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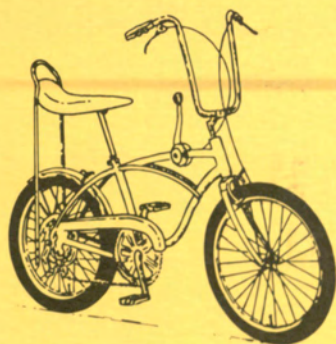
The Lighter Spring 2007

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the Lighter
Spring 2007



the **L**ighter

Spring 2007
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All submissions remain anonymous throughout 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 publication. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

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Introduction

TRACY MONSON



We slept soundly all night, the deep and quiet sleep of dreamers. And in our dreams we saw all the people of the world gathered on the shore of the ocean and our hearts were filled with humility and awe. The sun crept slowly over the water, and the people were bathed in a pinkish glow, their noses—flat, wide, pointy, sloped, pug—casting shadows on faces. An angel flew across the sea, and the people pointed and whispered to one another, their voices rising in a gentle hum. The earth shook and a great tower rose from the sand, particles flowing from the stones like water, and all the voices filled our ears and meaning flooded our minds. The people spoke truth and ink poured from their mouths and we swam in it, and circuits grew from finger to finger. We raised our bodies, ink-spattered and covered in kisses, and felt joy flooding our hearts.

When we are older, with dry, soft hands and extra skin that settles in warm folds, let younger and stronger women and men sit at our thorny feet with upturned eyes. We will be for them manuscripts, short, living histories. We will help them enhance the cadence of their first poems, conjuring into the air spirits of the past, spirits of the East, the West, spirits of genders and races unfamiliar.

We shall be there, knitting soft, connective blankets with flying fingers. And when our fingers are too stiff, our knuckles bumpy knobs, we shall be in libraries, inhaling human forms as they waft up our noses from between bound pages. We shall wade through the swirling streams of language, image, stopping here and there to drink deeply, deeply.

We are part of a story with no beginning or end. Our stories are the stories of every brother and sister we pass on the street. Reader and author, viewer and artist become one, we are intertwined with others, and we cannot live fully and truthfully without acknowledging this connection. Our stories are nothing when they mean for one person only; value occurs when our art means more than our selves.

Floating quietly together in the vast ocean, we reach our fingers to the stars



Interview: Melissa Fraterrigo

TRACY MONSON

Fiction writer Melissa Fraterrigo, who read at Valparaiso in Fall '06 as part of Wordfest, is the author of the short story collection *The Longest Pregnancy*. Her work has earned the Tarrt First Fiction Award as well as the Charles B. Wood Award for Distinguished Writing. Ms. Fraterrigo holds an MFA from Bowling Green State University's program in creative writing. She now lives and writes in Evergreen Park, Illinois.

The Longest Pregnancy is a collection of finely crafted tales, often about women who are powerful in odd, extraordinary ways. The stories feature characters such as Madera Bree (who never ages), Anesa (whose pregnancy lasts for seven years) and Julia (who one morning finds herself attached to her husband by a band of newly grown skin). The stories are rife with magical realism, yet manage to speak to true human complexities through clean, straightforward prose.

I had the good fortune to sit down and talk with Ms. Fraterrigo during her visit to campus.

TM: In particular, what do you find valuable about the genre of short story? How does it differ for you from poetry or the personal essay, for example?

MF: My sister recently had a baby and she was saying how nice it was for her to read a story and then go and do something else. I think right now the short story works really well with the constraints of our modern time. It's also really fascinating how popular short stories are becoming in film. *Million Dollar Baby*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Memento*...there's so many films just in the past couple of years that have been expanded from short stories. I think there's something powerful in that. A short story is unbelievably difficult to write, but it forces you to really distill your vision and remain focused. There's something powerful that the short story has because it *is* short, because of the brevity, and because of that singularity of vision that it requires.

TM: You said that Lorrie Moore was one of your influences. I was excited to learn that because she's my favorite short story writer, and I noticed when I was reading your book that there was something a little familiar about it.

MF: Yeah, she's one of the people I would say opened my eyes to stories.

TM: The things she tries, and the ways they work for her...

MF: Point of view, yeah. *Like Life* is a fabulous book.

TM: Yes, *Birds of America* is my gift book. I give it to someone almost every Christmas.

MF: Is it really? Did you ever read *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*

TM: Oh, yes. But her short stories definitely have something extra that her longer works don't.

MF: For sure, for sure.

TM: So, other influences, short story or otherwise, writers you read?

MF: I read a lot of contemporary writers. I suppose that other people might criticize that, say that I should go deeper into the canon, and I do read a classic here or there. But I don't want to put too many rules on myself. I do read a lot of female writers, both fiction and nonfiction. I love T.C. Boyle, Margaret Atwood, Elizabeth McCracken. When I find someone I really like, I try and read all of their work, to fully absorb it. But I also get ideas from reading the newspaper, from listening to the radio.

TM: As for your personal process, do you have a particular routine when you write?

MF: I do, I do. I make myself get up early, sit in my office. I read somewhere that orange stimulates creative energy, so I have a nice shade of orange, clay-colored walls in my office. It doesn't mean that every day something brilliant is coming out.

I think it's important to make writing a part of your regular life so that you're not so obsessed with making it magical or a process you put on a pedestal. I think that can help make your expectations more realistic. Treat it like a job. Respect it.

TM: How does the revision process work for you?

MF: Oof. So messy. But so important. I do 10-15 drafts of something before publication. I write by hand on yellow legal pads. When I go back and type a story, I consider it the first step in the revision process because as I type I change things. Time is also very important, the opportunity to put a piece of work aside and come back to it with a little bit of clarity.

TM: Why do you prefer writing by hand?

MF: I don't consider myself at all articulate. I think I stumble over words, and I think when I write sometimes I go too fast in my head, so it allows me to slow down. There's something about the process of moving my hand across the page that makes me feel closer to the story because, I guess like a painter, it feels like my own brushstrokes. The couple times I've tried typing on the screen, it feels unnatural, forced. You see that blank, white screen. For some reason, a legal pad always looks so happy to me.

TM: Turning to themes throughout *The Longest Pregnancy*... a lot of your female characters are really independent. Do you value this quality in women? In yourself?

MF: Definitely. I think that stems from writing from my perspective, my experience. These are truths that I've seen. The initial title for the collection was *How Women Survive* because I think a lot of the stories are about women attempting to survive either situations that they've created for themselves or that they find themselves in. When I was a college student I was a women's studies minor and have always had a lot of interest in the female experience.

TM: In a lot of these stories, though, the women end up struggling to find love or if they find it, they still have a hard time functioning inside society. After I read it, I was actually upset for a good couple of hours.

MF: Wow, no kidding?

TM: Yes, that just stuck with me. These strong women didn't have a place. They had to work to carve something out for themselves. I was wondering if you see some sort of struggle inherent in being a strong woman?

MF: Yeah. I think that there will always be forces that are against women, whether they are cultural or personally afflicted. But even in the case of those things that are seemingly personally afflicted, as with Julia in "The Attached Couple," were those choices really hers to make? I think that anytime a character in these stories faces a conflict, she is attempting to find herself in that problem. She's trying to figure what is true about herself.

TM: There's a lot of violence and lust in many of these stories, and often unchecked lust tends to drive much of the action. These impulses that you include in your stories, do they figure into an overall view of human nature you have and are working with?

MF: I think so. I guess the other thing I would say is that in many of those darker stories, the female characters are the ones that are maintaining the power. It's a way for them to have that sexual power, and I don't know that that's the way it works in our culture right now.

TM: Do you see that as an ideal thing, that power found in your stories? Are you looking for more of a balance?

MF: In the stories?

TM: In your personal view.

MF: I don't necessarily think that it's reality. It was a way for me to reflect on that, create that reality in a story even though it's not true. And I guess when I talk about truths in fiction, it can be true within a story and not mirror life exactly. There can be truth in a character. I think my characters are usually very realistic while the scenario is implausible. I think that implausibility allows you to get a little bit closer to the character because you see them at this moment where he or she is reduced to a point of stress.

TM: So, you do magical realism, correct? Is that what you would call it?

MF: Yes, I guess. Somebody wrote a review and they called it blue collar magic realism, which I like. The idea that it's a little bit darker and maybe a little more sparse—a cloud cover.

TM: And like you said before, it works because it lets you get closer to the character?

MF: Yes, and it's fun for me, a way for me to keep guessing, too. The stories start with a question and I don't know the answer. Like the reader, I get to go on the journey to figure out what the answer might be.

TM: Future projects? What's in the works?

MF: I'm working on a novel right now. I have a draft of that. And it needs a lot of work. A novel is huge and you have an entire community and you have various characters and you have to try and find a way to still have a crescendo that a short story might. It's not easy and it's nothing I've ever done before.

TM: That would be tough, I'm sure. Do we see a lot of the same types of themes in the novel?

MF: Yeah, there's a little bit of pregnancy. Can't get it out. I showed it to my writing group and I was like, I know you guys are getting so tired of reading about pregnancy. And they said, you know, it's not a big deal. Everybody has their demons or their themes to work through. I was just at the art museum, that Frank Dudley exhibition. This is a man who just fixated on the dunes. Just trust yourself.

TM: Pregnancy is more interesting than the dunes, I think.

MF: I love the dunes! I was just thinking again about your question about love, and I guess inherent to love is this idea of being accepted and I think that's something all the characters are seeking in one way or another. They want to be accepted for who they are in whatever fashion that might be—whether they're the strongest woman in the world or whatever. It's about identity and sometimes it's in a close relationship with someone else that we're able to gain greater insight into ourselves. Do you know what I mean?

TM: Yeah.

MF: So maybe it's in that process of seeking love that they're attempting to find that acceptance of themselves.

TM: I think that's really interesting. I mean, I think some women struggle with just the opposite of that. How can you be in a relationship without losing yourself? And you counter that.

MF: Yeah, like "The Attached Couple," which is a story that I like a lot. I started with that idea. You have two separate people and then there's this institution of marriage, this idea that you're bound to someone for life and yet you come with different expectations and histories. Who are they as a couple, and also who are they as individuals?

TM: The story that I had the hardest time getting a grasp on was "Madera Bree" because it was just so wild. I liked it, but it was tough.

MF: Yeah, it's out there. I like the pigs. The sound of pigs.

TM: The whole time I was wondering if the pigs were the key to her longevity. But I guess by the end of the story, that's not the important question after all.

MF: I like that idea that you might finish a story and have a couple questions. I like that you might see it one way, and someone else might see it another. I think that provides more opportunity for the reader to get out of it what you need, and have fun with it too, rather than the author telling you what to think.

TM: I think you give us that ambiguity quite well.

MF: Good! Then I won't answer that, about the pigs.

TM: Well, shoot.



Untitled 3 | BREKKE BERG

Precious Moments

KATHRYN L. SHELLY

Upon the finest cherry parlor shelves
sat Pretty Mommy, hair all wrapped in lace,
and, next to her, Poor William by himself.
As time had wiped the grin from his clay face,
he could no longer even force his lips
to aim a kiss at mother's painted hand.
So thought the boy whose mother's stewardship
of porcelain was more than he could stand,
and he, Poor William as he knew he'd been,
would watch her ruby nails upon the dress
and study how she touched up Mommy's grin,
or see her daily braid a golden tress.
She set them up in lines so soldier-straight
it hurt to look; he watched in rising hate.



The doll that was his mother used to sit
atop the shelves, its arms wide, clutching air.
And though it took a pretty heavy hit,
he toppled her from china shores, to where
the face could break, the grin would crack, and still
far wider than her arms the pieces flew.
He watched ceramic dust, the flying swill
aglitteer while it scattered like the dew.
His foot created powder from her arms,
while somewhere she was staring at the light,
appealing to the deities with dead charms,
reciting spells to keep her through the night.
And while he drove his toes into her teeth,
he heard her fractured gasp; she broke beneath.



The Misery in Animals

EVAN SCOTT BRYSON

One night-beamed, glow-battered, cricket-hushed summer, Antoine became a hedgehog.

He sat under the kitchen table when his mother and father ate breakfast and dinner. He feared his spines would ruin the dining-chair seat cushions. His father's eyes narrowed in shame as his mother placed plates of lasagna or bowls of steaming vegetable broth in her son's hands.

"Get up," said his father.

Antoine could only understand the language of hedgehogs.

"Raise," said his father, gesturing.

His son continued to eat under the dining table, blissfully unaware of the meanings of his father's sounds.

"Is he fucking autistic now?" asked the father, crossing his arms, daring himself not to kick his son in the face. "Do we need to call Dr. Gettler?"

This was not the first instance that the boy could not understand his parents, aside from the rudiments of given food, clothing, and shelter. Antoine's father said a good many things his son never understood. This father believed—perhaps not unwisely—that when Antoine conversed with his parents, he should speak like an adult, using adult words; this practice would introduce earlier to the boy the realities of life in polity and economics. Inversely, Antoine's father never spoke with the words of a child. Thus the young boy found the adult world and adult words as ugly, tangled and muddy, and his father was a cruel figure.

He became a hedgehog on accident, and by luck. He would not wish this on any person, he knows, because of the awful price a boy must pay to live such a prickly, lonely existence.

He had to change his eating habits, too. He could no longer stomach the cook's fanciful dishes of duck and cow tongue and cod. The very smell of cooked meat made him wince, and the sight of chicken guts tethered across a biscuit or hog hocks floating in bisque made him retch. This summer was his salad days. The whole city continued to feast on the flesh of animals but he simply could not.

At night he flopped into bed and did not move after the initial settling of his limbs. He did not want his blankets

ruined or have his goose-feather pillow explode were he to nuzzle his head for warmth. When he fell asleep this was only every-other day, for then he was so exhausted he could sleep through the cramps.

—

Often Antoine sat with his ear against the door to his father's study, a tall-ceilinged room of hundreds of untouchable books, and curio cabinets of unknowable curiosities, and a great desk cluttered with uninteresting memos.

On the phone, Antoine's father seemed like several different people—all at once. Breezy, professional and scary—"This is substantive, Charley, imperative. I don't know shit about the account yet, and acquisitions withal, I'm getting data that would have you eating your tie... Yes. No. Get in her face and tell that Bixler troll to forget a merger, we're liquidating from the rebar to the risers."

Or perhaps scheming, angry and pathetic—"You tell him, you tell him if I don't have his back, P&P won't either—we're not working for Jews, Harry; we're not in the Paris suburbs anymore. We're looking at crisis in—fucking listen to me, Harry, you are not listening..."

Sometimes his father said such biting words that Antoine felt hot embarrassment, even though only he was listening in, and no one saw him eavesdropping—"Yesterday commodities were at thirty-three and three-eighths, and today they're cresting at five under, with projected figures rounding at about seven down—so I'm going to ask you: have I got my cock in hand for nothing, or are you going to break that bitch's back, tug in, and make her sing?"

Antoine assumed his father said nice things, but he said them so low or so infrequently that Antoine never heard the voice of them. He believed, then, that they had no voice—that nice things were silent things; that pleasure, gratitude and love were so quiet as to be odorless, tasteless, colorless; that what is good is unnoticeable.

Antoine's mother hardly spoke at all, and when she did, her words were kind but thin. When Antoine cried, she said "there, there"—as if sadness were a place and gladness were a place, and she could not decide which place little Antoine should roam. When he laughed she asked "hmm, something funny"—as if she were tasting comedy but could only identify it so, and having identified, had conquered it dull with swallowing. When her son was excited and pointing she said "I see," though she never saw. She took great consideration in vesting attention to her son but, in the end, never felt the connection was worth the effort.

—

Antoine was under the portico preparing his burrow. He waited for his mother to start calling his name—"Antoine, Antoine?"—before throwing clods of mud through the slats.

He sealed together sticks and moss and forsythia stalks to make a fragile basket. He dusted the frame with calla lilies, tulips and whey grasses to soften the joints. He spied a spider spinning. Web-singing, silk-singed and captivated, Antoine slowed. The manifold mysteries of this whole other life living below his own, soundlessly...

His mother peered under the stairs to see the operation.

"Those," she hissed, pointing daintily, "those are my flowers."

Antoine's fingernails broke. He went back indoors.

"My boy, this is nonsense," said his father.

Antoine skirted under the grand piano and grinned. He crawled out of the ballroom admiring his deft paws. They took some getting used, but the sound of his claws on the burnished shale was a remarkable clicking, and well worth the tedium of navigating across plush carpets. He wore three band-aids and this muted the delight, but only a little.

His father splashed tonic water on an embroidered handkerchief then bent low to wipe away the streaks of blood.

His mother announced her arrival in the mezzanine by shaking a tan bottle of pills in Antoine's face. She placed a glass of cranberry juice on the marble floor. She picked up some browning rose petals and made small exclamations with her shoulders.

"That maid," she said, "that maid."

She popped the lid of the bottle and placed a small pink pill on the floor beside the juice.

"This has become pathological," she said. "You have become a danger to yourself."

She rifled through a black purse for a pinecone and a dandelion and shook these tidbits in front of her son's face. She was under the impression that these items from nature

were sacraments, and her brave foraging for them gave her an edge over her husband in coaxing Antoine.

Antoine had already left the room when she was done looking at the color of the pinecone and the color of the wrought-iron chandelier. Her ponderous smile turned into a blank frown and she left for the balcony, her heel knocking over the glass of cranberry juice.

The glass shattered and the juice spread in a sulking pool around the shards. When she passed the maid, she snapped her fingers.

When his parents were with associates they laughed so hard they snapped their faces back in the air, and snatched at the ceiling with their slick mouths, and the silver fillings in their teeth caught candle light before the jaws crashed shut again. Antoine covered his ears and closed his eyes. Still, he felt the teeth coming down against teeth. And even when he pressed his fingers deep into his ears, he felt the high, mawkish laughter just behind his eyes as it escaped their bodies in abrupt spasms.

When his mother drove him to school she cursed under her breath at stoplights and talked to people in cars beside her, even though everyone's windows were rolled up and the sunroof was closed and locks were down.

When his father told him bedtime stories they always ended with "I'm leaving to take a leak."

Globe-eyed, pearl-primed and bowtie-tossed children gathered around Antoine and touched his brittle hair. A little girl instructed her even younger sister the correct way to preen Antoine's spines without getting pinched, and a dau-phin from the state over admired Antoine's stately snout.

"He has a human name, of course," said Jacquelyn, a girl just on the cusp of eleven—that dream-age where the rococo vestments of childhood are traded in for the ever-unfurling drapery of youth.

"But it doesn't matter anymore," she continued. "Laisser le passé est le passé."

"Je suis dans l'amour," said Toby, matter-of-factly.

Toby's father worked for the government and Antoine vaguely remembered his own father's censorious disap-proval.

"I am in love with chocolate and also pumpkin soup," continued Toby.

Antoine tried to smile or agree—something exchanged and mutually appreciated—but instead frowned, and began to leave the group of children, slowly insinuating his self back into the buzzing soiree. The adults tittered, drunk with amusement and nostalgia, smelling money. The children looked at Antoine as the spin lights played across his being, leery their hedgehog friend should head back into the storm.

He fell asleep in the coatroom and the children camped beside him.

This night—when Antoine became a hedgehog—his mother and his father were back from seeing a lengthy opera. From the coatroom they entered the kitchen and then the father's study. Their footsteps on the red oak floors echoed throughout the house, like the family was there and really not there; and still, as though another family was walking through the giant, silent house.

Antoine knew from reading books that the world of ghosts was only half-removed from the world of the living, and in some places the borders were so thin that ghosts got through. He sometimes hoped his house was such a place. He wondered if the heavy clapping steps of his family could be heard in that invisible other house of that other place.

"Antoine, the Wagner—you slept through it, didn't you?"

Antoine was afraid to answer. He wanted to return to thinking about the other places, and he wanted to sleep some more.

"I do not see how," sighed his father, shaking his head as he dropped three pieces of ice into a tumbler. "The endless melody, such boldness in stromentato. And the soprano—the infinite angels above, they weep to hear such timbre."

Antoine nodded at the stern face of his father. His mother left the study. She never stayed in a room too long before needing to step onto the balcony for a cigarette.

His father asked, pointing at the tumbler, "Why do I drop the ice from this height?" He glared at his son with glacier-gray eyes. He often sprang these pop-quizzes on

Antoine, and always skewered the boy with the same stare: a look that began with curious approval—as if he believed his son capable—but with the sharpening angle of his brows, the look became resentful and impatient, vexing itself into a trident of vicious expectation.

“So—so you don’t chip the ice?” answered the boy.

His father looked away, bored. Of course it was too easy a question for amusement.

“Good night, Antoine,” he said, dismissing his son.

A nanny, summoned by shadows, took Antoine by the shoulders and led him up to bed. He bristled when the weight of her fingers pressed on his coat.

He liked the play of light. He liked standing in front of blank white walls in the abandoned rooms of his huge house, to see how the light crossed across his spines and made shadows with spikes. He liked the shape of himself. The wholeness. The shape of things was important to Antoine, because shape was so simple and so deceiving. He was Antoine, and not Antoine; he was a hedgehog and not a hedgehog; his shape was a flexible shell of possibilities, unbound by magnitudes of redefinition.

He lay on his bed staring at the rise and fall of his spikes. His father came into the room and stood above the bed.

“Look at me, Antoine,” said the father.

Antoine would not.

“I will not repeat myself. Three months of this ridiculous game. This—this bullshit.”

Antoine thought about his den below the portico. A family of rabbits had taken refuge in it a week back and he gave it up, unwilling to bid them move.

“You will look at me when I speak to you,” hissed the father.

Roused by the rising voice, Antoine gingerly rolled over. He smiled. His father smacked him in the face.

“Aach,” said Antoine, his mouth opening and closing in wordless spasms. “Aach, aach.”

“Say words!” commanded the father, smacking his son again.

Antoine said, “Aach, aach,” and began to cry.

His father lifted his burly palm and brought it down on Antoine’s throat.

“Now says words!” commanded the father.

But Antoine said only, “Aaach... aaach.”

The boy’s breathing stopped after a while.

The father sat on the edge of the bed and looked at his hedgehog son. He looked at his bleeding palms and began to cry a little.

Antoine lay in his bed looking at the wall. The street lights outside cast melon-bright on his dresser and shelves. He yawned. What a terrific life to sleep through operas and wear suit coats in the luscious summer heat. He thought about shapes.

Yet.

He also thought about his whirring ceiling fan, high above him, jostling in his room, its sliced pomegranate blades, and spinning always. How much did it take before the blades spun away? He was haunted by this accident—blades exploding out from the center, scouring contrails across the violet sky, making a dull Cessna hum.

He sighed.

He turned into a hedgehog.

He went to sleep and dreamed the best dream of his lifetime.

In the dream he met a stork. And a not-stork. They made jokes about the confusion and when Antoine awoke the next morning he still giggled.

Nothing was solved.



Roadside in Wyoming

EMERALD DAVIS

I am mesmerized
by the long yellow line which bisects
the bleached asphalt as it unwinds
underneath our Buick station
wagon.

Rolling ever onward,
we turn off the highway
and slow down to pass
through Spotted Horse,
Wyoming. A one man
town. A town

with one man, his dog,
a decrepit gas pump,
ramshackle residence,
and weathered sign
which whispers welcome.

No spotted
horse in this speed bump
of existence. The dog sports
a few dark splotches
which may only be mud.
Nothing to see.

My parents point
to the next spot
in this barren stretch of atlas,
an index finger away
from this memory
of a town.

The crunching tires grind
frantically, trying to catch
purchase in the rubble. Still
I peer through the dust-smudged
window.

The man and his dog shrink
away into a smear
and the unrolling
road resumes.



Inexplicable

MARTY DENICOLO

We leave a signature of destruction
everywhere we go—broken glass: diamonds
beneath those “X” inscriptions on our hearts.
Siren wails won’t run us off course. The storm
racked pier is buoyless refuge granted.
We jump just like others with alcohol
grins, but spirit’s inversely related
to density, so we float like fall leaves.
Whitecaps pull out/force back their refugees
in one great natural thrust to shore. Awake
'til dawn with sand-grit hands clutched tight, laughing
at finding truth in action. We’re alive
and free from singing that same wretched verse
to weary ears—our souls yearning for more.



Yellow Frog | MEGAN MURPHY





My Miasto's Stadt | CAROLYN STYPKA



Wonder and Innocence | SARAH KIGER

One Evening Pre-Holiday Season

HANNAH SMITH

On top of the green plastic plate that was passed from guest to guest,
the Santa-shaped sugar cookie wiggled closer to your fingers,
and left the ginger snap frowning next to the candy cane clique.
A shaky game of walking overtook you
as you returned to your seat, grazing the punch bowl
with the edge of your knee.
It mockingly splashed onto the tan shag.
We all know how red wine cinder stains—
and in the midst of the mad dash for the embroidered kitchen towels
you leaned in close to my ear
and whispered “I’ve always loved you”
and I knew that there was no point in trying to save the carpet.



Lady Ellen | KAHT NORTH



Burnout | JAMES STRASBURG

Blood Embrace

LAUREN SCHREIBER

FOR A. OWENS

My 7th great-grandpapie,
well,
Thayendenegea,
he killed some
great great great
great great
great
relatives

and now my liver
screams whiskey.

There was blood.
Oh my, is there!
Blood on blood
on blood.

Scrawny white foxes,
well they
rolled all over my rib cage.

Flint eyes glinting
they licked it,
my sacred heart,
and scampered red.

Sure!
We could set
fire
to this tree of ours.

Or even chop!
Mohawk hands,
they need pruning!
Chop until
peace trunk.

I know this.

But knife in hand,
can't you
sometimes
just feel that tall grass
on your
knee caps?



Untitled | MELANIE SCHAAP

Substantiation

KATHRYN L. SHELLY

All ill-at-arms and quill-at-hand:
so sat the poet, deep in thought,
until a phrase was dancing there
upon the air (and quickly brought
down, like a gut-shot bird.)

And then the poem had found its bones.
So then the poet scratched a curse
(upon the paper's stylish skin,
on "how things go from bad to verse")
down, to the final word.

All skeletal and spindly thin,
the words slept on, their brains made dumb,
determined not by drink or drug
(not alcohol or laudanum),
down to a little blurred "—."



First Position | THOMAS REEM



Untitled: Skin Series #6 | MELANIE SCHAAF

Excerpts from the series “Rape”

TRACY MONSON

Rape

is a seed, a spiteful
poppy (sleep, my pretty)
caught up under the gum,
crevice-wedged, smother-hugged
in a scratchy wool blanket.

is a glass kite string,
thin, splitting prism, sharp-tongued
and quick, plunging to sever an orange kite
with silver streamers
from able hands, upturned nose below.

is a rotted tree branch,
color of a half-century of tobacco-stained teeth
and drooped—
finely crushed bones in a withered
skin grocery sack of an arm.

—
This
is really
how it happened:

You are walking, later in the evening (but not so late as to be foolish) and it is dark already because it's simply that time of year, fall, your favorite because of the smells outside (mold and crisp and apples) and inside (spice and furnace) and also the colors, orange yellow red, found on sweaters and treetops. Someone steps in front of you, sliding from an alley, and at the time he is of course a man, but now, in your memories, he is usually more like a swamp thing, though sometimes he is a bear with the head of a fish. You are forced into the alley (of all places) and your fingers, they freeze as you fumble for your keys in your purse, or an ink pen, anything with which you could stab or gouge.

He backs you against the wall at the end of the alley and breathes into your face as his fingers, not frozen, grapple with your blouse buttons and a cloud of alcohol and staleness rises up your nose. You remember later that his eyes are moon-yellow, pale and watered, pinpoint pupils. He punches you once, hard, an explosion of fist on flesh and you sink, a piece of lead in a bucket, straight and directly down and you are dazed and he is on the ground too, and you hear a zzzip that sounds like a whip cracked

above you and you can't tell if it is his zipper or yours and then you remember you are wearing a skirt and your heart sinks until it smacks against the cold pavement. You hear him behind you, grunting and gasping and you feel nothing and your head pounds and your hands open and close and your eyes glaze and roll gliding over shapes and colors until you finally focus on a muddied pile of leaves,
orange yellow red,
sickly lit
by the stray beams
of a distant streetlamp.

A shower happened.

Clothes formed a haunted trail
down the hallway to the bathroom
where the shower curtain hung like a ghost
and the toilet stared, open-mouthed,
and the sink gaped, incredulous.

The water tickled her neck,
pin pricks,

thousands of tiny spiders.
They spread across her stomach,
her thighs, melted like candle wax
dripping down her calves.

She picked pebbles from her kneecaps,
then finger-skittered upward to her face,
the place around the socket beginning to swell,
turning blue, perhaps, like the gaudy eyeshadow
of a Halloween mask.

She scrubbed until her skin was raw,
red through the steam,
peeling off in crisped onion sheets,
until she became a pile of gleaming bones.

She slept, that night, the hard sleep of a dreamer,
and her dreams were riddled with machines.
She was a lawnmower,

her lips and teeth stained green as,
pushed relentlessly from behind,
she gobbled the grass beneath her face.

She was a bulldozer,
her arms stuck in a metal hug,
her legs twisted into tires,
asphalt smashed between the treads.

She was two pistons of an engine.
Hips and legs shot into the air,
while face and torso hammered down,
the screech of steel aching in her jaw.

She woke up sweaty,
grass clippings strewn about her pillow,
the smell of tar between her sheets.

Sounds, she realized,
were the cries of colors.

They grew more urgent,
 until she was forced to hear
 the bleating of green
 that drifted up from grassy medians
 and rose in the steam of her teacup.

Buoyed by currents,
 blue sighs wandered
 from the sky, high and mewling.
 Raspy panting
 warmed and wet her stomach
 from the lining of her navy blazer.

Red brayed at her from the bricks of buildings,
 hurled snarls against the glass,
 causing her to rush from the window
 of the local florist.

The plum she ate at dinner
 guffawed its way through her lips
 while brown just screamed
 as she prodded her meat
 with whispering, silvery tines.

The worst, though, was white,
 whimpering from the faded slipcover
 of her grandmother's old sofa
 and filling her ears with quiet weeping
 as she slipped between her sheets.

—

She took to smoking in the mornings,
 held the cloud in her mouth like an egg
 and let it out slowly,
 little licks of dragon smoke trickling down her chin.

She struck poses until her body was all angles—
 cocked knee, dipped head—
 and imagined herself made of triangles
 or cigarettes,
 and they sprouted from her scalp in ashy strands,
 singeing her shoulders,
 and the smell of melty flesh became her perfume.

For breakfast she threaded cereal
 onto a cigarette and ate it whole,
 mindful of her lipstick.

“This shall be my greatest performance,”
she boasted as she left,
and star-shaped glasses hid the soot in her eyes.

—

From behind the doctor’s shoulder,
she watched as he peered between her legs.
They drew back from the matted mess there
and the smell.

Barbed wire coiled from the hole
where her legs caved together,
skin-snagged,
and looped the hills of her thighs,
barbed stars smashed in fleshy beds.

Between her legs was a rusty jumble
holding a flooded village,
and tiny bodies were speared like trophies.
The flood had been salt and blood,
and now fish heads floated,

as well as her grandmother's hands
with the wrist bones showing,
and a couple of babies
ripped from their mothers
as the blood rose up.

The doctor picked through it all
and cultured her.

She stayed to watch him clean up the fish heads from the exam table,
as well as several pieces of soft, strawberry-blond straw
from the fields
before the flood.





Thirty Minutes of Your Time

LIZ HANSEN

I made twelve dollars today. I was at the mall, whose artificial lighting and endless variety have always given me the impression of a subterranean city populated by an entirely different species of animal. I had gone in search of a new toaster for my mom's birthday, but all the toasters I saw looked much too complicated, promising to toast four bagels at a time in elaborate ways, when all Mom wanted was to make toast. Our toaster has reached such an age that it no longer toasts; it only dries bread (if you use whole wheat bread, you can almost pretend that you're eating toast, because then your dried bread is toast-colored).

I walked from one end of the mall to the other, alone in a tall tile desert, looking for a store that might sell normal toasters, piecing together conversations out of the din around me: did you see last night when if you don't quit it right now we're going back to the survey and the shower is on Wednesday and I thought ten dollars can't believe

they're bringing it back fewer dropped calls I want to go on the plan works is that if you do have an overdraft it doesn't cost you thirty minutes of your time.

I weaved and darted through the crowd, past a kiosk that sold personalized mouse pads.

Survey Wednesday I thought ten dollars I want to go cost you thirty minutes of your time.

I passed a toy store having a going-out-of-business sale.

Survey ten dollars thirty minutes of your time.

Ten dollars in thirty minutes for spouting off my opinion was equivalent to earning twenty dollars an hour. Never in my wildest dreams as a student of the humanities had I been able to conceive of earning twenty dollars an hour, nor had I been able to find a summer job (financial hardship loomed on the other side of Mom's new toaster). I backtracked until I found the old woman hunched over a clipboard on a bench, half-hidden among the fraying fake ferns in the planters, mumbling ineffectually at passersby. "Did you say you were paying ten dollars for that?" I asked.

She looked up, as startled as if I had been a divine messenger, rather than a tractable and outspoken consumer. "Do you have about half an hour? That's how long it usually takes."

"Sure."

She stood up and turned to a different page on her clipboard. "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"All right..." She noted it down. "Are you or anyone in your household employed in any of the following: adver-

tising, marketing, any branch of the military, or foodservice?"

"No."

"Okay. We can go on. Occupation..."

"Student."

"University?"

"Yes."

"Okay... on to section 2B... have you or anyone in your household ever served in the army?"

"No."

"Have you ever been interested in serving in the army?"

"Not really."

"Please—wait—no. 48A." She frantically flipped through several more pages, as my responses led her through a veritable Choose-Your-Own-Adventure novel of survey questions. "Here we go. What is the likelihood that you will enlist in the army in the next twelve months: very likely, somewhat likely, not sure, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely?"

"Very unlikely."

She flipped through a few more pages. "Okay... I think—yes, that's all I need to ask you here. If you come back to our office, we'll finish up there."

I followed her through the mall towards the dingy market research office across from the lost child claim area, certain that this was some aggressive recruitment drive and that the next my family heard from me, resigned to their dried bread and the loss of their only daughter and sister, I would be dodging roadside bombs in Baghdad. But if I could find any way out of it, it was ten dollars.

"Have a seat," the woman directed me. I sank distrustfully into a sagging vinyl couch. She conferred with a teenage boy at the front desk who had a brooding look and a haircut that looked as though a small animal had crawled onto his head and died there. I could only hear her side of the conversation. "I missed that one... right... but she's... do we still have the other one?...okay."

The boy with the dead rodent haircut went into a back room to ask another teenager about my situation, whatever my situation was. I began to doubt that it could possibly be anywhere near as serious as I had feared. I heard the ponderous, tormented clomp of impractical shoes shuffling and stamping idly in the back room. "I made a mistake," the old woman finally announced. "You don't qualify for that survey."

"Thanks anyway." I started getting up.

"We do have a different one, though—I think. It pays twelve dollars."

"Sign me up." I probably wouldn't be impressed into the army in any covert, nefarious way. She went into the same back room and came back with a different clipboard, then sat down next to me on the couch.

"How old did you say you were?"

"Twenty."

"Hmmm... well, okay." She hesitated before going on to the next set of questions. "How often do you chew gum: often, sometimes, occasionally, or never?"

"How occasionally is 'occasionally?'"

"Why?"

"Maybe about twice a year."

"We're going to need you to say more than 'occasional-"

ally' if you want to go on with the survey."

"But I don't—all right. 'Sometimes.'"

She noted it down. "How often do you consume commercial energy drinks: often, sometimes, occasionally, or never?"

"Is coffee an energy drink?"

"No."

"Nev—" I looked at her. "Sometimes." She nodded.

"Respond to the following statement: I think that computerized ordering at fast food drive-thrus is a good idea, to improve efficiency and reduce human error—strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree?"

I. Man and machine squared off in my mind.

A. Human error was a terrible thing,

B. but it was human.

"I—"

C. If I said 'neutral,' I would not have to decide.

II. I needed the answer that would carry me to the sequence of questions that paid twelve dollars.

A. I saw myself at a drive-thru, on a cell phone, in a life where time was money and one lived from one such warmed-over, foil-wrapped cliché to the next, reaching out a car window to punch a number into a box and feed myself.

1. Value Meal #1

a. upgrade fries and drink,
\$0.79

b. substitute onion rings for
fries, \$0.29

2. Value Meal #2

a. upgrade fries and drink,
\$0.79

b. substitute onion rings for
fries, \$0.29

3. Value Meal #3

a. New

b. Fresh

4. For assistance, press 0.

5. 0 was how you got to talk to a
human being.

6. If you are finished ordering, press *
now.

"Strongly—"

0?

"—agree."

*

"I would be interested in trying a gum or fruit chew that offered the same energy boost as most commercial energy drinks.' Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree."

III. I would be interested in twelve dollars.

A. Respond to this statement.

"Strongly agree."

B. *

She took me into a different back room, full of threadbare partitions arranged around ancient computers. A gawky high school kid was explaining to the girl in the impractical shoes, "I think it's frozen or something. I could get all the commercials to play except the army one."

The old woman sat me down at a computer in the corner of the room. A stopwatch and four legal-sized envelopes

sat on the desk beside it. She took the stopwatch with her. "This will take about half an hour," she told me. "Just come up front when you're done. There's water there if you need it." She pointed to a small plastic cup on the other side of the computer.

"Thanks." I began the survey. It asked my opinion of energy gum. I composed a silent symphony of neutrality and ignorance.

The machine asked me to open the envelope marked H. It contained a pellet of gum about an inch wide, a feeble orange in color. I began chewing. The machine said I was supposed to chew for four minutes. The old woman had taken the stopwatch away. The gum tasted like chemicals that tried not to taste like chemicals. The clock on the computer screen said it was 6:21 AM. It was early afternoon. I chewed, tasting chemicals. After what might have been four, three, or five minutes, I spit the gum discreetly back into the envelope and advanced to the next screen. The machine interrogated me about softness, tartness, sweetness, overall citrus flavor, initial burst of flavor, and aftertaste. Aftertaste was a free response question. At 6:26 AM, I paused to consider my options, with an arrogant, childish, desperate desire to wax poetic to the human being who would have to read the responses to the gum survey someday, after all of the data had been collected and sorted and tabulated. It was a digitized message in a bottle.

Machine: Describe, in as much detail as possible, what you liked or disliked about the aftertaste.

Me: Strong chemical aftertaste, like a bad trip to the orthodontist.

I took an economical sip of the water. It was a small

cup, and I still had three envelopes of gum to go. The water was almost as bitter as the aftertaste.

Machine: Before proceeding, drink some water or eat some crackers, to be sure you have cleared your palate.

There were no crackers.

Me: Like a wine tasting in hell on April Fools' Day.

There were three other envelopes, marked X, O, and 0. Rodent Boy came around to my cubicle while I was spitting O back into its envelope. "Um... when you get to the demographics section, can you tell them you're twenty-five with kids?"

"I'm not."

"I know, but this is technically a survey for women ages twenty-five to thirty-four with kids."

"I'm twenty and I don't have kids."

"I know, but could you..."

"The computer's frozen again," someone called from behind another partition.

"I'm coming," Rodent Boy promised. "We've already got as many eighteen-to-twenty-four as we need, is all. That's all. Coming!" he called to the guy at the frozen computer.

I couldn't think of any new clever thing to say about the aftertaste, nor could I even distinguish it from the other aftertastes. I gnawed through the rest of the gum and the questions, meditating on the nuances of artificial flavor. The machine asked me to critique the packaging, which gave the product the look of a novelty item at the checkout counter of a sporting goods store. I entered that in the response field.

The demographics section was next. It asked my age,

income, the number of people in my household, and how many of them were children under the age of eighteen. It did not ask me whether I had children, per se, only whether there were children. The machine did not split hairs over relational details. I did not know my family's income. I clicked an option marked "Rather not disclose." There were three people in my household. I clicked "Next."

Machine: Error! The system returned an error for invalid responses to the following items:

C. Age

1. 18-24
2. 25-34
3. 35-44
4. 45-54
5. 55-64
6. 64+

D. Number of children under 18 years of age in your household

E. I drank what remained of the bitter water.

F. 25-34

G. 0

H. For assistance, press 0.

impractical shoes try to get the army commercial to play at a different computer, the air around me seething and jittering, because I had just had, at the machine's bidding, about four times as much caffeine in one half hour as I should have ingested in one day. The old woman took up her clipboard again and went to sit down behind a different artificial fern, near the playground. I thought about toasters and twelve dollars. Rodent Boy came back and printed off my check while I stood and waited. I went back out into the mall.

The old woman walked past my computer. "All done?"

I quickly clicked "Next." It was over then, closed off.

"Yeah," I told her. I stood up, looking at the four envelopes of used gum piled on the desk like love letters to the machine.

"You can throw those away."

I dropped them into the wastebasket under the desk and went back to the front. There was no one there. I sat on the couch and listened to Rodent Boy and the girl in the



Rachel | KAHT NORTH



Untitled | JAMES STRASBURG





Everyday | SCOTT FONFERKO



Untitled | KELLY COWAN



Olifant #3 | MELANIE SCHAMP



Untitled: Skin Series #12 | MELANIE SCHAA



Electricity | BREKKE BERG

Angel Woman Climbs a Mountain In the Sonora Desert

KRISTA HENNINGS

INSPIRED BY THE BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH

"MUJER ANGEL" BY GRACELA ITURBIDE

She could just glide up
like those cable cars in the alps,
suspended from invisible wires

of charged air that lightning bolts leave.
Angel Woman was on time, but
she prefers to arrive fashionably late.

Her black hair billows like a sheet
your grandmother hung on the clothesline
while you watched from her weathered porch.

Her white skirts, spun from cirrus, skim
the hill's shale surface. Spanish Needles
and Agave snag her cumulous petticoat,

so she lifts her dress in her left hand, pulls
it away from the brittle stalks and leaves
stealing its stitched and woven water vapors.

Angel Woman could have been on time,
but she's sure the party will wait for her:
she's bringing the music. Her silver sliver

of a boombox breaks the desert's
six thousand square miles of silence—

but between songs, tequila-tinged
laughter slips down the steep cliffs
and hits her like a rock slide.



Beautiful Plum Blossom

BENJAMIN GAULKE

The scar on the back of his left hand was barely visible now, eighteen years later. Standing in front of his locker, his American history textbook in his right hand, he stared at the half-inch thick, pink line that curved from the beginning of his middle finger all the way down to his wrist, dividing the tan skin of the back of his hand in two.

"Hey, Josiah!"

Pretending that he hadn't been looking at anything, he glanced up at her smile and tried to return it. He loved her.

There was this vibrant, quiet, humble intelligence that shone through her eyes, her steady poise, the way she pursed her lips when she played the trumpet.

"Hey, Hsiu-Mei!" he tried.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He tried to put the book in the locker, but it slipped and fell, the pages flipping and revealing illustrations of an

Indian offering maize to the pilgrims, John Quincy Adams suffering a fatal stroke on the floor of the House of Representatives, a map of the Battle of Gettysburg, a photograph of Emilio Aguinaldo, and Buzz Aldrin standing in front of an artfully displayed American flag that was now eternally, statically fluttering on the airless moon.

"Oh..." clumsily picking up the book and putting it in the locker. "Just going to lunch."

Hsiu-Mei was an incredible trumpet player, far better than Josiah was on the trombone. She would play jazz after marching band practice: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, "My Funny Valentine." She would riff on the melodies, improvising her own notes as she played familiar tunes.

She was the valedictorian, or soon to be at least. He would sometimes peer over her shoulder in calculus class and see poems scribbled in between the perfectly solved equations. Chinese characters lined the margins of the paper. He'd never had the courage to ask her if she'd made the poems up or if they were lines that she'd memorized from other poets. He never asked what the characters meant either, but they looked beautiful.

"Can I come with you?" she said. She was always so kind. That was the only reason she asked. Full of thoughts of Hsiu-Mei, Josiah was in danger of speechlessness, so he answered her question by distilling his feelings into an inadequate affirmation, much delayed, faintly preceded by near stutter: "Sure."

Of course she could come with him. But he didn't want to say anything stupid, be anything stupid. He sometimes felt ridiculous.

Hsiu-Mei was the only other Asian at Lexington Academy, or the only one, depending on how one looked at it. "Hyun-ki" always sounded foreign to Josiah, unfamiliar, even though it was his middle name, the only thing his adoptive parents had let him keep (in addition to the scar, which they couldn't take away) when they'd taken him from South Korea as an infant.

No one in the school knew his middle name. Josiah talked in a slight Southern drawl. Hsiu-Mei's voice was always calm and soothing, uninflected. She was petite, short, with long midnight colored hair that went straight down to her hips. She would pin her hair up in a bun before band performances on Friday nights and after the football games ended she would pull out all of the pins and let her hair spill around her shoulders before she would play the trumpet. These impromptu performances were the only times she would ever draw attention to herself. Normally she was quiet and reserved, but not shy. She was never shy. Josiah knew that she wasn't attracted to him because she hardly ever spoke to him, yet she was always talking to everyone else. Hsiu-mei was a social butterfly, flitting from one group of friends to the next, yet never alienating anyone.

They started walking. She talked about classes and nursed the conversation along effortlessly.

"What are you doing this weekend, Josiah?"

"Oh." He quickly thought, or tried to at least.

"Nothing."

"Oh."

Hsiu-mei stopped walking for a moment and reached in her purse for a bottle of Advil.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm starting to get a headache."

"It's OK."

She was bubbly again. She was talking more excitedly than normal. "Your family must be really nice. I always hear good things about your dad. He's important in the community."

"Yeah."

Josiah felt entirely unlike her, but he loved her because she was everything he wanted to be and wasn't. But more than that. That would have just been narcissism. He loved her because she was always generous, always kind. When she made him cookies for his eighteenth birthday—which wasn't anything special—she made cookies for everyone—the smile on her face had been so bright. When Josiah had a chance to try one of the cookies, Hsiu-mei asked him if they tasted good and he assured her that they were wonderful, but he really wanted to tell her that she was wonderful, that she was beautiful, but his tongue felt like a wooden block in his mouth, his brain impossibly slower than hers. She was a flash flitting in and out of his daily life, momentary bursts of excitement, hope, wonder, potential. Meaning. Hsiu-mei was poetry to Josiah. She made him feel like more than just the son of a charlatan Pentecostal preacher in rural Kensington, South Carolina. Something exotic and real. But he never had the words to ask.

He pondered why she'd asked him what he was doing that weekend. Was he supposed to say something? Do something? Ask something?

Josiah's father was never short for words. On Sunday mornings they spilled out of his mouth like mighty waters, a roar heard by three thousand members of Victory Christian Fellowship and ten thousand radio listeners. The sweat would bead off Pastor White's forehead as he healed people. The ailing would come from miles around to hear him rebuke the devil and preach the Word, his eyes bulging out as he expelled evil from a world corrupted by darkness. People would write down their sicknesses and heartbreaks on prayer cards before the services. The cards would go through a slot in the wall and on the other side of the wall a few trusted church members would sort through the cards to find compelling stories. There was a small earpiece that Josiah's father wore while preaching. Pastor White's helpers would whisper into his ear, "Victoria Ellman," and his father's face would light up with the inspiration of the Holy Ghost as he'd call out, "Is there a Victoria Ellman among God's people today? Is there a lamb in the Good Shepherd's flock today who has the name Victoria Ellman?" and an astonished woman in the crowd would inevitably call out, "Yes!" with tears streaking down her face. "Her son, Tim, is an alcoholic," the voice would whisper. "You're having a lot of heartbreak in your life right now, aren't you Victoria?" Josiah's father would say confidently as the woman would tearfully agree. Pastor White would say, "Your son, Tim, hasn't turned out the way that you'd hoped he would," and the dupe would always be stunned that the pastor could know such an intimate detail about her life. Pastor White would pray over her and tell her that the Holy Spirit would fix whatever the problem was, that whatever was wrong in her life, if she just prayed, God would fix the problem. If it

wasn't an alcoholic son, then it was promiscuous daughter, a curable cancer, a bad knee. Pastor White would say that the problem was worse than it was. The cancer was always terminal, the bad knee crippling. He would pronounce the person cured and miraculously they were, and if they weren't, they never came back, and if they did come back and complained, no one listened. Everyone was too busy speaking in tongues.

The believers always filled the pews of Victory Christian Fellowship and their wallets always opened when a hat was passed around for the offering. The church never seemed to have the money to buy offering plates, although Josiah's parents had the money for his private school education.

Should he have asked her out? He couldn't tell. But then he knew that he was just kidding himself. She'd only wanted to know what he had been doing that weekend. There hadn't been any implication to the question.

"How do you think band is coming along this year?" she asked.

"Oh, just fine..." he swallowed. "I really like your solo."

"Thanks. I think the trombones sound really good this year. You guys put a lot into it."

"Oh... Thanks."

Josiah's mother once told him to say "Tie yellow bowtie" over and over whenever he needed to speak in tongues. Josiah would spit those words out of his mouth in a charismatic fervor and make them sound foreign and divine. His father would claim that Josiah spoke Korean, that Josiah

was going to go back over to Korea and preach to the Koreans about Jesus and all the Koreans would heed his voice, because God calls all of His little lambs, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. The people in the audience would have fantasies of a land full of yellow peasants wearing conical hats. In this magical, backwards land the godless peasants would toil in hot rice fields until one day a young, well-dressed man came and told them about Jesus and healed their sick.

"Some of you might think it strange that this kid over here doesn't look like me and my wife, but it's just because we adopted him from Korea. I'm proud to say that he's my own and I love him like he's my son and one day he's going to go back to Korea and tell all of the Koreans about Jesus, because most of them have never heard of the Lamb of God Who Died To Take Away the Sins of the Whole World Amen."

Josiah would try to smile.

"He might not be able to say much right now and he might seem real shy and quiet-like but he can speak like a prophet in Korean when the Holy Spirit wants him to."

Tie yellow bowtie, Josiah would think. *Tie yellow bowtie, you bastard.*

Josiah once told a friend in second grade about the yellow bowtie that he was always tying with his tongue and the friend's parents talked to Josiah's parents and Josiah's father had said to Josiah, "What the fuck is wrong with you? You can't tell people that stuff!" and backhanded Josiah's face and ever since then Josiah had learned to stop talking, since none of the talking was real and the backhand had hurt. Instead of talking, Josiah would say words everyday,

as few as possible, and no matter what words he said, they always tasted the same as "Tie yellow bowtie," a nasty taste like the one vomit leaves on your tongue.

They sat down together at a table. They'd gotten to the cafeteria later than almost everyone else, and she'd had them sit where no one else was, against his protestations. She'd said she just wanted to talk to him, that it was good to just talk to one person sometimes, without distractions. Josiah felt exposed just sitting there with her, but that feeling started to fade as she talked. She opened the paper bag that held her lunch, said, "Excuse me," crossed herself, and started to pray.

Hsiu-mei was Catholic, a heathen according to his father. Josiah didn't care. She always seemed sincere when she prayed, and that was what mattered to him. A small pewter crucifix hung from her neck. Josiah wanted her to tell him about the Jesus on the crucifix, wanted her to tell him about that Jesus serenely suffering, wanted her to tell him in quiet, sincere words what that meant. Hsiu-mei could heal him. He was sure.

He tried to talk to her, but the topics he really wanted to bring up were forbidden in his mind. He would've felt weird asking about those things, so he just talked about mundane things: classes, weather. When those lines of conversation ended, there was a brief silence.

The reason he gave for joining band after his freshman year was that it sounded like fun. In reality, he hated standing

in hot fields with the sun beating down on him, which was what endless hours of band practice entailed. But Hsiu-Mei had moved to Kensington during his freshman year and she started going to Lexington Academy and she played trumpet in the band and Josiah was already beginning to like her, a lot, and he just wanted to be closer to her, to see her. He hated how the guys in the band, jealous of her talent, would sometimes call Hsiu-Mei "the geeky gook." One day they teased Josiah, saying that the two Chinese (meaning him and her) should hook up, a conversation that led to speculation over whether Asian penises were as long as white ones. Josiah laughed a yellow bowtie laugh, and he hated himself for laughing.

He said the first thing that came to mind.

"What are the characters that you write?"

Sitting there in the cafeteria, he felt his senior year winding to an inevitable close, and Josiah knew that there would be a day when he would see Hsiu-Mei and then he wouldn't see her the next day or ever again, and he hated the inevitability of that moment that he had always known was always coming, that moment predestined from the moment he first saw her freshman year when she walked into Algebra; and here he was, trying to forestall it, stop it, somehow.

Hsiu-Mei smiled. "Well, they're Chinese."

"I knew that. I mean, what do they *mean*?"

"Different things, of course."

Josiah felt like such an idiot, but then Hsiu-Mei saved him from that feeling. "Well," she started, "this is my name," and she wrote, "秀梅" and said "Hsiu-Mei."

In short, Hsiu-Mei had identity, reality: genuine personality, ethnicity, faith. He supposed the real reason he would never ask her out was that the status quo for Josiah was that his relationship with reality was ambiguous, tenuous. If he asked her out and she said "no" (and she had no reason to say "yes") then reality, the world where people were sincere, would have rejected him. The very act of hoping for Hsiu-Mei made Josiah feel human, even if that feeling was repressed. He could still hope that one day he would run his fingers through her hair and be with her and pray with her and listen to her telling him what it was like to have a real family, a real God, a real mind of her own, a real reality; and this hoping, just the hoping, the simple and beautiful hoping, gave him some sort of grounding in reality. He could never risk losing that, even if he wanted so much more than hope, since hope was not the same thing as faith.

Josiah knew that he could never write or say Hsiu-Mei's name like she did. He said it like everyone else ("Show-May"—which sounded beautiful enough, like a promise), but the way she said it had a song-like quality.

"Your name is beautiful," he said and almost blushed when he realized how dumb he sounded.

After a brief pause, Hsiu-Mei said, "Thanks."

"Does your name mean something?" asked Josiah.

"Oh, it would sound stupid," she pleaded, rather embarrassed.

"I'm sure it wouldn't." He had to know. "Please tell me, if you don't mind. I'm curious."

Hsiu-Mei looked around, almost nervous, but she maintained her smile.

"This might sound silly... and it's kind of hard to translate... it kind of means a, uh..."

Hsiu-Mei trailed off for a moment. Josiah eagerly looked at her in anticipation.

She finished, quickly: "Plum Blossom. Beautiful Plum Blossom. Kind of. Don't tell anyone. It might sound ridiculous." She smiled briefly.

Josiah didn't know what to say (he was intrigued; the name sounded wonderful, yet, at the same time, he could understand her reluctance, her embarrassment), but he wanted to say something, something about her, about her name, but Hsiu-Mei spoke next.

"Does 'Josiah' mean anything?"

"To be honest... I don't know what it means."

He looked at his hands.

"Hey, Josiah... Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Where did the scar on your hand come from?"

She showed him more characters during lunch that day: "美," "中," "你," "好," "天." She said her favorite was "家." It was too much for Josiah to keep track of the different pronunciations and characters and meanings. They were as indecipherable as the scar. He felt like she had said so much that was important, yet when he tried to remember it, he couldn't. He never afterwards brought up with her that day's conversation.

When lunch was over, Hsiu-Mei left with him the sheet with the characters on it. He still had it when they graduated. He looked at it every day before then.

"Oh... it... it's just when I cut myself on some metal on a slide when I was a kid."

The child had screamed. The tears had run down the woman's face as she took the knife and cruelly, lovingly, cut the back of his hand. She hadn't wanted to hurt him, but she had had to hurt him to have hope. She wanted to believe that she would see him again someday. She'd loved him. She couldn't have taken care of him; she hated having to leave him; if she ever saw him again, she would look at his hand; she would always look for him; she would recognize the scar, her son.

秀梅

BENJAMIN GAULKE

*When I'm with you, I feel like I could die
And that would be all right.*
—"Semi-Charmed Life"

Hsiù-Méi woke up the morning of her high school graduation and the world was moving slower. She hated it when the world moved so slowly. It was depressing and she was never able to get anything done. She was ugly. Bored. Plain. Unfocused. Average. Or worse. Hsiù-Méi looked at the clock; it was only 5:04. Knowing that she couldn't sleep anymore, she crawled out of bed. She didn't like sleeping anyway. She couldn't get anything done when sleeping.

It was raining outside. Hsiù-Méi looked around her room. It was a mess. Her flip-flops were next to the bed, unaligned, one upside-down. Her rain jacket was poorly hung on the hook on the door and it was still wet from when she got home at 2:30 in the morning. An unfinished

scholarship application lay on the desk (she needed an address for one of her references, Mr. Pruitt). She hadn't vacuumed in two days. Her bed needed to be made, the pencil sharpener emptied, the trumpet practiced. It was all too much and she started crying. Everything was moving too slowly and Josiah would think she was ugly and stupid and everyone would find out that she was the dumbest valedictorian ever, that she was fake and slow-witted. She couldn't let this happen.

She started looking around the room. Where had she left the pills? She tried to control her crying, but she was scared she wouldn't find them. She needed them. She looked under the flip-flops, under her bed, opened the dresser drawers and flung the clothes over her head, then slammed the drawers shut in frustration. Where were the pills? *Where are the fucking pills?* She was hysterical, crying, shaking, angry, angry at herself for losing the pills and she'd have to get new ones somewhere, dexies, ephedra, whatever, it didn't fucking matter where were the pills? *look at you you're a speed freak no I'm fucking not it's not my fucking fault that I need to do this just to survive. It's not my fault that you're good for nothing if you're ugly and stupid and society keeps trying to make you stupid and fat and slow and makes you eat more food than you need and waste time doing nothing and then expects you to have accomplished everything and to be happy and beautiful and neat and slim and smart and have a smile on your face.*

And she wanted Josiah to love her and she knew he never would when she wasn't everything she needed to be, and she wasn't that yet, no, not just yet.

She felt underneath the dresser and her fingers found a familiar shape. She shoved her arm farther and grabbed the smooth plastic Advil container and quickly twisted off its top. Two pills. *No, three is better.* Better too many than too few. She swallowed the pills. Better, better, better. Better better better. Betterbetterbetter: good. Hsiù-Méi wiped the tears off of her face. It was OK now. OK OK OK. Quickly, she showered, shaved her legs and armpits, brushed her hair which smelled fresh like mango extract from the conditioner, put in her contacts, dressed, folded her clothes, put them away, put the flip-flops together, straightened out the rain jacket, looked up Mr. Pruitt's address and filled it in, vacuumed, emptied the pencil sharpener, drank a glass of water, read her devotion, prayed the rosary with her fingers tightly feeling each bead (the Apostle's Creed, an Our Father, three Hail Marys for the increase of faith, hope, and love, and then a meditation on the Sorrowful Mysteries of the agony in the garden, the scourging at the pillar, the crowning with thorns, the carrying of the cross, and the crucifixion, which nurtured in her the virtues of sorrow for sin, purity, courage, patience, and perseverance; and so on), and then it was only 5:47 so she grabbed her trumpet and played and life was beautiful and OK and tonight she would go to the graduation ceremony and give her speech and afterwards play the trumpet one last time when everybody asked and then she would ask out Josiah because she was tired of waiting for him to do it and this time she would really do it because today was going to be wonderful, today was going to be the best day of her life, the best day ever, because the world was bright after all (even though the rain hadn't stopped from the previous

night); and Hsiù-Méi was happy and beautiful and neat and slim and smart and she had a smile on her face and it was all so so sincere.

Hsiù-Méi went for a jog at 8:00 AM after practicing her trumpet for almost two and a half hours. She jogged for two hours and then sat in the shade of the tree by the field near her home and wrote more of her poems. She tried to write one in Chinese, but the attempt was unsuccessful. She'd left Taiwan at the age of eleven and had only been back for brief vacations ever since then. She felt very American by now. Her parents still spoke Mandarin at home, but only half the time. She was forgetting how to write some of the characters.

Hsiù-Méi next went for a walk in the field, which was vibrant and exciting. Her senses felt as sharpened as a razor's edge. It had stopped raining and the sun had come out and the water on the ground was evaporating in a steamy, humid curtain. She was covered in sweat from the jog, but didn't mind the feeling. She could hear the whine of insects in the field along the edge of the woods, four, then five separate species; she had no clue what sort of bugs these were, but she could make out the differences in tones. The sun was so bright that it brought out in sharp relief all the colors of the field: mostly the yellows and greens of grasses, a few tiny blue or golden flowers, bits of bright foil trash glinting nicely, some dark brown mud with dragonflies flitting on the surface. It was beautiful.

Hsiù-Méi went over to look at the dragonflies. She could almost swear she could hear their wings whizzing through the air. One pair was copulating on the mud, the

male's head clamped over his mate's. Hsiù-Méi had seen on TV once that dragonflies were the most sexually sadistic animals in the world, that the males had specialized mouthparts to pierce the females' heads during mating so that the females couldn't get away. Many females would die from multiple matings; other ones would eat their partners.

In an evaporating puddle in the middle of the mud, some dark black tadpoles struggled for life. The puddle was too small for all of them and it was only getting smaller; some lay in the mud, dead, having lost in the competition.

The male dragonfly let go and the female flew away, one wing batting the surface of the water with a tiny sound that sent the tadpoles scurrying. A broken butterfly, its wings tearing at the end of its brief life, landed to get some moisture from the mud. It had flown crookedly. The iridescent blue of its fragile wings was cut through with holes and frayed at the edges.

Glad that she was not a dragonfly, a tadpole, or a butterfly, Hsiù-Méi stood up and smiled into the sun and felt wonderful. She walked back into her house, changed out of her sweaty clothes and sorted them into the proper laundry hampers in her closet, showered again, dried off, put on a pastel summer outfit (tan shorts, blue tank top), and laid down on her bed and enjoyed the feeling of life being wonderful and the soft mattress and the happy feeling like electricity in her head. She savored this for a minute before getting up and taking another pill from the Advil container and then going to the kitchen to make lunch, a spinach salad, half of which she ate before putting the other half in a Tupperware container for the next day's lunch. She drank a glass of water and thanked God for the food.

Back in her room, she grabbed her copy of Emily Dickinson's complete poems and fell in love with the feel of the pages in her fingers and the colors exploding in her mind as Emily described them and the fly dying on the windowsill and the longing for an absent lover, unnamed, and soon there was in her mind again that boy, Josiah, and that subtle feeling he sometimes recalled deep inside of her, almost like the euphoria of a hit, and him with everyone else watching her when she played the trumpet and her hoping that he didn't notice it when she missed a note, and then that one wonderful conversation when they talked and he said he thought the characters for her name were beautiful, unlike that bastard Michael who said they looked like chicken scratch, and Josiah was a very nice boy, a little quiet, but he wasn't mean like everyone else and he wasn't always trying to get ahead and be selfish like everyone else and he seemed to actually be interested in her, interested in talking, and he was very nice but school was already out and she wanted to make sure he didn't forget her but then she got scared at the thought that it was all in her head and she almost wanted to take another pill but she figured that she'd had enough already so she shouldn't take anymore. So she continued reading and hoping and hurting and feeling happy and then she played her trumpet some more and jogged some more and came back and showered again and it started raining, again, but she was still sunny and everything was still sunny, again, so it was OK, and she practiced her speech again and practiced her speech again and she was ready so she didn't worry except when she thought again that if she didn't ask Josiah out she would never see him

again and the thought of never again hurt so she decided again to ask him out but she didn't know how to do that, girls didn't do that in North Carolina, so she stopped thinking about it again. Again. Another pill and then things were faster again and OK and her mother made a special dinner for her and the family prayed a prayer of thanksgiving and then her parents told her that they were proud of their beautiful plum blossom for working so hard and making them proud and she was glad she made them proud because it wasn't easy to do that since her father had been a nobody in Taiwan who worked his way up the corporate ladder on his own merit and came to America to run a car parts plant and he wanted the best for his girl but wanted her to work hard too and sometimes she wondered if they wanted her to work too hard, but she tried not to worry about that. She went back to her room and read some more poetry and it all made so much sense, scanned so perfectly, the consonants and vowels blending together just right, the words capturing so much meaning. But she was nervous.

Pill.

She then changed into her dress for the evening, since it was that time, and put her trumpet in its case and put it in the trunk of the car and she got in the backseat and her parents drove her to the graduation ceremony and there were a lot of names called and then she had to give her speech and she told the audience about the future, how bright and beautiful and radiant it was, and there was applause and she was happy so happy and then she went up to Josiah afterwards and was talking to him and all of a sudden there was a lump in her throat and she

wanted to say he was cute and sweet and would he like to go get coffee or lunch or both some time over the summer or neither if that sounded stupid and he just wanted to talk? but the words were stuck, broken, and she asked him what he was doing and he said there was a party someone said he should go to and he didn't seem to want to go and she didn't want him to go, because it was John Malcolm's party, and John Malcolm was the asshole who mocked her voice while talking like a Vietnamese whore but then all these people came over and said Josiah should go with them, and he seemed scared, and she was scared, and she wanted to go to the party now because she wanted to protect him or save him or something, but at John Malcolm's house they treated him like a novelty and acted like they were his friends and kept getting him to drink and he seemed sad, but then happy and sad that he was happy and then he looked like he was in pain and he kept looking sadly at Hsiü-Méi and he kept drinking the beers as if that would make the pain go away and then he was deliriously drunk and the guys were hooting and Hsiü-Méi was scared so she took another pill to make the feeling go away, but it didn't, and the cheerleader slut was drunk and the guys said it would be funny if she gave Josiah a blowjob and Hsiü-Méi wanted to scream "NO!" but she was scared and Josiah was drunk and the guys were big and she didn't want to call home and ask for a ride because her parents would be ashamed of her and no one was going to leave the party for a while and then Summer asked if they would give her twenty bucks to do it and they said "yes" and Hsiü-Méi couldn't bear to look and she couldn't bear to leave and *this isn't the way it was*

supposed to be and she felt the density of the moment and the horror of the event hammering her mind and then she heard Josiah's voice.

"Taiyellobotaitaiyellobotaitaiyellobotaitaiyellobotaitai-yellobotai."

"What the hell is he talking about?" And the laughter.

Hsiù-Méi went outside.

It was dark.

The insects were sad and said so.

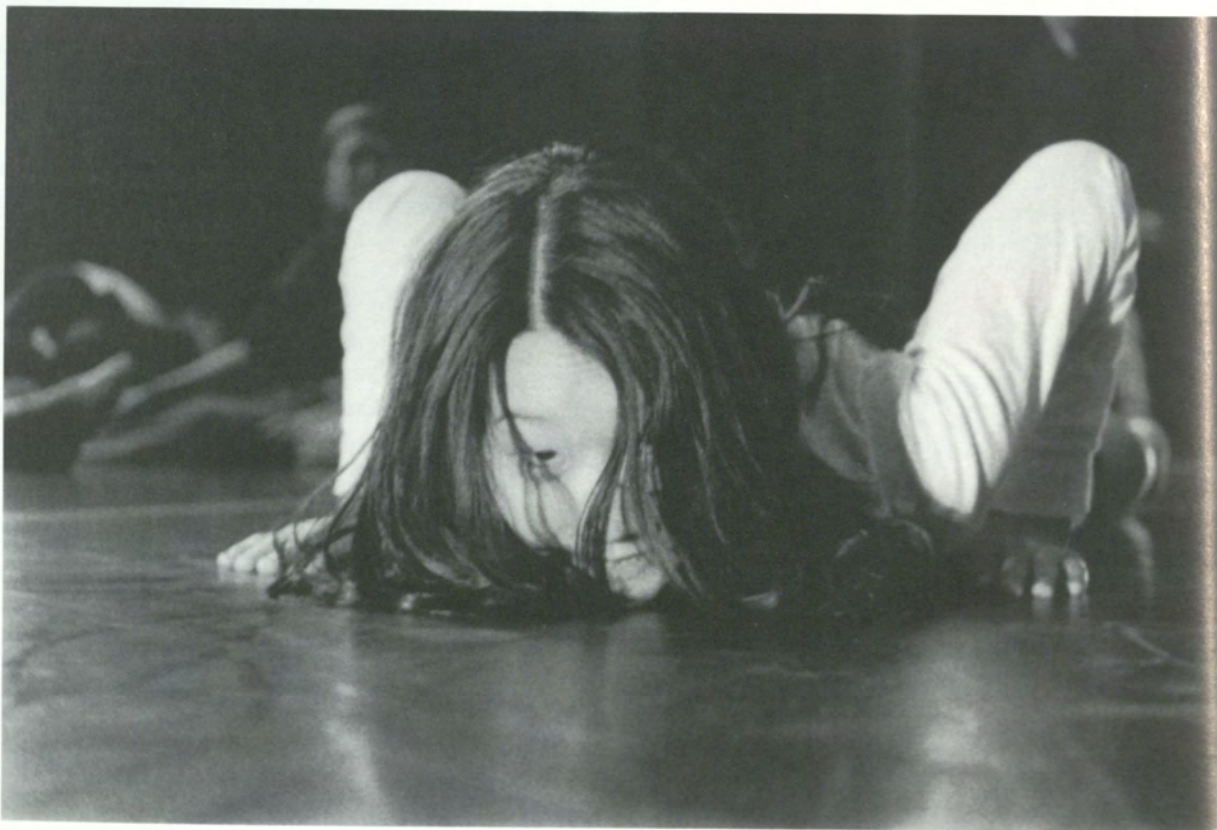
She felt something wrong.

Something in her eyes, her throat, her chest, her womb, and she wondered if Jesus loved any of them or could love any of them or if she was just holding empty beads when she prayed in the morning.

The world was moving slower again.

Hsiù-Méi took a pill... and it moved faster... and she was happy.





Eyes | THOMAS REEM

Bat Bathing

KRISTA HENNINGS

If you stand outside a cave,
face the mouth before feeding
time, a river of bats

floods out and submerges
you in a black-brown cloud
of leathery flapping.

Like from a broken dam, they rush
for the best moths and mosquitoes
in the backwoods behind you.

Your clothes and hair ripple
in wind from a thousand dry wings,
cool fabric flutters

like on any breezy October day.
Their shrieks scrape eardrums
then blend and become the soundtrack

to this baptism by flight. Sine waves
slice the night, vibrate every tiny hair
that grows from your skin, wrapping

you in reverberation, like a heavy
blanket someone left on the porch.
If you move quick, mimic the bats

with your arms, you might imagine
a fingertip barely brush the edge
of one dry wrinkled wing.

Faculty Corner: Sarah Oldenburg

EVAN SCOTT BRYSON

On Indiana summer nights my friends and I played hide-n-seek around the farm. We sailed like banshees over back cow pastures, the orchard, the cane trails and around the pond. If we slipped on the moon-dewed grasses, somehow managing to avoid a cow paddy, our next worst luck was grabbing a handful of Canadian thistle or foxtails. The leaves sliced into our fingers, stinging paper-cuts that stained our palms green...

Sarah Oldenburg's pen and ink series of weeds is elementally nostalgic. The very subject matter turns the mind's eye towards the past, with a mixture of happiness, sadness and longing. Her foursquare panels, etched in lines by turn delicate and furious, frame the sensual textures and undulations of childhood; they renegotiate our first encounters with nature in all our earliest, most glorious curiosity, where every trembling leaf or bent stem is an answer to a more

pressing question. The medium, coupled with the meticulous evocation of forms (some weeds droop, some choke, some flay; other weeds hold themselves up, reaching for light), creates a shimmering, elusive and intimate experience akin to memory. Quite a tall order for short specimens typically uprooted from gardens and flowerbeds.

The past, certainly, has its pratfalls. It implies growth and aging—and the baggage therein: abandonment, deception, pain, death. Having received her BA in Medical Illustration from Indiana University, and her MFA in Painting from American University, Oldenburg has developed the techniques and talents to detect and reproduce these conditions of living. Moreover, she invigorates the banality of weeds with the paradoxes therein: health v. disease, shelter v. cold, together v. alone. She hopes "each drawing might reflect a small truth of this contradiction in what is also the human experience: of the violence and the vulnerability of community and of the life span that comes with each life."

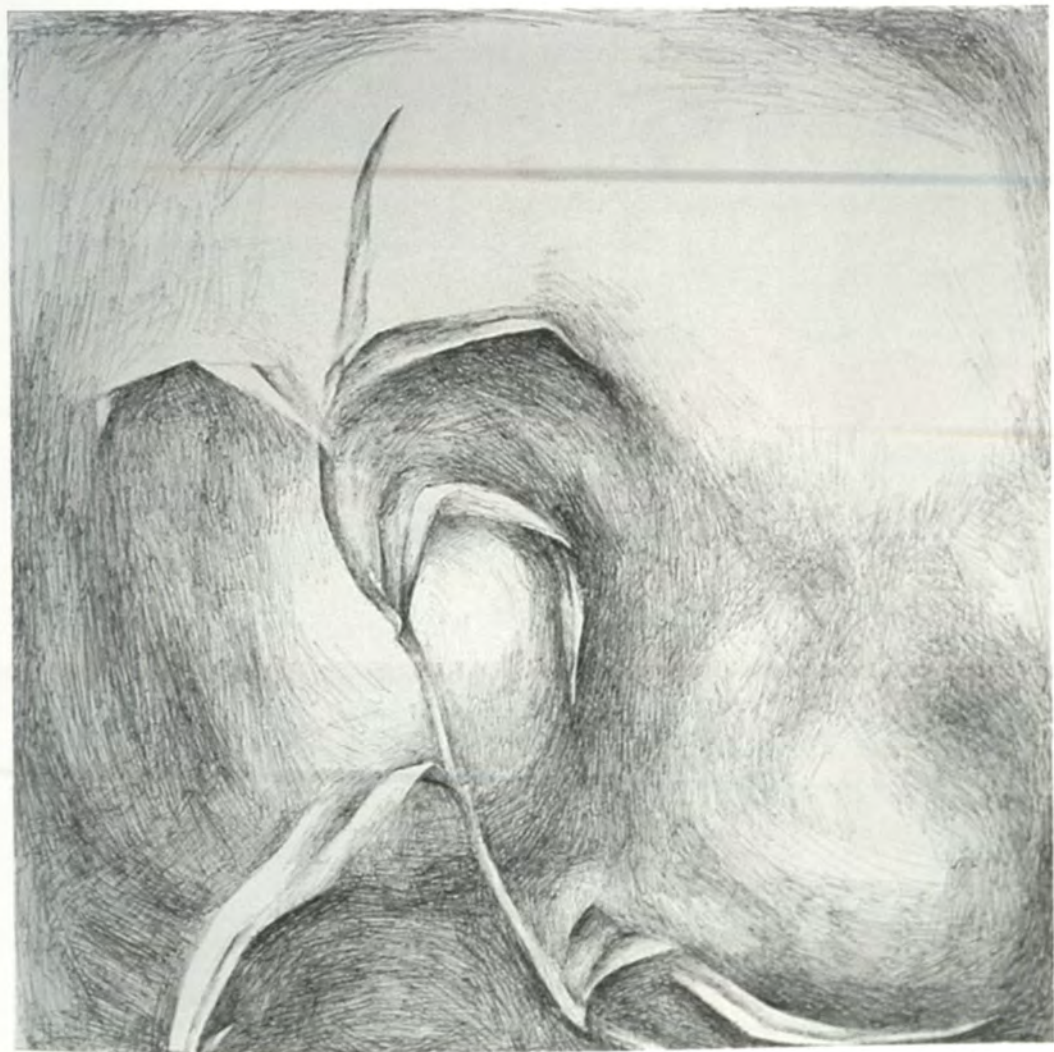
This semester marks Sarah Oldenburg's third year at Valparaiso University. She is Assistant Professor of Art.



Weeds (For Rembrandt), 2006. Ink on panel 8 x 8 in.



Weeds (Lean), 2006. Ink on panel 8 x 8 in.



Weeds (Next in Line), 2006. Ink on panel 8 x 8 in.



Weeds (Shell), 2006. Ink on panel 8 x 8 in.



Weeds (Three), 2006. Ink on panel 8 x 8 in.

Contributor's Notes

EMERALD DAVIS is a freshmen English and classics major. "Roadside in Wyoming" is based on a family summer vacation. Her family took countless roadtrips when she was younger, and the image of Spotted Horse stayed with her for years. Spotted Horse was an actual town in the atlas, and when she and her family visited, they found it wasn't much more than a man and his house. Emerald loves to travel, and though people may think Wyoming is a no-man's-land boring state, it is one of her favorite places to visit.

MARTY DENICOLO is a senior majoring in political science with a minor in philosophy. He enjoys beer and Lake Michigan. He also likes breaking things and yelling. He hopes to eventually earn a Ph.D. in political science, and his dissertation will be on the normative political assumptions underlying the act of drinking on stormy piers. Either that or religion and politics. Prrr Teet!

BENJAMIN GAULKE bitterly regrets having used up all of his wittiness on last semester's "Contributors' Notes." He apologizes to all people who have been irrevocably harmed by his poor choice of an epigraph for 秀梅. He is also eternally indebted to all of the friends who have helped him with his writing. Finally, in all seriousness, he will write for food. Please.

LIZ HANSON'S "Thirty Minutes of Your Time" is a chapter excerpted from her novel in progress. Liz is a senior English, art, and humanities major (strongly agree) from Wheaton, Illinois (sometimes) who plans to begin graduate work in English in the fall (very likely) at Loyola University Chicago or Marquette University (not sure).

KRISTA HENNINGS is a senior creative writing student from White Bear Lake, Minnesota. She tries to learn from her mistakes, but rarely does.

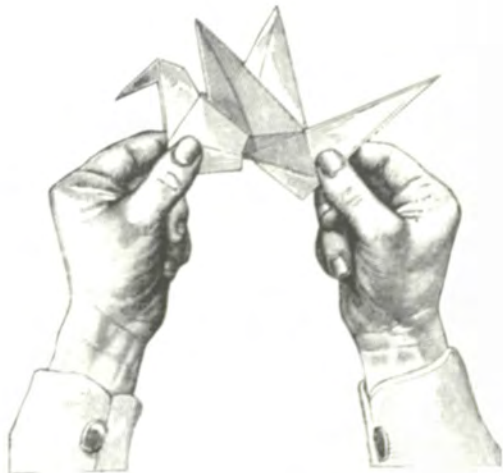
TRACY MONSON is so very thankful for many things and people.

MEGAN MURPHY is a senior art and English major from St. Louis, MO. Her photograph "Yellow Frog" is part of a series about the way people represent themselves through lawn ornamentation.

KAHT NORTH graduates this May with a BSFA in photography. Upon graduating, she will return to her home in Vermont where she will continue to pursue her love of art. In parting she would like to thank all the people in her

life that have made her who she is today. In addition, she wishes to thank all her models who were more than willing to strike a pose and “hold it”.

MELANIE SCHAAP would like to thank her friends and family for being wonderful.



Contributor's Notes

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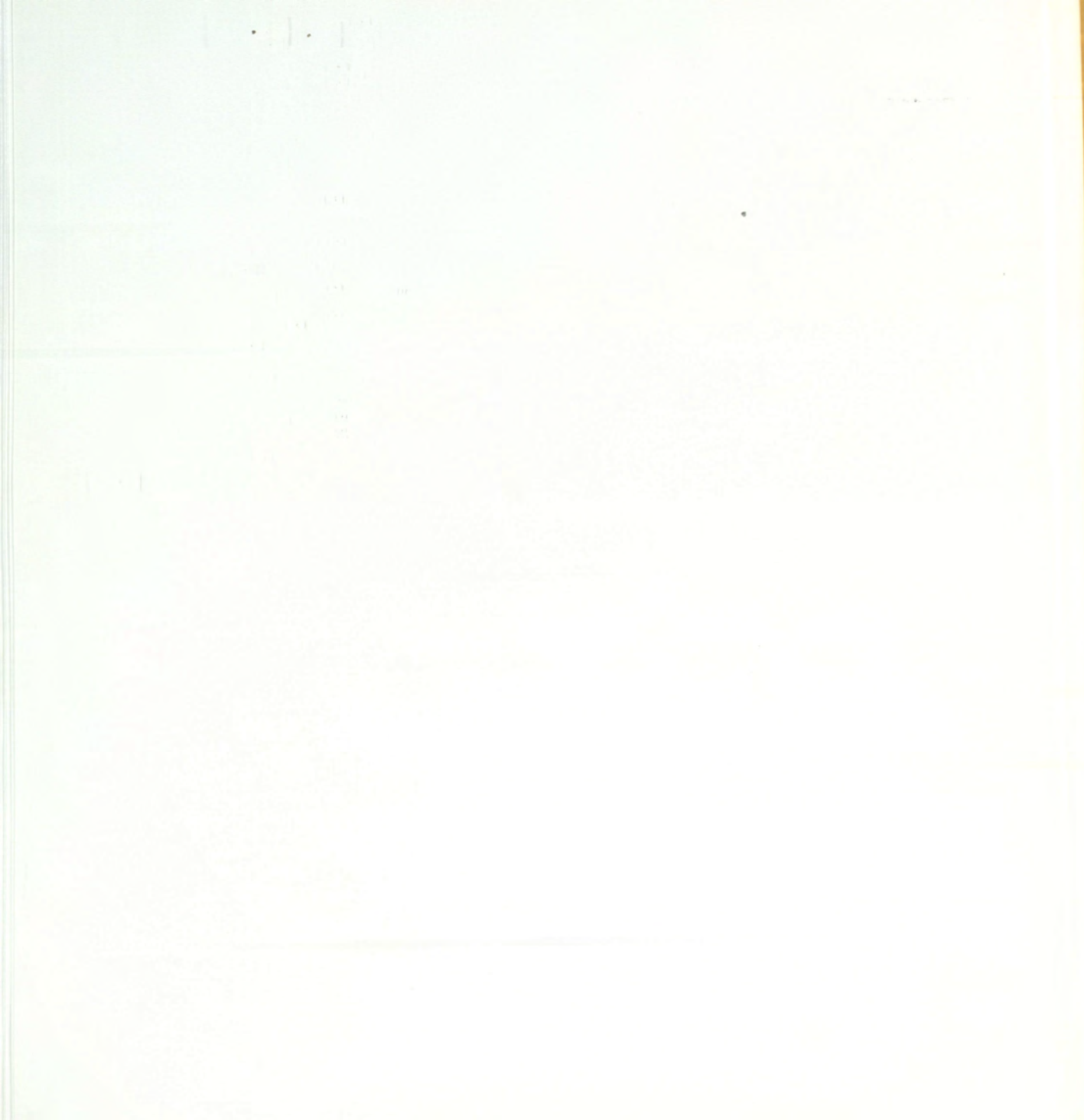
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Forward
at bike speed.