susie was watching *Inside the Actor's Studio*. Al Pacino. Again. I ripped the cord from the wall.

"I didn't want you! I wanted a Luke! A camping dog! But, you!... There *you* are!"

"Oh, my dear Greg, please don't feel put out by my stay here."

I about choked on my own tongue. Her West End British accent was soothing. Frustrating.

"Truly, Greg, it's no matter."

"It's a matter, Dog! Susie! It's a matter. You pee everywhere."

"Oh, Gregory, don't play the fool. You know I haven't done that for over a month."

I was arguing with a cocker spaniel that didn't pee.

"I'm telling Liz that you're done. Gone. Finished. The pound, or whatever. You're going!"

"Haven't you figured it out?"

"What? Figured what?...what?"

"Silly boy. Miss Elizabeth will leave you. I've put together a complete observational study of your ridiculous affair with that Kimberly woman. More of a girl, really. Truly, Greg, you could've been cheating with someone a little less vapid, couldn't you?" She said all this while nudging a file box out from behind the couch. Numerous files. Hundreds of pages. Red tabs, yellow tabs, black tabs, white tabs. "I hope you enjoyed your Thin Mints. Personally, I found them to be a bit lacking."

And I snapped. I did. Focus became fuzzy. Screaming. Barking. Pleading. Crying. Every noise was amplified but undefined in my head. I blacked out. I was getting slapped. Scratched. Clawed. Yelled at. Bitten.

But then I got a fistful of hair.

My bicep tightened. My forearm tightened. I heaved with all I had. The release of my momentum bumped me over the couch. The fistful of hair and body smashed into the wall. The lamp fell. Breaking. Coughing. Pleading. Sputtering. Gasping. Fading. Gone. Black.

I was out. Gone. Blacked out and gone.

Then I woke up. I don't know how long. How long had

I been out of it? A day? Two? My entire life? I woke up, my body drenched. Warm. Wet. Ammonia stinging my nostrils. I had cotton mouth and could throw up at any moment. My eyes gained focus. Liz in tears. Police officers. Medics. Koreans peering in the door. A stretcher going out the door, Kimberly's arm dangling from it. The other arm clutching a clear mask to her face. Swollen purple. Bloody. Nearly unrecognizable.

I looked at Susie. She was on guard just below Liz's knees. I glared at her. Waiting. Expecting to see her wink at me. Smile crookedly. Something.

But all she did was pee on the carpet. •

Notes to Self

by Kelsey Vetter

Wake up. Possibly from dream I can't remember, possibly from no dream at all. Depends on how hectic life is. Try not to wake up roommate as I get dressed, brush hair, grab keys, and head out for breakfast. This semester's roommate likes to lock the door at odd times.

Eat bagel smothered with cream cheese. Go back to room, brush teeth, pretend to care about lack of make-up (or not really pretend sometimes), leave for class. Get ride to class as usual. Nice setup.

During class, pretend to listen while actually writing down notes for current story. Pages are filled with details, quiet little details, silly notes, descriptions, lists of characters. My notebooks for class always end up as brainstorming for stories. If lecture is interesting (often), or if I want to exert myself (occasionally), or if I can't think of anything to say about current story, will pay attention. Nice balance.

Ride back to dorm. Door is often locked whether or not roommate is inside. Why did I pick this year to have a shitload of key chains?

See a couple in the dining hall. Watch them interact. He holds her in a front-to-back hug. Then she twirls out of his embrace. Then she returns. At first am jealous, but then imagine my two main characters together. They end up together at the end of my story (spoiler). Imagine them as couple. Am happy, because am thinking of what I can write. I'd have my couple in the same front-to-back hug, so lost in being with one another that they've forgotten where they are. Or maybe it's just the girl, my heroine, who has forgotten. She is a sweet, sincere, wistful sort of person. She shows her love for the boy with her touch – a hug, a kiss, hanging onto his hand. The boy is just beginning to understand her, learning how to interact with her. A new relationship.

Hear song on radio. Hear it again online – over and over if I want to. I usually want to. Could be love song. Could be break-up song. Right now can't decide which I like better. But anyway, I listen. My stories have soundtracks. Certain songs fit into certain stories. Those with some bite or attitude belong to stories that have the same qualities. My A-story is attracting a lot of heartfelt love songs. I

decide one of the characters likes jazz – old-fashioned, mellow, joyful melodies.

Half an hour before I go to bed, try to work on story. Homework has taken up most of the night. Right now am not regretting that. Yet. Right now grades matter more than usual. Some of my characters are obsessed with grades.

No work gets done.

Read blog about old-school young adult novels. It's a favorite. Characters from those books are often crude high school stereotypes. A character cheats constantly on her boyfriend. My character wouldn't do that. The stories are often trite and predictable. A-story won't be like that. Though sometimes have trouble coming up with what my story *would* be like.

Wake up next day. Cold day. Don't have coat with me. Think of what my main characters would wear. Often I think of my characters in terms of fashion. Don't know why. Because I'm a girl? Fashion and trends are important to high school girls. Even those who don't follow trends like I do. Lately I've wanted a lot of nice, trendy clothes. Feminine, soft, flowy – in vibrant colors and soft fabrics. A deep green, silk baby doll shirt. A thick, gray cardigan that gives me warmth and warm feelings. Smooth, dark jeans that actually *fit* me. Want to make sure my character has every shirt she might want. I've long decided that her favorite color is purple. Lately been wanting a little more purple in my closet.

Back to reality. Biology's barely manageable. Lab partner is slower than I am at reading, but faster at writing. You'd think it'd even out. It doesn't.

Lunch. Down time. Then onto afternoon class. Christ, already? I am not prepared. I cannot remember to do all the reading. I cannot budget my time. Must step up. But can't today. So I write. Design map for fictional high school. Am basing it on my old high school. Wish I had enjoyed my time there better, but it's easier to let that go now, I think.

Life interrupts the writing process. I feel depressed and out of my element. I feel selfish and cold and full of worries. I worry about me and exclude the outside world because it's the easy thing to do. It's hard to take control of things. Also, am lonely. Roommate left for the weekend without telling me. Friends right now are few and far between. There are precious few items in my room to remind me that I enjoy life, that I even have a personality. The walls are white

and I think of insane asylums.

After a few days, am getting better. Having a job is nice: am copy editor for the school paper. Good pace for me and a bit of a change. At job I don't have to worry about classes. At classes I don't have to worry about personal stuff.

Right now good and bad luck is interchangeable. Fate seems to be scratching its head when it comes to me.

Have not been writing. I try later on. It helps. So does eating half a bag of Fritos.

Have been daydreaming. For me, that's somewhat close to writing. I daydream about the same things for a period of time, so I don't need to write it down. Point is, it's in there. It's stewing. It's waiting for me to get it out. But first I have to get my act together.

Stress a little about job. It doesn't pay too well, but damn everything to hell if I give it up. I'm proving something to myself. I can have some semblance of a life. I can be a grown-up. I can push myself to be more. To do what I must.

Start listening to music again. Music that is familiar and has a name. Not just a title and an artist, but a category I have. Romantic music. Fed-up and pissed-off music. Chills-up-my-spine music. Sexy music. Get-up-and-do-something music. Teen angst music. I write while I listen. My writing can surprise me: I can be harsh and cynical; I can be contemplative with long sentences; I can be sincere and even lyrical, without making any sense and without caring. All it takes is for one song to fade into the next.

Night. After taking first bio test, am determined to do right in that class. Go to library and work on lab. Feeling good. Finish at 10:00. Have my dinky little MuVo and headphones. Decide to walk down ramp rather than take the shorter way. Sexy song is playing in my ears, and suddenly do not want to stop walking. So decide to walk down to Anderson Hall and circle around. Then decide to take a detour near Nichols Hall. Am close to the edge of campus. It begins to drizzle. Same song is still playing. I look up at a streetlamp and see the droplets. They look like snowflakes. Am ecstatically happy. The muggy air is irrationally perfect. For a second, am not on campus.

All the while am thinking. My own story, my own life together. The ideal life is in my mind, and it always changes. Oh, how it changes. If I were writing my life story ... okay, it'd still be a mess. I would have met several men by now, loved them, but ultimately have left them all in order to find one who is worthy. Would have had

more friends – superficial, complex, slightly tragic, incredibly clever – and would have proved my loyalty to them, as they would have to me. Would have more money. Or nicer clothes. Would have been smarter.

Return, finally, to dorm. Roommate keeps me up by texting up in her loft. Till 2:00. Complain. She stops, more or less.

Wake up to find a mosquito bite on back of arm. From walk. Totally worth it. Especially since I actually remembered to bring itching lotion.

Story is still on hold as life overstays its welcome. Story is on second draft, and there's a big ending down the road. There will be an extra conflict, the sum of my characters' frustrations at having taken so long to figure out their feelings. Am excited. It's taken me just as long to figure out their feelings, too.

Am also working on other story, B-story. Don't know what will become of it. It distracts me from A-story. Both distract me from life. Even writing about stories is a welcome distraction. In fact, am perfectly content right now to go on about them.

Imagine my brain. Red = real life and blue = story and writerly worries. It's split down the middle between red and blue. Now imagine the red and blue as having different shades. The red changes from burnt umber (dull, hopeless life) to fire truck (busy, gotta-keep-up-with-this life) to hot pink (good, happy life) – sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly. The blue started out a dull, steel blue and has progressively brightened to a deep sky blue. It's a special area. It's saying, "I'm you. The real you. I won't leave you."

Listen to romantic song. Quite lovely. Imagine my two characters gazing at each other across a room, realizing what they want. Lame? Oh, hell yeah. But in that moment can pretend "lame" isn't a concept. Can be serious by myself. Can create a reality. Can treat my characters like children. Indulge them. Give them what they want. Real life going too fast. In one class I have to prepare a presentation with a group. I get faces mixed up and end up asking the wrong girl, whose group I am *not* in, when do we meet? Of course she's confused. Then while at dorm receive call from professor – why am I not at the group meeting? Since call wakes me from daydreaming, I am even more frustrated. Find out about the mix-up later. Wonder if I am losing my sanity. Wonder how one goes about committing oneself. The white walls are not helping.

B-story in the back of my mind is pulled to the front. There

is nothing concrete about it, so I feel free to add, subtract, rewrite scenes in my mind, borrow scenes from other, unused stories. It's strange to me how some of my stories die. Never took the opportunity to pull them out and give them life when I should have. Hardly write any more fantasy, which was like crack to me during high school. The heroine of many past stories turned out to be the same: feisty, stubborn, unwilling to admit when she's in love, taking joy in ruining others' plans. Worries me slightly that I have created a sadist for a leading character more than once. I have had to put her on hold until I can find her story.

Try to write at night, when there is free time. Can't. Just ... can't. Nothing comes out. My fingers feel stupid and heavy resting on the keyboard.

Class.

I feel free to take notes on my story. Have new notebook this year. That helps: a clean slate, a chance to start over.

Find myself going back to high school a lot – am basing fictitious high school setting on Shawnee Mission West High School, my own. Sometimes my brain feels like it is vomiting up the memories. Other times there are blank spots. Start to wish I had enjoyed high school more.

Get home. Dad left me a message, so I call. When our conversation reaches the two-hour mark, begin to suspect I've missed him more than am willing to admit. I am anything and everything with him – frustrated student, know-it-all student, experienced college girl, serious writer, funny daughter. Although am not usually serious writer with him. Cannot tell if this is my fault or his. I am private about my stories. I cling to them only when no one's looking.

Rent two movies for the weekend: *Knocked Up* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Funny, gross, sweet movies. I like them, I connect with them. Have heard about Judd Apatow and his crew of writers, actors, and filmmakers. Remember an article I read about the phenomenon of the "man-child." Looks like a grown man, behaves like a teenage boy. *Arrested Development*, right?

I start to wonder: Am writing a story set in a high school. Cannot manage time like an adult. Get so lost in own imagination it's hard to get out. Blue vs. red, and I'm rooting for blue to take over completely.

Wonder if there's such a thing as a woman-child. Maybe I should write about one. •

Signs and Wonder

by Dan Hornsby

All along the lawn
By a street and by a church
They hold signs
Of Hell for homosexuals
And damnation for drug addicts.

Sell the signs and feed the hungry.
Sell your posters to the poor.
Let the dead rest in peace.
Let the rest live in it.

I stare at their signs and wonder.

Obligation

by Kristin Russell

My window plant has drifted,
crawling toward the paned
glass on my sill –
tiny faces turning upward
and small green palms pressing
against the impermeable enclosure.
Captured and contained, it can't
quite curse my name or cut
my throat, but the water sometimes spills
over the edge to remind me
it's there.
I repeat
to myself that I'm nurturing,
warm and ready, but I know
the spindly offshoot wrapping the still,
fleshy leaf inside
is actually a finger
posed in my direction.

Dust
by Zian Butler

Long feathered tails of dust have accumulated
As long as rivers flow
Brilliant lines arranged by time
Hanging and creeping down empty walls
If you could somehow reach through to them
Faint sounds would seem to grow
To and fro they sway with enigmatic motion
Carrying a beat uncommon anymore
The fossilized shapes of life linger
Within the thin layers of old wrinkled skin
Years have not been a good companion
Showing gathered grime that has begun to rust

Laying On of Hands

by Michael Verschelden

for my mother

While you rest on your stomach,
my knees straddle your hips. Your white
blood cell count has begun to stabilize
three weeks too late for treatment.

Your ashen flesh molds to my kneading
knuckles. Malignant mulch festers
in your breast.

I knob my thumbs deeper
and deeper into your lower back
until you yield. When I peel
away, slouched and sweating,
you dead in dream, I am almost
convinced the hands can heal.

At your next chemo session, the butterfly
needle flutters in the unsure hands
of a grad student as it stabs your bruise-
spotched flesh repeatedly for a vein
leading back to your heart.

Your right hand
squeezes into a violent fist in an attempt
to attract blood. With every puncture
your left hand clutches mine
and you stay as silent as a god.

Drum

by Jeremy Chugg

Take up a stick, smoothed hickory,
maybe with a nylon or wooden tip
whatever your preference.
Slap it down and feel it bounce
off what used to be coated plastic,
and before that
tightened skin that spoke to fighting men.
Rattlesnakes preparing for attack, Crack, Crack!
Flam-a-diddle, triplet, double stroke rolls,
graveside rituals of past heroes,
now asleep.

Listen
move your hands lightly,
speak with whispers, give pulse,
breathe.
Accompany a melody, delicate is the life
of children.
Grow them up with care.
Not to spoil them early
let them wear, articulate
the torrid tendencies of bitterness
and its relationship with fate.
Will they become strong and bold?
Brave?
Will they be remembered with a song,
or bomb, when the drummers drum
at their grave?

Death to Vocabulary

by Shannon Nakai

I used to be versatile with words.
A regular poet, people claimed.
The words dripped off my tongue and flowed
Elegantly as they were named.

Yet, tainted as all good things are
(Or as all good things are doomed),
I became an addict to a swearing habit,
And was immediately consumed.

The first was “Hell.” Well, what is Hell?
A powerful description of misery to begin.
My mother warned me of diminishing
The gravity of the place of sin.

I started relying on “Hell” a lot
As a word to shock and disturb.
But soon it became my only adjective,
And I found that I needed a verb.

“Bitch” was nice. “Bitch” was cool.
“Quit your bitching,” people would shout.
So I joined in, delighted to see
What the “bitching” was all about.

Those words are common, I would say.
But my obscenities had not reached their prime.
I did not say the *vulgarity*s like “inferior” minds did.
Alas, it was only a matter of time.

"A little leak can sink a great ship."
The water laps up to my heel.
And with the gain of habit comes the loss of control,
And the water spills over the wheel.

I struggle to fix what was once never a problem.
My ship slips deeper in the sea.
I was once a poet; now those beautiful words
Are forever lost to me.

King of Pain

by Melinda DeFrain

Slight and red-headed, the new art teacher, Mr. Truman, emitted a spunky but negative energy, like the Heat Miser from my favorite children's Christmas movie, *The Year Without a Santa Claus*. He spent the whole first hour pacing energetically around the classroom, freckles bursting from his face like sunspots, expounding on the importance of art, while kids popped their zits or stuck chewed pieces of bubble gum underneath the surface of the art table.

During his spiel he periodically stopped, backing up his statements with expressive jabs into the air. The way he made it sound, this admission was all that was necessary to become the next Georgia O'Keefe, similar to the way that admitting Jesus into your heart would save your soul. I wanted to appear compliant and open, ready to admit art into my life, and so I perfected a series of head bobs, meant to express my interest. But the girl next to me, the one with the tiny braid down her back, too-cool Jean, the coolest girl in eighth grade, jabbed me with her pencil. "Are you epileptic?" she hissed.

Chastened, I toned it down. If I were ever going to be as cool as Jean, I'd have to stop this reflexive teacher's pet behavior. Still, I was ready to accept the word and become the kind of universally-adored artist Walter could no longer ignore.

In class, the real object of my adoration slouched, his legs crossed out in front of him, his long body trapped in a child's desk. Already, Walter was a head taller than the other boys at Coleman Junior High, his voice thick and throaty like a grown man's. He was as different from the other scrawny, pencil-necked boys trudging the hallway as a peacock was from a flock of sparrows.

I stared out the dingy, rectangular windows of the classroom, imagining us thousands of miles away, kissing on a beach, awash in an orange-ochre glow. I scribbled plans in my diary for our wedding and subsequent honeymoon to the Galapagos, the islands already heavily researched and another of my many passions. We'd have our photograph snapped, each of us straddling a harnessed tortoise, holding hands as the huge reptiles lumbered forward, Walter's lanky legs dangling off the sides of the slipper shell.

In front of the full-length mirror my mother attached to my bedroom door, I tried to understand why he didn't seem interested.

I stretched myself onto my tiptoes, craving height, better skin, and most of all, perfect vision. I thought my glasses might be keeping Walter from seeing the real me. After all, I was one of only a very few girls who wore them. I cursed both the glasses and my mother.

The summer before, in the small enclosure referred to as the "Vision Shoppe," my mother had twirled the racks while I stood watching them spin around. After she'd plucked a pair of frames from the rack, I'd collapsed down on a padded stool across from the technician for the adjustment. Without the lenses, the frames felt light and airy on my face.

"Ooh," the technician cooed. "Don't you look smart?"

She whisked the glasses off my nose and then tightened the screws. I watched, interested, for a moment. Then she recommended the photo-gray lenses, lenses which darken in bright light, and protect the retina against glare.

"No, thanks," I mumbled.

I'd seen these lenses on members of the German Club and on the very elderly.

"We'll take them," my mother said.

I came to loathe the lenses, their persistent darkening and lightening. I had to scurry to dive into my mother's Pinto station wagon before anyone noticed the transition. In outdoor photographs, it appeared as if someone censored my face. I considered crushing the glasses in the long grass of the schoolyard but knew my mother would march me back down to the optometrist for a replacement.

During this period of self-flagellation, Walter surprised me by happening to look my way, the corners of his mouth twisting up just slightly, whether with derision or acknowledgement I wasn't sure. It felt powerful just to be noticed, though, and I felt an intensity pass between us, a physical jolt that nearly bounced me out of my seat. Stunned, I smiled back. Maybe the Galapagos weren't nearly as distant as I'd imagined.

But then, somehow, tiny, red-headed Katie, her slutty, womanly hip bones jutting out over the waistband of her tight, acid-washed Bongo jeans, transformed her whole oral report into a treatise on why Walter shouldn't be interested in me, permanently ensuring I would never scuba dive with him in the Galapagos. She cocked her hips and delivered the final punch with a smile: "And that just goes to show that boys don't make passes at girls who wear

glasses.”

Her brown, beady eyes darted around the room until she found me, the only one with glasses in the whole room. “Oh, sorry, *Melinda*,” she said.

After school, I tried again with my mother. She frowned and, depressed, let the worry lines expand and radiate out from her eyes. “Oh, *Melinda*,” my mother had said, “your glasses are wonderful.”

Later I looked up the quote Katie had borrowed from Dorothy Parker. I knew Katie had no idea who Dorothy Parker was, and I thought how unfair this was, that slut-bag Katie could be successful this way, the kind of person to pilfer a snippet of something without understanding anything about the source.

And all the bullies weren’t at school. The year before, I’d discovered all my dolls in my dollhouse disemboweled with the poker from the fireplace set, the father with the shellacked reddish-blond hair slumped on a maroon velvet chair. His head sat on the dining room table surrounded by teacups and saucers, unblinkingly surveying his mutilated kingdom.

“Mom!” I shouted. “Mark murdered all my dolls!”

My mother came into my bedroom, adhesive tape pressed to her forehead to squeeze out wrinkles. “Your brother loves you,” she said.

I wasn’t sure if what she said was true, but I hung on to the wish, despite the fact that my brother’s actions seemed disturbingly reminiscent of BTK, the serial killer shaking up Wichita by binding, torturing, and then killing his victims. After learning about him, I’d spent countless evenings tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Before he’d tortured and killed my doll family, it had felt good to know Mark was in the next room; now my illusions were shattered.

In response to these situations, and out of a deep and widening frustration with the gap between how I wanted things to be and how things really were, I began to write poetry: a little haiku; a few limericks; some free verse here and there. I composed poems about Walter, although I was exceedingly careful not to mention his name in case the work fell into the wrong hands. Another poem explicated my silent rebellion against my mother and the photo-grays, a rebellion which boiled silently and angrily beneath the surface, and the last, incongruously, about the dangers of pollution, another passionate area of interest. This last poem I considered my crowning

glory, an accomplishment that displaced the others and stood out as an act of pure original genius. I devised the idea for it late one night watching television as I wrestled with the onset of teen angst and insomnia.

On screen, the iconic image of Chief Iron Eyes Cod shed a single tear as he surveyed the wasted and littered wilderness of North America. In full regalia, he stood amidst the debris, stolid and unbending, his noble heart broken. I didn't like to think about it, but I lay awake at night anyway, wondering about him. He had a reason to be dissatisfied; it was clear. Thinking about it, a hollow pit floated at the bottom of my stomach. Somehow between seducing Walter and living life as my mother's daughter, I had to convince the world to clean up its act.

The poem I wrote was titled "American Indian Lament." It featured an obese woman in a red sports car, carelessly tossing her fry wrappers out the window. Intended to be a scathing commentary about the thoughtlessness of people, it was also meant as a eulogy to the destroyed dream. The complexity of the poem, like my life, was staggering.

After the success of this last poem, I decided to submit my poetry to my English teacher. "Thanks," she said. She gathered the collection without further comment and stuffed it into her pile of composition papers.

"*Thanks?*" I thought bitterly. Where were my accolades? Where was the local media? How would Walter be smitten by my crusade when it was sitting somewhere between Skinny-Hussy Katie's paper on why cheerleading is really a sport and Nerdy Jan's report on Chinese mythology?

I had to find another solution, and fast, so I tossed my passions into art class with Mr. Truman, hoping hard that I was tossing them in the right direction. I was pretty sure he wasn't going to hurt me like Walter had, and that he would lead me to a path that wouldn't constantly require the approval of others. Mr. Truman explained wax batik in class.

"It's a very old art form," he intoned.

I listened carefully to him explain the history and then complete the directions for the assignment. I liked the idea of working with the fabric, designing and dying it, and the sight of the blank sheets made me eager to begin.

After he explained the project, he sat back down at his desk

while we completed our initial ideas on paper for the assignment. I sat thinking about Mr. Truman while I was supposed to be drawing. He didn't inspire me physically like Walter did, but there was something else about him, his evident, ardent love for art.

At dinner that night, I told my mother and brother about the project, expecting recognition for my new passion, and my new mentor. "Didn't we do that in second grade?" my brother asked.

In class the next day, we finished our design for the batik. I sketched a plan: three entwined flowers. I wanted them to be indigo and red. Mr. Truman surprised me behind my chair.

"That looks nice," he said quietly.

I'd been thinking about Walter less, something I recognized as probably emotionally healthy. I began to write different things in my diary, wondering for instance about the age difference between me and Mr. Truman. Did this mean I was finally a woman?

It was during this maturation phase that my mother insisted on redecorating my room. My old toys and books were toted down to storage. She sat in her jeans on my bed, glancing around at the contents of my room as if it were a foreign territory she meant to conquer. Our conversations ran like this:

"You're too old for this stuff now."

"Why?"

"Put something else there," she said. "Something your age."

But she never filled me in on what else might go there. Instead the shelves remained blank and empty, reproachful even.

"It's time to be a young lady," my mother said.

"A young lady?" I retorted, unwelcome feelings flooding my chest. Part of me clearly felt ready for ladyhood, but another part of me was conflicted and unprepared. Already there were rumors flying around school about what a girl named Dee-Dee let some guy at a party do to her.

And apparently my mother was conflicted as well.

"You can't shave your legs," she said, when I asked her.

I stared her down, but she didn't look away. "Why?"

"The hair will grow back bristly and tough," she said, her eyes taking on what I took to be a hard, knowing look. "Like wild pig hair," she followed up.

Wild pig hair? I didn't want to know more. I realized my

mother never wore shorts and wondered if that was why, because of her wild pig hair. I thought about Dee-Dee. I was willing to bet she'd already shaved her legs, like some wild pig. I wondered if this had something to do with my mother wanting me to be ugly.

"Won't it be smooth?" I asked, confused.

"For about a day," she said. "And then every day you'll have to shave your legs." She smiled at me, softening. "Don't do it," she said, and I knew just as with the photo-grays, she'd won before we'd even started.

The next morning I discovered a copy of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, a liberal sex education manual, placed strategically on my bed. One of my mother's colleagues, an ex-hippie named Susan, had recommended it. Inside the book, page after page of full glossy photographs of male and female sexual apparatus unveiled themselves. I was repulsed and fascinated at the same time, but in a gesture of adolescent ill-will decided not to talk to my mother about the book. Although there was no denying the book had found a target. I was aware of a "hot arousal," a passion I did my best to bury. I thought of Walter, Stage 3, and then of Mr. Truman, Stage 2, and slammed the book underneath my bed.

The next day in art class something happened that changed everything. We all sat up straight in our seats. Mr. Truman, his face scarlet, his fists pumping the air, was yelling. The victim turned out to be a boy named Scott.

"What's going on?" Jean whispered to the girl across from us.

"I don't know," the girl mumbled, rolling her eyes.

This wasn't anything like the usual, buoyant Mr. Truman.

"Listen next time," he snapped at Scott.

After class a mob of students gathered outside the door to talk about what happened.

"What's up with him?" Jean asked.

"He's a freak," another girl said.

I longed to punch the girl-cool right out of Jean and this other girl, too. I could have shown them a page from *Our Bodies, Our Selves* to bring them back to earth, but I was afraid I'd get busted and bounced out of school.

But despite this incident, my life had continued to improve significantly since the Dorothy Parker experience. I realized I hadn't thought of Walter in over a month. My brother was even treating

me better. Sometimes he even talked to me about real things, like where to get the best beer in town and places to make out with his multitude of girlfriends.

"Hey," he said one day, "did you ever finish that batik?"

"Yes," I said cautiously. I realized I'd never forgiven him about the dolls, just as he'd apparently never forgiven me for being born. But maybe I was being too hard on him. Maybe he was just trying to express an interest in me. He might even empathize, or at least sympathize with me, remembering how awful junior high could be.

After all, we used to have fun. Our favorite game had been "Wild Markus Attacks." In this game, my brother stalked and hunted me, the Wild Pooji. Never mentioned as a subject, only as the prey, the Wild Pooji didn't do the chasing. Instead, as soon as she was captured, she was trussed and carried back to camp. Somehow I'd always enjoyed the game, making the most out of it by screaming and shouting with wild abandon, a cathartically delicious experience.

"Well, how'd it turn out?" he asked.

"What?" I asked, distracted.

"The batik, Dummy."

"I'll go get it."

"No, that's okay," he said. "It's not a big deal."

In the middle of December, just before Christmas, Mr. Truman burst into the room, fresh, shoulders straightened, an air of confident expectation firmly attached to him.

"We will be doing something completely different today, class," he said.

One kid had his head down on the desk, and a waterfall of drool cascaded from his mouth. Next to me, Jean began fingering her braid.

"We will be drawing our own interpretation of the song 'King of Pain,' by The Police." Mr. Truman smiled indulgently at Scott's raised hand.

"Just a sec, Scott," he chirped. "Does anybody know this song?"

My chest pounded. I knew the song; in fact, I owned the *Synchronicity* album. Pride swelled through me as Mr. Truman took in that fact. This *was* synchronicity.

"In just a few minutes I will be playing the song, and you

will be painting what you feel, what you associate with the music and the lyrics.” He paused for a breath. The old Mr. Truman was back, I noted with relief. He positively beamed, energy pulsating from him in nearly visible waves.

“Now go get your materials and come right back.” He checked his oversized, black Swatch. “We have just over an hour to draw.”

Back at our desks with the materials, we waited collectively for Mr. Truman’s go ahead.

His long, tapered finger pressed the play key. “Go,” he said. The music echoed, tinny and strangely powerful, around the room.

“There’s a little black spot on the sun today... it’s the same old thing as yesterday.” The kid with the drool was sitting upright. Jean’s braid looked attentive. We listened in fascinated silence... “King of Pain, I will always be...”

Mr. Truman held our attention. He stood, head cocked to one side, eyes bright, listening to something no one else could hear, his posture strangely intimate, a glimpse into the real Mr. Truman. Then across the room, as if everyone in the class was intent on sabotaging my passions, someone farted, the sound of it like thunder. A short bark of a laugh rose over the music, drowning out the intensity, and I could see from the droop in his shoulders that the spell was broken.

Mr. Truman clicked the stop button.

“Okay, class,” he said, his voice garbling, “go to work.”

“King of Pain,” I thought, and for a minute nothing came. I froze, my mind as blank as a freshly-erased chalkboard. I visualized the Chief from the commercial and for a moment entertained the idea of drawing him. But I rejected this idea almost immediately. The Chief just wasn’t a rock song kind of man. Then I pictured the father from my dollhouse, decapitated. I decided these sub-ideas all led back to the main idea: there was and always would be somebody trying to smash your kingdom.

Finally, I drew a portrait of Mr. Truman himself, complete with a beautiful, transparent crown suspended above his head. But as soon as I turned it in, and as much as I’d wanted to please him, I’d failed Mr. Truman.

My skills, although improved, had not progressed far enough that people would know Mr. Truman from Mr. Potato Head, newly anointed King of Pain.

A few weeks later, I discovered he was in trouble. Some parents complained about his use of bad language, his demands on the students. It also turned out that his assignments were too freelance, something the administrators didn't like.

Things snowballed, and I heard through the grapevine that he was drinking alcohol in the lounge. Whispers echoed in the hallways like ricocheting bullets. "He's gay," Scott said, "I know it. He just looks like a fag."

Jean jabbed me in the ribs before he entered the classroom. "Let's see what the fruit cocktail has got for us today," she said.

I glared at her, suddenly not caring about what she thought of me, the sense of freedom exhilarating.

"Stop jabbing me like that," I said. "It hurts."

I realized there was absolutely no way to protect anybody, except maybe yourself.

Back at school after the break, I learned Mr. Truman had been "let go."

He wouldn't even be finishing the school year. Heavy and leaden, my feet wouldn't pick up to walk down the hallway. I spent the day staring out my classroom windows at the snow swirling around, wind currents blowing rivulets across the blacktop. I pictured Mr. Truman at home, playing "King of Pain" over and over, the way I sometimes played favorite songs when I felt sad.

After school, I went into the bathroom and shut myself in. I can't explain all that I was feeling. Anger and pain, all the things an adolescent experiences profoundly, the emotions Mr. Truman had tried to give us a means of expressing. I carefully took out a razor and drug it over the thick, black hair on my leg. Of course it gouged my flesh.

"Mooooom!" I howled, tears streaking across my face. "Mom."

I could hear her charging the stairs two at a time.

"What?"

"This hurts."

She gently took the razor away and shut it in the drawer. "Maybe you aren't ready."

In the morning, Mark came in through the front door and slouched in the doorway of the first floor bathroom. I was about to cross a line that could never be crossed backward, and he watched me rip open the package of razors, my witness and my torturer.

“You’re shaving your legs?” he asked incredulously.

I nodded, working hard to maintain my air of confidence, the feat of a novice tight rope walker. After a second, I shut my eyes, waiting for the blow.

“Way to go,” he said. I opened my eyes again, surprised.

He paused for a minute considering something. “You’re going to cut yourself, Dummy.” I let what he’d said linger for a moment and then shrugged my shoulders hard.

This conversation, mid-range between supportive and devastating, was as close to nice as my brother was capable. I took what I could get.

That night, as I squinted at the macramé I’d crafted, and which hung from a gothic hook my mother had screwed into the wall, I felt bleak. My legs, which had been smooth that morning, were already covered in dense and unforgiving stubble. The knots I’d tied painstakingly, five in each vertical row, were beginning to fray. And there, too, hung the batik. The stem of the blue flower had turned out brown instead of green, my first lesson about intention not equaling result. I couldn’t believe, after all my hard work, all that had taken place, and everything I’d felt, that this was the product. For a minute, I was desperate, the hollow, black pit of despair pooling in my chest again, but I closed my eyes and thought again of Mr. Truman. I wondered if he’d found a new teaching job, and if he kept trying the “King of Pain” assignment. If, when he pressed the key and said, “go,” everyone would understand. No one would jab anyone in the ribs or make discouraging, disparaging comments. Instead, everyone would draw, steadily improving, heads down, hands moving, eyes glued to the paper. •

Ramallah

by Julianne Jensby

The city within a wall.
Citizens are held hostage,
controlled as if they are dolls.
They are segregated by stone
from family
living six miles away
in Jerusalem.
Checkpoints, paperwork checks, and guards
turn that short drive
into a hassle
of hours.
Even with the proper paperwork,
their daily life depends on
the brutal,
abusive
guards.
Israelis in uniform
with machine guns
more powerful than B-52s,
demanding them to strip,
feeling into every crevice of their bodies
for weapons of violence,
when their mutual religion
preaches peace.
Pregnant women,
seeking a doctor in the neighboring city,
with their male escort
unable to pass the checkpoint
because legal paperwork is denied,
die.

Dreaming on Paper

by Andrea Spry

For some, putting pencil to paper is a serious study.
A difficult capture, caging the world in static pictures.
That is not Art – only a rigid science like butterflies pinned
in a museum's glass case with dead eyes. But paper and pencil
should breed together, creating living, breathing Art to dance in man's
view.

So take the artist's tool and sense the pencil's weight, heft it. Does it
feel right?

If it's too light your fingers could cramp with the exhilarated tension,
and if it's too heavy they'll fumble around, unsure of their skill.

The pencil should meld with your fingers, easily worming
about the paper's smooth surface, consuming the blankness.

For inspiration, listen to your dreams.

Sharp or fuzzy, the lines will come gradually,
crystalizing into a chrysalis containing the final vision.

But once the pencil finds its rest, the work is not yet done.

Pick up the eraser, cut out unwanted lines which cumber
the life inside the page, and let the creature breathe,
released from the limitless confines of your mind.

But be careful to not crush your newfound wonder.

For dreams are as fragile as butterflies' wings,
and each one as unique.

Stovetop Love
by Dianne Wilhelm

I used to stand and watch the rings the glowing rings circle
embrace guarded closely by adults; they warned me
time and again not to touch the fascinating
hiss of laughter irresistible reserved for
those who recognize the danger
in playing with flame yet use
the heat to cook their hearts
into perfection drawing
me in imitation; they
never said how a
burn can be
horribly
cold

Swinging: A Time to Reflect

by Christina Mason

In a quiet schoolyard,
a woman approaches a familiar set of chariots.
Each eager to fly her to another place and time.

Choosing one, she climbs on.
Cradled by the worn leather,
she clings to rust-coated chains
and pushes away from the ground.

Leaning forward
and pulling back,
she rises higher
and higher, leaving earth.
A gentle rhythm coaxes
dreams out of hiding.
Leaning forward
and pulling back.

Swaying back
and forth,
memories come and go.

High above the earth,
the rhythmic childhood pastime
provides separation from the world.

Soaring back
and forth,
the past comes and goes.

Her golden hair resembles the fields of wheat
ready for harvest, dancing in the wind.

Eyes shut, unaware of the time,
the chariot lulls the woman into a peaceful trance,
only obtainable in the sky.

Darkness sets in and a chill reminds the woman
to return home.

Leaning back, she flies to the ground,
slowing down
like a feather
back
and forth.

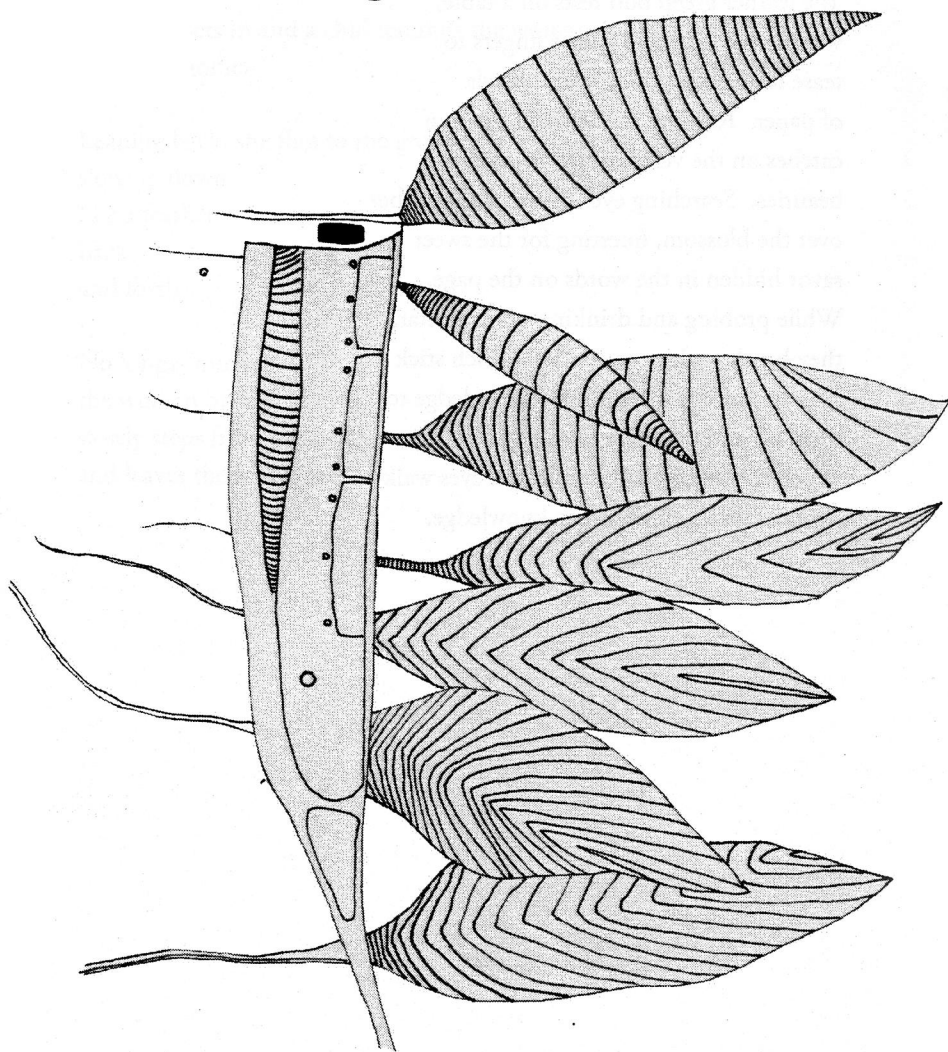
No longer moving,
the woman opens her eyes,
slowly steps from the swing,
and leaves the schoolyard.

The Blooming of a Book

by Andrea Spry

The leather green bud rests on a table,
waiting for light and gentle fingers to
tease it open, exposing white petals
of paper. Ruffling in the wind, the sun
catches on the veins of the delicate
beauties. Searching eyes flutter and clamber
over the blossom, questing for the sweet
savor hidden in the words on the page.
While probing and drinking up its nectar,
they brush against novel ideas which stick
loosely and pile – bundles of knowledge to
carry off and pollinate fresh pages
which the fingers will fondle and eyes walk
upon in search of delicious knowledge.

Hummingbird



by Jeremy R. Harvey

My father's face was expressionless, unaffected by the outside world. It's like this every time; he just stares, glassy eyed, looking at the beige wall behind us, or at us, it's hard to tell. My mom always insists that he was normal, a good man before the war, "a real go-getter," as she put it. Mom says he was the salutatorian of his high school class and star third baseman for the Ponca City High baseball team. He gave up a scholarship to play baseball at Wichita State to join the Army; Mom says that he thought it was the right thing to do, to go to Vietnam. She tells me that he was brave, a hero in the war, that he escaped from a POW camp, saved two other men in the process, and received a Purple Heart by doing so. I never knew him this way. I just saw an inanimate man only capable of staring.

"Hank, Samuel did very well in school this year. His best subjects were spelling and geography. He even got a 105 on his geography test last week; it was over the capitals, and for extra credit he named the capital of the Soviet Union." Mom looked over at me. "Isn't that right, Samuel?" My mom talked to him like the teachers at school talk to the Mexican kids: slowly, hoping they'd understand.

I shrugged my shoulders and looked at the clock; we'd been there nearly 45 minutes. "It's time to go, Mom."

She nodded her head. "I'll tell the assistant to shave you; you're looking a little shabby there. You know I like you clean-shaven." My mom laughed a little to herself, flattened out a crease in her skirt, then stood up from her chair, walked over to my father, and kissed him on the top of his head. "We'll see you next week, Hank. Love ya." She motioned to one of the attendants, a man sporting a Magnum-esque mustache and blue hospital fatigues, that we were leaving. I looked at my father once more and then stood up.

Mom pulled her LTD Country Squire onto I-35 and hit the gas. The interior of the car had been steeped in afternoon sun; the vinyl seat cover was stinging my legs with the built-up heat. We rolled down our windows, and the breeze began to roar through the car, slowly cooling off the interior. Through the windshield, I saw a group of buzzards hovering against the pale blue sky, circling and waiting for anything. I imagined what we must have looked like from their view, a big green beetle, stuttering, then zooming, then with a pop of the muffler, stuttering again. Waiting to die.

My mom rolled up her window and asked me to do the same to mine.

"Why? We'll get baked in here." I looked out at the buzzards.
"Because, Samuel, the wind is too loud, and I want to talk to you."

She pointed her eyes down at me, making sure that I had understood. "You really need to make more of an effort with your father. I know it's hard and all, but all the doctors say he still can hear, even if he doesn't show it."

"How do they know?"

"Well, because that's what they do. All I'm saying is that you need to try and talk to him. Tell him about school, show him your baseball cards, tell him you love him."

"I don't."

Mom sealed her lips tightly and applied all of her focus to the length of highway ahead; her cheeks turned red, and I noticed her eyes well with tears. A few of the tears welled out and rolled down her leathery skin that was worn from age and Virginia Slims. The perm she had gotten last month at Expressions was beginning to wane, the curls regaining their natural straightness.

"I'm sorry, Mom." I reached out my hand and put it on her shoulder. "I didn't mean it."

"No need to apologize, Sam. He's been like that since before you were born. I understand, and I don't blame you for how you feel. It's hard to say that when you know he won't say it back."

I nodded in agreement, although I had never told anyone besides her that I loved them, and telling your mother you love her doesn't really run the risk of any rejection.

"Samuel, there's very little in people's lives that they get to decide for themselves, okay? Nobody wanted your father to just up and lose his head, but it happened, and you don't have to like it, just try to accept it."

Mom smiled at me, her eyes now framed by little streaks of mascara. I couldn't tell if it was from the sweat or from tears. "You can roll it down again, honey."

"Thanks."

The drive home to Ponca City was long and hot. Mom's window got stuck after she rolled it up, and, despite her swearing, she couldn't manage to budge it loose. After that, she laughed and said she was sorry for cursing and that I shouldn't adopt that manner of speaking.

I played around with the radio for a few minutes but was unable to pick up any stations besides the one playing country music.

It was fun until I found Willie with a pair of tin snips, cutting the shell off of a box turtle. When I asked him what he was doing, he sort of laughed and told me he was going to be a surgeon.

We listened to Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton singing “Islands in the Stream” until my mom turned it off and said she couldn’t take another minute of that shit. I laughed a little, despite having liked Dolly Parton’s voice.

“We’re almost home, Sam. Don’t ruin the trip now.” Mom slapped me on the knee. “You’re a good little guy, Sam.”

I smiled and let my arm hang out the window; it was quickly pulled tight by my resistance against the wind. I thought of those buzzards and wished that I had better wings, something to lift us off of the ground and fly above everything.

Mom pulled our big green wagon into the driveway and turned off the ignition. The engine came to a rest noisily. The muffler released a bang, and my mother glanced around at the other houses ashamedly.

“Sam, you can go to Willie’s if you want, but only for a while. I’m gonna go get the fans going and see about dinner. Be home by seven, okay?”

“Mom, do you still love him?” I wanted to reel this question back as soon as I had said it, but it was too late, and my heart began beating rapidly. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.” I tugged on the ceiling liner that had begun to come loose during the winter.

“It’s okay, Samuel.”

I pulled the door latch and pushed the door open, quickly exited, and ran across the street to Willie’s house; he was already playing in his dusty yard by the roots of an old oak tree.

I had known Willie for a couple of years now, and even though I questioned his motives around animals, we still hung out a lot. I even went camping with him and his dad one time out at Kaw Lake; it was fun until I found Willie with a pair of tin snips, cutting the shell off of a box turtle. When I asked him what he was doing, he sort of laughed

and told me he was going to be a surgeon. Of course, I knew this was a lie; Willie had never gotten better than a low D on any of Mrs. Curtis's science tests. My mom said that Willie was going to grow up to be the kind of guy who meant well but was just too damn stupid to know any better. She was right, too; half of the time Willie was just a plain half-wit.

"What're you doing, Willie?"

"Playing G.I. Joe." Willie held up his Cobra Commander figure that he had just gotten last weekend. "I'll let you be the boss."

"No, thanks, I'm a He-Man guy."

"He-Man's a faggot." Willie giggled, bent his Cobra Commander figure into a sitting position, and placed it on top of a Pony shoe box.

"What's in the box?"

"Wanna see?" Willie smiled. He had lost another tooth. Like me, he was losing them late. I glanced at the dark space where his left eye-tooth should have been.

"Sure."

Willie opened the box and put his hand over the slit, flipped the box over, his hand still over the small crevice. He quickly brought his other hand over and placed it on top of the other, which was loosely clenched, so as not to crush his possession.

"Come close."

I moved in slowly, as if any sudden movement would startle whatever was trapped. I stooped near and waited. Willie put his hands closer to my eyes and pulled the thumb of his fist closer to his palm, leaving a small space for viewing.

"See it?"

"I see a beak. What is it?"

"Hummingbird." Willie smiled a little, impressed with his own intelligence. "I found it this morning. It was cold."

"Are you going to let it go?"

"Nope. It's mine now."

"What are you going to do with it, then?" I thought of Willie's tin snips.

He looked up at me and must have seen something in my face.

"I'm gonna save it and do what I'd like." Willie put the bird back in the box.

For a few minutes we sat there, the box between us. Willie

crashed some random G.I. Joes together and made spit explosions. The ones he wasn't using he sat on top of the shoe box. They all sat in a row, with no allegiance to either G.I. Joe or Cobra Commander. Some of them held their original machine guns and rocket launchers, others held twigs. No character was left without a weapon.

I stood up quickly, planted my left foot on the ground, and, with my right insole, dug into a thick layer of dust and sand. I kicked it onto Willie, half of it going onto his chest, the other half smothering his face.

"What the hell are you doing, Sam?" Willie coughed and rubbed his eyes.

I bent down quickly, grabbed the box, and cradled it under my left arm. Willie's hand shot out and took hold of my ankle; he pulled it desperately towards his mouth, teeth bared, dingy with dirt. I yanked my leg back, made sure the shoe box was secure, and took off across the street, toward my house.

"Bastard-ass!" Willie screamed.

I looked back at him. He picked up a handful of G.I. Joes and threw them at me. The figurines crashed against the paved street. Willie let loose with another strange combination of curse words. Two houses down, Mr. Shannon was standing on his lawn, an unguided water hose in his hand. I nervously waved at him. He looked over at Willie, back at me, and slowly raised his hand hello.

My mom stood at the stove, stirring and periodically glancing at the timer, her left hand resting against her hip. I could smell the fish sticks in the oven, and I assumed she was stirring macaroni and cheese. She heard me sit down at the kitchen table. She turned around to look at me, curiously studying the box, and questioned without speaking.

"I took it from Willie, Mom. You know how he is with animals." I was worried; I couldn't just bring it back.

"What's in the box, Sam?"

"A little hummingbird." I put the shoebox on my lap and set my hands on top of the box to stake my claim.

My mom smiled and moved my hands off the box, picking it up. She stuck her hand in it and pulled out a loose fist, much the same way as Willie had done. "These are fragile birds, Sam. You don't want to handle them too much."

"I didn't even touch it."

"Good." My mom bent her legs and crouched down, setting

her forearms across my lap. "Look at the little guy."

"Guy?"

"Yeah, see his red throat? Only the males have that."

It sat shaking in my mother's hand, barely alive, cold and scared. She loosened her grip, slowly at first, and then all at once revealed the hummingbird. One of its wings was limply set off to the side of the body.

"I'm sorry, little hummingbird." I smiled at the little bird, no bigger than my mom's pinky finger. The hummingbird just sat there. I could tell it was still alive; its little chest heaved with rapid breaths. "Is he okay, Mom?"

"I think he'll be alright, Sam. Let's just give it some time, some rest; poor guy's been through a lot."

My mom walked over to the laundry basket and took out the cape from my Superman pajamas. "Okay if he uses this for a bed?"

I nodded my head yes and watched her fold it neatly into the shoebox with one hand; the other hand held the hummingbird. My mom gently set the bird in the shoebox, onto to my Superman cape, right across the S. She asked me if I would carry the box over to the end table. I picked up the box and slowly followed my mom to the table, watching my feet to make sure every step was carefully measured and planted. My mom turned the lamp on, and I carefully placed the box beneath the lamplight.

"Let's go eat, Sam."

I glanced at the bird and then followed my mom back into the kitchen.

After dinner, I walked over to check on the bird. I had half expected him to be dead, but he was still there, his little eyes staring blankly at the cardboard walls. I felt sorry for him; his whole world had been transformed. I looked past the shoebox toward the back end of the table and noticed an old picture back beyond the lamplight. A film of dust blanketed the top of the frame. I looked closer and noticed my father, younger, before I knew him. In the picture he was dressed in his blue jeans and an Oklahoma Sooner's T-shirt, early spring behind him, new grass, flowers blossoming, and sky stretching beyond the sun. His hands were stuffed into his pockets. He was smiling. I picked it up and brought it fully into the light. •

The Last Smack **by Hayley Darpel**

Shaky, pursed line of contempt.
His stormy gaze scalds my insides.
Waves of skin push from my brow.
Fearful, but persistent,
anything to change his mind.
I raise my chin and peer
through glazed emeralds
dripping with empathy in
hopes to rouse his love.
But his razor-sharp palm draws back like a bow. Out puffs the welt
speckled
with the same purple blood
he shares.

Philosophy at 3 a.m.
by Steven Miller

Vincent likes to slick his hair back
maniacally, like that scene in the movie
when you realize he's actually Satan,
and you feel worse because you identified
with him the most. For three weeks now
I'm getting high out back in the sweet
and stagnant black, tossing stale donuts
to the giant-rat nutria in the canal ditch
because it's actual policy. But this is all
absolutely external. I can describe for you
the interior succinctly, which is to say
lately me and my mind are not close friends.

Desk Job

by Colin Kostelecky

Sitting, staring at a desk we perspire;
in chairs as soft as steel we type the time away,
wait until that moment we retire.

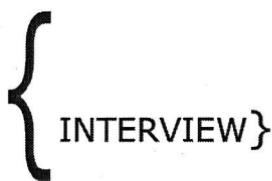
While bosses lurk to check the work they've hired
we feign a cheerful zeal to keep them all at bay.
Sitting, staring at a desk we perspire.

Repeating repetitions rouse desires
strong to leave, but still, tenaciously we stay,
wait until that moment we retire.

Banausic bellows fuel the banal fire
stoked by keystrokes every working day.
Sitting, staring at a desk we perspire.

Our cubicled hearts have all conspired
to hold together tight like heroes brave,
wait until that moment we retire.

Though on every labored breath hangs chance that we'll expire,
we spend so many typing office years away.
Sitting, staring at a desk we perspire,
wait until that moment we retire.

INTERVIEW}

The Art of Memoir

An Interview with Meredith Hall

Conducted by Christopher Linforth

Meredith Hall is the writer of the memoir, Without a Map (Beacon Press 2007), a collection of interconnected essays that recount her life, her search for the son she gave up for adoption, and the familial relationships that were broken and, later, re-forged by this event. She visited the K-State campus in October 2008 to talk to the students of Elizabeth Dodd's Creative Nonfiction class and to give a reading from her best-selling book. Hall has had work published in The New York Times, Fourth Genre, The Kenyon Review, and many other journals. An award of \$50,000 from the notable A Room of Her Own Foundation (AROHF) in 2002 gave Hall the freedom to complete her memoir. She spoke to me in the following e-mail interview about the nature, and creation, of memoir writing:

CL: *Without a Map* contains a great deal of loneliness, heartbreak, and the breakdown of familial relationships, yet it seems to transcend the classic "misery memoir" with its attention to detail, beautiful language, and fragmented aesthetic. Have people tried to pigeonhole or present the book in this niche genre? And how do you feel about the role of memoir in the literary world?

MH: Two large questions here. First, no – I haven't had the awful experience of readers seeing this book as "confessional." I was very, very worried about this issue as I wrote, asking myself daily, "Am I whining? Who is going to want to read this stuff?" I hope that it is

not a “misery memoir.” If it is not, then maybe the reason is this: I believe that memoir, good memoir, requires us to become good people, larger and wiser and bearing some sort of grace. No one needs to read anger with our past. Anger is easy. It is the search for calm, for acceptance and understanding, that we all seek. I hope this book offers some of that.

Your second question: I have been astonished at the response to *Without a Map*. I often read now to a crowd of one hundred or three hundred people. Why? I hope part of it is that the book is well written, that it carries the power of literary work. But something more than that is going on. We seem to have a profound need to hear how a life is lived, how one person among us has made sense of love and loss and sorrow and beauty, of this enormous capacity we have to love life, to want goodness and justice and fullness in life. We are all meant to tell stories, and do very little of it now. I think people come to this book – which is, I think, quite frank and revealing of one striving woman’s mind and heart – grateful that a story is being shared, and that the search for rightness and understanding and grace is its subject. In turn, people want so much to say, “Hear me. I, too, have a story to tell. Will someone listen?” We need to share our stories, our search to understand the human experience, to understand God and love and loss and longing and peace.

CL: Over the last few years, you have been published in several prestigious journals and newspapers. Did this alacrity of your rise in the literary landscape take you by surprise? And how did it fit in with the writing process of your book as a whole?

MH: A surprise is an understatement. I reeled for a while. I taught writing at UNH for many years, always thinking that someday I might like to write something – I had no idea what. Then one fall, I sat in on a friend’s graduate essay writing course and wrote a couple of essays that were immediately picked up. The first, “Shunned,” won The Pushcart Prize. That winter I very audaciously applied for the \$50,000 Gift of Freedom award from A Room of Her Own Foundation. Shockingly, I won the award. I took an eighteen-month leave

from my teaching and moved to San Francisco, having absolutely no idea what I was going to write. In fact, the problem was bigger than that; I had absolutely no idea how to be a writer. I was terrified and felt like an imposter, a faker. I decided, because all I had written were those two personal essays, to write some more of those essays. Once I committed to that, I seemed to disappear into what I have come to call my tunnel, a deep and isolated and wonderful place. It was a strange and powerful experience. I felt as if I were a scribe, that once I decided to write these stories, they came to me already written. That all I needed to do was to volunteer to go down, down, down into that place, and open my mouth. The stories were waiting. A lonely and extraordinary time. It took just five months to write the book, and I did virtually no revising.

I imagined that my audience was an old crone, an aunty who loved me and wanted to hear my stories. And so I told these stories to her, intimate and deeply revealing. A private conversation. I never imagined that anyone would ever read my little book, and so I wrote freely. Nothing was withheld. I – and my family – came onto the page without any conceits. And then this little book went into the world, and lots of people started to read it. At first, I felt profoundly exposed and worried about my family's exposure. It took time to get my legs under me in the new and very public world I found myself in – a fluorescent world. Now, I have a better understanding of why so many people come to this book and who I am as I share it with them.

CL: Your memoir is a book of interlinked essays, connected narratives, which slip in and out of a linear chronology. Could you, perhaps, talk about how your book was envisioned through this disjointed narrative structure? And, further, how you decided what to include and what to exclude?

MH: This question always invites me to step outside my process and analyze just what happened – a fun project. You are right that I wrote this book as a series of essays. Many were published in lit. journals as I went along. I imagined the book as an exciting and slightly experimental form, non-linear, narrative-driven,

with the “mind-walks” – Rupert’s drops, the mummies of Guana-juato, the Nüshu writing, etc. – linking the essays. I quickly came to see that the form was too self-aware and intruded on the narrative pace. And so I embedded those mind-walks into the essays, arranged the essays chronologically, and called them chapters. I was very surprised when reviewers and readers commented from the start that I have used a complex structure, that it is non-chronological, a looping narrative. I see now that they are right. I had no plan. This structure was intuitive, an organic process. It reflects how I think, the recursive return to look again, and again, and again.

CL: Chapter 4, “The Uprising,” seems to stand out as strikingly different from the other essays. There are fact sections about 1960s politics, riots, and the Vietnam War. Such strong juxtaposition in one chapter is an interesting creative choice. Did you consider extending this concept to your other essays? Or did you think about, for the book, modifying the piece to be more homologous?

MH: I saw this chapter as a challenge within the whole. I liked the form a lot and became deeply engaged in the research. I was drawn back into those chaotic times and wanted very much to weave the personal, social, and historical into a story of internal and external upheaval. I have been surprised that no one mentions that it is so different from the other chapters, which are contemplative and exploratory. No, I could not have used this form anywhere else – it is directly tied to its subject.

CL: Your use of language throughout the book is precise, often electrifying, and looms as a brooding atmosphere that draws the reader in. Indeed, there is a recurring focus on light, whether it is a description of the mercury light on the Hampton boardwalk, the bleak, New Hampshire winter when you, as a pregnant 16-year-old, are trapped inside the house, or, later in class, when you observe light and reflect upon its qualities. Was this description, or use, of light a conscious framing device, or was it more like an artist using paint strokes of place, space, and emotional state?

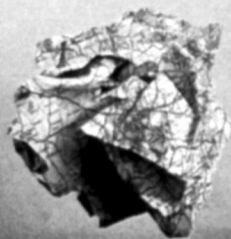
MH: I do not consciously construct when I write. I remember very keenly. I seem to see the world as a painter does – it is so achingly beautiful, so complex and vibrant. I have a profound emotional response to the physical world, a response of gratitude and wonder. I cannot separate the physical world from my experiences in it.

No, I do not make choices about the themes that arise. I see now that water runs, quite literally, throughout this book – rivers, tides, ponds. I did not know this had emerged as a theme – or the light you are mentioning now! – until readers commented on it. I had a wonderful experience with the Middle East chapter: a friend, a very good reader, commented to me that she loves the way milk works in that section. Milk? Yes, she said. The milk lost from your young breasts, the milk of the sheep given to you by the old man, the breast milk offered by the mother at the end. I had no idea. Writing is so mysterious. Writers must allow ourselves to enter its world and let it do this to us.

CL: In the light of the James Frey affair, how do you deal with the idea of presenting “truth” about the past? Is it influenced by the projections of the writer? And, more broadly, can language be an adequate repository for replaying past events?

MH: No memoirist needs to justify her work against the Frey affair. The question really is, “What is memory?” I believe that we *are* memory. Turn your eyes to the moment just past, and we enter, with no other option, the world that constitutes the “I” – I experience, I interpret, I am. I believe that we carry what has happened to us at least as fully as we do what is here at this moment. We know. That is not to say that those around us carry the same memories. They are ours alone, a landscape we inhabit intimately. Ask your siblings what happened that day at your grandparents’ camp on the pond, and wonder at how their world diverges from, and sometimes even contradicts, your own. I write what happened to me. I remember the light, the words, the breeze that felt sad or fresh. I am what has been. I tell these stories having to trust myself. •

without a map



a memoir

"An unusually elegant memoir that feels as though it's been carved straight out of Meredith Hall's capacious heart. The story is riveting, the words perfect."
— Lauren Slater

Meredith Hall

Hall, Meredith. *Without a Map*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

{ AWARDS }

The *Touchstone* Creative Writing Awards are given each year to the best work by Kansas State University undergraduates in each of the three genres. Only poetry, fiction, and nonfiction entries from undergraduates at Kansas State University are eligible. Submission to *Touchstone* automatically enters one's work in the contest. In addition to the contributors' payment of two copies, a \$75 prize is given to each of the first place award winners, and a \$25 prize is given to each of the second place award winners.

{AWARDS}

Fiction:

1st Place

“Learning”

by Jessica Ulrich

2nd Place

“One Day”

by Kate Harland

Poetry:

1st Place

“Authors Wanted”

by Dianne Wilhelm

2nd Place

“Kansas Hands”

by Kristin Russell

Nonfiction:

1st Place

“Fourth of July in Konya”

by Steven Miller

2nd Place

“Notes to Self”

by Kelsey Vetter

{ CONTRIBUTORS }

Adam Achéy is originally from Tucson, Arizona, and is currently a second-year MFA student in painting at Kansas State University. Aside from the pen and ink drawings displayed in this volume of *Touchstone*, Achéy primarily utilizes a mixed media approach in his paintings, which includes acrylic, ink, oil, and various pigment dispersions on canvas. His current works are investigations into planetary engineering on recently-discovered extrasolar planets.

Adam Pickert graduated from Kansas State University in December 2008 with a degree in psychology and a minor in communication studies. He often writes to try and see others' perspectives or to relax under life's stresses or triumphs. This is his first publication.

Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán's poetry and nonfiction appear in more than one hundred publications in Alba, Aotearoa, Australia, Canada, Cymru, England, Hawai'i, and the United States. A Ph.D. candidate in American Studies, Bodhrán is currently completing three projects: *Yerbabuena/Mala yerba*, *All My Roots Need Rain: mixed blood poetry & prose*, and *Heart of the Nation: Indigenous Womanisms, Queer People of Color, and Native Sovereignities*.

Andrea Spry is a sophomore majoring in graphic design with a minor in creative writing at Kansas State University. She has been previously published in her high school's literary magazine, *The Red Feather*.

Christina Mason is a senior in secondary education with an emphasis in English and a minor in music at Kansas State University. She is active in the K-State Symphony Band and Marching Band. This is her first publication.

Christopher Linforth is a master's candidate in creative writing at Kansas State University. He has work published in the *Denver Quarterly* and the *Coal City Review*.

Colin Kostelecky is currently a sophomore majoring in English and German at Washburn University. This is his first publication.

Dan Hornsby is a Kansas State University freshman in creative writing from Muncie, Indiana. He spends his time songwriting and playing the guitar and the harmonica in a group called The Postcards (their songs are now available on iTunes). He enjoys working at The Dusty Bookshelf (where he cleans up after the cat and stares at the covers of pulp science fiction novels) as well as impromptu road trips and biographies of Theodore Roosevelt.

Dianne Wilhelm is an undergraduate at Kansas State University.

Eli Neal is a junior in creative writing at Kansas State University. This is his first publication. His passions in life include: live music, road trips, hitchhiking, adventures, hip-hop, absurd conversations, surrounding himself with the most ridiculous people he can find, and living his life in as spontaneous and unpredictable a manner as possible.

Hayley Darpel is a junior in English with an emphasis in creative writing at Kansas State University. She has been writing poetry for over ten years but has never been published. She hopes this will be her first of many publications.

Jeremy Chugg is a senior in English at Kansas State University.

Jeremy R. Harvey is a senior majoring in creative writing at Washburn University. He has been previously published in *The Washburn Review*.

Jessica Ulrich is an undergraduate in English with an emphasis in creative writing at Kansas State University.

Julianne Jensby is a sophomore at Kansas State University. She is majoring in food science/pre-medicine with a minor in leadership studies. This is her first publication.

Kari Jackson is a graduate of Kansas State University and is cur-

rently in her second year of the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Kansas. She has lived in Kansas all her life, steadily moving east, and has been published across the state in *The Tulgey Wood*, *Touchstone*, *Kiosk*, and *Flint Hills Review*.

Kate Harland is a sophomore in secondary education with an emphasis in English at Kansas State University. She hails from Wichita, Kansas, and has been previously published in her high school's literary magazine, *The Red Feather*.

Kelsey Hixson-Bowles is a freshman at Kansas State University double majoring in English and biology. Her poetry has been published a number of times in *Mindburst*, her high school's literary magazine, as well as in the Live Poets Society of New Jersey's annual publication. She has a curious amalgam of interests and can usually be found with a cup of coffee, a book, and a smile.

Kelsey Vetter is a fifth-year senior at Kansas State University majoring in English. This is her first publication in *Touchstone*. She would like to thank her friends in her Advanced Creative Nonfiction class for encouraging her to submit "Notes to Self," which received a "B" in the class.

Kristin Russell is a senior in English and public relations at Kansas State University. She has been published previously in *Touchstone*, and some of her writing can also be heard on *Kansas Public Radio* and *The Wildcat 91.9*.

Melinda DeFrain is currently a graduate student in the third and final year of her MFA program at Wichita State University. She received her MA from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. She is currently living in Wichita with her husband and two young daughters, where she is working on completing a novel.

Michael Verschelden is a senior in English at Kansas State University.

Molly Hamm hails from Shawnee, Kansas. She is a senior majoring in secondary education with an emphasis in English and interna-

tional studies and a minor in nonprofit leadership at Kansas State University. Molly enjoys reading anything she can find, especially nonfiction, but her favorite fiction authors include Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe. In the future, she hopes to teach high school English classes in the United States or abroad.

Robert Wighs is a senior in theatre performance at Kansas State University who will be graduating in May 2009. This is his first publication.

Shannon Nakai is a sophomore in English with an emphasis in creative writing and a minor in French at Kansas State University. Nakai began writing stories as soon as she learned how to write words, and she writes not because she hopes to be famous or get a movie deal, but because she wishes to contribute to literature, like Salinger, Frazier, Foer, and Knowles. This is her first publication.

Steven Miller is a senior in English with an emphasis in creative writing at Kansas State University. He has published poetry in *Lit. Rag*, articles in *Statements*, and currently writes for the *Collegian*, K-State's student-run newspaper. If he is reincarnated, he would like to come back as a panda because they seem to have a lot of supporters.

Tyler Woods is in his second year of graduate studies in the KSU Theatre Department at Kansas State University. With an emphasis in stage directing, Tyler has enjoyed much success working with K-State's student theatre organization, Ebony Theatre, a group devoted to bringing the work of African-American playwrights to the K-State and Manhattan communities. An aspiring performer, director, playwright, and poet, Tyler seeks inspiration in black and white photography, music, and his increasing deficit in romance. His poem, "#7," is part of a set of poetry that includes more than 60 original verses inspired by photographs of lovers.

Zian Butler was born in Texas, raised in Puerto Rico, and now lives in the bright state of Kansas. Butler is a junior majoring in psychology at Kansas State University and speaks English and Spanish fluently. This is Butler's first publication.

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INTERVIEW

Meredith Hall

K-State Libraries



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Kate Harland
Robert Wighs
Jeremy R. Harvey

POETRY

Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

Kari Jackson

Tyler Woods

Dianne Wilhelm

Molly Hamm

Kristin Russell

Kelsey Hixson-Bowles

Michael Verschelden

Adam Pickert

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Christina Mason

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NONFICTION

Steven Miller

Kelsey Vetter

Melinda DeFraim

ART

Adam Achéy