

Spring 2000

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Valparaiso University

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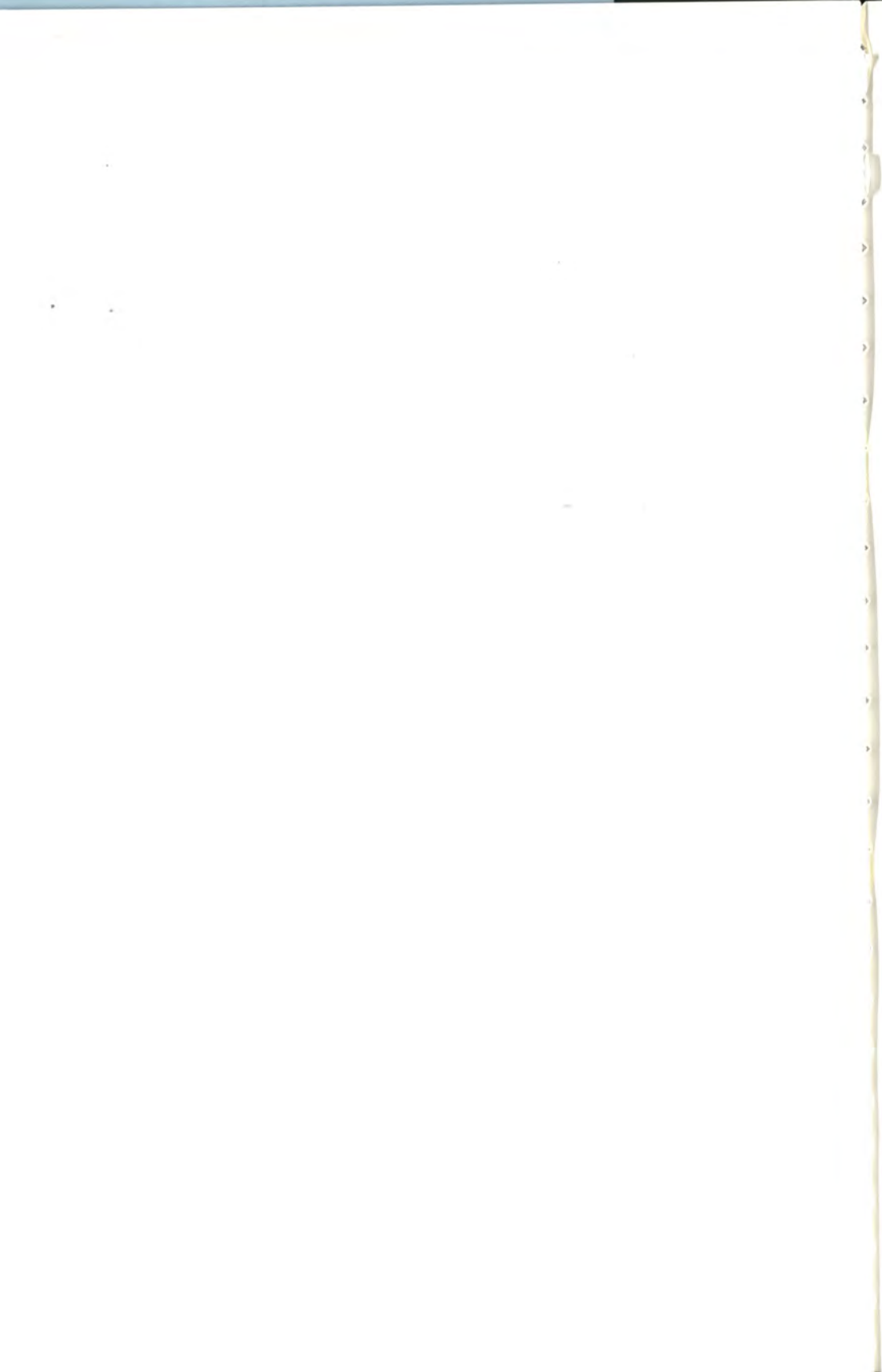
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the

nightmare

Spring 2000



the lighter

Valparaiso University's
Literary Magazine

Volume XLV Issue 2

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All submissions remain anonymous through the selection process.

The Lighter welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation.

The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this magazine. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

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Acknowledgements

The Lighter staff thanks our advisor, Walter Wangerin, for his guidance, and the Committee on Media for its support. Thanks to Christine Dale and Tim Dolecek for being amazing staff. Most of all, thank you to the students who graciously submitted their work this semester.

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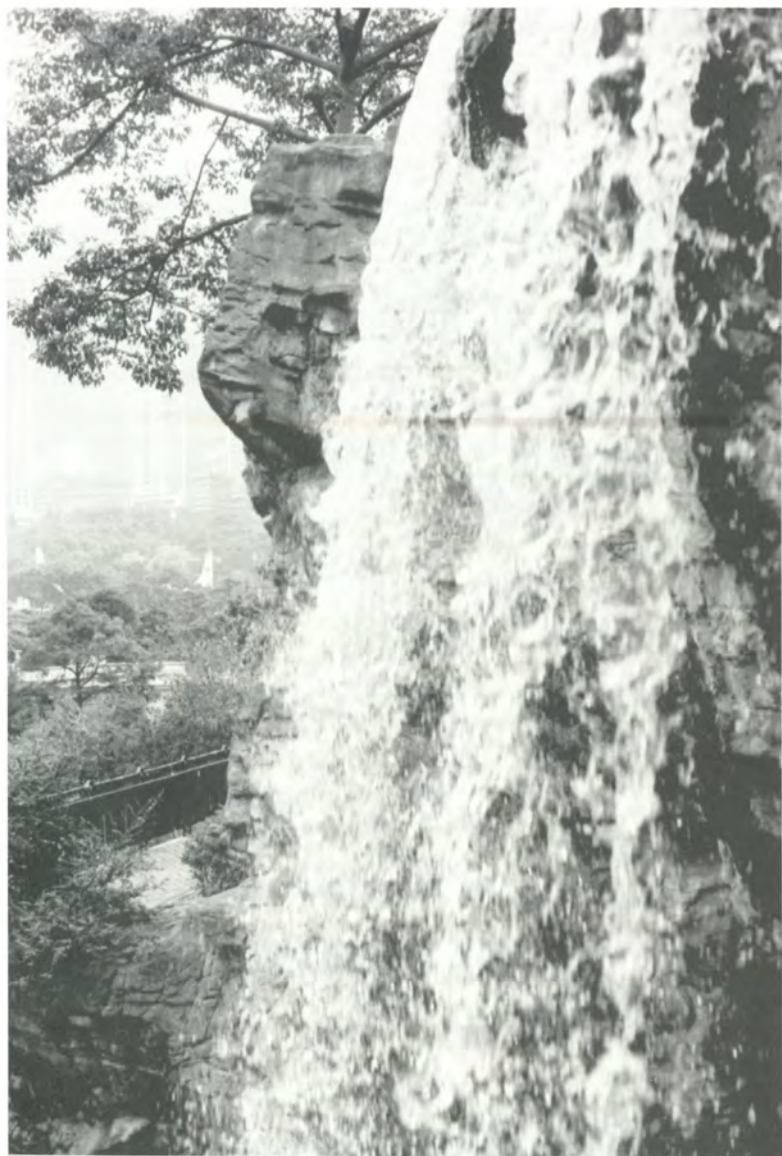
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Contributor's Notes

Prose



Jason M. Weber

Inner City Falls (Central, Hong Kong)

Listening Through Her Eye-Lids

Lindsey Gaff

Her oversized and gangly frame pretends to fit into the lumpy confines of the skinny couch. She is sleeping and quietly thinking about how much she adores sleeping until an ear-seething noise grinds in from the direction of the hallway, or at least from where she vaguely remembers a hallway. After nineteen hours in Kelly's Buick and a steady diet of Marlboro Lights and Cool Ranch Doritos, it's a wonder she remembers anything. Mary better appreciate this visit, she thinks. Yesterday affirmed that trips from Illinois to New York City should be spread out over considerable periods of time, like Leap Year and dentist appointments.

Speaking of dentists, this grinding has captured her sleepy attention. Sounds like someone is pouring cereal down the garbage disposal. Maybe they are protesting Kellogg's, she muses. Not enough raisins in their Raisin and Nut Bran. The corners of her pouty lips twitch with the beginnings of a grin. She regrets that no one is able to appreciate her witty early morning thoughts. Every day amusing quips and comical observations flow freely through her mind, many of which go unknown to those in her presence. What a shame, she thinks, all this raw talent and no one is listening.

Mary told her and Kelly how the people she lived with had a tendency towards slobbery. The cereal was likely being poured out because of the roaches or ants inhabiting it. The swirling blades of the garbage disposal were serving as the vagabond insects' tragic demise. Slob. Slob. Slob. She thinks his name is something like Eric. No, it's Derek. Yeah, Derek is probably the slob to blame for the ant-infested cereal. The other roommate is Sue. But she can't remember exactly what Mary said about Sue. Yesterday Kelly mentioned something about Sue and an eating disorder right after crossing the Ohio line. What a truly dull state Ohio is.

Wait a minute, she thinks. Cereal can't make that teeth-grinding, metallic crunch. Cereal crackles and pops. The side panel says high in fiber and full of whole wheat goodness, but nothing about steel shards or aluminum casings. Almost funny, she thinks, but not as good as the Raisin Bran remark. One lemon doesn't daunt her. She's confident that her lemons are more interesting than the average person's best. They probably don't think about interesting and funny stuff as much as she does.

The grinding intensifies, sounding more like pebbles in a blender. It sounds like little pebbles, the synthetic ocean blue pebbles in every fish tank in every pet store in America. She hates fish. Not one of hers has ever lasted more

than three weeks. Their flaky white scales would fall off a little more each day. They wouldn't eat. There was one that hid under the rock in the back corner of the tank until its body finally floated to the surface. She never could figure out what she did to kill them.

Good Lord. Still grinding. All this thinking flutters her fleshy eyelids and crusty bits of sleep sprinkle onto her bulbous nose. She lurches onto her side like a whale on land, squinting at the dribbles of light passing through the loosely drawn shades. Everything looks gray except the black hole in the wall towards the direction of the grinding.

It has to be Derek in there, he's the only one who could still be around the apartment this late. Mary and Sue are in school. She remembers Mary saying that Derek dropped out of college after his sophomore year for personal reasons. He has been hopping from job to job, mostly at coffee shops and bookstores. Oooh, he must be so dark and brooding. Hair hanging loosely to his ears. A few strands, more greasy than the rest, fall down over his eyelashes. Most girls probably think he's a drummer. Or a drop out. Mary heard drugs were involved with his departure from college, but as far as she knows Derek's clean now. He better be, she thinks, drug busts are not a part of her spring break itinerary.

Then she remembers the juicy bit about Derek Kelly shared with her somewhere around Buffalo. Lots of Derek's friends had been betting on when Derek was going to come out of the closet. These bets were based on the assumption that all twenty-two year old virgins must be either gay or priests. However, on this fateful New Year's Eve, Derek had a one night stand. After only three hours of mingling in a mass of trendy twenty-somethings, Derek gave it up to some artist who lives close to Central Park on East 77th Street. Doesn't Woody Allen live near there? Now wouldn't it have been something if Derek had sex with Woody Allen on New Year's Eve. Three months ago that would have been less absurd than Derek's sleeping with a woman. Wearing a tight, clingy frock she picked up from Chanel, the artist probably cornered Derek in her candlelit bedroom, using one of those "How-To-Get-Your-Man" lines that only seem effective on the pages of Glamour. That's Central Park for you. She wonders if Kelly wants to go to Central Park today. Is Kelly even awake yet? She can't hear any talking from the hallway. The grinding has stopped.

Creaking footsteps softly sound on the wooden floor of the hallway. Her eyes snap shut and her body rigidly assumes the standard peaceful sleeping position. She's not ready for the awkward "nice to meet you, thanks for letting

me crash on your couch" conversation. She doesn't even know the guy. She doesn't want to go out there and commit herself to idle pleasantries until Kelly is awake to share the burden. A figure pauses in the frame of the doorway. She feels the presence and weighted silence of the room. Two seconds pass and the footsteps creak back into the kitchen. Her chest depresses in a sigh of relief. More light is coming through her eyelids. The sun must be completely up by now. The faint aroma of freshly ground coffee beans drifts into her nostrils. So Derek was grinding coffee beans. That's a rather dull explanation, she thinks. She is much more pleased with the Raisin Bran theory.

Untitled True Story

Nate Holdren

march 26 all my housemates left today.

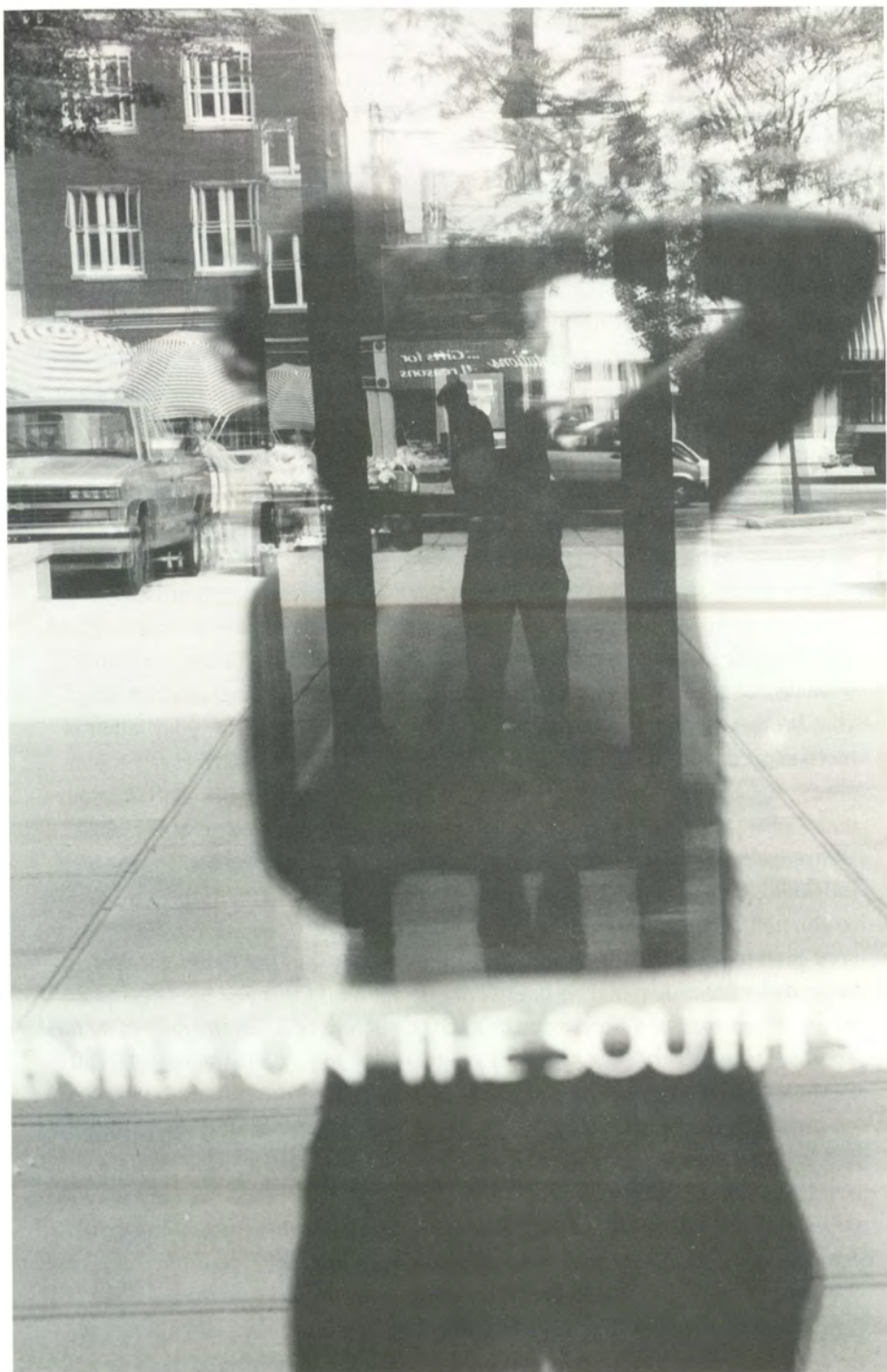
i forgot what quiet sounds like. for once i actually like hearing the house creak as it settles, it relieves the silence. as much as i hate how crowded this house gets, tonight being all alone feels worse. i made a note in my journal, realized i must be depressed because i m glad angelica hasn t called. there s no need to inflict myself on her tonight. fuck, when did i become the type of person who keeps a journal? when did i start writing this sort of stream of consciousness bullshit? i think more than anything else i m trying to trick myself, as if writing it all down will make mental illness and hours at the library sound somehow glamorous instead of pathetic. got another idea for a story tonight, maybe i ll actually follow up on this one. got a letter from a friend, told of a broken condom and a night of worried self-reflection walking the train tracks. i must not be too depressed since i can still sympathize. for me depression is self-absorbtion, plain and simple, being trapped in the attic of my head, focusing all my attention on my own self, laying bare all the faults and inadequacies for the purpose of self-flagellation. i must still be a christian, deep down. i found a bottle of whiskey in a cupboard tonight. i had about a coffee mug full. i wanted to try for the whole bottle but i managed to restrain myself, mainly because i don t want to fight with its owner. i could feel the drink sitting in my stomach, heavy and sharp. i like that feeling, very concrete, very real. it made my face warm, gave me just enough of a headache to make me sleepy. i figure it s not much different from watching tv or masturbating or counting my footsteps or making lists all the time, just ways to kill the time and try to shut the mind off.

Untitled True Story

Nate Holdren

April 19, at lunch in a pizza place

i am given a napkin and silverware, a glass of water, an empty glass, and a glass bottle of soda. no problem. pour my drink. i don t want to knock over my bottle so i move it away from my elbow. my soda glass lies too close to the water glass. i move the water glass only to discover the bottle occupies a perfect position for my other elbow to knock over. i move the bottle closer to the the center of the table just as i notice that my glass of soda is encroaching on scott s section of the table. not wanting to crowd my friend i move the glass. i keep moving my drinking glasses and bottle for about five minutes, and start adjusting my napkin and silverware as well. i end up with my drinks and silverware in a line in front of me. water shines on the table, lines of condensation left by the bottoms of the glasses sliding across the formica. i m left with plenty of elbow room but now my utensils sit in a wall, sectioning me off from the rest of the table, blocking me off from my friends. i reach to adjust again when i realize i ve just spent five full minutes adjusting my table setting. what am i doing? i begin to wonder if i m freaking out. just then i notice that the person at the next table over eats pizza in an extraordinary way. hold the whitish pizza with the fork, cut with the knife. careful not to spill any of the bright red tomato sauce, use the fork to fold the perfectly square section exactly in half before popping the folded bit of pizza neatly into the mouth. how fascinating, how neat and fastidious, and all done while maintaining a conversation! very impressive! over this person s shoulder i see the tile on the floor. how disordered the mottled pattern of dots on the linoleum is. the disorder of the dots mixed with grid of tile squares unsettles me. someone i m sitting with is talking. i try to casually fade back into the conversation. i focus my attention on the people, mustn t embarrass myself. don t let on that i haven t been following along, try to pick out this conversation from the restaraunt background hubbub. words words words. i can do this. just listen. it will start to make sense. words words mumble laugh words. remember to smile keep listening focus focus it s only conversation it s not hard focus focus focus. the table has a marbled top. no pattern, just aimless swirls. i try to make sense of the sounds coming from the people siting nearby, but my attention keeps getting drawn pack to tracing the shapeless lines on the perfectly circular grey marbled table top.



Angelica Mortensen

untitled

Contradictions:

Whitney A. Todd

Make your bed first thing in the morning so that I don't have to come up and do it after you've left for school; don't try to pick out your clothes yourself you'll only make yourself look like a fool; perfection is everything; never chew with your mouth open; never put your elbows on the table; never contradict your grandmother when she does these things because she is your grandmother; always say your prayers before you go to bed because you never know when you might not wake up the next morning; if you can't be perfect look perfect it's just as good; a clean house is an absolute must; vacuum the carpets for me after school; never mind I'll vacuum them myself because you can't get the carpet lines straight enough; always remember to smile; never invite other people or children over to this house I don't want them to see we might not be as perfect as we seem to be; always remember that God is watching you and can see when you are doing bad things and knows when you are thinking bad thoughts; no matter what do not ever talk back to your father; *but sometimes he is wrong and the things he says and accuses me of are crazy and I didn't do them*; no matter what do not ever talk back to your father; girls can do anything boys can do; your brother is more important than you are because he is a boy; your father is more important than I am because he is a man; your father is always right; I am always right; don't scrape your silverware against the side of your plate it annoys your father; always put your napkin on your lap as soon as you sit at the table; whites go in hot water; coloreds go in cold water; if a white has some color on it for God's sake don't put it in hot water; don't talk to your father unless he speaks to you first because you never know what sort of mood he is in; your father is very good to all of us and we should all be extremely grateful to him for all that he provides for us and that he doesn't put us out on the streets; *but what about when he gets mad and starts screaming at us and breaks down the doors and hits us*; your father is very good to all of us and we should all be extremely grateful to him for all that he provides for us and that he doesn't put us out on the streets; don't forget to smile; you must bring home all A's I always got straight A's; *but they don't give out A's at my school they give out O's as the best grades and I've never gotten anything but O's*; you must bring home all A's I always got straight A's; this is how to quilt; this is how to sew a hem; this is how to mend a ripped seam; you will probably be able to do much more with your life than just sew but just in case you don't you should know how to do these things; don't tell anyone anything about what goes on in the house; women are just as smart as men but know that they have to make sacrifices when they have children and

husbands; children have to make sacrifices for their parents; smile like you mean it; don't ever let anyone see you cry; don't ever let your father hear you cry it annoys him; this is how much money your father makes; this is how much he gives me for us to live on and this is how to get by on that; *but where does the rest of the money go*; this is how much he gives me for us to live on and this is how to get by on that; what's wrong with you you're still not smiling.

Fearful Alacrity (a five-sentence story)

Stephanie Scott

"I will encounter darkness as a bride."

-Charles Williams, *Shadows of Ecstasy*

Upon waking, the man shared his dream with the breathless, diligent company surrounding the couch on which he lay.

"A man drags a bag through a dead forest while another watches, unseen, behind a scraggly tree, until the bagman, sensing he's watched, stops and stares into the other's eyes. Understanding unfolds. They strike a silent pact to live and never tell. They bury the body together and give each other a nod to let go of the place."

In Pieces

Angelica Mortensen

Twisting the handle, Anna pressed her upper arm and hip into the door. In this case, she felt relieved when it failed to respond to the pressure of her body weight. No one was home. She would not have to endure the catch of hopelessness in her mother's voice, her aunt's impossible questions, or her uncle's penetrating stare.

Her fingers sought jagged edges of keys inside her backpack pocket. A quick glance at the key chain allowed her to differentiate the dulled copper of the key to her uncle's house from the silver key from her and her mom's former apartment. ("Why am I hanging onto this?" she asked herself every time in the past six months when she pulled out the keys, yet she kept it.) To steady the shaking of her right hand, she firmly grasped her right wrist with her left hand, then successfully turned the key and withdrew the dead bolt.

This time, the heft of her body opened the door, and her feet landed softly on the carpeted floor. The door still open, her body froze on that spot of carpet just inside the door. Only her eyes moved about the room.

In a high, quavering voice, Anna muttered, "I need to go away. I want to get away from here. I have to get away from here. I need to go. I need to go away." Where? her head asked. "I don't know where. I need to get away. I can't be here." The words dissolved into several short gasps for air followed by a brief wheeze of exhalation.

The first prickles of pins and needles in her cheeks jerked her rational self into attention. Her eyes pinched shut, her teeth cutting into her lower lip, her fingernails stuck into the palm of her hand, she worked her breathing back to sighing but slow, shaky but deep. Opening her eyes, she spoke aloud with the best firmness she could muster, "I can't go now, because then when I get back they'll all be here, and I'll have to explain where I was." Don't come back. "Where am I supposed to go? Mom would worry." Anna's voice rose in pitch. "I can't do that to her. She couldn't handle it, 'specially if she found out why. She'd fall apart, she'd just break, and it'd be all my fault."

Closing her eyes again, she inhaled deeply, then re-opened her eyes. "No, I shouldn't leave. I can't leave. Mom's gotta live here so I've gotta."

Her legs hadn't yet responded to either side of the debate. Sucking in a sharp breath, she took several brisk steps forward, a few paces down the hallway to her right. She then found herself at the edge of the room in which she slept. At this spot her feet stopped her body's movement so suddenly she had to clutch the doorframe to regain her balance.

Instead of aimlessly circling the room, her eyes darted immediately toward the bed. The sun shone dully on the discolored white bedspread which Anna had pulled to the top of the bed that morning and on the worn stuffed dog that she had repositioned on the pillow. Anna had slept with the stuffed dog every night since she received it for her sixth birthday, even taking it with her to sleep-overs. It had gotten knocked off the bed in the night. Anna pressed her eyes shut to keep from staring at the spot. Pressing back the memories this bed recalled proved more difficult. In her mind, she felt her back again pressed against the fitted sheet of the bed. With her eyes shut, she could see how the moonlight highlighted the hair on her uncle's hands as they slid up her cotton nightgown; in her memory she could still feel the rough edges of his fingernails.

She kept her head aimed toward the ground as she opened her eyes. Hastily she slipped her backpack from her shoulders, flung it into the room, shut the door, and fled the few steps to the bathroom. She leaned her back against the door to shut it firmly, then twisted the lock. "I'll take a shower." Anna tried to pretend a decision to act had led her to the bathroom, not the impulse of panic.

When she flipped on the light, she found herself looking into the mirror that hung over the two sinks, straight at her reflected self. She watched the deep gray of her iris consume the blackness of her pupil. She tried to push her lips up, but the smile collapsed and her lips merely trembled.

"Hi." Immediately after she'd spoken she thought it odd. Her hand flitted to her forehead, pushing the long tangled strands of hair away from her face. Her right arm suspended in a sort of '7,' she froze mid-motion to study herself. The position of her arms pulled her T-shirt taut, and, beneath the faded silk-screen of Mars and Jupiter, she could see the outline of her ribs. Under the soft white light, her inner arms stark whiteness seemed eerily luminescent. The blue veins stuck out as prominently from her wrists as the purple-blue circles under her eyes stood out from the paleness of her face.

"Have you been sleeping okay?" Her mom had asked her last week.

"Um. . . yeah. I'm--I'm fine. How come? Why'd you ask?"

"You've got big dark circles under your eyes, baby."

"Oh, um. That's weird. I dunno. Maybe I'm anemic."

"Have you been getting a lot of bruises?"

"What are you--What do you mean?" For moments Anna's mind had dragged up images of not-so-gentle hands, clutching and grabbing. "Oh, oh y-you mean about the anemia. Yeah, I-I got bruises."

"Maybe you haven't got enough iron in your diet. I'll see about picking up some fish at the store. It's got a lot of iron in it."

Looking in the mirror now, Anna realized her mother would soon start wondering why the fish didn't seem to be remedying the situation. She supposed she would have to invest in some cover-up cosmetics.

Pressing the palms of her hands onto the plastic counter top, she leaned her weight forward. "I need--I need to stop. I need to stop thinking--thinking about it." She looked into her reflection's wide wet eyes. Searching her reflection for distraction, she pounced upon the print of her once-white T-shirt, thinned out and softened with age. "The solar system--Mr. G in fifth grade taught us a song about it to remember like their order or something. It went like, "Mercury's the speediest one, only twenty-eight days around the sun." Twenty-eight? That's not right. It's--Oh, fuck. I dunno." She blinked rapidly, but tears began spilling out of her eyes. She watched her own face crumple, her eyes squished and weeping, her cheeks streaked, mucus running to her mouth, her lips pushed down, her chin dimpled. She rubbed her hand harshly across her eyes. "Jesus. Fuck. What's wrong with me? I just wanna take a shower. Just take a shower. Can't I even take a fucking shower?" Anna did not stop rubbing her eyes until she checked the flow of tears. Whether from the rubbing or the crying, her eyes shone raw red--stupidly so, she thought. Picking up a hairbrush, she began ripping through her ash blond hair. Undeterred by the prickles of pain as she tore hairs from the roots, she yanked the brush through tangles, straight from roots to the split ends which fell against her waist.

Her hair now staticky but tangle-free, she used her opposite foot to press each shoe off. To keep from losing her balance, she leaned against the counter as she pulled off her socks. Averting her eyes from the mirror, she lifted the solar system T-shirt off over her head. She dropped her shirt to the floor, then, before she could unfasten the button on her jeans, she looked. She saw how her white tank top clung against her body, showing off every soft curve. She saw the bareness of her shoulders. She saw the goose bumps forming on her arms, and shivered. She saw her nipples sticking out between the ribbing of the tank top, and clutched her arms to her breasts.

She remembered a conversation with her mother months earlier in the car.

"Mom, I think--in gym class--I'm getting so that I sorta . . ." Her mother had looked over at her distractedly. "Mom, do you think, we could go to the store sometime and look at bras?"

"Oh, Annie, you're still so little."

"But I'm fourteen, and everyone else--"

"You really don't need to be in such a hurry to grow up."

"I'm--I'm not, it's just that sometimes, I mean, like when I run and stuff, it's sorta uncomfortable. It kinda hurts."

"Well, we'll see."

Flushed to her ears, Anna had swallowed hard and not opened her mouth for the rest of the ride.

And so she still wore the tank top, which could at least serve the function of hiding her nipples beneath her shirt. Shivering, Anna stared into the eyes of her reflection and pulled her arms more tightly against her body. "I just need to take off my top, my pants, and my underwear and get in the shower." She inhaled deeply, then exhaled in a sigh. "Okay?" She nodded, then slowly, hesitantly, after glancing about the bathroom, uncrossed her arms. Looking down, she unbuttoned her jeans, slid both them and her underwear from her hips, and pulled her tank top up and off her body. Her head still hanging downward, she closed her eyes, then ran her palms down her face till her fingers stopped on her mouth. She opened her eyes to look at the moist eyes and down turned, trembling lower lip of her reflection. "Oh, Jesus." She turned around in a circle and checked the door knob to make sure it was locked. That first night, she hadn't heard him come in, hadn't seen him until his hands were upon her.

Hoping to keep her mind occupied as well as her hands, Anna started braiding her hair. But she could still recall how her first drowsy thought, that first time, had been that she had left the window open and the wind was blowing on her bare stomach. Slowly awakening, she had noticed that the wind seemed to be changing direction, and, much unlike the wind, adding pressure. In confusion, she had opened her eyes to see a hand, then arm, then face. The hand moved and put a finger to the lips, then pointed toward the room where Anna's mother slept. "Your mother--she wouldn't understand." Anna had obeyed, laying there each time soundless, motionless--still confused, but always completely awake.

Anna's hair now hung down her torso in two braids. "I look like I'm ten." She blinked her eyes wildly. "I act like I'm ten. I act like a fucking little girl. I never do anything. Why don't my arms move to push him away? Why can't I just lift my leg to kick him, or even just my fingers to poke him in the eye? I could sit there with a can of mace or, or, or a bottle of fox urine that they sell at the hunting store and then, when he crawled back in bed with his wife, he'd have

ta explain why he smelled like pee." Her words began to break apart with gulping sobs. "I--don't even--say, "You're a pedophile and evil and I hate your fucking guts." Her voice had risen in pitch to the point of a squeak. "Why don't I do anything? I just lay there and let him." She looked upon her reflected self--eyes red and gushing, face streaked with mucus and tears, her whole body naked and convulsing--and smashed the end of her fist into the mirror.

Bits of reflected glass showered down upon the counter top. Anna felt her stomach drop like on the downhill of a roller coaster. "Ooh. No. They're gonna wanna know how this happened." She stared, eyes wide, hand to her mouth, at the results of her action. "How can I explain it? How can I explain it? There was--there was a mild earthquake--no, that's ridiculous, that'd be on the news. . um. . um, a helicopter flew overhead. Oh, I don't think that'd work. I could, I could just pretend I had no idea, y'know, disavow any knowledge. 'I was sitting in the other room, and I heard a noise.' 'I came in here after school and it was like this.' But they might suspect--they might not believe that. 'Mirrors don't just break,' aunt Louisa will say. 'I--I was cleaning the bathroom, and, and I threw the soap dispenser back on the counter, and it hit the mirror an' it broke.' Okay. Okay. I'll get in trouble, but I think they'll believe it."

She sighed, looked at the mess, then at her fractured self in the mirror. She shook her head. Idly, she piled her hair on top of her head and held it there with one hand. With the other arm, she pressed her breasts flat into her chest, then walked close enough to the counter that her reflection showed her body only from above her hips. Dropping her hands to her sides and stepping back, she stared at the difference. In her still throbbing hand, she picked up a piece of glass about half her hand's size, and, with the other hand, grasped a chunk of hair close to her head and pulled it straight. Keeping the glass away from her face, she sawed off that hunk of hair, then proceeded the same way across the rest of her head. When finished, she looked from the mess of hair on the floor to the mess of hair on her head. It was uneven, but short, cropped all around within an inch of her head. She recrossed her arms. Barely consciously she noted the smear of blood her hand had left across her ribs. Anna could not tell if the sound which came from her mouth was a laugh or a sob.

She heard the front door slam and quickly quieted. After glancing one more time at her reflected self, Anna scooped the mounds of hair from the floor, threw them in the garbage can, climbed in the shower, and turned on the water. She would have to think of a way to explain her haircut.



Andrea Young

untitled

If they want me

Angelica Mortensen

"Jane says, 'I ain't never been in love, I don't know what it is.' She only knows if someone wants her. 'I only know if they want me.'" Singing along to whatever happened to be playing on the radio was one of the few pleasures Jane took in driving. But she stumbled over these words, though she'd heard the Jane's Addiction song enough times to memorize the lines. It felt disjunctive, like she was singing about herself in third person. She pressed the power button to the radio and the car fell silent. The words continued to play in her head. "She only knows if someone wants her."

Well, at least that's something. I fall for people--don't know if that's love. And I'm pretty sure they don't want me. She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes and braked just in time for a pedestrian in the crosswalk. "Jesus Christ! That was really stupid, Jane," She muttered to herself. She inhaled then exhaled in a sigh. "Okay, I just need to drive to turn at the light to get to Meg's house, pick up Meg, and then we'll go to Alex's." She concentrated on braking at the light, putting on her turn signal, and pulling slowly into the dirt driveway.

Knowing the volume at which Meg's family kept the TV, she rapped her knuckles sharply against the door, then put them in her mouth. She was looking up at the chipped numbering on the house and sucking on her knuckles when Meg's brother answered the door. She felt her face grow warm. He grunted something that she interpreted as "Come in" and she followed him into the house. When he plopped down on the couch and directed his attention to the TV, Jane hesitated, then took a seat on the opposite end of the couch.

Meg's mom sat only a few feet away in her recliner, but she obscured her face with a newspaper, as if trying to shield herself from the noise of the TV. "Meg'll be down in just a minute." She looked up from her newspaper. "Well, you look pretty tonight."

Jane looked down to the rise and fall of her body under the purple satin slipdress. "Oh, it's actually just a nightgown. I just got it on clearance."

"Well, it looks very nice on you."

"Oh. . .um. . .thanks." She smiled slightly and put her hands to her cheeks to cool the burning. "I don't think it goes very well with this gray cardigan, but it's too cold to wear it by itself, and plus then I'd feel sorta naked."

"Jane, the sweater looks just fine. I think you look lovely."

Jane heard the 'click-click' of heels in the hallway and turned her head expectantly in that direction. "Hey, what's up?" Meg bounded into the room, showing all her teeth in a brilliant smile.

"Not much. You ready to go?"

"Yeah. When do I gotta be home, mom?"

"Midnight."

"Midnight! Even tonight?"

"What's so special about tonight?"

"It's Alex's birthday!"

"Yeah, and so next weekend it'll be Brian's birthday, and the next it'll be Carrie's birthday, and then it'll be Jane's birthday."

"Oh, Jane won't have a party. She's anti-social."

Jane opened her mouth, then slowly closed it again.

Meg's mom turned her eyes to Jane. "You're always over here, Jane. You don't seem too anti-social to me."

"Jane just doesn't like other people."

"That's--that's not true."

"Okay, fine, other people scare you."

Jane narrowed her eyes. She didn't want to tell Meg to "Fuck off" in front of her mother. "Um. . .Meg, we probably should get going."

"Oh, yeah, so I'll be back later, okay?"

"Midnight."

"Fine." Meg sighed and rolled her eyes. "Later."

"Bye, honey. You kids have fun."

Jane gave Meg's mom a half-smile as Meg turned on her heel to leave.

Jane noticed how the porch light highlighted the lines across the bridge of Meg's nose when she wrinkled it. "Oh, God, why'd you have to drive the dork-mobile tonight?"

"My dad had to go to some party for his work. Actually, I kinda like driving my mom's car better anyway. It doesn't stick out in back so I don't have to worry about backing into things. That's the nice thing about station wagons." Jane flipped on her headlights, then turned her head and began to back slowly out of the driveway.

"So, you remember how to get to Alex's house, right?"

"Yeah, it's on Liberty Drive, right?"

"Yeah, third house on the left. The one with pink awnings."

"So. . .are you sure you wanna go? Are you sure you don't wanna just go to coffee at Denny's?" Jane forced a little laugh.

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun. You'll know like everyone there."

"But, well, I don't think I know most people very well--I probably just know most of 'em like well enough to care what they think and feel stupid in front of them."

"I'll be there."

"But you're not gonna want to just hang out with me all night."

"Sarah'll be there, Jim's gonna come, Laura was gonna try and get out of her cousin's wedding and come. You'll have plenny of people to hang out with."

"But are they gonna be--will there be--Is there gonna be lots of drunk people?"

"It's his birthday and his parents aren't home, so what do you think?"

Jane exhaled loudly. "I hate being around drunk people. A lot of people, well, they just kinda creep me out. And my friends--they go from being these wonderful smart people to people who think they're all smart and interesting when really they're just drooling on your lap and rambling about how long it takes them to clean the fungus out from between their toes."

"Are you talking about me?"

"No, you usually spend most of your time at these things in the bathroom puking."

"Jesus Christ, Jane, why you gotta be so negative? What's your problem, anyway?"

"Why am I even going to this?"

"To have fun!"

"But I won't have fun."

"Yeah, not with that attitude you won't. You act like an old person." Meg pressed the power button on the radio and started flipping through the stations. For a while the blips of music, talk or static were the only audible sounds in the car.

When she spoke next, Meg's voice had softened. "But, Jane, it would be a shame to waste yourself on Denny's tonight."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean you look pretty hot in that dress."

"I--Why do you say that?"

"'cause you do."

"I don't know if--It's better when I stand up, I think. When I sit down, I

have to keep tugging at it 'cause it's so short and it keeps bunching up at my stomach all around the rolls of fat."

"Rolls of fat? Jane, that's just the cloth bunching up. That's what dresses do. You don't have any rolls of fat."

"I--"

"How much do you weigh?"

Jane stared at the tail lights of the car in front of her.

"I bet my right thigh weighs more than you."

"Oh, that's not true."

"Well, then, how much?"

"Ninety-two."

"Ninety-two and you think you're fat? You're like fucking anorexic."

"No--I'm--"

"I say you're skinny and I'm not trying to get anything from you one way or another."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's not like I wanna feel all powerful and make you cry, and it's not like I'm trying to flatter you so I can fuck you."

"Great. Glad to hear that." In the back of her mind, Jane noted that the song that had just started playing on the radio sounded familiar.

"Ooh, Jane's Addiction. I haven't heard this song in forever."

"Oh, I just heard it earlier today. Do we--can we change the station?"

"But its such a good song!"

"I don't mean--I didn't say it wasn't a good song. I just don't really feel like listening to it right now, that's all."

"Oh, that's just 'cause you think it's about you."

"Not really." Jane pulled her left eyebrow down and scrunched her mouth up to the left side of her face. "I should be so lucky."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nevermind. Can you just change it? I'll like run into something if I try to mess with the radio."

"Fine."

"The U.S. Senate today. . ." played over the radio before Meg switched to a station playing light jazz.

"Wait, turn it back to that, would you?"

"Senate rejected a bill which would have extended health care to fifteen

million children--"

"Those fucking bastards! Goddamn republicans." Jane's voice rose in pitch. "Heaven forbid they should take away a couple tax breaks from multi-billion dollar corporations so that some kids can go to the doctor before they're so sick their parents have to take them to the emergency room. I mean, it's actually more cost-effective to provide preventative health care than to pay for emergency room visits. But I guess those costs don't affect the corporations who're in power."

"That's pretty shitty. Hey, don't miss your turn, it's right up here."

"Pink awnings, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Jane slowed the car as she turned onto Liberty Drive. She immediately noticed the driveway ahead to her right, parked full with cars. After Jane pulled the car over to the side of the street, Meg opened her door and climbed out, then stuck her head back into the car. "You coming?"

Jane sighed. "Yeah, I guess so." She slipped out of her seat belt, grabbed a bundle of papers from the back seat, and stepped slowly from the car.

Meg had already begun walking toward the door. "Hey, wait." The soles of Jane's Mary Janes slapped rapidly against the pavement as she half ran to catch up. She reached the porch just as Meg pressed the button for the doorbell.

Alex's face appeared in the window at the top of the door before he opened it. "Hey!" He looked directly at Jane's face. "You came!"

"You act like--you sound surprised."

"Well, it's just that you don't usually come to parties."

"Well, I didn't--I guess it's just--it shows just how special you are that I'll even go to your birthday party."

"Hey thanks. Come on in." Alex backed against the door, and Jane followed Meg through the space he had left in the doorway. Jane could hear unintelligible voices and the beat of the stereo filtering into the kitchen from neighboring rooms, but noticed with relief that no one else was in the kitchen itself.

Once they stepped into the kitchen, Jane untucked the papers from under her arm. "Oh, Alex, I brought you some stuff."

He turned around and looked at the papers in her outstretched hand. "Thanks." He smiled at her face.

"Don't get too excited. The stuff at the bottom, that's just your lit paper that you wanted me to look at. It's like--it's good, your argument's really good

and your word choice is usually good. You've got a few comma problems and little stuff like that but overall--" Jane noticed that Meg was walking away, into the living room. "--oh, I suppose you don't want to talk about this now. I'll go over it with you later, okay?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks so much for looking at it for me." He took the papers from her into his left hand. "Hey, what's this?" He held up the article that lay on top, a sheet of paper folded over with "Happy Birthday Alex" spelled out on it by letters cut out of magazines. "Oh, that's really cool, Jane. It's like ransom note style. And the background looks really awesome."

"Oh, that, it's just--I just cut out patterns I thought looked interesting and glued 'em on there."

"It's really cool. Thank you, Jane." He leaned toward her and wrapped his arms around her. Jane felt her breasts press into his chest as she returned the hug.

She felt her face growing warm and wished she could control the blushing. "Oh, you're--you're welcome."

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"I've got--I've got to drive." Jane felt thankful for the excuse.

"No, I didn't mean that, not for you. We've got pepsi or water and stuff."

"Okay, yeah, I'll have a pepsi."

Alex grabbed a can from the refrigerator and handed it to her.

"Thanks." She let her hand holding the can fall to her side. "So. . .um. . . on the way over here I was listening to the radio and I guess Senate rejected that health care bill that was up, y'know, the one that was directed toward covering children."

"God, that sucks. I mean, I'm not surprised. Health care for poor kids would probably mean cutting some of the tax breaks for the corporations and that's who the senators are really representing. Government by the people, for the people, my ass."

"I know." Jane nodded. "I try talking about this shit with my dad, and he's all, 'America's the greatest country in the world' and 'If people don't like it here, why don't they move?' I try to explain to him that that's not always an option."

"But people like that, 'cause they're in a privileged position where they can make choices, they think everyone has that choice, and--" The door bell rang. "Oh, shit, I'd better get that. I think Laura's in the living room if you wanna say 'hi.'"

After Alex left her side, Jane stood near the refrigerator for a moment, then inhaled deeply and walked to the living room.

Hearing Meg's giggle, Jane scanned the room to find her. Meg was leaning against the wall on the other side of the room, wine cooler in hand, giggling at something Rob Simms had just told her. A group of people whom Jane vaguely knew--they were friends of friends--clustered around the TV. Jane guessed Laura was probably in the basement and debated trying to find her. Jane imagined how awkward she must look standing alone in the doorway of the living room, so she sat down on the end of the couch and began flipping through the magazine in front of her. Maybe Laura's just in the bathroom. Maybe Alex'll come in here after he lets whoever it is in.

Jane tried to feign interest in an article on Comet Hale Bopp. She read through every word-- "tail" "gas" "and" "period" "the" "speeds" "galaxy"--but she did not construct them into a complete thought. Her surroundings absorbed her attention. Though her eyes stayed glued to the page, her ears attended to the sounds around her. "I couldn't believe he said that." Jane recognized Rob Simm's voice, then Meg's giggling response. Shrieks from the TV rang out over any single voice in the cluster. The thud of shoes on the hallway floor signified someone's approach. She felt the couch shift under pressure and glanced up to find its cause. Not Alex was the first thought that registered, with a pang of disappointment. Not only did the body next to her not belong to Alex, it didn't belong to anyone she knew. Meg said I'd know everyone here. She shifted and flipped to the next page on Hale-Bopp.

"He-ey."

Jane felt obligated to look at the face. "Hi."

"Whatcha looking at?"

"It's, um . . . just an--just something in National--"

"Oh," He leaned toward her and peered over her shoulder. "Comets. I know all about that shit. My grandpa's got an observatory in his backyard."

Jane moved her head so it appeared she glanced at his face, then looked back down at the diagram detailing the periods of revolution of various comets.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. We can like see all the planets and shit from that."

"All of them? But I thought you couldn't--"

"Oh, well, not all of them all the time, I mean, you've gotta be at the right part of the year to see like all the moons of Mercury and shit like that."

Jane leaned back into the couch cushion and looked toward the face, yet maintained her grip on the magazine. "Really? Well, um, I sorta thought

that Uranus was the one with all the moons--I mean, I could be wrong--and that Mercury--"

"Well, we go to my grandpa's like every weekend and watch for meteors and shit."

"That's cool." Who the hell are you anyway? The question echoed through Jane's brain, but she didn't say it.

"Yeah, he's here this weekend too."

"Huh." What is he talking about? "Um. . .who?"

"Who what?"

"Who's here this weekend?"

"My grandpa."

"Oh." Jane paused, waiting for more information. She began leafing through the magazine. He continued to simply sit next to her and breathe noisily. "Is he usually somewhere else?"

"Yeah. He's just here for the wedding."

Jane looked him in the face and raised her eyebrows.

He leaned back onto the couch cushion so his arm touched her shoulder.

Jane noticed the mostly empty bottle of Smirkoff vodka in his hand.

Ahh. That explains some things. "So, there's a wedding in your family?"

"Yeah, my cousin, you know, Laura's cousin too."

"Oooh, you're related to Laura!"

"Yeah. I'm her cousin." He spoke the words simply, as if implying she should have known. "Cliff."

"Oh, okay. So. . .um. . .is Laura around somewhere?"

"Yeah, somewhere. I think she's like in basement, hanging out with some guy, y'know?" He raised the pitch of his voice for the last word and winked.

"Huh?"

"So, yeah, it's cool that I'm up here for a couple of days 'cause I can check out the Air Force Base."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, once I graduate, I'm gonna enlist and shit."

"Oh." Jane turned to a page featuring Siberian tigers. "Um. Do you enjoy flying?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm an awesome pilot."

"So--So you actually have flown a plane yourself?"

"Yeah, all the time. There's like an airport right by my house." He leaned

sideways, toward her. "So, yeah, I think it'll be real cool to get paid for flying and shit. I think I'll be a real asset for my country." Jane wondered if he'd picked the word "asset" up from the "Join the Air Force" brochure. "I mean, they're really gonna need people like me joining up with all that shit going on with the Chinese."

Jane felt the pressure of his body on her arm yet did not shift. "What-- what 'shit' are you referring to?"

"Well, I mean, they're gonna be taking this place over with all their communist shit if we don't watch our backs. We'll all be raising red flags and singing praises to Mao if we don't get 'em first."

"I sorta think China's really more of a fascist capitalist. . ." Jane talked down toward the Siberian tiger on the page and let her sentence trail off.

"So, I wanna get on board and shit and kick their red asses." He leaned forward and sideways, so that his torso hung over her lap. When Jane raised her head, the tip of his chin was level with her cheek, so that she could feel his sticky breath on her face. He softened his voice. "So, what did you say your name was?"

You never asked. "Jane."

"So, Jen, you know Laura?"

"Yeah, I've known her since--"

"I don't think I've heard her talk about you before."

"Well, we're not that--"

"Oh, yeah, she did say something about you."

"Really?" Jane's eyebrows jumped higher on her forehead.

"Yeah, she was telling me she had this friend with like short brownish hair and. . .um. . ." He peered at her face. "And blue eyes and she looks so attractive in little purple dresses." He grinned, showing his teeth.

Jane put her hands to her cheeks to cool the burning and laughed slightly. She tried to look down at the Siberian tigers, but his face was right before her. Approaching even closer. Till his lips pressed into hers. He smells like cough syrup was her only coherent thought. But she opened her mouth. Prickles of pain shot through her lips as he nibbled. She felt the slimy coating of his tongue and tasted the cough syrupy saliva. Pressure against her sides meant his hands were there. Her senses could comprehend. But the only words her mind formed: I only know if they want me.

It was something.

Play Normal

Angelica Mortensen

"That's not fair! I had to have the headless Ken last time!"

"Well, Shavin' Fun Ken was my birthday present. Plus you get to have the Barbie with the long hair and so you can braid it and stuff." Allison tries to take on an air of reasonableness.

"Her hair is dumb. She's got those poofy bangs."

"Well, if you don't want her, I'll take her."

"Then can I have the real Ken?"

"You've got your own Ken doll."

"But he doesn't have a head."

"It's your own fault. If you hadn't driven the Barbie motorcycle so close to the Pearsons' fence, then their dog couldn't have pulled his head off."

"So I guess it's your fault that grandma's dog bit your hand, too, 'cause you shouldn't 've put your hand so close to her mouth."

Allison exhales in a sharp huff and puts her hands to her hips. "Listen, Casey, do you want me to play with you or not?"

Casey picks at the thread of the carpet. "Yeah, I wanna play."

"Then I get to play with my Ken and you have to play with yours."

"Fine."

Allison picks up the disputed object and puts it into standing position. "Brr-ing. Brr-ing."

She also stands up Ken's eleven-and-a-half-inch counterpart, whose lumpiness is slightly hidden beneath a strapless purple gown. Allison's voice purrs, "Hello," then deepens. "Hi, honey, wanna go to that party at Courtney's tonight?" High and musical: "Sure." "I'll be at your house at eight." "Okay." The lumpy piece of plastic in Allison's hand leaps over to the poofy-banged twin lying on the floor next to Casey.

"Casey," Allison hisses, barely moving her lips. "What's your Barbie's name?"

"Danny."

"You can't name your Barbie Danny. That's a boy's name."

"Nuh-uh. There's someone in my class named Danny and she's a girl."

"That's weird."

"Well, I can name her whatever I want and that's what it is." What's yours's name?"

"Candy." Allison resumes her sticky sweet tones. "Danny, you have got to help me find something to wear to the party tonight."

"What's wrong with that dress, the one you got on?"

"Ken is taking me to the party."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, it all bulges right here," Allison twists the plastic arm so it points just below the elasticized waist of the dress. "It makes me look all fat. And sometimes the top slips down. It'd be so embarrassing if Ken saw my boobs."

Casey giggles. "Can I go to the party, too?"

"Oh, yes. You must. Otherwise, who will I talk to?"

"I thought you were going with Ken."

"Well, yeah."

"So, can't you talk to him?"

"I dunno."

"Why do you go with him if you can't talk to him?"

"So we can dance 'n stuff."

"I would dance with you. And we could talk at the same time."

"Oh, I can't dance with you. You're a girl."

"So what? Allison, don't you remember when I danced with Michelle at Lori's wedding?"

"Yeah, but that's different. You're kids."

"So?"

Allison heaves a sigh and looks down into her sister's eyes. "When you're older you'll understand these things."

"That just means you don't understand either."

"I do so."

"Then how come you can't explain it?"

Allison's eyes narrow along with her lips as she presses them against one another. "Nevermind. Let's just play." Putting the sugary tones back in her voice, Allison bobs her doll up and down to the rhythm of her speech. "So. Are you bringing your boyfriend to the party?"

"He won't fit on my motorcycle."

"Well, maybe my boyfriend can come pick you up after he gets me. He's got a pink convertible."

"Well, I'm not sure, he's, um. . . up to going to any parties yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, see, he had a little accident."

"Oh, my gosh! What happened?"

"Well, um. . . he was riding the motorcycle and, ya see, there was this

tree branch hanging down real low and I guess he didn't see it or he thought it was higher or something, because, well, he whacked his head on it and it knocked his head right off."

"Nu-uh." Allison's voice loses its simpering air. "Come on, I don't wanna play like that Casey. Let's play normal. Can't you just pretend he has a head?"

"Why?"

"'Cause normal people have heads."

"So? He doesn't."

"You can't live without a head."

"Allison, he's not really alive. He's a doll."

"I know that. But we're pretending they're alive."

"So I'm pretending he can be alive without a head."

"Come on. Just pretend he has a head. I want to play normal."

"Look, you made me have the headless one so I get to play with him however I want."

"But that's dumb."

"Then you take the headless one and I'll take the regular one, if it's so easy to pretend he's got a head."

"No! I get to keep my Ken."

"What does your Barbie's boyfriend need a head for anyway? It's not like he needs to be able to talk."

"But he looks weird without a head. Plus then they can't kiss and stuff."

"So then if I have to have the one without a head, he doesn't got to act normal. He can act however I want too."

"Fine." The thin line of Allison's lips bears little resemblance to the pink-rimmed white 'U' of her plastic alter-ego.

"So, anyway," Casey puts the plastic tippy-toes back to the carpet. "Like I was saying, I dunno if he'll be feeling good enough to go to the party."

"Um. . . that's too bad. I guess he should just stay home then."

"I mean, maybe I could try and bring him with but I'd have ta watch him all the time to make sure he didn't run into anything. Plus I don't think he'd have much fun 'cause he couldn't talk to people or eat anything."

"Yeah, I think headless people should probably not go to parties."

"But, well, I was thinking I might try and find him a new head. I mean, it's kinda nice to be around someone that all they do is listen, and I can just tell him anything and he always just sits there, never leaves or says anything mean."

But it'd be nice if he could say something back every once in a while."

"So is he gonna have head surgery done soon?"

"It depends if I find him a new head."

"You're going to do the surgery?"

"Why not?"

"I think you need a doctor to do that."

"Well, I am a doctor."

"Hey, Casey," Allison whispers. "Pretend he gets a new head and he's just like normal for the party."

"Maybe. I'm not sure if that's what I wanna do yet," Casey whispers back, then resumes her normal spoken voice. "Why don't you just pick me up for the party and I'll tell you then if my boyfriend feels good enough to go to the party."

"Um. . .okay." Allison pauses. "Oh, Danny, you never did help me find something to wear. You should come back to my house with me an' we can pick something out for you, too."

"I can't. I gotta go find a new head for my boyfriend."

"Well, I guess I'll see you at eight or something."

"Okay." Casey crawls over to the toy chest and kneels in front of it.

Allison looks up from her pile of puffy pink gowns to her sister. "What're you looking for?"

Since Casey holds the lid open with her head, her voice echoes from inside the chest. "A head."

"We don't have his head anymore."

"I know. The dog ate it."

"So what're you looking for?"

"I told you. A head."

"But you're not gonna find a Ken doll head in there."

"I know."

"Casey, what're you gonna do?"

"You'll see."

"No, tell me."

"I want it to be a surprise."

"It's gonna be something weird, isn't it? Come on, just pretend he's got a new head, okay? Or just pretend the head he's got is a regular person head."

"I dunno. I'll see."

"Or just don't bring 'im to the party. I want it to be a normal party with

dancing and eating and fun stuff. Nothing weird."

"Okay, it'll be a person head." Casey snatches her hand from the toy chest and held it behind her back.

"What is it? Lemme see."

"No, it won't look right till it's attached."

"But it's a regular person head?"

"It's a person head." Casey lifts her doll up by its mass of nylon hair, then stands. "Okay, Candy, I'm going to go do surgery and then I'll go with you to the party."

Allison bunches up her lips, sighs, and turns back to the task of finding a dress.

Minutes later, Casey reappears in the room with a bulge in the side of her t-shirt.

Casey seats herself on the floor, doll in hand. "Brr-ing. Brr-ing."

"Hello?" Allison stands her doll on plastic tip-toes which barely showed beneath layers of pink nylon.

"Hi, I'm ready to go to the party whenever. I think my boyfriend's gonna come too. The surgery went good."

"Um. . .okay. My boyfriend just got here to pick me up, so we'll be here soon."

Allison pushes the pink plastic convertible with two plastic passengers a foot to where Casey sits.

"Hi." Casey hops her doll over the plastic door and seats her in the back seat. "My boyfriend'll be here in just a second." Casey pulls the object from her shirt and seats it also in the backseat.

"Casey! You duct taped your other Barbie's head on him!"

"Well, it wouldn't stay on any other way. You don't gotta worry about it, though. I know how to put the head back on her. And I can get the sticky from the duck tape off with alcohol. Mom showed me how when I got sticky stuff on--"

"But, Casey, you can't play with him--I mean, her--I--whatever that thing is."

"Why not? The duck tape should hold his head on."

"No, I mean, you've got a girl head on a boy body."

"How do you know that it's a girl head and a boy body?"

Allison raises her eyebrows. "It's Barbie's head and Ken's body." She gestures with the hand that held the doll so that the yellow hair swishes wildly about. "And duh--Barbie's a girl and Ken's a boy."

"Can't you just pretend that it's not Barbie's head?"

"But she's got long hair, and blue eyeshadow, and earrings!"

"Well cousin Jesse has long hair. And I've seen boys with earrings before. And, well, for the eyeshadow, I'll just pretend he's got a black eye, like from the surgery."

"Noo, Ca-asey," Allison stretches her sister's name out for several seconds. "It looks so weird. It doesn't look like a boy and you've gotta have a boy for a boyfriend."

"You wanted me to pretend he was a normal boy when he didn't have a head, why can't you pretend--"

"But--but that head, I can't pretend it's not there. It just looks so weird." Allison throws her Barbie to the floor. "Can we just--oh, why don't we just play something else."

"But I got my Ken doll all ready to play."

"I don't wanna play with you and your weird-o doll. Let's just play house. This'll be my baby." Allison picks up a wrinkly rubber doll wearing a pinned scrap of cloth for a diaper. "Do you wanna be my daughter or another mommy?"

"Can't I be something else?"

"Nooo. Casey, why can't you play normal? Why you always gotta do weird stuff?" Allison sighs. "I'm gonna go watch TV, where they do it normal."

The Deadmilk Abduction

Russ Chibe

St. Valentine rode into town on a steed black as night. The crisp autumn breeze cast an appropriate splash of pink upon his bleached face. His pupils were hidden behind a shadow dripping from the brim of his hat to the bridge of his nose. As the six o'clock sun began its descent, the citizens of Deadmilk, Wyoming gazed at the mysterious visitor. The men of Deadmilk weren't accustomed to strangers 'round these parts, and the women weren't quite accustomed to anything. Yet something about St. Valentine held the eyes of each lady rigidly fixed upon his figure. It may have been his flowing robes. Or possibly his red leather chaps. Perhaps it was the sneer on his face as he spit out his chew. Regardless, every being devoid of a Y-chromosome heard without fail the declaration of St. Valentine: "I'm lookin' for Britney Spears."

The men all looked around as if they had no idea what he was talking about. They had the look of a couple of frat boys answering the door for the cops, their dropped jaws and crinkled brows looking back and forth, asking "Party? What party? There's no party here!" The women, on the other hand, were not about to play that game. They knew there was a party going on. There was a pleated-skirt with knee-high socks and bare midriff party going on right in their antiquated John Wayne town better known as Deadmilk. Sure, they had hid parties before. They hid that first Memphis-to-Korea-to-Vegas-via-Hawaii party that ended in a bathroom in 1977. Some argue Carl Perkins had actually sent out the invitations, but even so they hid the party from him too. They hid Eve Plum and little Danny Bonnaduce, though it's doubtful Ken Kesey's bus would have been offered asylum likewise. They played Dr. Jekyll to Maurice Starr's Mr. Hyde, and even tolerated Robert Van Winkle. But enough was enough. They were to play the accomplice no more. If St. Valentine had come all this way for a showdown with Britney Spears, he was going to get one. And perhaps Britney herself sensed this. For, before any woman could out her, she did the deed herself. "I'm right here," she called across the dust. As she stepped out from behind a cactus, the townspeople gasped. It looked like there was going to be a showdown at sundown.

St. Valentine took a step and tugged at his hat. "You Britney Spears?"

"Don't get around much, do you?"

"Look, perhaps you don't know who I am. My name is St. Valentine."

"As in the day?"

"Or the massacre. Take your pick."

"So what do you want? An autograph? A picture? My thoughts on U.S.

hegemony in world affairs?"

"I want love."

"Look, I don't know what the laws are like where you're from, but I'm still only 17, and around here that can get you twenty."

"No, I don't want to consummate love. I want *love*. The emotion. As St. Valentine, it is my holy duty to be the sacred keeper of love. Yet I lost it somewhere in the mid-fifties. I trusted this human race, and figured it would soon be returned to me. But a critical point has been reached. I'm here for love and I hear you've got it."

Britney was shocked. "What makes you think I have love?"

"Look, I can't tell you exactly when I first noticed love was missing. But I can say it was somewhere between World War II and Korea. Around the late Sixties I thought I might get it back with the whole Summer of Love thing and all that. But it went through too many hands too fast and the next thing I knew it was the 1980s. Alex Keaton and *Risky Business*. I read in the Wall Street Journal that Disney had acquired love in some merger. I'm pretty sure Gates is trying to synthesize it, or it least make Windows 2000 necessary for it to run. Of course, you know he's going to leave out something, so that you'll need to buy an upgrade. But the real thing is still property of Uncle Wally, and word is it got passed down to you through the Mickey Mouse Club. That is, unless that Aguilera chick has it."

"Aguilera's a bitch! Now get the hell out of my face..."

"Perhaps you don't understand. I'm not leaving until I get love back."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"Well, you could always just give it to me. But that would be too easy, wouldn't it?"

"Look, Britney Spears doesn't give. Disney doesn't give. Fame doesn't give. Fame takes, and I'm fame. So you can either leave, or stand here and wait for my career to falter. Who knows, maybe you can help me pick up the slack if my career sputters. 'Pop idol out on the town with saint.' That should at least quell the breast-implant debate. At any rate, hopefully I won't have to resort to posing in *Playboy*."

"I'm not here to help your career. Maybe your MTV attention span can't handle the length of this conversation, but I'm here to get love, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. But you can't have it. You see, old man, you're the past and I'm the future, so you can either move out of my way or get trampled

like Debbie Gibson."

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. I'm not leaving until I get love back, so if you're going to be this way, I propose a duel. Right here. Sundown. You game?"

"Sure, I'm game. The question is, are you?"

And on that note Britney disappeared among the onlookers of Deadmilk. Now you might be asking at this very moment, just how would Britney Spears and St. Valentine have a duel? Well, if you have to ask that question, it's a wonder you've gotten this far. But let me say this: a duel to determine the fate of love in this 21st century post-modern world was about to go down, and mere weapons wouldn't do. This here was a battle of wills and bank accounts, influence and centerfolds. So when the two figures arrived on opposite ends of the town square, with the sun fleeing to Asia, they had no six-shooters. They simply approached each other with bow-legged struts and deadpan faces.

"All right Valentine, you gonna take me down? You can't take me down! I'm Britney Spears! I'm bigger than you and all your little saint friends put together. I'm the crowned princess of the record industry, and nobody can stop me!"

"Britney, I'm afraid you've overestimated yourself. You're not simply fighting this lowly saint. Sure, I wish to reacquire love. But the forces of love are much greater than me." And behold, on the horizon approached an army. There was Jimmy Stewart, and Ginger Rogers. Jim Henson, and Ben and Jerry. Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot were walking hand in hand. Frank Capra was leading an army ready to retake love from its corporate captor. There would be no more Valentine's Day cards for sale on January 3rd. Homemade chocolate chip cookies would replace diamonds as the ultimate symbol of true love. Parents would teach their children to care for one another, instead of letting Barney do it for them. A revolution was at hand, and a little girl from Louisiana was the only thing in their way.

Well, that's what they thought. Until suddenly, off in the distance, a small group on horseback could be seen. The clattering of hooves thundered through the valley, and the flaring of equine nostrils seemed to energize Deadmilk. Everybody stood shocked, like sheep watching an approaching fox. No choreography would save Britney now. The eerie stillness was disrupted when someone yelled, "Look, it's Melissa Ethridge!" Indeed, the established singer-songwriter made a V-line toward the pop starlet, with David Crosby in tow. Suddenly David reached down and plucked Britney from the dusty earth.

"I got her. Go, go, go!" David was nearly out of breath as they pulled right and headed for the city limits. Britney wanted to scream, but couldn't. All she could muster, in her best Nancy Kerrigan voice, was "Why? Why me?"

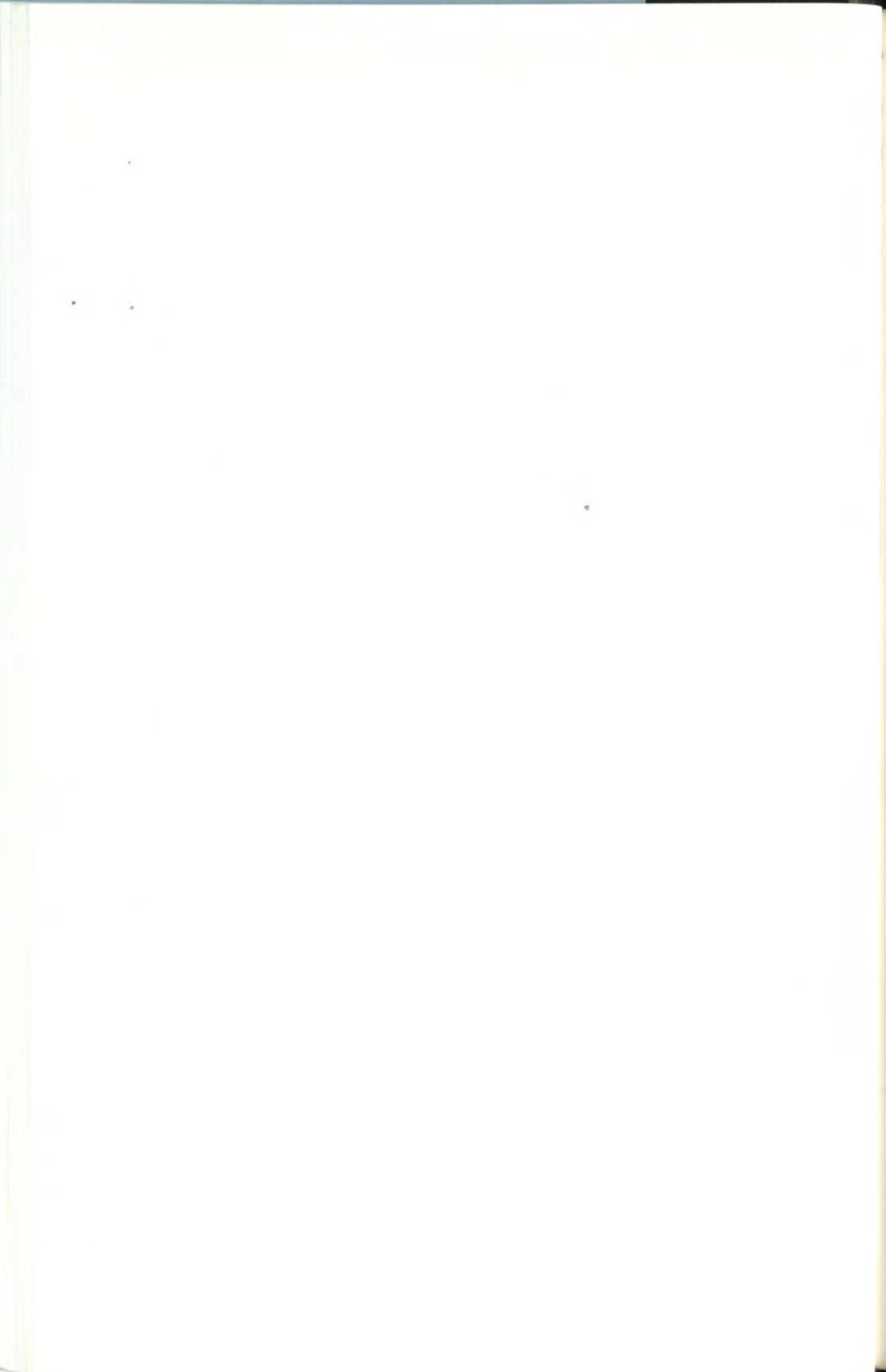
Melissa looked back. "It's ours now! It's ours!"

Britney trembled. "But why me?"

"You?" Melissa snickered. "You think we want *you*? Ha. This isn't about you. This is about what you have. This is about what St. Valentine wanted. This is about what I'm going to get." And with that the trio vanished into the sunset.

In the meantime, St. Valentine stood in the town square, his head swiveling down from his neck, a solitary tear running down his cheek. "It was mine, and I let it get away." He looked towards the people of Deadmilk. Something infuriated him. "Aren't you people going to help me take back love?!"

The townfolk looked at each other, then they looked at the ground. Some of them shuffled about, pivoting their feet back and forth about their shoetips, as if putting out cigarette butts in the dirt. One man looked up timidly. "I don't know... I mean, 'tain't none of my business..."



Interview



Carrie Watkins

lighted restroom

Interview with René Steinke

Mary Linxweiler

René Steinke attended VU and recently revisited campus upon the debut of her first novel, *The Fires*. This interview reinstates a former tradition of interviews in *The Lighter* and relays a conversation shared between this writer and the editor of *The Lighter*, Mary Linxweiler.

ML: When you were a VU student, how did you envision your career? What did you think you'd be doing now?

RS: I decided that I wanted to teach when I was here, and I wanted to write, although I wasn't sure I was going to have the confidence to see it through. I saw myself doing something with language and hopefully teaching, but then I also knew graduate school was ahead and I didn't know if I would make it through graduate school. So, I guess I hoped I'd be doing what I'm doing now, but I wasn't sure I would be. I wasn't sure I would make it.

ML: So that brings me to your history post-VU. What did you do?

RS: I went right from Valparaiso to the University of Virginia, where I studied creative writing. I studied poetry with Charles Wright and others and I did workshops. I was the youngest person in the workshops, which was scary for me because there were no workshops here when I was a student. I had only done independent studies with Ed Byrne, and that was much different from having your work critiqued by twelve poets. That was scary at first--very instructional, but I had to really learn to handle criticism fast. I also had to learn how to be productive and develop the discipline. After I got my Master's of Fine Arts in creative writing at Virginia (I wrote some fiction there, too, but mainly poetry), then I moved to Chicago for a year and I began a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I began teaching at creative writing at Virginia, and then at Chicago I taught composition. For personal and academic reasons, I transferred Ph.D. programs to the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, which also had a Ph.D. in English with a creative writing concentration. It seemed to be a slightly more prestigious and well-run program. I moved, lived in Milwaukee, worked on a Ph.D. I took academic classes as well as creative writing classes. When I was in Chicago, that's when I started writing *The Fires*. I began to show it to a few people, very slowly. I worked on it the whole time I was in the Midwest--in Chicago and Milwaukee, while I worked on my Ph.D. I got my Ph.D. in 1993. My area of concentration was modern literature, especially experimental works. I

was very interested in poetry and fiction that sort of crossed boundaries that mixed it up a little bit, so I was very interested in prose poems. Novels that were more non-linear, like Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and *Finnigan's Wake* by Joyce. So that's what I did my graduate exams on. Then, I taught at Valparaiso for a year, in Christ College, which was wonderful--really fun. I loved the students, and it was definitely the best teaching experience I've ever had. I taught fiction writing through the freshman program, and I taught a seminar in experimental women's writers. It was really, really great. Then, in the summer, I moved to New York. I just decided that I wanted to live in New York City, so I applied for a bunch of jobs there, and I taught part-time at several colleges in the fall, and then in January I got the job at SUNYS Brook Community College--a full-time job, tenure-track--and I've been there ever since. I published *The Fires* in 1999 and finished it a couple years before.

ML: In previous issues of *The Lighter*, you have all poetry published. I also noticed from *The Fires* that how you write is very poetic--as a poet writing fiction. How did you make that transition?

RS: I just got interested in fiction. I guess I've always loved fiction--from a pretty young age, my favorite writers did that. So I didn't really see it as that radical. I read *To The Lighthouse* in Professor Meyer's class, and it just blew me away. It happened more when I was in Virginia, I discovered this writer William Boyan who also has a really lush prose style, and I must have read Nabakov at Valparaiso, and he has a very poetic style. So I just started writing it. It took me a long time to totally make the transition. I wrote prose poems for a long time. I wrote short stories for awhile. My short stories weren't very successful I don't think. Then I wrote poetry in a novel for awhile--*The Fires*. Now I write poetry with my students, but I should say I don't write it seriously. I haven't actually worked on my poetry in a long time--it's been about four or five years. I think when I was at Virginia or maybe it was a little later, I started to feel like I knew I had some poetic skills, but I knew I wasn't as good of a poet as I wanted to be. I felt like I could accomplish more in fiction with my skills. It was more of a technical thing than a sort of question of audience or a question of any kind of message I wanted to get across. It was more my ability, and I just sort of took a very honest approach. But I love poetry and I still read it very, very regularly. I try to keep up with contemporary poets.

ML: Who are some of your favorite poets?

RS: Anne Carston, Robert Haas, Robert Timothy, Elizabeth Bishop--probably one of my all-time favorite writers, Rilke, Silvia Plath, Frank Bizart--who Ed Byrne introduced me to. Those are my favorites.

ML: What advice would you offer beginning writers?

RS: Two pieces of advice, and they are going to seem almost opposite. First piece of advice--find readers wherever you can. Get your work^out there, however you can--readings, have your friends read it, publishing--if things are ready to be published. Get people to read your work no matter what you do, to see what you are accomplishing and what you are not accomplishing. That's important. Try and write every day. Try to write at least a little bit every day. I think the discipline of writing is very, very important. Regular writing gives you confidence with your writing. The last thing I would say is respect the privacy of writing as well, in terms of the product. So, on the one hand I am saying find an audience. On the other hand, I'm saying the privacy of writing is very important. It's important that you recognize that at a certain point it's just you and the page, and you have to figure out how to be a writer for yourself. You have to figure out what your subject matter is. You have to figure out what habits work for you--do you write in the morning, do you write in the evening, do you write at lunchtime. You have to figure out how to deal with your own frustrations, and how to deal with your own fears, and how to deal with your own anxieties. That's a big part of writing, and no one can give you any advice that's going to necessarily work for you. That's a very personal discovery that you have to figure out--a personal journey, really, that you have to go down, and it can be scary, but that's what has to happen. When writers would come to Valpo when I was a student, I would sort of study them and I would think, "well, Steve writes only at night, and he only writes about the city, then that must be what real writers do," and I would sort of try to emulate them, and that's not the best condition I discovered. You have to be yourself as a writer--be the best writer that you can be, not copy someone else. So, the shortest way to say it is there are many different ways to be a writer as there are to be a person. That's what you have to figure out for yourself as a writer. That's not to say that you can't take advice or that you can't listen to what other writers say or what your readers say, but at a certain point, writing is very private.

ML: If you don't mind my asking, what are your personal habits for the discipline of writing--for example, do you write every day for three hours a day?

RS: Well, I try. We all fall by the wayside a bit. When I'm really writing well, ideally I write in the mornings for anywhere between three and six hours, depending on how much time I have. I usually teach in the afternoons and evenings, so I try to get up earlier if I have to be somewhere earlier so that at least I have a nice chunk of time to write every day. I usually read a little bit of poetry, actually, before I start writing. Or a page or two from a book of prose that I really love. That helps me to concentrate and gets me in the mood to get my imagination going. I really almost have to write in the morning because after the morning passes--if I get up at noon that's okay, but it has to be basically the first thing I do because if I start doing other things, I start to worry, and it's very hard for me to concentrate. So many things might just be superstitious, but they make you believe you can write better, so sometimes that pulls you into actually writing.

ML: Could you speak about writing for a moment? What purpose does it have for you? And, what is your history with writing?

RS: I started writing--I wanted to write when I was really young. I wrote poems when I was in second grade. I tried to write a novel when I was about nine--about a horse and a cat. I think that my father always really encouraged me--my father was a big reader, and he sort of passed that on to me. I think the writing bug came from being a minister's daughter and hearing my father preach on Sundays, but I'm not sure--it's been there for a long time. But a lot of kids want to be writers--I think it's not that uncommon, anyway. For awhile I thought I might be a journalist, and for awhile I thought I might be a lawyer, actually--I would have been a terrible lawyer. Then for awhile I thought I would write scholarship, and I do write a little bit of scholarship. Writing--that's a hard question--why do you do it, why do you do it.... Obviously it's important because it's worth doing it, and there are a lot of easier things to do.... I guess it's a combination of trying to figure something out and wanting to create something at the same time--trying to figure out some mystery, and also trying to create something that will somehow speak to people.

ML: The process of publication is kind of foreboding to a lot of us. How was that

for you? What was the process like?

RS: Even publishing in *The Lighter* was very scary for me. But really, it's not so scary. The first poem in a non-school magazine was in *The Christian Century* when I was in college. I had corresponded for a long time with the Lutheran theologian Martin Marty who was a writer and a friend of my father's, and from the time I was a child, he would read my writing and write me back some nice letters, even though he was really writing about theology. So, in college, I corresponded with him still, and I sent him some poems that I was writing, and I didn't know this (I mean, I knew that he was editor of *The Christian Century*), but I had no idea he was going to submit them. But anyway, he submitted one of them to the poetry editor and they published it. I was completely surprised, and thrilled, but completely surprised. This was when I was a senior at VU. So that was my first non-school publication, and then Byrne always had told us 'you know what--everyone collects rejections--' it just becomes sort of like a badge of honor, with people having them in a shoebox or spread them all over their walls. So I tried to have a sense of humor about it, and when I was in graduate school, I lived with a woman who was a poet, and she was also trying to get published, and we were on the same level, so I understood that a lot of people are going to get rejection. I mean, I can't say it was easy, but it's hard to know when your poem or story is at the point when it is ready to be published--when you are ready to let it go, and that is where your friends who are readers can help you. They can say, 'I don't think this is quite ready,' 'You still need to work on this,' 'I don't understand this....' And then you just do it. You figure out the literary journals that you like, that seem like they might like one of your poems. You have to figure out the name of the poetry editor, send them a little note saying, 'I've been published here,' or 'I've been writing poetry for this many years, please consider these poems.' Then you wait to hear back. You just have to get a certain attitude about it--sort of, whatever happens, happens. Try not to get too caught up in it, and really focus on the work. I didn't publish anything for many years when I was working on *The Fires*. I didn't publish anything at all, except for book reviews that I wrote, for about six years, and that was hard, because if I had been defining myself as a writer based on publications, that would have been horrid. I had to very much concentrate on the discipline of working on the novel and trust that it was going to work out. It didn't always feel like it was going to work out, and I thought, 'oh brother, I've just wasted three or four years

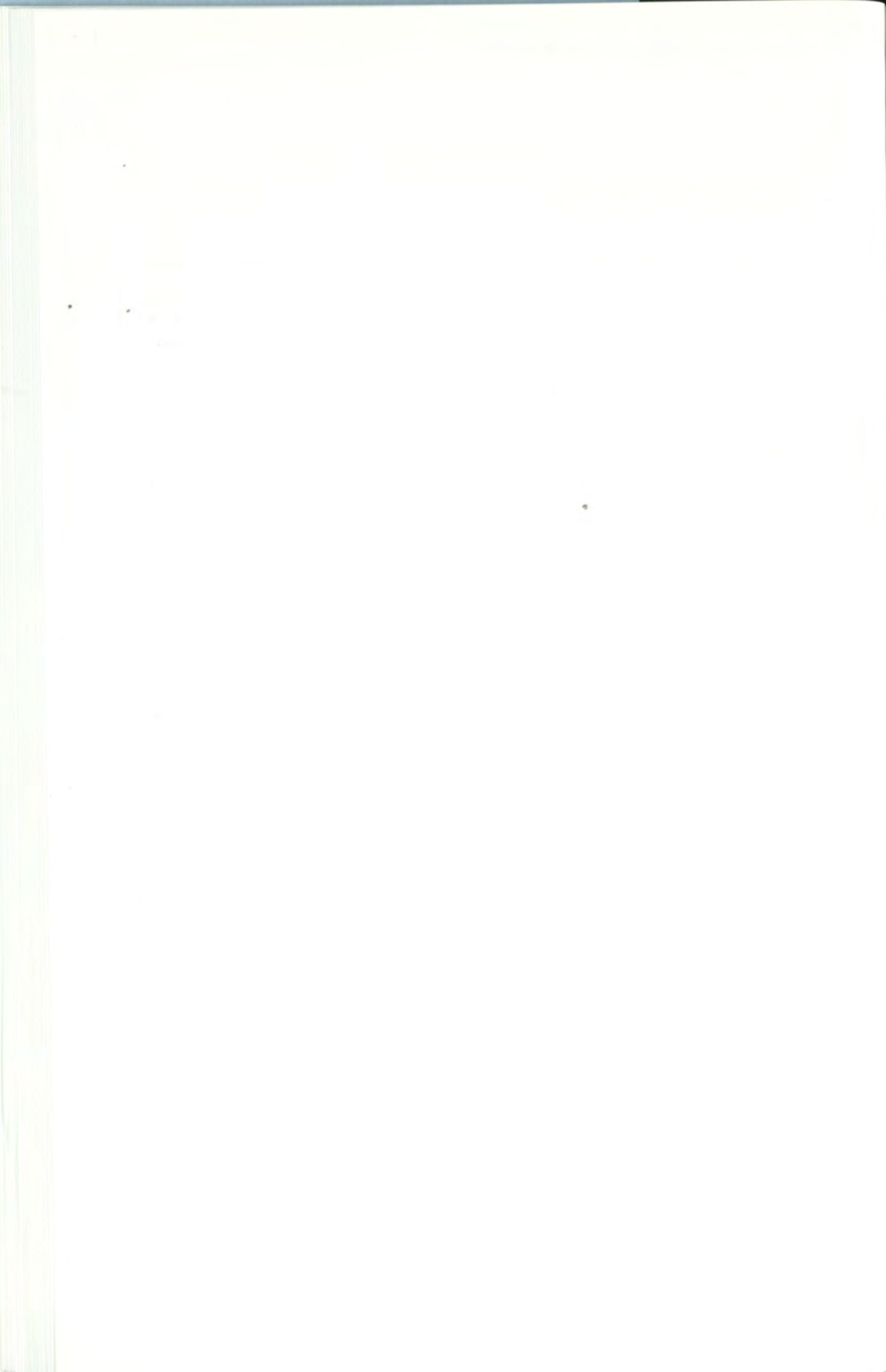
because I've only been working on *The Fires*.' It was hard. So I would say, try, but also the really important thing is your work.

ML: For *The Fires*, did you take it to the first publisher and they said 'we love it!?'

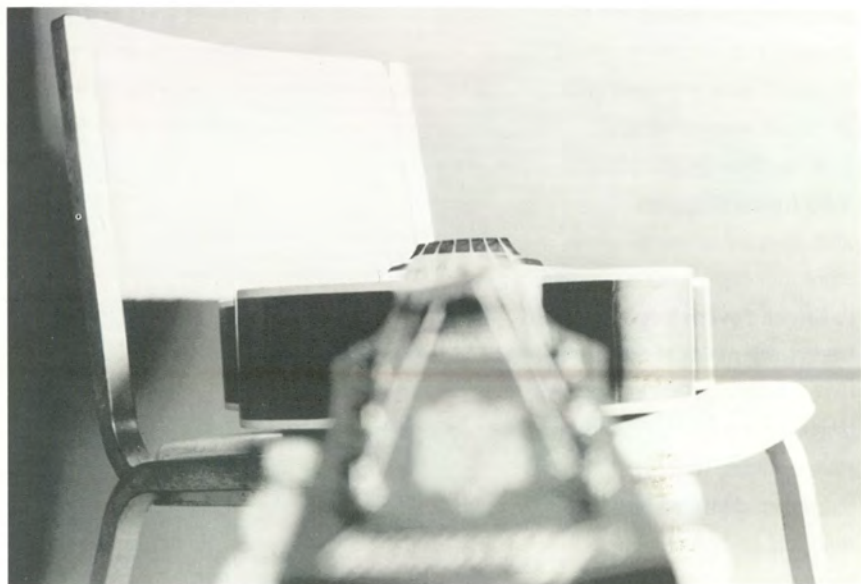
RS: No. First, I had to find an agent who would represent me. Even though I live in New York, it is hard to connect with agents who want to take on a first novel, because first novel automatically means the agent has to be very excited and very enthusiastic about the book, and a lot of agents just don't want to bother with a first novel. And it's almost guaranteed not to be a money-maker, at least not a big money-maker. So, it took me a few months to find an agent. Then I found an agent, he read the novel, I worked on it a little bit more, he sent it around--I think he started sending it around in the summer, about May or June, and it was bought at the very end of September. But I have some rejection letters, though I did not save copies of them. But I had some rejection letters from publishers saying 'we liked this about *The Fires*,' or 'we didn't like this.' After it was bought, I re-wrote it again. My editor had some things she wanted me to work on still. The revision process is endless. She was right. I was mad at her at first. She said 'I want you to work on the ending,' but she was right. In fact, I was editing and changing things up until the last minute. When they first print up your manuscript, you get this thing called galleys, which is a preliminary print-up of the book, but they can still make changes. So a copy editor goes over it, and you can go over it. I was still changing things--adding sentences and taking out metaphors at that point. At that point you have pay for changes because it's changing the typeset, but I didn't care. Even now when I read, sometimes, I don't like an adjective. I would still change things, if I could, in *The Fires*, but you have to let things go after awhile.

ML: To end on an exciting note, what did you do when you found out it was going to be published, that it was accepted for publication?

RS: I came home from teaching, and my husband was smiling the biggest smile and nodding, and then he told me. I jumped up and down. We immediately went out to celebrate--had a toast to celebrate it. Then I got on the phone and called everyone I know. The next day I called people at Valparaiso. It was exciting.



Poetry



Misty Parent

Guitar -- form study

A Freedom Song

Sarah Davis

They say you got lucky,
saw sweet sixteen as the free-
dom queens soberly rumbled
by, sated with boys and girls
in ragged warrior wear
with lips bleeding brightly
from frozen whispers
and silenced screams:
memories they couldn't remember
to forget. Feverish eyes scanned
the crowd, malarial madness
barely burning. Cracked claws
brittle and brown as dried dung
clung numbly to frozen faith.
Then you spotted a hand,
that soft all-knowing
hand, limply wave its one
last goodbye--the twisted
fragment of a boy, your lover,
someone's brother,
delivered home: a final farewell.
As barren as his naked body,
the land pressed up
to meet you as the pain
came pouring down; locked
beneath black skin, sickness
swelled your eyes. You ground
dust and dryness between
clenched teeth, choking on heat
and hate. Licking salt-coated
lips clean of sharply seasoned tears
you remembered Angola, Tanzania,

Mozambique. Now you pound
your millet for daily
bread, and cling to your glass
of holy wine like beggars
outside bottle stores,
praying that it is enough.



Liz Wuerffel

London, Spring 1999

central standard time

David Sisk

olo
glance into my hindsight
dancing in the morrow

the magnitude of yesterdays
in the denied significance

that I may never confess
as you indeed suggest

ol-
glance into my foresight
foraging through the yesterdays

that I may never confess

to tomorrow I seek and how
today was all but sought
oh what time was foresaken

-|-
to see our foundation
as a provision for our present

a blindness to expectation

that I may never confess

my preoccupation with all days
except today

dancing for the elite

David Sisk

"claustrophobic memoirs
kinder the higher mind"
--author

May I
have this dance?

It begins
She takes my hand
and we glide to the floor
careful to make no gesture of sin

Elegant we seem
always upon admission
Inevitably she will begin
inviting tango's permission

to wrap each limb
of her seemingly delicate
body around my engagement
with aim to educate my illiterate skin

sailing over my arm
with useless knowledge
sweat drips off the tip of my fingers
down to the basin of her manipulative intellect

my head becomes full with her
on the verge of explosion
we are excused
to rest

...awhile

Dancing yet again with intuition
she swallows seduction



and me, I sip
confusion

I take her hand for the first
and last time to salute her
a good night and
riddance

May I have no
memory?

Figures Eight

Laurie Kolak

Figures form lines of finely patterned
linoleum spreading over itself,
tracing the maze of decision
to slightly differing combinations of tan and brown.
Blocks, oblong and painfully familiar,
cobble the elementary school bathroom
filling the dreams of future architects
and anarchists who see their reflections in the tile.

Figures expand the feminine carriage
of power. Bar stool mimes outline
Eve in air and damn the snake
for their longing. Bending barmaids
soak up the tipped beers in oval
patterns of their walk. Skin follows
the expanse of lung and heart--culpable
as the figurehead of internal longings.

Figures clutched in sweaty palms
of children mimicking superman
save the world every afternoon at 3:06 pm
on a saliva-driven trajectory to Mars.
Let's say your guy is afraid of my guy....
Castles in foam mats and hidden caverns
of coffee tables provide homes so the bravest
of superheroes can visit their mothers.

Figures encode numerical combinations
of problems and answers in one two three.
All are variables in realms of billions
if hands count ten fingers. The reference point
constantly shifts in populations
that crawl from shadowy bloodless wombs
and leave the world forever
counting larger numbers.

Figures sing like the bug-eyed woman
stroking the instrument like a pet, and saying
the words "guitar lick" slow and round.
In flourishes of punishment and reward
banged off the pliant strings, she yields
to artistic expression.
The same anecdote about a dog in Kentucky
displaces the story from her memory.

Figures roll on twists of words--
puns and high humor and the inherent
advantage of education making
the word "inherent" comprehensible.
Intellectual battles fought on the uneven grass
of vague and unannounced moments
become my metaphor as the form of poetry
demands something in place of rhyme.

Figures pounded in tight-lipped concentration
pull answers from a box of misshapen
candles and luminaries with broken wicks.
Yet, still with these dulled tips,
light nips at the darkness and squinty eyes
find light enough to breathe for the moment.
Furrowed brows will squeeze eyes together
eventually. If failure, then success.

"Figures" mutter adolescent scholars
finding knowledge to replace experience
so when disappointment heaves
the brocade curtains over possibility,
I say I knew it all along.
These words are exchanged in dark
hallways when I pretend
I never believed the music was for my dance.



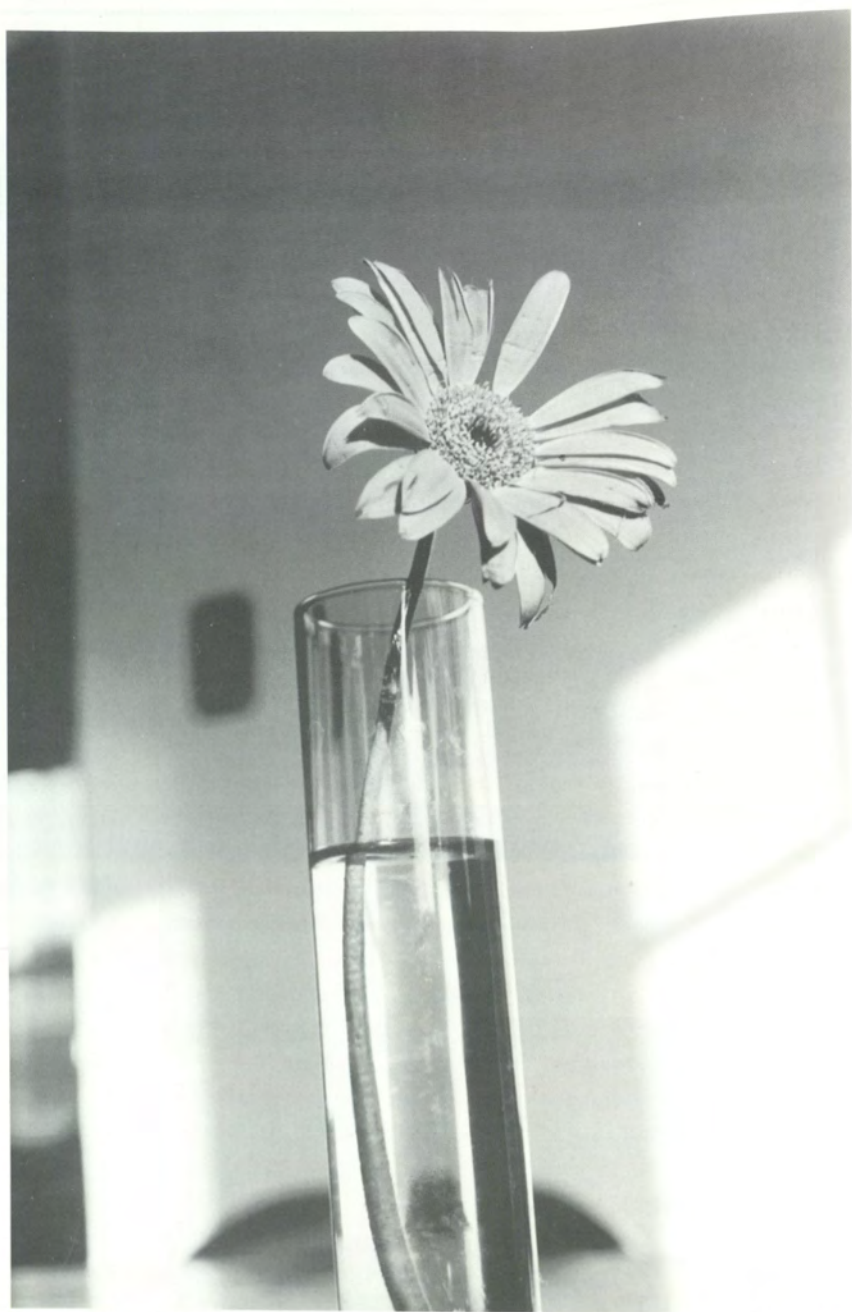
Christine Dale

untitled

On the Passing of a Generation II.

Michelle Stahlhut

He is no more
she remembers after shouting that
supper is ready again
for the fifty-eighth year in a row
and receiving nothing but
echoing shadows from walls still
seeping with whirlwind tornadoes
of green bean casseroles left silently
on the doorstep.



Lisa Schelling

flower

Married With Hairspray

Lindsey Gaff

Swinging hips thrust the perfumed sweat
of the dancers into the nostrils of those who "wish to sit."
Their sensible shoes automatically slap the steps in merry
time, reviving the ebbing flow of blood
in their sleeping feet. They watch the throbbing dance
of disco-lit figures, mesmerized by the rainbow shadows stretched across the floor.

Salty bodies rub and slither against one another on the dance floor.
Blue hair in the back whispers that their groping hands, dripping with sweat
aren't welcome in any kind of dance
she ever knew. Not vertical dancing anyway. But blue hair sits
with her toes pinched and raises her glass of blood-
soaked wine to the lovers who remembered to marry.

The music quits and the bride stands adored, like a virgin Mary
with hairspray but without the virgin. She drops her shoes to the floor.
The groom staggers to her with a cold folding chair, his tongue thick with blood
and beer. The music begins. Music that sounds like the deep, slow kicks of sweaty
can-can dancers, the music played every time a garter is discarded from some sitting
bride. He rests his hand on her, or rather the three of her that won't stop dancing.

The groom bares his swollen teeth to the crowd as his fingers dance
a familiar path beneath the bride's floor-length facade. He marries
his flesh to hers as he often does, special this time because of the audience who sits,
whooping its hollow approval. The groom fumbles the garter past her knee and onto
the floor,
sweeping it up in a clumsy gesture of triumph. His up-stretched arms reveal the
sweat-
stained pits of his tuxedo. A stray lipstick smudge drips from his neck like blood.

The bride's leg remembers the garter's tight, elastic grip as the path of her blood
gradually erases its imprint. She rises and carries off the rigid folding chair like an
unwilling dance
partner. The rest of the thick-tongued men gather in a mass of elbows and sweat,
eager for a familiar leg of their own. Her own reason to marry
rests in his dense arms. Because she needed to rest somewhere. The floor-

boards buckle and moan under the weight of the men. The bride sits.

Blue hair motions with her claw fingers and whispers for me to sit
and share a little toast with her and the blood-
soaked wine. Because there on the floor,
in front of friends and God, will dance
the lovers who remembered to marry,
but forgot that perfume cannot eliminate sweat.



Megan Moffett

Fire-Saver

Why We Want Form

Mary Linxweiler

His hand soft
Presses to the kind
Groove of your neck.

Above and between
The two raised bones,
Jutting lovely as knots

In trunks of trees,
His fingers rest.
Cool against your fired

Flesh, and you are careful
Not to shift your form.
You wonder what he knows.

An upturning sifts
From the sky, settles
Upon your lips.





Julie Hurttgam

Coventry Cathedral

Dinner Party

Mary Linxweiler

We do not know the cause of mania.

-George L. Ginsberg, Dept. of Psychiatry, NYU Medical
Center, 1979

Joyful agony
places thoughts around
a long mahogany table, complete
with guests. Standing with plastic fingers
lightly grazing glossy backs of classy chairs, all wait
and gaze with glassy,
moist eyes

*Some colorless,
transparent or translucent? Either
way, their souls cannot avoid rising
to surface, just as a corpse eventually reaches
the air we breathe,
after being tossed to the vat
of a river. Rainbow eyes seem
to cleanse the moment: prism qualities
alleviate black chaos, only through distortion.*

at the dishes,
smooth and numerous,

*Thoughts
of a beach with perfect bodies, oiled,
golden from sun's caress. Intimidation
by people and porcelain seems ridiculous--it is
the truth.*

at each other,

*It is not
fair that certain glances are artificial,
full though, seemingly, of authenticity, validating*

*strength of character, while others' soul pockets, weak,
betray emotional facts--a sincere lack of peace of mind.
Judgment emerges
through smirks of pressed,
flattened lips, where smiles lurk. Does laughter
escape? What rings echoes suffocates strangles me? I want
to hear music. God, that would please me--no, more--I would
know euphoria!*

at the floor.

We

*see patterns, dreamy but still alert. Senses
uplift in every capacity, tingling with
agonizing joy.*

On Making Love to a Lemon

In the San Francisco Airport

Mary Linxweiler

Fruit salad pleased me already. Cantaloupe
And I disagree: it remains, with a lone,
Childlike grape. Last second request for lemon
In my water seemed indiscriminate. Post fruit
Salad, plus two hours until my companion's
Arrival, the full glass stands, untouched.

Upon the waitress bringing
The tumbler toward me, I admired the green
Swizzle, artfully displaying the reward
Of my quick thought. Now, plate clean, I
Realize how seductively the knobbed tip extends
Beyond the edge of the glass, reminding

Me of browned bare summer legs dangling
Off docks, toes knowing the lake. Sliding
Into the liquid, the green speared the satiny
Lemon, which lingers at the surface like a voiceless
Siren luring me to water with beauty I long
To understand.

As if touching summer itself, I lift the thick
End and press the wedge to the side of the glass,
Attempting to release the fruit into my drink,
To no avail. So I grasp the sword firmly
Between my fingers, shake to see foggy drops fall
Into clarity and place the fleshiness in my mouth,

Narrowness closest to my tongue and rind's
Width forcing my lips apart. Blissfully, I
Repeat the steps, over and over, and the epiphany:
Until now, I had taken lemons for granted.
I press the half slice to lips and teeth and tongue
So many times we are both raw, used, absorbed

Into each other, full of delights offered benevolently,
Intimately. My tongue searches my lips for excess.
I suck one pulpy drop into my mouth, place
The speared fruit beside the dehydrating
Cantaloupe, pay my bill, and leave in search
Of my companion.

A Child in Chicago

Faris Adnon

[Wind city/Lakeshore Dr. / 11p.m / X-mas 1993]

The shore is inviting him to the calmness table and glasses from a strange wine* He is inviting the shore to his small bag and his simple dreams* He is going by slowly with no direction* Hundreds of trains passed by and thousands of busses* Streets are crossing each other..are dancing with each other.. they will go somewhere and nowhere..they are dismal cold like jails back home* He is the child with his exhausted feet without any direction* Balconies are dancing with the silver light* Windows covered with curtains* Windows of a thousand rooms and no shelter for tonight* The child is wondering: maybe it's filled with warmth* He is the child whose stepping slowly in Chicago with no direction* Nor a window will open for him in this dark cold night* A cop is asking him suddenly:

where ya from?

A blond lady on the pavement is asking:

where ya from?

.. The child is opening his old overcoat* Opening his heavy memory and whispering in this abyss:

Beloved, where are you?

He is the child under Chicago's night* He is opening his old overcoat.. to shelter the silver moon and birds without a passport* He is the child * is stepping on world's pavements* although this cold and starvation* to read and write crazy poems* to walk alone following his only star.. under the E*X*I'L'E sky..



Jason M. Weber

Little Boy Blue

Petra Morning Drought

Stephanie Scott

Antequam haec legis, mortuus ero.

The sun bleeds in waves
through a heavy purple shade
where tripping, sandaled feet
dry-shuff the sandy floors
and if it would only rain
they might believe in you
and not in this stillness, no,
but the pant of water hunting
ground in darkness and the drool
of a rain-cloud dog running
for the whistle of a hurricane.





Amy Mcfadden

Alcove

Giggle

Lisa Farver

so
go
throw
back your head
and laugh
so hard
and fast
you get whiplash
hurl out the heaviest
ha ha
guffaw
your jaw
ever saw
cuz it's not like it hurts
to sometimes stretch your face
and look
so far out of place
you displace
your ears
and erase the
sound
and feel
of frowning
(the sound of melancholy drowning...)





Kristie Sarmiento

Snake Goddess

Falling Stars

Lisa Farver

I stared skyward
in earnest,
searching for the Big Dipper
beacon of constancy
standing in the sky
like a bottomless ladle
that could lap up gallons
and gallons
of grievances for me
and still stay stable
Up there in that
vast, unfathomable heaven
that i once danced in,
dangling,
laughing
from the handle of that ladle,
cradled calmly,
swaddled in somnolence.

So i looked for the Big Dipper
so intently,
delving into the sky's unfathomable constancy,
that i didn't see the sky was falling,
the stars flailing,
flinging themselves toward the earth
in suicidal tragicomedy.
Hurling themselves,
headfirst,
into the tightened fist of reality.

And they struck
and stuck themselves.

And i fell to my knees
and shielded my eyes from the debris....

And when i came back up,
everything was covered
in the same stale grey.

But it was more of a stagnance
than a constancy
And i couldn't feel myself breathing....

But i saw my breath
climbing in vain
to the hole
where heaven used to be.

Sense of Balance

Lisa Farver

My lips wrap around the glass,
trapping it between my teeth
as i tilt back the bottle....
Beneath me
the earth teeters
and I totter
like a toddler
between a walk and a crawl
exploring the toystore
in a busy shopping mall
and if he should fall
he risks
getting trampled
by the zombie shoppers
running rampant....
i extend
my free hand
in a vain
valiant
effort
at stopping myself from toppling
but i collapse
into a mass
onto a filthy
foreign floor
leaving a spill
that i squint at and determine
will not be indelible
because the only thing
i can't erase
is the image of my father's face
yelling
telling me
how i need to get myself (my life)
some
balance

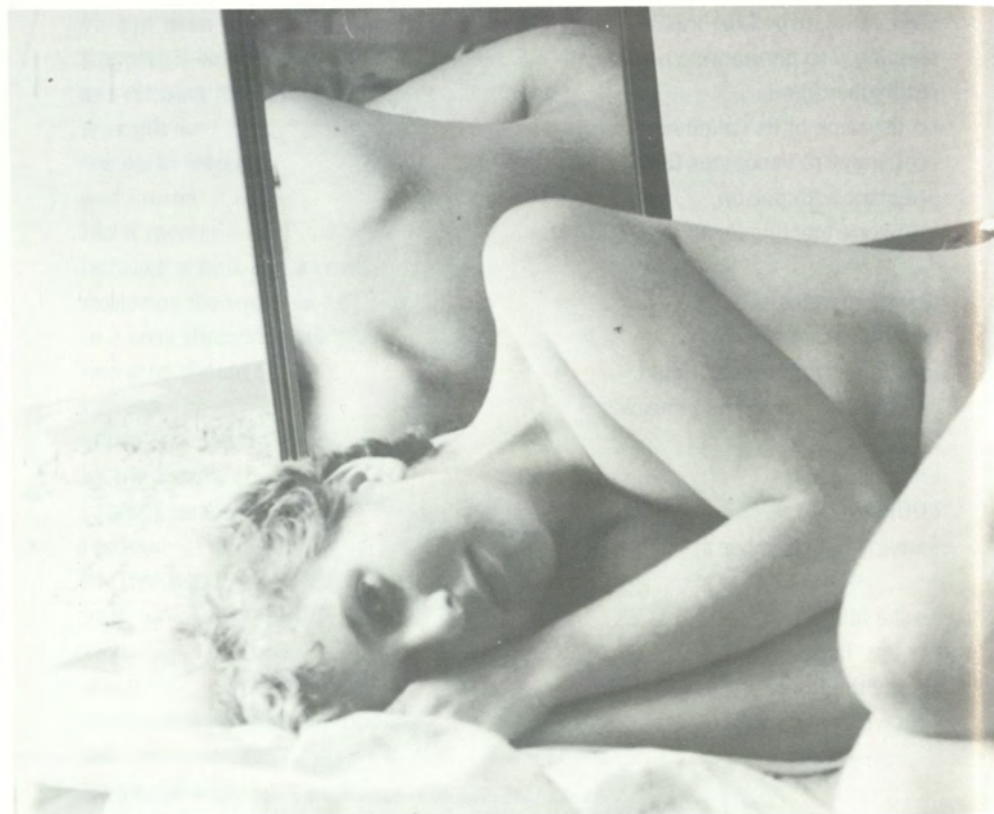
Self-inflicted

Lisa Farver

Cleopatra grasped the asp,
clasping it to her panting breast,
resting her hand
on the nape of its naked neck,
pressing with venomous fangs,
pregnant with poison,
into her trembling flesh.

Impatient veins
wrestle each other
for the tainted taste of liquid
Spilling into her languid muscles,
PULSING,
entangling her,
COURSING.
Swaying her chamber at angles

As she falls,
her lips, listless,
kissing the floor
with weary whispers



Angelica Mortensen

untit

Modern Art

Lisa Farver

Casting shadows in iron
he molds her.
Softening and shaping
the square of her shoulders...
unfolding her...

Unraveling her resistance...

His soiled canvas
wrapping itself around her defenses.

Her silhouette intense
bends boldly across his body,
more shine than shadow.

But ravaged and fallow
from his changing hues and shades.

As he lifts the chisel,
her angles fade.

Why the Bees are Busy

Otto Marxhausen

So you think he loves you, do you?
Why?
Because he said you were a flower?
Because he bought you roses?
Let us reflect for a moment,
My dear,
On what a flower is:

A flower is a floozy
With her legs wide open.
She screams to the world,
Come spread my sex.

He knows this,
Deep down.
And so do you,
Although you have not wished to admit it.
I don't blame you; we all like to think on pretty things.

But remember, girls.
Next time he says
Your neck is a lily,
Your face a daisy,
Your lips like rosebuds,
Think of the venus flytrap
And bite.



Kristie Sarmiento

Marduk and Ishtar

Cynical

Timothy Hagen

Metaphors elusive
The soul--invisible?
Tease us! you cry
Brother, don't preach.
But these words
Like bubbles
You think empty,
Not seeing the breath
Of my meaning.



Kristie Sarmiento

Parker's Back

Of Letters

Timothy Hagen

Communicating, words my meaning
I wish them to carry.
Yet they seem to declare independence
Apart from me. New shades of meaning
Unintended they possess.
But are words naught but vibrating frequencies
Of air, or ink patterns on paper?
You then, are culpable for
Instilling them with meaning
When you hear or read.
But then are you just talking to
Yourself, if my meaning is not
Communicated?

Rust Spot

Timothy Hagen

Fair maiden, dost thou wait for me?
Ah, my charming prince,
Thou art but a shadow of my dreams.
Really? My heart bleeds at thy insult,
How may I prove myself to thee?
But wait! Is that a speck on thy chin, pray thee?
Rusted prince!
Blemished maiden!
'Tis dark, hold me!
Silent, my heart, she is not for thee.
Be gone, prince oxidized!
If thou shouldst repent,
I'll need the moon in recompense
I'm off, dear maiden,
Perhaps in Eden I shall find,
Though covered with sand to
Expunge this rust,
A maiden fairer and true
A heart more gracious.
Unlike you.
Adieu, tin man, with a heart too high
I'll find a better prince, when the time is nigh.

Eroding Etchings Echo

Sarah Sullivan

--Abandoned, bruised, aching and tired.

How can you hold these hands after dawning on their history?

I will remember.

How could I forget?

*Lead on, you blindly insist, over
this trodden precipice. We venture
from warehouse to windmill,
to abandoned shacks and fading sheds.
My breath deflates, bludgeoned
as silhouettes reveal a quivering barn
where eerie windchimes echo
and a trembling foundation exhales;
refusing to crack. Hideous whispers
fill this old bucket of rust, conquering
each missing shingle and cracking wood frame,
every chipping paint tile and broken pane.*

Sloppy arrogance once meshed with meek,
gullible desires which succumbed to the sultry
scents of this musty stable. Seductive,
foolish passions slithered, enticed
and aroused each severed nerve
as the mask of darkness held tightly
to the masquerade. Secretly
Satan smiled as shame mopped these floors
like stains smeared on a satin gown. Who could ever

cease secluded ghosts from sucking,
quenching the gleam from your blazing, sterile eyes?
Miserable silence dances, flirting
with this dingy stench as we dodge slivers creeping
off these jagged walls. If only they could speak

for my heart aching to scream
from this throbbing cavern within,
You alone know my etchings.

I will remember you. Only
how will you forget?

A Pyromaniac's Good-bye

Patrick Sanchez

To a friend's place, poured two cups of coffee
twice afraid to drink lipstickless.
The clock was clicking behind a cloak of smoke,
Morse Code. The message was indiscernable.

I drove a quarter mile to room between here
and there, with picnicking on the mind
and bare feet in dune grass.
It was a controlled fire,

a pyromaniac's creation. I knew without
counting the doors you were there waiting.
I stood as if remembering the curve behind your knee,
the thinness of your delicate hair, the men stealing

glances, as if forgetting was possible. You
were never so inexplicable. The talk hovered.
Returning, the door was open spreading midnight
ash into the hallway as we walked.

Voices were eager on the telephone with rediscovery.
I smudged the brim of the mug
hoping Sunday would never come. The clock
was moving on fumes, broken down, stranded

in the middle of an unfamiliar civilization.
The door was ajar spilling afternoon light
into the hallway, a red carpet bleeding onto the wall,
between us a conversation with deliberate thoughts

and every word under control. I have never
been as fickle as today on the porch. Planning
it this way, meeting within four days
of your arrival at the airport.

Trying to forget the absence of make-up

in the end, I drove a quarter mile to room 430
on a full tank of gas wanting nothing further
than to be. You were there waiting, with your back

to me until I said your name, on the porch always
sitting properly careful to give nothing away
of womanhood. Returning, the door was open spreading
midnight ash into the hallway as we walked.

It was a polite good-bye.

In Passing

Patrick Sanchez

In the back of the house
where the sun spooks the fence
in the spots that have separated
since it was built, you sit,
like a photograph broken
in fifty places, across the yard.
Your green scarf billows
in the breeze and your black dress
runs from your thighs, the ruin
of rain on your hair like the book
inside your lap. I once sought
sorrow in a girl so that I might write
a poem. Upon seeing your head
tilt back into November
gray as if you could be drunk,
as if reflecting for a second
time on something that you
have read, I have new hopes
of making a book, to seize
that immovable look
from your face with but one line,
one word.

When the Night Goes

Patrick Sanchez

Inside, her hands unfold fingers
 within long sleeves of secrets
and disappear, like two black
 widows scared white, between her thighs.

His eyes gather and run to the corners,
 concluding like two wet photographs
at the bottom of his chin.
 He cannot remember creating them.

Night is keeping morning's bottom
 lip, but slides over her edge,
a dull arrow, sinking silently behind
 earth like a lover to be buried.

She's always late because of him.
 Fingers steal photographs and vanish,
tripping over too many legs, her eyes
 darting to the door and out.

Haiku

Patrick Sanchez & David Sisk

Breathe
your
desire's
livelihood.

Awake
hard.

Go
cause
freedom.



Amy McFadden

Phone Books III

Beside Myself

Patrick Sanchez & David Sisk

(a poem impromptus, September 1999)

Put me on hold.
The telephone gods have been unkind
to me this weekend.

I paced the floor
of my room looking towards the ceiling
for advice.

The looking became habitual
from Friday to Sunday.
I thought I heard the rain.

Three times the phone rang
and three times I was unsatisfied
with the results.

A ketchup bottle called
my name with the prefix
Mr.

My head spun around,
eyes drooping to the ground,
afraid to look up.

The table cloth read:
*"plan yesterdays in order
to remember tomorrow."*

Where has today gone?
The doctor called and suggested
a second opinion.

My mother was motherly
on the opposite end of the line.



Speaking of advents,

the third was a gal
I used to call on Saturday nights
to come with beverage

and a good night's
attitude to my bed, so we
could rest awhile.

I ate an onion
and some ketchup waiting
for her to ring.

Such a monastery
for submission she had invented
for me.

I subscribed fully
on my knees prophesizing
with my eyes for her.

The power has been out
to lunch all weekend. It would figure
my church of names

claims no faith.
The ceiling is more inviting.
Forgive me darling;

eat an onion and breathe for me.
I live for those moments
in the world I've begun.

I'll inform the beverage
hound that I've otherwise

made plans,

God's on the telephone.

2.

Lips release me.

Break apart my hips and their insides.

My pride has already been buried
and the hopeful smiles have vanished.

Forget the way she changed channels
with her elbows at night.

I have this founded on something pure,
at the door sits a ghost,

myself yesterday morning
mourning at the thought of her.

He's rebellious of late
and the night is upon us.

I dance the troubled step, the one step,
all by myself but it's contagious

and cherished. I refuse to feel my yesterdays
in order to ascertain those punctual,

private privileges of the popular me.
In your eyes my silent queen,

what else could your name be?
I like the mystery in you lady.

Move me, place me like an ottoman,
an ornament on your tree.

And, if you refrain from trashing memories
then far be it from my grasp

to control anything.
I love the laughs, the improprieties you bring

to my midnight table.
They make me uncanny, unabridged to

bridge those invisible gaps,
but surely straighten my pout. I am able.

After all my never-never girl, you took me
in the nape of your neck,

in the canthus of your eye, in the palm
of your hand, and put me on that shelf.

Rolled me up. Wrapped me up. Warped my mind
and defined my persona.

I like the way we shifted when we were dreaming
together. I suppose this is an ode to "We,"

and the romps, the stomps, the impromptus
that came over me with such force.

Like a sickly dog I trod,
sorrowful and awful as it is.

You were my nickname maker, my first string all-star
my back-breaker, my rodeo mistress.

Thank you for making me dirty,
for making me clean,

for making my bed and for restraining that ghost,
that skeleton in my blanket. Thank you for tucking him safely

in the behind of my head.

The Art of Swinging

Bethany Hirt

Swinging:

Mind and body, together
in motion, disobeying
gravity and building
shape in an arc
of height

At night:

Shadows and sky, breath
lingering in air, waiting
for you to come back
to where
you left off

Daylight:

height and color, reach
the sky, glaring
down the sun's
brilliant gaze, defying
its distance with every
stroke of strength

Two:

synchronized and smooth,
a push forward, a fall
back, stilted
freedom and security
together

One:

thought and serenity,
like a womb

close your eyes
and float

Mr. Wesby

Josh Messner

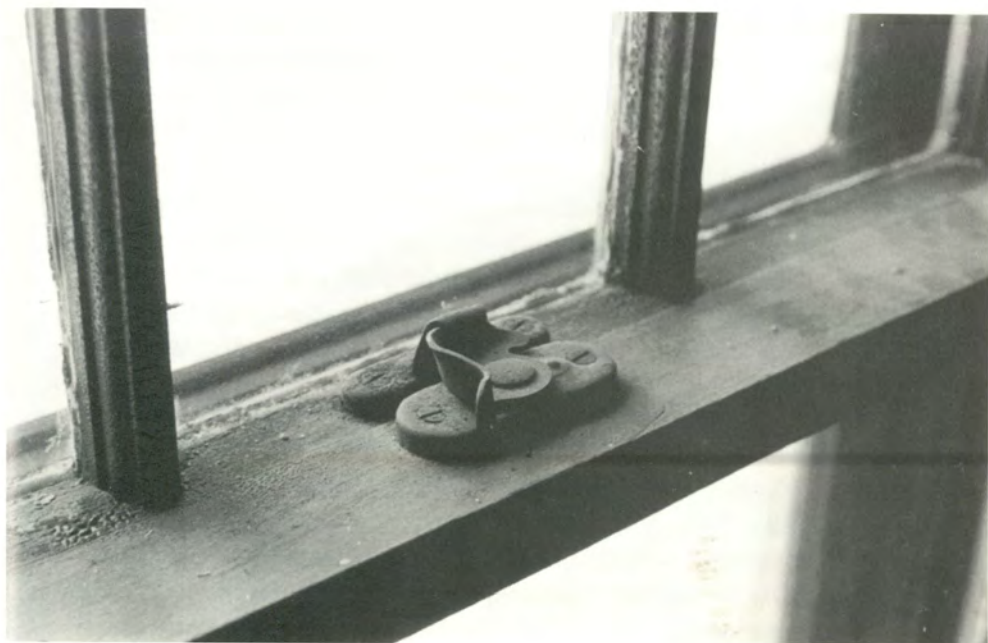
Mr. Wesby insists on a bit of humanity this morning.

The New Jersey turnpike toll booth operator takes our money
tosses it into the drawer
and thinks we've driven off

Mr. Wesby waits, foot on the brake, until the young man
looks back at him, expecting the next car in line.

The impersonal din of a thousand cars and airplanes surrounds us,
so Mr. Wesby half shouts,
"Thank you,"
and drives away.





Lisa Schelling

sill

Contributor's Notes

Faris Adnon is always under the influence of Surrealistic wind. He has fallen in love with Lake Michigan since his arrival to NW Indiana. He combines colors and words to restore his dreams and recall his missing childhood.

Russ Chibe is a third-year meteorology major from Darien, IL, who generally writes songs in his spare time, but occasionally tackles prose. He is a member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia music fraternity and chairs the Union Board Concert Committee. Russ plays piano for the VU Jazz Band and Groove Daemons, and is the lead vocalist/guitarist of the mysterious pseudo-punk band KGB. Russ hopes to make a living in atmospheric research, while at the same time writing and performing on the weekends to stay sane.

Sarah Davis is a senior English major, Gender Studies/Human Biology minor from Eagle, MI (there are no eagles there). She is addicted to iced mochas and loves the smell of books and the movie "Dirty Dancing." She hopes to return to Southern Africa sometime in the near future, and will someday be found either working in the publishing field or teaching in a university, having been inspired by her VU professors.

Timothy Hagen cannot claim a completely cynical outlook on life, for although he thinks this world is rather rusty, he knows a Word, who, unblemished, cleans with blood, not sand.

Nate Holdren is a senior philosophy student who likes sunny days, reading, long walks, and late night conversation.

Mary Linxweiler agrees with Robert Bly that poetry has something to do with gratitude. She too wants to crawl from her desk to kiss the books she loves, tears hot and wildfire across her cheeks.

Josh Messner appreciates those amazing people who can live in the city, perfecting the art of tough patience and gentle compassion for the person who just cut them off or took their parking spot. Maybe it's just his upbringing, but Josh will always prefer the fresh air, night skies and silent car horns of the country.

Angelica Mortensen is in her senior year, majoring in English and Humanities. If anyone out there would like to offer her a well-paying (okay, how about subsistence level?) job at a literary magazine or progressive publishing company, she would be more than happy to accept.

Kristie M. Sarmiento is a CC sophomore majoring in art (illustration) with minors in theatre design, business, and Spanish. When she isn't going home to good ol' Darien every weekend, she is eating/sleeping/watching TV in her quad in Memorial. Occasionally she does some artwork, some of which wouldn't be possible without a friend's willingness to strip.

Lisa Schelling is a senior Environmental Science major. After graduation, she hopes to be able to spend more time on enjoying the truly beautiful things in life, like cooking, breathing, and doing the dishes.

Michelle Stahlhut is a senior Theology and English major who just wants to spend another semester talking with good friends over a pint at The Grapes. She dedicates this poem to her grandma who for the first time in 80 years of life, is living alone and learning to cook for one. And as the "real world" is nearing with graduation, she says to all of those good friends: Perhaps we can meet again for tea in London. Until then, cheers.

Sarah Sullivan is a Junior from a small town in Michigan. In all of her spare time she dotes on photography, traveling and writing. And, stronger than any other passion, she only desires to share the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

As a nontraditional student at Valparaiso University, **Whitney A. Todd** still tries to find a little time to spare for her personal writing, in addition to always making time for school and her children. Writing has been a personal love for many years, and she is grateful for the opportunity to share a piece of it with the community.

Jason M. Weber was born in New York and raised in Hong Kong. He is currently a junior Computer Science major and because he's working so hard to complete his gen eds he hasn't had time to take pictures in a long while--hope he hasn't lost the touch! See more of his work at <http://first.at/rikerweber>.

Contributors

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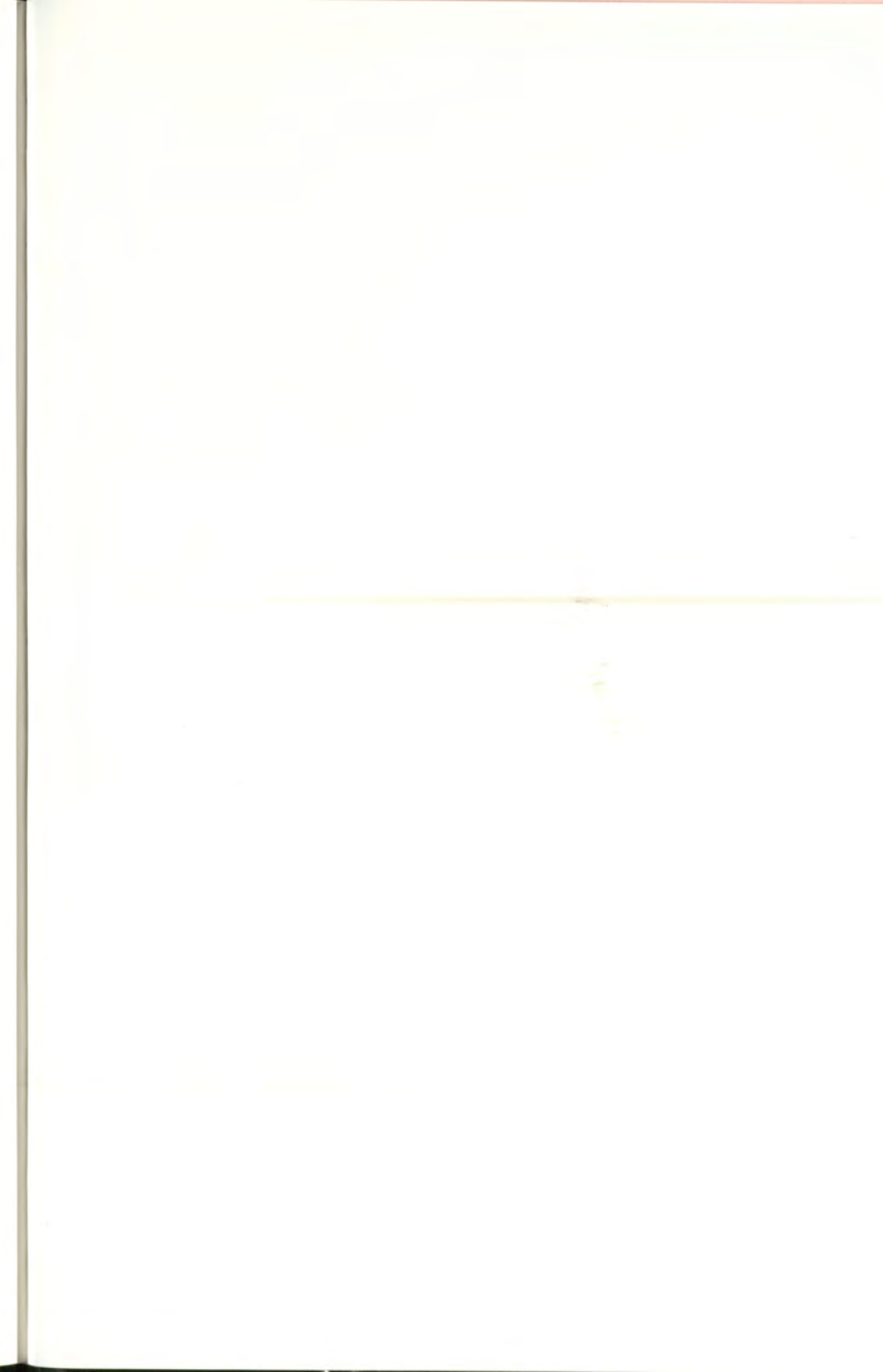
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1/10/00
C. J. ...