

Rollins College

Rollins Scholarship Online

Brushing - Historical

Brushing

2003

Brushing, 2003, Vol. 31

Rollins College Students

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.rollins.edu/historical_brushing



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rollins College Students, "Brushing, 2003, Vol. 31" (2003). *Brushing - Historical*. 44.
https://scholarship.rollins.edu/historical_brushing/44

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Brushing at Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Brushing - Historical by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

ROLLINS COLLEGE
Brushing



Brushing

ROLLINS COLLEGE
LITERARY AND ART JOURNAL
VOLUME XXXI, 2003

Brushing

Editor

Myriah A. Hampton

Editorial Assistant

Bill Harle

Fiction Editor

Darlyn Finch

Poetry Editor

Meekah Ahuvia

Assistant Poetry Editor/

Web Page Editor

Barry Hall

Art Editor

Briggs Jones

Assistant Art Editor

Allison Hertz

Staff

Dientje Francis

Jamie Morris

Faculty Advisor

Michael Kula

Cover Art

Anne Elsea

Published at Rollins College, *Brushing* reflects the college's generous support. Published works are selected by the student board and editor.

Brushing is published in the spring of each year at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. All works published are the work of members of the Rollins community.

Copyrights for individual pieces are retained by the contributors. No work herein may be copied or reproduced without permissions of the copyright owner.

Brushing Copyright 2003 Rollins College

Works

POETRY

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|---------------------|
| 7 | 1986 | Whit Cheever |
| 8 | Days | Caity Brown Geist |
| 8 | Middle Ground | Caity Brown Geist |
| 9 | A Battle Lost | Maureen Phelan |
| 10 | Eves | Anne Schlotterlein |
| 11 | Requiem | Anne Schlotterlein |
| 12 | Sunday Easy | Michael C. Trottier |
| 13 | Fireflies | Christine Harrison |
| 14 | Sunday Morning | Dionne Butler |
| 15 | Puppet Show | Amanda K. Pederson |
| 17 | The Truth is... | Sara Harris |
| 19 | Dinner Date | Sara Harris |
| 20 | Elk Mountain Frost | Cody Wilkie |
| 21 | Cogito Ergo Ero | Alan Nordstrom |
| 22 | Soul Sailing | Alan Nordstrom |
| 23 | What Price Fame | Haley Ortega |
| 23 | Patience | Haley Ortega |
| 24 | Botany In Action | Christopher Joslyn |
| 25 | The Holly-King | Christopher Joslyn |
| 27 | Detour Ahead | Rhonda Fay George |
| 29 | Ce n'est pas un poème. | Sarah Kathryn Moore |
| 30 | Hand | Sarah Kathryn Moore |
| 31 | Revolution | Kendra Corrie |
| 33 | peace corps | Brahm Fay |
| 34 | Untitled | Kerry Bruce |
| 34 | Untitled | Kerry Bruce |
| 35 | Morning at the Lake | Chris Robinson |
| 36 | The Things We Keep | Julie Langheim |
| 37 | Buy a Gun Poem | R. Coleman Walker |

Works

ART

- | | | |
|----|---|------------------|
| 38 | Giovanni | Maureen Phelan |
| 39 | Gucci | Amanda Colberson |
| 40 | Lil Dog | Amanda Colberson |
| 41 | Graffiti | Amanda Colberson |
| 42 | Route 66 | Maya Greven |
| 43 | Chaco Canyon | Maya Greven |
| 44 | Untitled | Anne Elseon |
| 45 | Untitled | Anne Elseon |
| 46 | Untitled | Anne Elseon |
| 47 | Uncle Larry | Barry Alan Hall |
| 48 | An American President: Portraits of Unity | Barry Alan Hall |
| 49 | Portrait of a Gypsy in Greece | Amanda Stevens |
| 50 | Untitled | Amanda Stevens |
| 51 | Punkers | Amanda Stevens |

FICTION

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 52 | Present Tense | Sarah Kathryn Moore |
| 60 | The Illusion of Top-Shelf Liquor | J. Byrd Marshall |
| 64 | Punta Conejo | Kevin Miller |
| 68 | Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Spider | Sarah Cowie |
| 70 | When Nikki Went Away | Eliza Osborn |
| 80 | Rust | Rachel Polley |
| 84 | Finish at Canaveral National Seashore | Katherine Vaccaro |
| 89 | The Shelf Life of an Artist | Matt Rothschild |
| 91 | Yellow Sheets and Olive Oil | Fiona Lapham |

Editors Note

Brushing is currently celebrating nearly ninety years of creativity at Rollins College. This year's edition of *Brushing* reflects the original vision of an entirely new staff.

This year alone *Brushing* received a vast amount of submissions, increased the journal's acceptance rate, invited a prominent visiting speaker, and hosted two public readings.

Thank you to the entire Rollins community for supporting this journal. Thank you to all of the members of the community for submitting their works.

Three cash rewards were awarded to the best piece of poetry, art, and fiction in the magazine. Congratulations to Chrisopher Joslyn for the best work of poetry, judged and awarded by Alan Nordstrom. Congratulations to Anne Elsea for the best work of art, featured on the cover of the journal. Finally, congratulations to Eliza Osborn for the best work of fiction, judged and awarded by C. Michael Curtis. Thank you to all of the judges for kindly giving their time to review the submissions.

1986

Whit Cheever

Stomping feet and clapping hands
Roaring noise from rows of fans
Thousands root for the red and white...
The Sox will rule the world tonight

Victory waits with one more out
Thoughts of triumph start to sprout...
Moment lingers as hopes imbue...
One more strike...our dreams come true

Dad's denial's slowly fleeing...
His eyes accept the sights he's seeing
The curse of the Babe will soon be cured
Ending the anguish that Boston's endured;

Dad's finest champagne from thirty-four
Will not be lonely anymore
His anxious hands grip trembling glass...
And approach the cork as seconds pass

Time is blurred in times like these
When reality's lost but memories freeze
Two men down in the ninth, full count
Eternities pass as our tensions mount

The pitch is thrown; the champagne spills
Dad's glass, half empty, finally fills
But tangled up in Red Sox fate...
Bambino's curse is at the plate

The ball is smacked in Buckner's direction
We'll win the season of fate's perfection
A bouncing grounder; a routine play
Approaching first, Bill gets in its way

He lowers his glove...the ball slides past
And time realigns- it happens so fast...
The champagne slips from shivering hands,
Shattering glass pours rain on the fans

October night misled my eyes
Of dreams consumed in autumn skies
Visions fade like startled ghosts
Of Boston's hearts that came so close

Days

Caity Brown Geist

If yesterday was today and today was tomorrow
I would pick up the phone and call you.
You would answer and I would tell you how I really felt then, last year
last month
last week
now
I would yell at
you for lying
And making me laugh
And making me cry
And somehow giving me the best
And worst days of my life
But today is today
And you called me last night
And even though you're too far away to touch
All I said was my day was fine

Middle Ground

Caity Brown Geist

we met in the middle.
you, knowingly infamous with dirty hair and history
me, seemingly innocent with busted heart and morals
you, with a new leaf mentality
me, with a sudden need for excess
we had our past in common.
we admired each other for those little missing pieces of ourselves.

A Battle Lost

Maureen Phelan

The knight was weary,
His glory expired.
He was always fighting.
He was growing tired.
The demands of knighthood
Were too much to bear.
He'd begun to show
Some wear and tear.
The sparkling eyes
No longer shone.
People forgot
He was flesh and bone.
The dragon was large,
And he was so small.
Against all his fears,
He was nothing at all.
He brought up his weapon,
The fires exploded.
He knew all along-

The pistol was loaded.

He fell to the ground.

His life it unfurled.

The brilliant young man,
Done in by the world.

Eves

Anne Schlotterlein

Two Eves walked side-by-side
Intent on their journey in a lesser Eden.
But it was dusk, and one stumbled
Over the philosophy of a serpent.
But she regained her feet, and ran
For she knew that her friend would fall
And she would help her stand again.
When they had both stumbled,
And both stood anew
They walked on, hand-in-hand
Disregarding Adams,
Like so many uneaten apples,
Strewn along the ground.
And then they continued on,
With the greater Eden on the horizon.

Requiem (For the September 11 Memorial Service, 2002)

Anne Schlotterlein

There is a breathless pause before the first swoop of violins
Like a swimmer before diving into an unknown pool---
Hesitation, fear, expectation and that unusual mortal bravery
Blending into one silent sob and then....

The surface breaks. The room is flooded, saturated with Sound
Notes shiver and hang off of the chandeliers like morning rain
Suspended breathlessly above the wailing crowd.
The air is thick with music, like a fog that coats
Skin and hair and lungs and souls
Until all is drenched with note upon note....

A beautiful bit of mourning. Coloring all with a rainbow
Shade on shade of beautiful sadness made flesh
Drowning all who hear it, and we are willingly drowned.
A rainbow of mourning. Beneath the blackest day,
The blackest dream imaginable,
We are slicked over, all is slicked over
With suffused color

And Lacyromosa drips from our eyes, streams of Scarlet
Sadness flaming against argent cheeks and burning pure.
And Dies irae sears us white and clean and we, as one,
Breathe in this ocean of resonating darkened rainbow.

And we breathe out again.

Sunday Easy

Michael C. Trottier

Do you want me to draw a bath for you,
Fry some potatoes for you,
Scratch your back for you?
This is life for two and Sunday makes it easy.

Last night I dreamt of a shy, shy woman
Who did not look like you but was somehow.
Thin and young with fresh, unfounded fears,
That never flapped untested wings.

Do you want me to make that breakfast now,
Watch you play with the cat now,
Discuss our plans now?
Hear the cat meow as Sunday makes it pleasant.

Last night I took her no's as just, just maybe
When she did not speak true but was somehow.
A face, yours, beamed trust, embracing years,
That never flagged while testing things.

Would you like me to start the dishes, then
Hear your dreams while drying them,
Tell of my love then?
Speaking of my dream while Sunday makes it easy.

Fireflies

Christine Harrison

A silky sense of sanity plays hopscotch with my toes,
with layers of uncertainty much too shaky to propose.
A toiled edge of nothingness leaves me painted to the skies
like a bird in isolation, or the trail of fireflies.

I see into the endless, and in this endless I am lost.
While these seas of apprehension give me reasons to be tossed.
I am seared with each sensation, yet too numb for vanity,
in a time where every moment sheds a false reality.

So I lay naked in the desert as the sand rips me away.
I can't forsake what has been absent, cannot leave what will not stay.
At the core of confrontation, I am cornered into this
satisfaction of a purpose in the wake I seem to miss.

So to build these correlations, say the moon to rising tides;
is to find these contradictions in the realm of my insides.
Yes in a sense we are creation, but our marks deny real depth,
for in the path of predecessors we are yet to have our breath.

So with these thoughts I see us, in the eyes of fireflies.
In the visions cast upon them, breaking in the darkened skies.
And as the sun remains our stopwatch, counting lives as lives go on,
we are that single instant, and in that instant we are gone.

Sunday Morning

Dionne Butler

Making use of my bellbottom's
back pocket,
i slipped the pack of Marlboro Menthol's
into the space and watched
the dark blues of the sky turn
over and into yellow streaks
of sunlight
from your kitchen window.
it was a long night,
sandalwood and rosehips
mingling with the stale
jose cuervo that lingered in the air,
and having yet to clean up the beer cans
and loose ashes from careless partygoers.
i sipped my coffee gingerly,
all bleary-eyed,
and lit a defense mechanism, hoping
the smoke would hide my insecurities.
finding solace within your raging sapphire
pools of eyes;
i fell apart.
simply,
slowly like honey,
i melted.
without a reason,
without a way
to remedy my hangover
or my heart.

Puppet Show

Amanda K. Pederson

my jointed body is dressed in pale green,
blue ribbons tied tightly across my chest,
feet bound by lace,
limbs poised,
waiting to perform

you call me your puppet
but i do not respond,
not to the warm hand on my braided hair
or even the plum-colored roses you place by my side

yet when you tug at my strings
with your full weight,
i dance across the room on wooden toes,
no hesitation in my soundless steps

i see now the smoke in your eyes,
the flicker and cruelty of your gaze,
you give me life with your fingers' movements,
yet balance me carelessly on the very edge of the stage

you have not seen or felt
my fingers clenched around your heart,
or the veil i carry to cover your pain,
not the woman i will become
or even the girl i was,
a vision of pigtails and crinoline,
your doll even then

you refuse to acknowledge my faltering step,
the cracks in my painted face,
the smell of dust on my heels,
the weakening of the strings you have pulled so tightly

there will be ice and autumn leaves beneath my feet
as i walk away,
giving noise to my departure,
my steps heavy for the very first time,
heralding what is to come,
each footfall reminding you that i will soon be out of reach

my vibrant eyes will not waver,
will not turn back to see your arms lifted in vain,
looking back across the distance,
silently watching me leave,
awestruck that i do so freely,
your stilted choreography absent in my hollow frame

dagger tucked beneath scarlet robes,
cut strings trailing behind me,
feet connecting with solid earth,
I walk

The Truth is...

Sara Harris

The truth is:

Sex does not equal love.
But sex sells.

Cookies always burn on the bottom first –
Where you can't see.

The truth is:

The world is filled with Ledas as well as swans.

Global warming is real.
SUVs are the hottest selling cars.

The truth is:

Apathy is a world wide epidemic.
Those who care are radicals

There are too many lawyers.
They fight without passion.

The truth is:

We are SURROUNDED by conformity.
Go ahead, look!

There's plenty of food to go around
But we are pigs.

The truth is:

We are a ticking bomb...
Bombs are self destructive...

People too often live their lives by "would haves and could haves"
The past has passed. Move on!

The truth is:

Silence can be too loud and
it's easy to be alone in a crowded room.

Not all smiling people are happy just as
Not all tears are genuine.

The truth is:

Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder
It's in the eye of the advertiser.

Serenity often sleeps through chaos.
Chaos is often most controlled.

And the truth is:

Jaws drop in ecstasy
As well as horror.

Dinner Date

Sara Harris

Last night you hung your mask on the bedpost.
Almost forgot it on your way out.

What a tragedy that would have been.
Pale skin never sees the sunlight.
Your naked body whispers secrets in my ears.
I swear I'll never tell.

Tonight clothes coat you in silence.
At dinner you flirt with the waitress. She has the name of a pet rabbit.
Bitsy.

Covered in clothes, plenty of cleavage.
You order the most expensive bottle of wine
and wink.

I sit at the table naked.
I gave up wearing clothes,
I told you I forgot them.
You seem confused, though not embarrassed.
Perhaps you should forget your clothes one day.
You laugh at me.

Silly idea. Should've known.
As we leave you place a hand on the small of my bare back
And a forty dollar tip on the table.

Elk Mountain Frost

Cody Wilkie

'Tis when I'm stuck in the throes around
That I reminisce of my former ground:
The hills too grand to be called hills
And the woods that stir with nature's sound.

I long for stars enlightened by
The kind of cold which stills a sigh
And freezes the thoughts that warm my head;
I see their gaze with my inward eye.

And frost performing what it will
When a world in motion is seemingly still.
As long as my two eyes have thirst,
I'll homeward gaze and drink my fill.

COGITO ERGO ERO

Alan Nordstrom

The thought all this will fade and someday die,
That we who see and sing so vibrantly
Will molder into dust while mourners cry
Inspires us to believe it cannot be.

It cannot, must not be that all's for naught,
That this exquisite world so finely wrought,
Which culminates in us who can be taught
To love it well, will vanish like a thought.

Such thought must have a mind where it resides,
Nor is thought lost, in deeper consciousness,
And we are thought and all else thought besides
And shall endure beyond mere wish and guess.

If thinking makes it so, all this shall be—
Then hold this thought awhile and we shall see.

SOUL SAILING

Alan Nordstrom

On days like this I hear the winds of grace
Breeze by my ears and charm me out to sea,
Leaving the shore behind, turning my face
Horizonward where earth and sky agree,

As if I might sail off this churning sphere
And fly beyond diurnal gravity
Aloft in the essential air, all clear
Of downcast doubt, supremely free.

These winds are blowing ever, only I
Refuse at times to heed their call or see
The sea alluring me to lift my eye
And know the sky as where I yearn to be.

This gust of geist has roused me to transcend,
A little while at least, my mortal end.

What Price Fame

Halley Ortega

Oh, fat envelope
That touts I have amazing talent
That sends me honeyed promises
Of glory and delight.
For I have been selected out of thousands
To have my words blazoned 'cross a crisp page
To clutch in my ink-smudged fist- immortality
(O, Elysium!)
But I must respond quickly if I wish to take
My place amongst the greats.
Shelley, Millay, Dickinson, was it cheaper
For you, because of inflation?
My own copy of an anthology that is
Destined to sit beside
"Leaves of Grass" or "And Still I Rise". If I
Act no, act now, I will have my unearthly
Gift unleashed upon the masses.
For only \$49.95
Plus S&H.

Patience

Halley Ortega

Most beautiful flower of Mount Carmel
We've come to sit at your knee and ask
Why.
We know you'll stay mute.
But those tears you shed are our as well.
And we have to ask.

We can wait.

AWARDED BEST POEM

Botany In Action

Christopher Joslyn

This morning I found you before the rain,
Before a shower, before makeup and hairspray,
Before you made your breath like mint,
Before morning prayer, soap, earrings, and perfume,
Before hot water, breakfast and a cigarette, when
You were six brown leaves dancing in the wind

This morning I found you before the phone rang,
Before the first bill was paid, before your impatiens woke to thirst,
Before you cleaned rough white crystals of sleep from the corner of your eye,
Before you took any medicine, before you looked in any mirror,
Before your life began to need you, when
You were smooth stones at the bottom of a cold, fast-moving stream

This morning I found you before you touched the powdered wing of your own
early beauty
With an attempt to be beautiful.
Your hair a million unmapped directions, a survey of the wildness of sleep,
Your body rising, falling with your breath, before you dressed in different
rhythm.

This morning I found you when you were botany in action,
Partly bud and partly bloom, a scarlet flower drinking air and light.

The Holly-King

Christopher Joslyn

crucified on the updraft,
resurrected in the jetstream,
holy man,
resonant man,
boots in the mud, hands
wrist-deep in genetic history,
w/ new beard coming to his jaw,
he is the young weatherman
unaware which way the wind blows,
instead he roams through history
coming out of the sea with shells and seaweed hanging in his hair.

he has learned in the deep
that we need a new name for man
— who turns into an endless parade of moses —
man who is a dancer on desolation street
past houses w/ cataracted windows in porchlight.

Man
who is sad here,
thinks deeply here,
sips a cup of coffee on the curb.

A new name for man gone mad because the car wouldn't start
man gone mad because the hems of his clothes have gotten tattered
from the ground.

We need a new name for man,
one lacking ambiguity,
one that is fresh like lightning
and as sharp as young geology.

we need a new name for man the banjo-player the potato-eater
the seer of visions
man the evolutionary fuckup
man the hollyking
man the seeker after ravens.

all these things demand a new word of power,
something to rise from the horizon like an atomic monster,
something to command the single eye, saying, 'look'.
We need a word for the one who does these things
who takes these drugs,

sleeps insane hours,
who discovers the salt in tears
& explores unknown portions of the day

we need a new name for man
who digs the eyes of the goddess
no matter what the color,
no matter what the goddess
no matter what the pulse rate of the lady who arrives in silk or in
cotton or in rayon

or in
nothing at all –
pure meaning in this pulse, pure meaning in the chambers of the
goddess heart,
we've had drums for 100,000 yrs. to describe the sound,
& recently morse code & streamtrain locomotives have chorused w/
the rhythm.
now we have midi, decks, tape loops, keyboards, light shows, drugs,
and drums

again
to animate that heartbeat among crowds of Man,
Man the monger of the temporary
Man the hoarder of the ordinary
who needs a new name –
& out of the caverns of the sea, the Name comes,
a low rumble,
the final word to supplant the rantings of man
the new word to give new color to the situation (& to all situations
everywhere)

it is a name spoken by the moon
and by wolves and birth
and endless rituals
where we move in circles
like wreaths of bone and muscle.

It is a name spoken by waves breaking at the shore
In their salty howl of dissolution
It is spoken by the gravity of distant planets
And the fall of an apple from a tree.

It is a name programmed into stormclouds
& encoded in the movement of a crowd across the street
it is spoken by the mountains, and by crows
following predators' tracks to fresh prey

Detour Ahead

Rhonda Fay George

I go the jazz beat
soulful,

Coltrane, Holliday

The style of "x" crossed glasses
Tilted toward tall bottles of red
And late night walks
Under sophisticated October skies.

I find some subtle road
Nearby,

Especially at dusk in June
When the cricket's choir plays faint
And heat perfumes suffocate
The evening breeze's deep exhales.

I go the detour
Ahead

In a plastic chair,
Stereo propped close,
The blue-gray sky
Low
Dripping
Into the button
Down shirt,
Panties and bra
(that hint at what they hide)

secret part of me
until

loud lumps of life
smooth inside my head
and the pompous moon—
too early to reign, makes

the mellow night tip toe slow,
lightly

as I lay my head on its feathery pillow
drifting with the naked voice that saunters east
strolling beyond this sultry boulevard to
the twilight lounge in blue

where martinis, stirred
by long olive-topped toothpicks
are sipped and mood is sung
like smoke from a film-noir cigarette.

Ce n'est pas un poème.

Sarah Kathryn Moore

No, I'll tell you what poetry is. It's the single perfect curl in my hair on a humid day. It is the bruise on my calf where I fell trying to walk down a hill in four inch heels. There is poetry in the way we are letting our friendship wither, slowly and softly so as not to hurt the other's feelings. Poetry is the way you overenunciate your t's- "I don't know why you can't just let it go."
Poetry is holding on too long.

Poetry is not, however, me with my head shoved under the pillow because next door they've been going at it all night, and every time I start to flirt with sleep, a "YES!" heaves me ungently back into consciousness. The walls here are thin. The sheets are thin, and I shiver in my bed alone. You are always warm, so you don't understand the chilly misery of waspwing blankets at midnight.
Poetry is not ever being cold.

Poetry is also not the way moonlight silvers your hair to birch-bark instead of honey. But don't worry. You and I were poems together one spring when we, ever the innocents, snagged the two most notorious troublemakers in high school. Of course, there was no poetry whatsoever when we bawled together on your couch after they left us.
Poetry is out of the ordinary.

We hated how Miss Neill would pick apart poems like chicken carcasses, separating the edible from the inedible, searching for hidden meanings where none existed. But let me give you twenty words in strings too tight to pull apart, too brave to hold us together. This is for you, but it is not a poem. It is too full of grace.

here is tuesday's child.
she is a string of pearls.
she is a musical phrase.
she is a sweeping arc.

Hand

Sarah Kathryn Moore

I am wholly selfish, and so have nothing to give you; my smile, my small impatient hands are mine and mine alone. When you see my onstage (you hopeful, you innocent infected with nighttime and footlights) I am not smiling and singing for you. If you are touched, if your throat tightens or your hands tense, that is accidental. It is not my gift to you.

I am wholly selfish. I horde my Self mouselike in a hollow, leaving you with neither dust nor crumb. I will not offer anything at all.

See here. My hands are empty.

Take my advice, you moony would-be

lover, with your carnations and your compliments, roses and regrets, and turn away, you brokenhearted, your pleading hands open and palms stretched taut, I have nothing to give you:

only this. The shadow of a hand holding flowers lengthening, lengthening, thinning unrecognizable into a poem written late at night.

Revolution

Kendra Corrie

I want to talk about a revolution
Like the kind you find in
Songs suppressed by the hierarchy of institution.
Lyrical messages of freedom and contribution.
Moving the masses to become part of the solution.
I want to talk about a revolution.

I want to talk about a revolution
Where men are no longer defined by what they have
But who they are.
And it's acceptable to meet your future mate in a library,
Rather than a bar
Because the sexes have found autonomy
Somewhere in between Venus and Mars.
I want to talk about a revolution.

I want to talk about a revolution
So women will stop allowing themselves to be characterized
By their size,
And people of all shapes and colors are thought to be beautiful
For the light in their eyes,
Because beauty is not beautiful
When health and integrity are compromised.
I want to talk about a revolution.

I want to talk about a revolution
Of the lines we have drawn on the Earth—
Creating a time when 'Earth' is the only answer to the
Question of place of birth.
And humans lose monopoly of the food chain
Because balance is at the core of its worth.
I want to talk about a revolution.

I want to talk about a revolution,
How we can break down old methods and
Rebuild with new systems
That don't include guns or nuclear fission
Because when love and peace are our only ammunition
We can flex our power by remembering that the body cannot move
Without the mind's permission.
I want to talk about a revolution.

I went on a search for a how-to on revolution,
But with a view of the big picture came
Massive confusion.
So I returned to the wisdom of Mother Earth,
Then Father Sun.
Their advice was to be mindful,
And remember to have fun,
But most importantly
When you see an opportunity for change—
Don't run.
Because a revolution begins
With the revolution of one.

peace corps

Brahm Fay

i showed her something I wrote
today
she smiled, like they do
we felt safe
for a grand and temporary moment

something happened to her recently
something significant

i could relate to her only so far as to
bring back the smile
for a moment
then it left again and
I was useless, again

not worthless mind you
useless hurts less, and so
we made an arrangement to meet again
to divulge the way things are
and take notice of how they are not

clouds usually do move swiftly
even briskly, when the weather speaks of change.
those mysterious jet streams
change the situation in ways that cant be seen
it will be the right thing,
as long as I am patient enough
to notice it for good weather

Untitled

Kerry Bruce

Here I lay with you beneath the stars.
And falls into place.
Not an erotic moment—just the right one.
Not perfectly, surely—was there ever a more imperfect one?
 But it's right, here beneath the stars.
'There's just you and there's just me now.
We've lost our forever, but we've found each other.
What was wrong with that night?
 Bug bites, sticks, and dirt, and all,
 Covering us, making their bed as we made ours.
But perfect, here beneath the stars, with you.
I think we will always be beneath the stars, you and I.

Untitled

Kerry Bruce

Here is something:

In my pocket I found
Eighteen cents and half a roll of Lifesavers.

In this dream I has found the same things—
'The Lifesavers saved my life in the dream.

I always carry half a pack of Lifesavers in my pockets.
Here's why:

 If I'm ever in a flash flood and I look in my pocket,
 If all goes according to the dream,
 I'll become the size of a person who a Lifesaver-sized Lifesaver could
 save.

Sometimes dreams are stupid.
Sometimes people are stupid.
Sometimes I am stupid.

Sometimes dreams are prophetic, however:
 'This once, I went camping and I had a dream
 I am sure foretells my death.
It didn't tell how or when, or much of anything else. Just this:
I will die one day, and I'll be between the ages of twenty and...
Okay, so in the dream there was no cap, but being twenty, It's still
 possible...

Morning at the Lake

Chris Robinson

Smooth sailing through a calm day, sun is bright wind is fair
Joy absorbed through the skin drips anxiety,
Worry and loneliness dribble down,
Sleep into the ground.

And in this moment the world stops, give
Time to think under young elms, sun-bleached eyes +
Chlorine with immaculate smell wafting mingles with
The vapors rising off the lake like ghosts,
Ghosts of the night under cypress-shaded underwater jungle.

To stand on the dock, bare back to the sun, line in the water
No expectation of a catch, this freedom over life while
They watch behind air-conditioned windows + filtered light.
Envy, jealous of the joy, sun washes skin like water
Getting hotter, step into the light and smile.

A morning like this continues all day, brings a knowing smile to my
lips
Unfelt warmth from within yearns to mix with the sunlight.
Sorrow holds no ground with the lake in mind and
A great blue heron smiles wading in the sunny water.
Doubt washed away, joy sparkles in the sunny water.
Warmth in my heart all day, swim in the sunny water.

The Things We Keep

Julie Langheim

It was the way our eyes
 collided,
upon first setting sight.
Two paths merged together,
 one heart, one mind.

It was the air of confidence,
that once encompassed you.

Your hair. Your laugh.
 Your looks
 Curled feather lashes.
 Pupas that pierced me through.

It was the lines you slowly traced,
playing the guessing game on my back.
The way you bit your lower lip,
gazed away, said, "like that."

It was the way you grasped me.
Held me.
Restred.
Your head, heavy in my lap.

It was Tent Rocks, classic rock.
Boulder and a flat.

It was Ottis Redding arms.
These arms.

Lonely. My arms. Your arms.
Longing. Yearning.

Ottis Redding songs,
still remind me of you.

It was stolen kisses.
speechless passion.
It was motions pounding.
Bathwater splashing.
It was moonlit days, sun kissed nights.
Peaceful silence, summer skies.

'That's what it was. In us it sleeps.
It is our secret. In us it keeps.

Buy a Gun Poem

R. Coleman Walker

This is my saddest poem

Because you've got a right... that I think is wrong

But since George Bush spent 137 million...to buy an election...

Maybe you should buy a gun

So it's true... everything can be bought... our nation included

So how free are we... when our nation is for sale... 137 million to buy an election

So maybe you should buy a gun... and bullets too

Bargain prices...at Texas gun shows... 137 dollars for a pistol...

1.37 of a pack of bullets

So maybe you should buy a gun

And there are loopholes large enough to run through

So in America, any asshole can buy a gun... and yes maybe you should... buy a gun

Then maybe you should find yourself...on a bus or jet plain... bound for Pennsylvania

The avenue not the state

Oh now wait this isn't... a someone should shoot the president poem

Oh no this is a maybe you should buy a gun poem... because people have that right

What you decide is right...to be done with that right is your own doing

Though someone probably deserves to be shot

And if you're not wise to his tricks you just might find

He is deciding it is you

So maybe you should buy a gun...hide it your backpack, slacks, jacket

Maybe someone needs to shoot someone

Who makes all these shootings possible

Thanks to loopholes large enough for armies to march through

Of course if I had...137 million to use to buy a nation... we wouldn't

Be having these problems... but I don't

Though I do have...137 dollars for a pistol... and 1.37 for bullets

Yah maybe they all need to be shot

Erase our mistakes and start over

And this isn't a kill the president poem... so don't arrest me

This is however a someone who makes the shooting possible should be shot poem

So maybe you should buy a gun



Giovanni
Maureen Phelan



Gucci
Amanda Colberson



Lil Dog
Amanda Colberson



Graffiti
Amanda Colberson



Route 66
Maya Greven



Chaco Canyon
Maya Greven

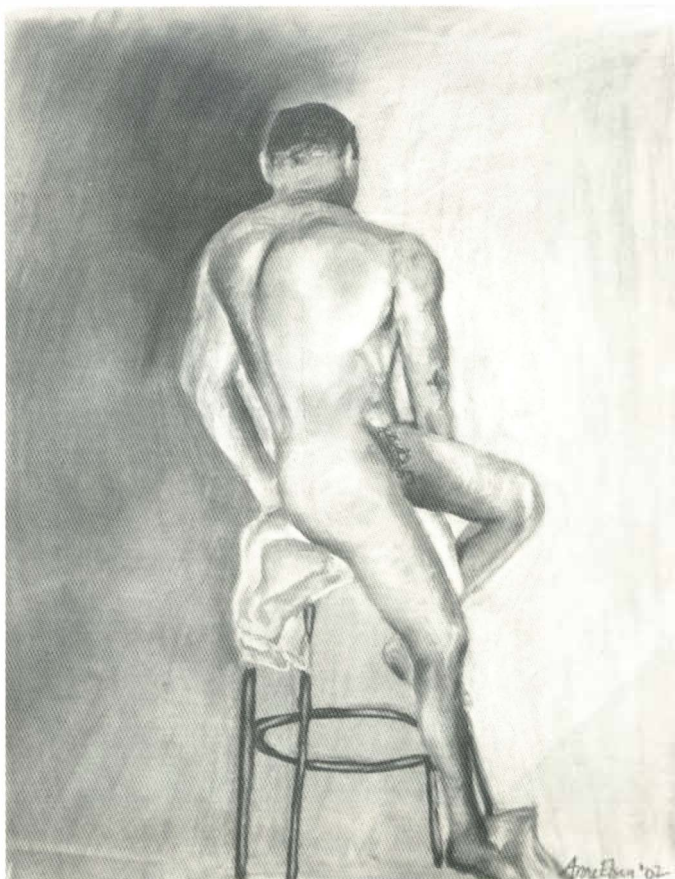


Untitled

Anne Elsea

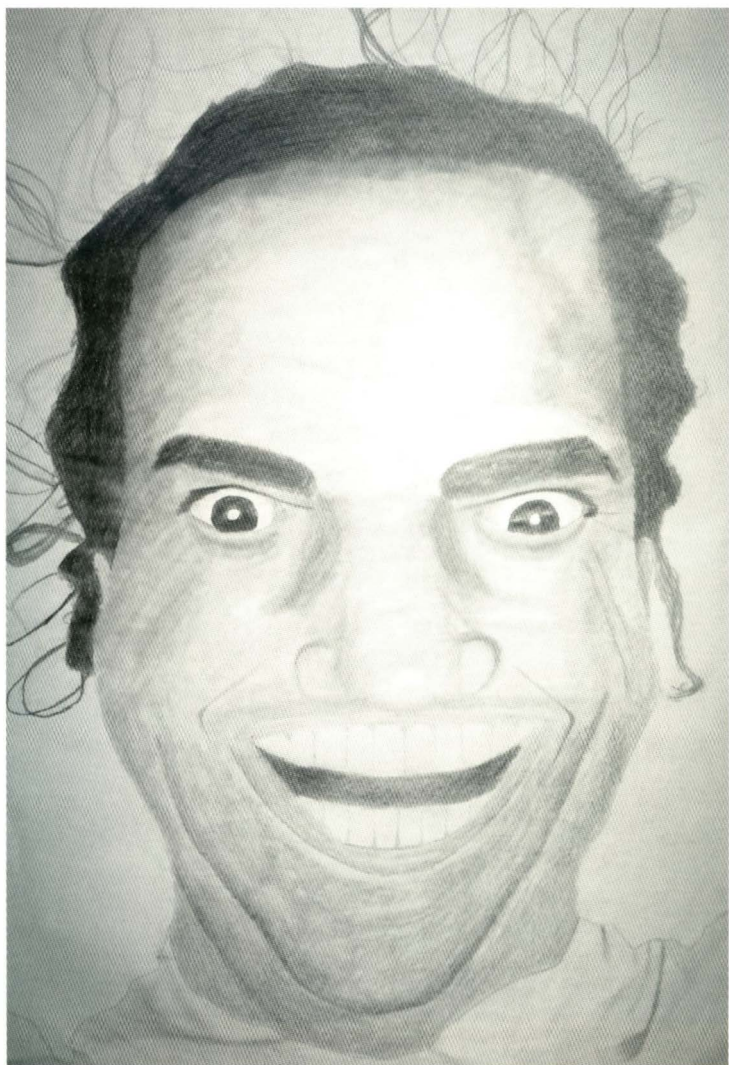


Untitled
Anne Elsea

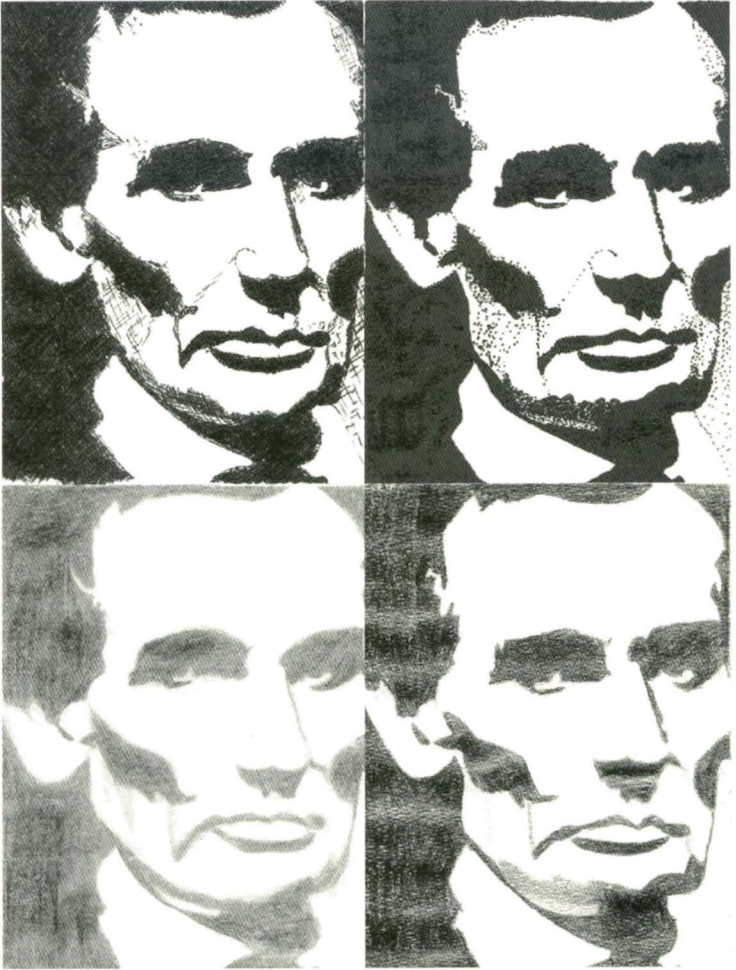


Untitled

Anne Elsea



Uncle Larry
Barry Alan Hall

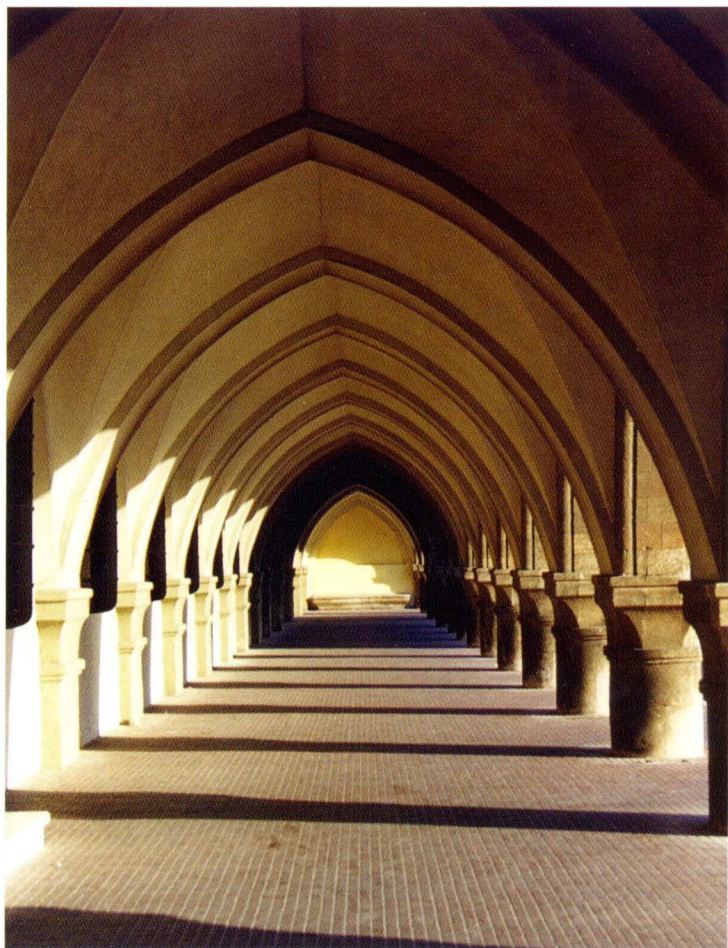


An American President:
Portraits of Unity
Barry Alan Hall

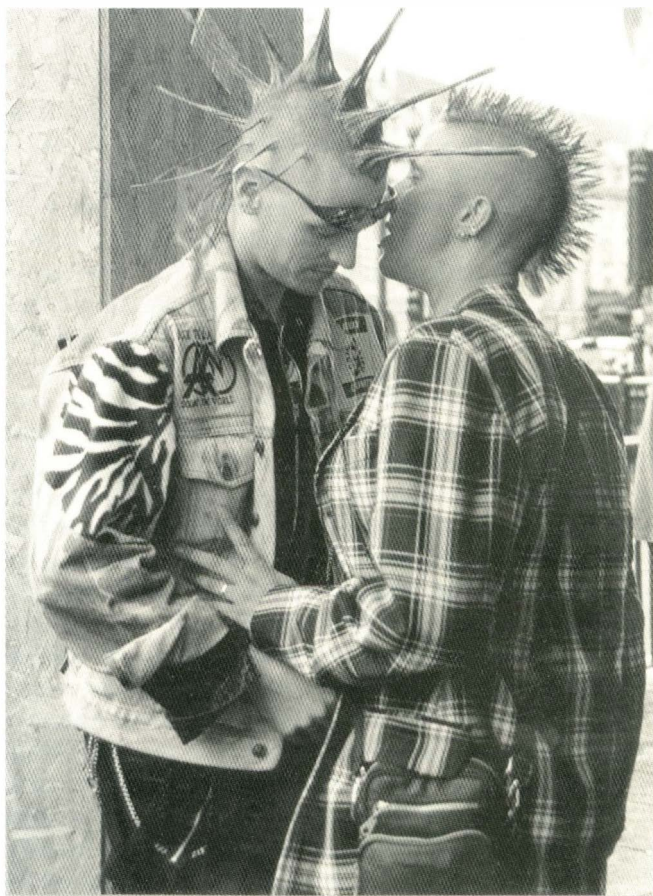


Portrait of a Gypsy in Greece

Amanda Stevens



Untitled
Amanda Stevens



Punkers
Amanda Stevens

Present Tense

Sarah Kathryn Moore

Pseudo is in love with Anna. His days are mundane- wake up eat breakfast kiss Margaret goodbye work work work eat lunch work work home again kiss Margaret hello bathe dine read the newspaper- but his nights are infinitely exotic and exhilarating. Listen! This is what happens. First: evening falls fast and firm on New York. Lights jewel the city and Pseudo stands in front of his bedroom mirror, in his penthouse, with his wife. He is wearing his tuxedo. His eyes are strangely bright and his shoes are impossibly black. Second: despite attending the ballet nearly every night for the past two weeks, Pseudo does not yet know how to knot a bowtie. Margaret does it for him. Third: he goes through a mental checklist in final preparation for the coming evening- eyeglasses clean. Hair paradoxically gelled into submission yet slightly and fashionably tousled. Wallet. Overcoat. A dozen roses, dark as passion soft as sheets and stowed carefully twelve floors below in the lobby. Pseudo glances at Margaret, searching for traces of suspicion or doubt. Finding none, he smiles gently and touches her face, promising to be home after the dinner party. He says, You could come too, you know. These things are so boring without you, and everyone wants to meet my lovely wife. She laughs weakly- I know, I know, I just get so nervous. Go on, have fun. Think of me. His back is toward her, his foot out the door as he answers: Always.

Into the mirrored elevator, down twelve tedious floors. Through the lobby, past the new bellhop- Hello, Robert! Hello, Sir, here are your flowers. Out the revolving doors and into January's rigid embrace, into New York's busy thrill. Pseudo raises his strong hand, gold band catching the streetlight like a holy relic, like the grail- Taxi! The cab detaches itself from traffic, a curious beetle. The driver is middle-aged, speaks poor English, smokes cigars. Where to? Pseudo closes the cab door. Lincoln Center.

The drive takes an eternity. Every stoplight is the enemy, every brave or foolish pedestrian in front of the cab a criminal. Pseudo's foot taps rapidly, making sharp angry noises against the slick floor. He checks his cuffs, his shoes, his hair. They arrive, and his heart startles at the sight of the huge familiar building. She is there, now, he thinks. She is inside. The fare is seven fifty. Pseudo throws a twenty at the driver and ducks out of the cab in an effortless arc. People lower their eyes as he passes, or stop and stare- stunned and utterly in awe. His strong smooth body, his crisp clean movements- he is the archangel Gabriel. He is a god. He is God. He is in motion, he is inside.

He is immediately enveloped in tranquil grandeur. It always reminds Pseudo of a murder mystery, elegant men and striking or handsome women. Sipping champagne. Cultured and significant. Their

elaborately coiffed heads bob like buoys and they speak languidly of Things That Matter, of poetry and politics, their voices affluent echoes of an era aging but still alive. Pseudo is less remarkable here, but still, unaccompanied and attractive, he is a beacon to the lonely women in the room. Pretty daughters in pairs offer their silent and hard-eyed approval as he passes. He is unaware.

Down, down, down, staircase after scarlet staircase to the very front of the massive theater. Pseudo is electric with anticipation. His thoughts are several minutes ahead, so that his body struggles clumsily to keep up. He bumps into three people on his way to the middle of the seventh row, old ladies who sputter and scowl. He settles into his seat. He hasn't eaten since this morning, but he isn't hungry. The vast hall is chilly, but he isn't cold. His hands tighten around his bouquet. All his energy is focused on the stage, on the heavy velvet of closed curtains. A single syllable bounces briskly inside his lovely empty head - Soon. Soon. Soon.

Up, up, uptown to the gilded building. Back past the new bellhop, onto the mirrored elevator, into the apartment so recently deserted by our dashing businessman. It is now occupied only by his wife, sitting motionless on an expensive elaborate divan. Margaret wonders what the Woman is like, if She's beautiful, if She loves him. Margaret wishes Pseudo wouldn't lie. Margaret sighs and ties back her hair and sets about baking shortcake. She sings softly to the strawberries and sugar, a tuneless murmur that is at once tranquil and tragic. It is starting to rain, and this makes Margaret cheerful, the being inside, the being safe inside a cheery kitchen with strawberry shortcake in the making.

While she bakes, Margaret thinks. The way she thinks closely resembles the way she loves- deeply and sincerely and ordinarily. She thinks about how nice Central Park looks in the late spring when it rains. She thinks about a movie she saw where the girl movie star kisses the boy movie star in the rain and how much she herself wants to kiss someone like that. She thinks that she would like a little pet bird to hold and love when Pseudo goes away to visit Her. As she does not yet have a pet bird, she puts on a recording of Swan Lake to keep her company. The minor chords tremble and tug at something she didn't know was inside of her. She smiles slowly and goes back to baking. She thinks perhaps she'll get a bird tomorrow. She thinks perhaps she'll name it Strawberry.

The name of Anna's lotion is Strawberries and Cream and she massages it into her hands, cracked and dry from the cold winter wind. Fifteen minutes until the curtain opens again on her. She's stretching, in the dressing room with two missing bulbs above the mirror. Her makeup

is complete, her costume settled gently onto her fluid figure. Her hair is pinned back neatly and her long limber legs stretch supple under the gentle guidance of her small slender hands. Anna thrills briefly with exhilaration. Tonight will be good. Last night was not so good, but tonight will be very good. She knows it, and smiles childlike at the thought. Besides, there's someone she's dancing for. Letting out a girlish giggle, Anna sashays out of the dressing room and toward the waiting wings.

Not a hundred yards away, separated from her by an imposing crimson curtain, Pseudo's tension is tangible. It rises heavily above the blanket of subdued sound generated by the audience. It is punctuated and egged on by the occasional sharp cough or incongruous shrieking laugh. He sits in his plush seat as fidgety and impatient as a boy, tapping the playbill against his knee. He doesn't need to read it. He has had it memorized since his first night at the ballet. He'd gone with Margaret, as a birthday gift. She's always loved Swan Lake. Afterwards, reeling and dizzy from his first sight of Anna, he'd gone home and read the playbill twenty times, as if reading would make her appear. Of course, only the few facts remained. Printed in blackest ink on the paper and Psuedo's mind. Anna has been with ABT since 1997. Previous roles include Coppelia, Sugarplum, Giselle. Before joining ABT, she danced with the Boston Ballet for five years.

Pseudo ponders these precious insights and thirsts, as always, to know worlds more. He starves for her with a hunger that must be sated, and soon. He leans toward the silent stage, the invisible wings, and wills the lights to dim, wills the orchestra to tremble awake. As if in answer, the oboe strikes a reedy note and other instruments come to life. The crowd hushes. The lights hush, fading to respectful obscurity. The overture begins and ends. The first act goes by. Anna is not in it; it is a meaningless annoyance. Finally, the curtains whisk open again. After a moment of exquisite torture, Anna arrives onstage.

Pseudo's ears ring. He can feel blood pulsing through each tiny vein. His hands clench in wonder. She is close enough to speak to. She is as far away as peace or purity. She is dancing the role of Odette, for the moment, not yet a princess but still an enchanted swan. Pseudo's entire world darkens and weakens around him until there is only Anna, dancing alone through the lakes and palaces and corridors of his troubled tumbled mind.

Only Anna. Her strong dancer's legs cut and twist and shape the air easily. She is good. She is greater than good, she is extraordinary. Remarkable and startling- unparalleled, even. She is a virtuoso, playing the audience as skillfully and lovingly as the lone oboist plays his instrument. She aches with ardor; it falls from her like honey, like water.

Like water, like tears, like blood. Pseudo sits amazed. In the two weeks he has been nightly attending the ballet, his joy and surprise at her skill have not diminished. In fact, they always emerge new and surprising, a phoenix, a crocus. He briefly recalls his happiest moments, his triumphs, his awards, his promotions, his first night with Margaret, but nothing comes close to what he feels watching Anna dance.

And that is all he has to dream of, her dancing. He has never seen her offstage, never spoken to her or met her or smiled at her. The bitter melancholy! The impossible anguish! The agony! She doesn't know we are in love, he thinks, she hasn't realized it yet. In an awful moment of horrifying uncertainty, it dawns on Pseudo that she isn't even aware of his existence. If only she could hear his voice! He is sure she is waiting. Wondering where he is and whatever is taking him so long to get to her. He is terrified that it is too late.

Still humming along with her music, Margaret settles the shortcake into the oven, and gives it a last loving look before wandering into the bedroom and pulling a book at random from the mahogany bookshelf. Her glance snags on a framed photograph above the fireplace. It was taken on their honeymoon, at the Parthenon, by a stranger in a wheelchair who didn't speak English but had a smile white and wide as a crescent moon. The photograph, as art, is somewhat lacking- it is crooked and fuzzy, and half of Pseudo's left arm and hand are cut off, so that his wedding ring is invisible. But it is clear that this is a couple very much in love- his arm encircles her waist protectively, and she touches him with the reverence of a pilgrim reaching out for the anticipated object of her adoration. Her eyes are locked on his face. His, conversely, challenge the camera, and his mouth is caught in a wide-open laugh at something the crippled photographer was mumbling in Greek.

Only two years since. Margaret finds herself trapped again in *Where Things Changed*, in *What Went Wrong*. It tires her to go over this again, but she is always amazed when she takes in how quickly it happened. One moment she was a shy and self-conscious undergrad, and the next she was the recipient of lavish attention from a guest lecturer beautiful as Apollo and rich as Croesus. She watched, detached and spellbound, as whirlwind romance evolved into rapid marriage, and suddenly she's the very young wife of a very successful businessman, very alone all day in their expensive penthouse while her husband carries on a very obvious affair. Something inside Margaret bruises beyond repair. Her trust is crushed and trampled on daily, her unending tenderness and patience taken for granted. She doesn't understand this man she has married. She doesn't understand what faults of hers drove him away. She doesn't understand the restlessness that pervades his movements now or his muted indifference to her every thought and action. She can't keep

on like this, restive sparrow-thoughts clouding her mind until it's impossible to sort out her own feelings, distracted as she is by the beating of a million uneasy wings. She'll talk to him about it tonight. She has to know. She collapses onto the bed, dark eyes shadowed and distant, and tosses the unopened book on Pseudo's side of the blankets, untouched and cold, the pillows perfectly positioned and shiver-silent.

The ballet passes more quickly than it ever has for Pseudo. He is blind to the other dancers, to the magnificent scenery and matchless musicians. They are only there to provide a backdrop, after all, for his passion. They are only there that Anna might have a setting lovely and removed from the far-off angry world. She belongs in a ballet, Pseudo thinks, forever. Enchanted and dreamlike. She comes back in the second act as Odile, and Pseudo marvels that, even when she is portraying utter evil, he is brimming and breathless with her unbearable beauty.

Finally, the curtain closes reluctantly, leaving Pseudo trembling in ecstasy, mouth slightly open and breath coming in quick, fluttering gasps. Her dancing is always flawless, of course, but tonight it was unequalled. Pseudo has forgotten how to speak. The endless litany in his head now reads- My God. My God. My God. It is not an exclamation so much as a prayer to some indefinite deity who must have created Anna to prove perfection to His wayward and cynical children. Pseudo explodes from his plush seat as the curtain reopens, unveiling Anna once again to the awestruck audience. He claps until his hands are numb, and one by one by one every spellbound spectator rises and joins the standing ovation until the theater is awash in applause thick and rhythmic as rain. Flowers shower to the stage and Anna bends her body to retrieve them, her face a calm curve bright with beauty.

Pseudo begins to throw his own flowers, then looks with dismay at the growing garden blooming suddenly onstage. His roses will never be noticed. A thought strikes him, so obvious and daring he wonders why he's never thought of it before- he will hand them to her instead. He will meet her. He will. And everything will be solved, somehow, isn't that how these stories always end? Yes. Yes! He rises from his seat with a fervent determination and strides past the old ladies dripping with jewelry, past smooth cool couples and a few sleepy-eyed children. Every footstep, every hurried heartbeat hammers Anna's name. Pseudo opens the lobby doors and finds the night has grown darker and stranger and very cold.

As the curtain closes for the last time, Anna's smile goes from gracious and graceful to giant, and she suddenly leaps, laughing.

Beside her, her friend Hannah laughs too, says, It was perfect, yes? And Anna says, Yes. Then she turns eager to the wings, and there he is, in typical techie-black, leaning against the curtain he pulls in and out, smiling at her. It has taken her forever to convince him that he is worthy, this out-of-work actor doing odd jobs at the theater. At first, he had been so dazzled by her that he'd hardly been able to speak, but he is kind, and quiet, and they are gently drawn to each other. He isn't handsome, exactly, but his eyes are dove-grey and he speaks five languages and talks with her about literature and love, and who can explain the vague mysteries of tenderness, anyway? This is what Anna thinks to herself as she blushes and agrees to meet him tomorrow for lunch.

Outside, Pseudo circles the building sharklike, avoiding the odd security guard or exiting usher. It is cold, but there is no fleeting thought of returning home, to his warm bed and his pretty wife. Pseudo finds a door in the back marked "DO NOT ENTER". He stands just outside the doorway. He wonders if this is the one she'll actually come out of. There are probably a hundred doors sprinkled outside the enormous complex. Fear wriggles into his frenzied mind. It lasts for perhaps a minute. Then, in a wave of warmth and infinite comfort, he knows this is the door she'll come out of. He's sure she knows he's waiting. She's hurrying to him, wrapped in white. He won't even say anything, and she'll know. He imagines her hands slim-fingered and pale, their touch feather-faint. He imagines her lips, soft as snow. He positions himself against the railing opposite the door. He folds his arms, knowing how he looks in his tuxedo and bright eyes. His face is frozen in a half-smile, one eyebrow raised, his mouth curled into an ironic smirk. He strokes the rose petals with one finger. This is how he wants her to see him first. She'll know. How could she not know? She'll know.

Five... fifteen... fifty minutes gone and no sign of Anna. Pseudo stands, back to the wind, positioned exactly as he has been for almost an hour, waiting for her. My swan, he thinks, my only. My Anna. No one has come out this door yet. But he knows she is on her way. He is patient. Focused wholly on the door, which at any moment could glide open and give her to him. An hour. An hour and a half. Now: it is time. Pseudo knows it the instant before she opens the door. He is ready. He is waiting. The handle turns, and his arms open of their own will to embrace her. His angel! His everything! The air surrounding him is dense and thick with energy. The door opens, and Anna stands surprised just inside the building.

The first thing Pseudo notices is how ordinary her eyes are. A thousand times over the past two weeks, he's imagined catching her eyes with his own, imagined how they would look. At this moment, seeing her up close for the first time, he realizes that he's never even known their

color. He has pictured striking green, silver blue, rich chocolate brown. However, her eyes are a commonplace indefinite hazel, and much smaller than he's pictured. Furthermore, without heavy stage makeup, they are very close-set, giving her a bookish, confused stare. Her lips are small as well, and thin. Her hair is, incongruously, pinned back into a bun, looking exactly the way it did onstage, only crusted with hairspray and darker than it seemed in the theater. She is not wearing a white dress, but bleach-stained baggy sweatpants, and an enormous winter coat over an orange t-shirt. Pseudo frantically wonders where her wings are and in the same moment realizes that he actually expected her to open the door still in costume- winged and shimmery, swathed in alabaster gossamer. He thinks, She does ordinary things, makes coffee and goes grocery shopping. He's never thought about that before. It doesn't seem right. She is standing in front of him, wearing clothes that any dancer might wear after a rehearsal or performance. No floral fragrance enfolds her body. In fact, she smells much like the women at the gym Pseudo goes to on weekdays, sweaty and unpleasant. She is also not as tall as he'd envisioned. Wearing flat-soled Keds instead of toe shoes, the top of her head comes up to just beneath his chin. She is plain as the thousands of women he passes everyday on his way to work or the theater. The name "Anna" sticks in his throat and is pushed back down towards his churning stomach. This woman's name is Nothing Special. This woman's name is Nobody Important.

Pseudo recoils in horror. This isn't her! It can't be! The lady he loves is enchanting, a princess, a paradigm of perfection. This small woman, damp with perspiration, tired, with circles under her eyes and a red nose, this can't be her. But he knows it is. As if teasing him, she lifts an arm to hold the door, and the monogram on her upraised gym bag sings "Anna Elaine" in impeccable curlicues. Pseudo stammers. He stumbles away from the door, dropping his flowers, not turning on her but watching her, wild-eyed, as he backs away. Finally, he does turn and is swallowed by the midnight, by the ceaseless city noises. A dozen petal-perfect roses remain on the cement where he dropped them. Dark as passion. Soft as sheets.

Anna picks up the bouquet, then stands in the doorway and watches the strange handsome man lurch away, bemused and a little frightened. Who is he? She glances around uncertainly, but doesn't see anyone else. Someone calls her from behind- Anna! She turns around and it's Ivan, enormous, his eyes still silver-lidded with stage makeup he forgot to take off. She grins, says playfully, Hey hey, Sir Ballerino! It's an old joke between them, but they both laugh. She asks about his roommate, his boyfriend, his brother. They walk together to the subway station and part feeling happier than they had before their small exchange. She

thinks briefly about the odd gentleman who had been standing outside the door when she opened it, then shrugs it off. Just one of those things. She settles into the orange plastic subway seat, glad to be on her way home to water her plants and feed her cat and snuggle into bed.

Margaret rises from the bed, her mind calmer, her stride steady. She checks the oven again, then combs her hair and breathes deeply. She will talk to him tonight. The thought no longer frightens her. She paces slowly, considers her options. There is the off chance that she is mistaken, and he's only busy with work. No other woman at all. But if he is, as she assumes, in love with another, she must move out and find a very small apartment, go back to school, and get a job teaching or at a museum. She stops. She suddenly smiles. The idea appeals to her immensely. She begins to almost look forward to Pseudo's return, so she can show him his weak-willed wife is no longer a helpless, hapless pawn for him to shuffle around as he pleases. She imagines a new home, tiny and shabby but all her own. She is filled with unexpected joy and cuddles into a canary-yellow sweater and dances around the room.

Pseudo doesn't know where he's going. His thoughts are disjointed, incongruent, and he is dimly conscious of cars swerving and honking, people shouting angrily. All he's really aware of is a vast empty chasm in his head that has always been there and will always be there and which he can't ever fill. He wanders blind to everything and half-deaf, muddled. He doesn't notice when he loses his coat, and doesn't notice the icy mud plastering to his pants and filling his shoes. A fragment of memory slices into his confused mind- Margaret, dusting the house yesterday and singing tunelessly in her rough comforting alto voice. Suddenly he knows exactly where he's going. His stride becomes purposeful, and, lo! He is standing in front of his building, the new bellhop smiling uncertainly at him on the other side of the glass doors. He slips hurriedly into the revolving door and runs to the elevator. No, he thinks, too slow. He sprints to the stairs and runs up twelve floors. He pauses, then shakes his head and keeps running. He has never run so fast, he has never been so sure. He runs to the very tiptop of the building, twenty floors up, and finds a fire escape. He climbs up on the railing and pauses a moment.

The city sprawls in front of him like a lovely woman, and wind like her cold breath musses his hair playfully. He breathes deeply, and then leaps ecstatic into Manhattan's waiting arms, which cradle him like a child, like a lover, and he falls, falls, falls, like a dancer, like an angel, while his wife sings love songs to her shortcake and pigeons take solemn flight over Central Park.

The Illusion of Top-Shelf Liquor

J. Byrd Marshall

His favorite lines from Full Metal Jacket:

Gunner

You guys should do a story about me!

Joker

Why?

Gunner

Because I'm so fucking good!

Most people would choose something from the blistering satire or the anti-war message that pervades the film. Ethan chooses something stupid. He chooses a scene that certainly wouldn't be the choice of a waiter or waitress at such a pretty chain restaurant downtown.

It's the kind of restaurant with a theme that most people would pay at with a credit card.

While terribly inoffensive pop and jazz music plays in most of the restaurant, the dish room where Ethan works is filled with something a little bit more like the scene that plays itself out repeatedly in his head. He really is that good. The loud music helps Ethan keep his rhythm. Flipping and tossing dishes around without breaking a single one takes the pure skill that only music can give.

He did drop one once.

It was the beginning of the rock-rap amalgam.

That sucked.

With a crappy job like this there are two ways to get through the day. The first is to work badly the entire time, barely keeping pace with the steady flow of people's half eaten food being thrust in your face. The second is to remove the half eaten food as quickly as possible from the face in order to relax for a few minutes with a cigarette that inevitably tastes like people's half eaten food.

No matter how nice the restaurant, it is always like a locker room behind the scenes. There is cursing, steam, and the pain of the metaphorical towel snap.

And the dishwasher is the lowest man on the totem pole.

Ethan is just too young to be self-conscious. Anyone over the age of seventeen knows that seventeen is an age of arrogance. He is the proud and young king of the land! The dishes are his enemy to be defeated. If he can't wash all the large dishes within the next two minutes, his classmates are dangling above a vat of hot lava. They are going to be killed. Satan is holding the rope. And he wants those dishes clean!

He must kick ass!

He must fight on!

The sweat that pours out of him and the burns on his fingers are badges of honor.

He has far too much imagination for this.

But he knows the truth.

The steam is doing wonders for his pores, he knows that.

In the strangest way that is completely contrary to who he is and where he is, there is a pride that goes along with this sort of work. Even when he is alone on Valentine's Day in a small room with a fifty year old black man who has multiple bullet wounds, he has pride.

Valentine's Day was over without so much as a hug.

Of course it was a joke.

Of course the door was locked.

When he walked in, it was more of a stalk. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, with of all things, pantyhose on his head. There was little else distinguishable about him. He was small and slight of build. What would draw your attention immediately to him if he were on a stage in a play was the fact that he had a gun. It was almost too perfect.

Ethan thought it was a classic practical joke for how perfect it was.

This was of course in the two seconds he had to think.

Darnell was herded along with the rest of them.

He thinks about Anne Frank and how her family was herded out of the annex.

In such an extreme situation, words become meaningless.

The man herded them into the small area where the manager worked. There was a crappy desk, a crappy shelf, and a crappy filing cabinet. It was as if whoever designed the room put all the money into the large silver safe that was underneath the desk.

The gun waved.

Voices screamed.

Or did they?

The remainder of the staff was herded into the small room. Six people lay on the floor while the manager opened the safe. Ethan was instructed to put his head down. He saw two things while he was pretending not to look.

The manager's face filled with panic.

Ethan looked up to see the revolver at an odd angle. He thinks perhaps it is a thirty-eight. He sees the bullets in the chamber. It is at this point that it is not a joke. There are bullets in there. Live ammunition.

The pride falters.

The manager is so panicked that he can't get the safe open.

The small room suddenly turns into a basketball game. It's a basketball game with no opposing team, as everyone roots for the manager. The gun is waved about the room. The man with the gun roots for the manager too, cheering the manager on and putting the gun

to the head of the various employees. It is a team effort, and while there is the tension of ten thousand fans compressed into the one little room, Ethan cannot figure out who the opponent is.

The gunman begins to lose his logic. The gun moves again and again to the various employees, perhaps attempting to discern who the manager cares about most.

No one knows what is happening.

The gunman finally brings his hostility to bear on Ethan's back. Ethan can only crouch there and wonder what is to happen. He tries to remember The Lord's Prayer, but can't, and there is only one thing that will suffice.

"Fuck!"

The manager still can't get the safe open. There is one more attempt. The gun is digging into Ethan's back.

The manager spins the combination too rapidly; Ethan sees that he might have missed.

The pride collapses.

Ethan cannot cry, but in this lost state, something interesting happens.

Of course, any trained police officer could have predicted it. In the absence of pride, mantra, strength, hope, and insanity...Ethan freezes like a deer caught in headlights. There is no feeling, no emotion. The cliché occurs to him briefly, but there is no thought for what seems the longest time. Of course, no one has ever lived to describe what it is like when the truck is bearing down on them. Strange thoughts only flit around Ethan's mind.

I hope I don't cry.

He won't shoot, it would make a mess.

I suppose he'll get life if he kills me. They have those things in store windows – 10-20-Life – I think that if I die he'll get life.

Is the gun directly on my spine?

I hope that I'm not crippled, I'd rather die.

My mother will take care of me.

I should tell this guy that my dad will kick his ass if he does this.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... kill the women; just leave me alive, I'm too cute to die!

Then things get funny.

The cleaning crew comes in.

Ethan is spared as three people who speak with what he thinks are Haitian accents and quite beautiful ones at that enter the restaurant through the back to sanitize the floors. Of course! It's Tuesday. Now there are nine people. The gunman falters when the safe opens.

There is little money in the safe.

The manager has to explain that it is Valentine's Day and that most people pay with credit card. People would almost laugh at this scene if it wasn't slightly horrifying. The gunman curses in a whole new

definition of the verb.

Ethan breathes again. It is cold air. They are in the freezer.

"Why in the hell did that asshole put us in the freezer?!" Ethan says, venturing that sort of false confidence that people who have been broken exhibit.

"I don't know... tradition?"

Struck by the strangeness of this answer, Ethan opens the large freezer door, and is the first to walk out. Later, he will tell himself that he was the first to walk out, but truly, he was among the last.

The chef, Darnell, and several others whose name Ethan does not know emerge from the freezer as if they had been living there without sunlight in the cold for weeks. People compose themselves, pretend to dust themselves off, shake themselves out. The eldest person in the group has the sense to move to the phone.

Ethan being the youngest; punches the manager out.

"You should have locked the door, you asshole!"

He tells himself that he punched the manager out, but truly, Ethan went directly for the restaurant's bar. There laid the top-shelf liquor. He takes a shot of Jack Daniels, and pours two more when others see what he is doing. At least, he tells himself that. Ethan has the courage to drink one shot of Malibu Coconut Rum. He feels his confidence and strength return as he does this, reminding himself to later tell people that he took a shot of whiskey.

It will return, and he knows that.

I hope that I'm not crippled, I'd rather die.

He is strong, and the person who was so lost as to threaten him with a gun is the weak.

I hope I don't cry.

The confidence will grow itself again, but one thing is certain... the dance.

The dance that Ethan danced in his youth, the one thing that allowed him his strength, his confidence, his very youth, is over. He can no longer claim to be truly great, because now he knows that he is weak.

He was threatened and backed down. Ethan is not greater than human, but human was something that he had to aspire to be. In that night, in that moment of loss, was the point at which perhaps he was finally human.

Youth was over.

Punta Conejo

Kevin Miller

If you were to write me a letter, it would take an hour to pick it up and an hour to get back to Punta Conejo (Ko nay' ho).

Adam tells me in not-so-many words about the perfection and the desert camping next to the Pacific Ocean. I ask, "So what's Conejo like, Adam?"

With hand motions in the shape of breaking waves and head wobbles that look like a muscular disease, he says, "It's, aughh, yeah." Adam is not retarded. He is a surfer.

* * *

Bumping along the last cliff road into the arroyo, my brother and I watched a mammoth set of five waves wrap around the point and break into a small bay. This was Adam's spot.

Firewood proved difficult among desert shrubbery and scorpions. "You want Spaghettio's again?" I asked my brother. He nodded his head. "How about Kool-Aid?"

"Warm Kool-Aid sucks," he said, walking around the fire in the silt.

Our camp site wouldn't feel like home for another day or so. I felt dirty, and our truck seemed parked at an odd angle. "Sure you want to put the tent there?" I asked.

Rich stepped back from the dusky sight of the flat-lying tent. "I don't fucking care," he said with a sour lip.

You're the only guy I know who could be so jammed up in such a paradise.

We heard a small rustling in the sand. An afro-headed Australian approached with a cold bottle of beer. Ben Walker stood in front of the fire-glow, scaly tan with the powdery, riverbed dust up his shins. He looked like he'd just sung his way across Australia on bare feet. He asked us over for a cold Pacifico, and as we walked over to his site, I imagined us treading in the bush where he lived. A week ago, we thought we'd rough it without a cooler. Ben walked with his bottle against a setting sun. He was the miraculous, the one and only—turning our hot water into cold wine—Jesus Christ.

After a run-down of the wave conditions, we thanked Ben and his two mates for the beer. On the way back to the tent, I scanned a black sky pierced by more stars than I'd ever seen, red, white, and blue—mostly white. The fourth of July was six days away. The arching haze of the Milky Way smiled behind satellites. They could be counted as they crossed the sky, sunlight reflecting off their panels, moving faster than an airplane but much slower than a shooting star. One night at Conejo, I counted fourteen satellites without drinking any beer or

smoking any pot.

You know, you and I can drink, surf, ride silently in a car... We can fish, clean the kitchen, load luggage, and smoke cigarettes. But the minute we start talking about life or anything related to it...

In the chill of the morning, a new yellow pup sniffed the outside of our tent. Upon looking through the screen, five puppies pounced on and rolled over each other. A snake devoured one of the pups during the second night, just outside our tent. Upon returning three weeks later, we didn't see any puppies.

You say it's a dog-eat-dog world, eh? What about snake-eat-puppy? I taught you to cuss. And smoke. I taught you what to hate. You can stop hating those things now. You don't have to cuss as much either. Things aren't that bad.

I made coffee, ate cereal with condensed milk, and pulled on my spring suit. The sun crept up behind the cliffs and cast a natural glow. Surfboards stacked inside travel bags came down off the roof with a poof in the moon dust of the riverbed. I rubbed some off-white wax on the deck of my board and entered the first-of-three man-made tide pools used for oyster and sea urchin beds by local fishermen.

Bobbing slightly about one hundred fifty yards out, Ben sat on his board with his elbow cocked on his hip. He was looking toward the horizon, waiting.

I carefully placed my feet next to urchins on the rocky bottom, watching for other sharp spots. Rich stumbled behind me and said, "I stepped on an urchin."

"Ouch. You okay?" I asked. No response. I looked back and saw his face cringed up in pain, *like the time I kneed you in the gut and knocked the wind out, and you fainted.* "Did it hurt?"

"Fuck yeah, man! It's like a cactus!" he shouted. Later during our stay, I stepped on a few urchins with booties covering my soles. They would crunch like Pringles. Without booties, their spines could only be removed with tweezers and much dedication.

I hopped on my board and paddled to the ocean side of the pool. Once on my feet, I waited for a large set to break before I jumped on and stroked for the horizon with two Australians behind me.

The current subsided in the deeper water and paddling became easier. Every so often, a big set would surprise us out of the west. Fifteen feet on the face wasn't out of the question. After taking a few on the head, mellow paddling became anxious paddling. Rich worked hard on the inside, trying for the safe shoulder, but he never made it. *I wish you could've made it out here. I feel safer when you're around. Good try, though. Good try... When it gets smaller, you'll get out here, and we'll have some fun. We'll make lunch and take some pictures. I feel bad, but it's dangerous out here. I'd rather have you safe on the beach than sitting out here. You're*

probably scared like me. I don't blame you for goin' in.

After a twenty minute paddle, the Australians and I sat within fifteen yards of each other, getting a feel for the bigger ones. Wave faces peaked at fourteen feet. Looking at the wave from the beach, it broke from left to right. The view from the safety of the sand was deceiving. It was bigger than it looked.

Conejo broke in a perfect line of green face for about three hundred yards on a real screamer. Portions would section-out depending on the direction of the swell, but most waves broke perfectly. The water clarity enabled a view of the cobblestone bottom when the sun reached high enough, but in early morning, the darker, deeper hue was chilling.

I looked to the beach and saw Rich setting up the tri-pod in the sand.

Five rows of attacking elephants marched over the horizon, and my stomach became light and then heavy. I paddled hard for the outside. I floated over the shoulder of the first set wave and saw Ben air-drop into the pit of a twelve-foot monster. He landed with finesse on a board that was clearly too short for the conditions and pushed strong off the bottom. When I looked back to see if he'd made it around the peak, I saw a fan of spray ten feet high. As I floated over another set wave, I looked back again and saw glimpses of his head speeding down the line about a hundred yards away. He made at least thirty miles an hour down the face, trying to keep up.

The next wave gave me butterflies. I knew I had to take it. One of the Australians sat too deep, and as he duck-dove under the lip, I turned and paddled. The speed of the swell caught me off guard as I imagined it had for Ben as well. The drop would be late. (The only forgiving aspect of Conejo was that it didn't open up top-to-bottom like more intimidating Hawaiian breaks. The wave here usually broke only three-quarters down the face unless you caught a bomber.) Mine broke as expected only I didn't make it to my feet. The lip of the wave held me fast, and I felt gravity take a forceful hold, sending me into a head-first, twelve-foot freefall.

Cool water went unnoticed in my wetsuit because I was too busy pissing in it. The fall, however horrific as it appeared from the beach, proved less serious. I had speed going into the water, and so long as I kept from hitting bottom, which was about six feet deep, I would go down and out the back of the wave. The force of the whitewater on my board, which was attached to my ankle by a leash, felt snug as my head breached the surface. I gathered the board under my belly and duck-dove the last two set waves with a slight, nervous shake in my muscles, the kind you get when you're really hungry.

* * *

I worked hard for five waves. Paddling back out after my first wave, my back felt strong. Three trips later, my arms and back ceased to cooperate without serious effort.

Somewhere in the southern hemisphere, about two to three days ago, gravity had played a key role. The amount of energy necessary to generate this swell had resulted from some pretty serious collisions. Natural forces—hot and cold air shifting, releasing pressure and moisture, ramping water molecules up and down. Somewhere, the momentum formed... Molecules swelled upward for a fraction of a second and then settled back down... But the motion kept going, picking up other molecules and plankton. The further the wave pushed, the bigger it grew; the more distance it traveled, the more speed it acquired, and the more ripples it swallowed, the hungrier it became... Until a smooth deep-water ocean swell sped toward its final destination.

This water pressure heaving out and over the cobblestone was no easy thing to manage. The speed of the drop forced my arms up and over my head. The gut-tickling acceleration finally settled in when my feet gained balance. Wind raced by my ears. A good, hard lean toward the wave, followed by a push off the back foot, sent me out and onto the face of the breaking wave. And there, if nothing else, I felt weightlessness as the world passed by. Sometimes, I held out my arms. I didn't worry about what was spinning behind me. It was like the heat of copulation, the midpoint of freefall, perfect song in harmony with dance, fire on a cool night.

Imaging the original fury which conducted such a means for a positive ending helped justify the trouble we went through to get here.

I know this trip will be good for you, man. If anything will keep you alive while you're in dental school, this trip will do it.

* * *

I rode one in to conserve energy and gather more courage. We talked about late take-offs and good rides around the Aussies campsite and hoped the swell would relax.

Mother Nature didn't cooperate, and the looks of the horizon and impact zone kept us safely on the beach for a full day.

We played cards as a beat-up, multicolored thing pulled around to our site. The dark, skinny driver hollered, "Gasolina, por favor?"

I broke out my five gallon spare tank and said, "sesenta pesos." I held out my hand.

"No. No. Mota? Mota?" he asked.

"No comprende mota."

"Mota! Aqui," he said, pointing to his trunk.

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Spider?

Sarah Cowie

Let's get the name straight first. The name in the book is Little Miss Muffet, but my real name is Betty, Betty Muffet. Mother Goose says that name isn't marketable. She says it doesn't roll off the tongue. I say as long as there's dollar signs attached to it, you can call me Mother Teresa, if you like.

Second, I don't mind telling you, sitting on a tuffet is the most uncomfortable experience next to hemorrhoid surgery that I can think of. So, you can guess that the tuffet thing was not my idea. But then you've got a word like Muffet. What can you find to sit on that's going to rhyme with that? It sure as heck ain't gonna be the words "Lazy Boy."

So the story goes, there I sat, Little Miss Muffet sitting on my tuffet eating my curds and whey. Anyone here heard of curds and whey? It should have been written "choking and gagging on her curds and whey."

When along comes a spider; now, this is when the poop hits the fan. First of all, there wasn't supposed to be a spider, at least as far as I knew.

When Mother Goose came to me and told me about this gig, I needed some cash. So I said, "Sure." But I did not agree to share the spotlight with a nasty crawling insect.

Most of you already know the outcome, at least by the story's standards. Along comes the spider, sits down beside her, and frightens Miss Muffet away.

The real shtick goes like this:

I get to the set after a pretty crazy night hanging out with Little Bo Peep; who, by the way, only lost her sheep because she passed out during her watch on the herd. She has a small drinking problem. But who am I to make judgments?

So anyway, I'm there feeling a little under the weather. They've got me in the chair trying to get rid of the dark circles and pasty complexion, when Mother G. comes over and says, "Betty, listen, we've decided we want you to meet a man while you're sitting and eating. You know, kind of that 'lonely waif meets the man of her dreams' sort of thing."

I'm like, "Sure, is he cute?"

She says, "He's got a good personality; his name is Harry."

So I figure, fine, I'm gonna hafta play bashful with Mr. Personality. Honkie dorie with me; I could care less as long as the money's the same.

They finish up with the makeup and usher me over to the tuffet. The minute I sit down on that rotted-out piece of fabric and stitching, I tell them there is no way I'm sitting on this unless I talk to my agent first.

They get my agent on the cell and negotiate a higher price. You know, Georgey Porgy can be a real skirt-chaser, but the kid can hustle for money.

I sit down. Then, they hand me this nasty-looking bunch of goo and tell me to eat it. I say, "Nah-ah! You eat it!"

They say, "That's part of the picture."

I say, "I'll eat it on the condition I get residuals from this."

Done, fine, another call to Georgey and we're on our way. You know, there's a lot I won't do as an actress for money, but I figure everyone in this business has got to swallow a load of crap sometime, so I guess this is my time.

Okay, I'm sitting there trying to smile as I choke down this slimy bunch of crap and they're popping film, when out of the corner of my eye I see something fuzzy. It takes all of two seconds for my mind to register what is parking itself next to me.

In a flash, Mother G. is wearing that bowl of gruel and I'm up hanging off the boom guy's microphone, howling and pitching a fit.

Mother G. yells, "Cut! Print!"

I'm screaming, "THERE IS NO WAY I'M GETTING DOWN WITH THAT THING IN THE ROOM!"

Harry is standing on all eights, staring at me with this perplexed look on his face. Suddenly, he smiles and one of his gazillion eyeballs starts winking at me.

That's it! I'll put up with just about anything, but I will not be made a fool of.

I climb down and march over to Mother G. By this time, she's talking with a bunch of guys in suits who, from the way they're talking, must be the marketing slimes who are promoting this whole raunchy, messed-up gathering.

I say to her, "What's going on here?" She escorts me into a corner and starts trying that whole negotiating bunch of garbage again. Well, I'm not going for it.

That's it, I'm out of there. Three days and several phone calls later, my face is on the opening pages of the number-one, most-read book in history.

About Harry. Well, he's coming over to meet my parents next Tuesday. Yeah, I know, but he's really very charming once you get past the hairy legs and all.

When Nikki Went Away

Eliza Osborn

Summers in Phoenix, Arizona are not meant to be spent outside. The sun rises in the morning, shining on the low roofed houses and the neatly mowed lawns, dissolving any sort of coolness that might have developed in the air overnight. The atmosphere feels like a toaster oven and when you venture outside you have the sensation that you are one of those eggs fried by kids on the sidewalk, that you could easily be cooked if you are away from the sweet relief of air conditioning for too long.

I spent my sixteenth summer in Phoenix, the summer before eleventh grade, avoiding the cruel heat of the outdoors. I lounged on the chaise-lounge in our family room watching soap operas and sipping on cold cokes and iced mochas. I painted my nails, read *Cosmo* and *In Style*, and only left the house to go to the tanning salon, the gym, or Yvonne's Hair Cuttery to lighten my already white-blond hair. My fifteen year-old brother Alec called me Princess Quinn that summer and I deserved the title. I basked in the glory of knowing that I held absolutely no responsibilities for anyone or anything besides myself. I was concerned only with my own happiness and the thought that this would be my year to shine on the volleyball team at Xavier Prep.

I had planned my summer to be this way, lazy and inconsequential. In May, my mother had offered me a job on the set of *Wake-Up Phoenix*, the city's number-one morning news show, of which she was the co-host. I had refused, of course, knowing that this was simply her way of trying to spend time with me in order to make herself feel better about having been buried in her work ever since I was twelve. That was the year that my dad wrapped his car around a tree and never regained consciousness. After the funeral, Mom had gone into hyper mode, going full-time at *Wake-Up Phoenix* and hiring a nanny, Gemma, to keep an eye on Alec, me, and our then two year-old sister, Nikki.

Nikki, now six, was still under the watchful eye of Gemma, who had become like a mother to all of us. She was our cook, our chauffeur, and our disciplinarian. The house basically fell apart when she wasn't around. Gemma had supplied me with my never-ending supply of beverages, snacks, and videos that summer, and had relieved me of any pesky Nikki-sitting duties that I might have had. Alec constantly nagged me, "Stop being such a mooch and take your drivers test so you can do something yourself for once." But I didn't see the point if Gemma was there.

One mid-August Sunday Gemma couldn't be there, however. I awoke suddenly to the sound of the phone ringing. I could feel the sun leaking in through my window blinds, but didn't bother to open my

eyes. I heard Alec answer the phone. If he hadn't left for his job at the supermarket, it was too early for me to get up. I began to fall back asleep. I was dreaming of Matt Damon and volleyball when I heard the door open. Before I could groan I felt a sharp pinch on the side of my arm and sat up with a start. "Jesus, Alec, get out!" I rubbed my eyes and tried to read the annoyed look on his face, which was encased by a mop of dirty blond hair that had obviously not been brushed that morning.

"Gemma has heat stroke; she's not coming today; you need to get up and watch Nikki. Come on, she's wanting breakfast."

I groaned and lay back down on my bed, already feeling fatigued by the sun's heat, blaring into my room through the closed window. "Why do I have to watch her, can't you call someone else?"

Alec walked to the door. "What Princess, do you actually have something going on? Just get up, you can figure out what to do with her. I'm leaving; I have a life, after all."

"I have a life too," I mumbled. "I just prefer to keep it uneventful." Alec didn't hear me. He was already on his way down the hall. I lay in my bed and listened to him say goodbye to Nikki, then walk towards the back door and shut it behind him. I sat up and looked out my window, watching him head to the bus stop. Normally I pitied him on these mornings. He chose to work while I got to lounge, but today I felt just as barred down by responsibility as he was. I stared out the window for a few minutes, not looking at anything, just spacing. I got up and walked over to the mirror. My skin was tan, but could have been tanner if I went to the salon more often. My hair was a good shade of blond, though. The blonder the better had been my motto this summer, and it suited me well. My eyes were boring old brown, but I was considering green lenses. I flexed my muscle in the mirror. Volleyball would be awesome this year and I had diligently been sticking to my workout and diet regimen all summer. I turned and looked at my door. If I walked out into the hallway, Nikki would hear the creaking of the floorboards and would make me play with her, take care of her. I hated babysitting, too much worrying about other people. I gave myself one last look in the mirror, smiled (at least those whitening strips were paying off), and slowly ventured into the family room.

Nikki was on the floor, lying on her stomach. She was absorbed in cartoons and didn't pay attention to me. Her short strawberry hair was mussed and she was wearing my old Little Mermaid nightgown. I sat down on the couch. "Gemma's not coming today."

She looked at me as if she hadn't heard me come into the room. She came over and sat beside me. I put my feet up on the table and she copied my gesture. "Alec says she's sick. He said you would make me blueberry pancakes."

"How about Frosted Flakes?" I said tiredly.

"He said blueberry pancakes, and he said you would take me to the pool."

"Why can't we just stay here and watch Toy Story or something? We'll play the relaxing game."

"Quinny, I'm bored! You always play the relaxing game," Nikki whined. "Gemma promised to take me to the pool today. I've been waiting all week." She paused. "Gemma's the only one around here who cares what I want."

I sighed. I didn't feel like dealing with drama. "Either pancakes or the pool," I conceded. Nikki chose the pool. She jumped up and ran to change into her ballerina bathing suit; I prepared us each a bowl of cereal, and soon we were seated in the coolness of my friend Sydney's light blue Jetta, on our way to the Havertey School Pool.

Sydney and I had been best friends since volleyball camp when we were seven. We had one of those rare bonds that entailed mind reading and sentence finishing. She was like the twin sister from whom I had been separated at birth, and I often wondered if we had some kind of psychic connection that allowed us to complement each other as well as we did. She was my other half at school and on the volleyball court. I didn't feel whole without Sydney. I had been mad at her when she had decided to work this summer, although it was to my benefit this morning.

She stopped the Jetta in front of the pool's gateway entrance. Nikki jumped out and danced around impatiently while I slowly unbuckled my seatbelt. Sydney looked in the rear-view mirror and ran her hand through her curly black hair.

I sighed.

"Oh Quinn, relax," Sydney said impatiently, "I think you can handle one afternoon of actual human interaction."

"I'm not so sure. Are you positive you can't take a day off and make this a little more pleasant for me?"

"No sweetie, you'll survive. Now kindly step out of the car, I've really gotta go to work." Sydney worked at the Be-Bop fifties-style diner, and had already arranged for the volleyball team to have our victory parties there.

I stepped onto the pavement and watched enviously as Sydney zoomed out of the parking lot. I wished that I was in her shoes until remembering that she would be working today too. "Come on, Quinn, I want to show you my dive," Nikki squealed, practically dragging me through the gates. She got a bag of gummy bears out of the snack machine, and I directed us toward two open lounge chairs next to the cute lifeguard's station. I was glad that I'd decided to go for the baby-blue string bikini today.

"Let's go in, Quinny," Nikki said excitedly.

"Not yet; just relax for a while."

Nikki groaned, but sat in her chair and began munching on gummy

bears while I slowly peeled off my sundress, glancing at the lifeguard to see if he was paying attention. He wasn't. I lay down in the chair as gracefully as possible, closed my eyes, and let my skin soak up the bright rays of sun hitting us head on. I heard Nikki fiddling with the gummy bear bag. Then after a few moments of blissful silence, I heard her chair moving, and I opened my eyes to find her standing over me.

"Can we please go in now?"

"How about you go in, and I'll meet you in a little while?" Nikki didn't look pleased, so I added, "You can practice your dive, and I'll watch you when I get in."

Nikki smiled and I could see a space in the front of her mouth where a baby tooth had recently fallen out. "I'll be practicing; tell me when you're ready, ok?" she said excitedly, not waiting for my reply as she hurried over to the diving board.

I began to lather myself with sunscreen, but the lifeguard still took no notice, so I decided to draw attention to my mouth by eating some of Nikki's gummy bears. I fished around in the bag, but Nikki had eaten all the cherry flavored ones, knowing that they were my favorites. I was annoyed until realizing that I now had an opportunity to walk directly through the lifeguard's line of sight. I saw Nikki standing at the end of a long line for the diving board, behind a little boy in a Speedo. She gave me a thumbs up and pointed to the Speedo, sticking her tongue out. I rolled my eyes at her, stood up slowly, and walked past the lifeguard, trying my best to be carefree, sexy, and vulnerable all at once. After getting a new bag of gummy bears I walked back towards him. He was looking. I smiled and he smiled back. I felt a sense of accomplishment and lay back in my chair. I looked for Nikki in the line, but didn't see her. "That line moved quickly," I thought, until I noticed that the little boy in the Speedo was still waiting. Nikki was not in line. I scanned the pool. I saw kids everywhere, but no red-heads in sight.

I sat up, squinting my eyes. Where could she have gone? I didn't see her anywhere. I could feel the panic rising up, but I pushed it down. I stood up as calmly as I could. Forgetting about the lifeguard, I walked quickly over to the Speedo boy.

"Excuse me; did you see where the girl behind you went? She has red hair and a pink bathing suit." I noticed that my voice had a tiny shake to it.

He looked behind him. "Oh, she left; I'm not sure where she went, but she lost her spot in line."

I didn't respond. I walked around the line, through the rows of lounge chairs on the other side of the pool. No Nikki. I peered into the game room to the left of the entrance. No Nikki. I looked in both restrooms. No Nikki. I looked by the food machines, in the lifeguard's office. No Nikki. I walked back towards our chairs, looking around me as I walked. I hoped more than anything that she was behind the

lifeguard stand next to our chairs, that I just couldn't see her yet, but when I got back, No Nikki.

The panic rose up and overtook me like a tidal wave. I ran towards the entrance, through the gates, and out into the parking lot. I stopped and looked around. The lot was empty except for one pregnant mother walking towards the pool with her children. She had no worries; everyone in her family was accounted for. Nikki was not. The sun bore down on me so strongly that I swore I could feel a hole being burned through my scalp. Beads of perspiration ran down my face and chest. As I stood in the parking lot in my baby blue bikini, I knew that Nikki was gone. My six year-old sister with the toothless grin, strawberry hair, and pink ballerina bathing suit was gone, and I was the one who had lost her!

I don't remember too much of what happened the rest of that day; the hours all seemed to fade together, as did all those weeks in the first few months after Nikki disappeared. I remember going to the Lifeguard's office, feeling like I couldn't breathe, like my heart was going to jump out of my chest. I'm not sure how long the pool management waited before calling the police, but it was long enough for me to lead them on another futile search around the pool and for them to call "Nikki Atkinson, please report to the Lifeguard Station," over the loudspeaker so many times that it felt like a song stuck in my head. When the police finally came, they tried to get information from me, but I don't think that I answered a single question. I was dizzy and my ears rung. Sometimes officers came to talk to me, but I was of no use, so I mostly sat on a lounge chair, alone, waiting. I kept thinking of things that I should be doing to help. I could tell them that Nikki was allergic to apple juice, that she got sunburned easily, and that she had a pink scar on her knee from the time she tried to jump from the top of the swing set.

Mom took forever to get to the pool. Her segment on the show ended late, and when she finally arrived I was in the bathroom, staring at myself despairingly in the mirror. When I came out, I saw her talking to two of the officers who had failed in their earlier attempts to converse with me. As I came closer, their words turned to soft murmurs. Mom looked up at me. I searched her eyes for anger, but saw only a mixture of confusion and desperation. I recognized that look; I hadn't seen it since dad's funeral and it scared me. It brought back memories of sad faces, black hats, and solemnly placed roses. As I looked closer, however, I could detect a glimmer of hope in her eyes, something that had not been there the last time. This caused a small amount of relief to flow through me like a refreshing rainfall.

As I watched that glimmer fade over the next few weeks, my relief slowly began to evaporate. The police assigned to Nikki's case tried to seem optimistic, as if they were close to finding her. It seemed to me,

though, that they just talked about doing things rather than actually doing them. Mom's job on Wake-Up Phoenix got Nikki a lot of publicity and within hours there were signs and posters of her smiling her toothless, happy grin all over the city. But for all the hype, we weren't getting any closer to finding Nikki. She had simply disappeared, and as I watched my mother's hope slowly burn out, my guilt cut me deeper and deeper, like a sharp knife that was stabbing me repeatedly. Alec completely ignored me. I got the impression that this was the only way he could keep himself from blowing up at me. I wished that he would just get it over with.

Every night I prayed that the police would get a lead while I was sleeping and every morning I ran into the kitchen only to find out that nothing had changed. Everything seemed perfect in my dreams, but I woke up to find out that nothing was perfect and never would be again. I soon realized that it was easier to quit waking up altogether. When I felt the sun peeping through the shades I would pull my covers over my head and close my eyes to the world. I now lived in my bed, under the safety of my pink covers. I lay there all day, every day, pondering my life. Why had I spent this summer, my whole life for that matter, in a "Quinn world," where only my troubles and my thoughts mattered? I realized that I had never bothered to spend any time with Nikki, to be close to Alec, to rebuild my relationship with Mom instead of letting her slowly remove herself from the family. Was I like this when Dad was alive, did I live in a bubble even then?

These thoughts consumed me so thoroughly that I was somehow able to ignore all of the now-meaningless figures who walked in and tried to reintegrate me into the world of the living. Gemma and Grandma Shelia were in and out constantly. Mom stayed too busy to bother, but Sydney came by every day. She read me magazine articles and short stories. She told me gossip and rumors from school; she even gave me a daily weather forecast, as if she was hoping that the Phoenix sun would somehow rouse me from my self-induced coma. She brought the volleyball team sometimes. Margo, Cat, and Ellie were the ones that came most often. They stood over my bed, smiling nervously, unsure of what to do or say. It reminded me of when Dad died. Margo moved her eyes nervously around the room; Cat and Ellie fidgeted; Sydney made pointless chatter, and I blocked every bit of it out. It was all too familiar, and I buried myself in my sheets knowing that they were secretly judging me for being the cause of such a horrible situation.

Nothing changed until the day that Alec came into my room and stood over my head, which was buried under the sheets. "Princess, do you realize that it's two months today?"

Two months? I felt my heart jump into my throat, but I didn't respond.

"I'm sure Nikki would really appreciate how you've chosen to live under your sheets until she comes home. It's amazing how you've committed yourself to her cause. You are making this process so much easier for everyone. Now we can forget about Nikki and worry about your little breakdown instead."

I lay still for a while, not sure what to do. I couldn't respond. He was right and I knew it. The room was silent. Alec stood over me, waiting. Then I heard him turn and walk towards the door. "Get up Princess," he said as he left the room.

I sat up and slowly pulled my covers below my head. It was October. Nikki had vanished on August 15th, and now it was October 15th. My guilt had caused me to miss out on two months of life, and it had done absolutely nothing for Nikki. I slowly stepped out of bed and walked over to the mirror. My hair had lost its lustrous shine; my muscles had lost their tone. I was a mess; my life was a mess. I felt the familiar tears welling. In the kitchen I could hear Gemma moving around; she had the TV on. Mom was on the porch with the screen door open, talking on the phone.

I realized with a sudden intensity how much I had missed. The rest of my family was moving on with their lives, recovering and continuing to function. I had hoped to suppress my guilt by going into hibernation, and still my guilt was worse than ever. I stood over my bed, and for the first time in two months began to make it. I straightened the sheets, fluffed the pillows. It was time to reenter the world. I felt a momentary glint of excitement, until a framed photo on my bedside table caught my eye. It was Alec, Nikki, and me on a boat in Nantucket. I picked up the photo and touched Nikki's laughing face with my hand. A crushing apprehension came over me. I was starting life again, but how could I live normally, knowing what I had done to Nikki?

I came to find that I could not. It was impossible to return to my old life. My guilt followed me everywhere. It was a shadow, a constant presence. I couldn't help but miss the consistent comfort of living between my sheets. At least in bed, I was alone; I was mourning. Now, whenever I found myself having fun, when I was playing volleyball, shopping, or even helping Gemma in the kitchen, I felt that I was betraying Nikki. It began to depress me that my friends were not having this problem. My experience had changed me so drastically, and they remained unaltered. I felt beyond them somehow.

"Syd," Margo said, snapping her gum during break at volleyball practice, "You need to take us shopping soon. Your car is not being taken advantage of at all."

"I think Margo just wants to take advantage of the back seat," Cat joked.

"I think Hugh would take advantage of it with you," Sara giggled.

Margo threw a volleyball at Sara, "Oh damn, my acrylic; these are new, too. That just blows!" She leaned towards me and showed me her newly-plain fingernail.

"Well if you guys wanna go after practice, Margo can do her nails, and we can shop," Sydney offered.

"Ok," said Sara, "but we can't go to the place were Jackie What's-her-face works; I hate that girl so much."

I sighed, stood up, and walked towards the locker room. Sydney's eyes followed me sadly. She knew I wasn't going to the mall. I just couldn't handle the petty conversation. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with my friends. I just couldn't relate to them anymore. There was no room in my head for acrylics or shopping. I had been a teenage girl, and look what it had done to Nikki. I was an adult now. I was in the world of my peers, but not of it.

Finally, in November, Sydney convinced me to go to the volleyball team's end of season party at the Be-Bop diner. "I miss you," she pleaded, "you never want to hang out with us anymore." So I went. The Be-Bop diner was packed, and I found myself annoyed that it wasn't just the team at the party. The chatter, music, and happiness around me reminded me of all my reasons not to be happy. My head began to hurt. Sydney put her arm around me.

"Quinny, you look like you're being tortured."

Margo and Hugh walked in, holding hands, and I saw Cat grab Sara and run giggling towards the bathroom. I felt sick.

"Syd, this is too much, I think I need to go."

"Ok, I'll come with you."

"No, you should stay. You're allowed to have fun. Just because I can't, it doesn't mean you shouldn't. We're not attached at the hip, you know."

Sydney stepped back, looking hurt. I paused for minute, but the tears were coming. I headed towards the door. I barely made it out before Sydney caught up with me and grabbed my arm.

"Nikki would want you to have fun, Quinn. She wouldn't want you to punish yourself like this."

I started to speak, but the tears were coming quickly now, and Sydney hugged me. I thought I could feel her crying softly onto my shirt. She kept her arm around me as she led me to her Jetta, tears flooding down my cheeks. She started the engine and turned on the radio. The soft music floated through the car, and she sat in silence, listening to my sobs.

The holidays approached, and it surprised me that the seasons still changed and life continued to move. We didn't celebrate Thanksgiving that year. After Dad died, it had been hard enough for Mom to continue

the tradition; losing Nikki made the effort seem unbearable. I spent Thanksgiving at Sydney's. After dinner we sat on the floor in her room eating leftover pumpkin pie and looking at old middle school yearbooks. We came across my sixth grade picture, and I was surprised at how much my carefree smile resembled Nikki's.

"She probably would've looked a lot like me," I murmured.

"She still could," said Sydney, taking a bite of my pumpkin pie.

"Maybe." I closed the yearbook and put the rest of my pie on Sydney's plate. She flipped on the TV and I focused on the screen, allowing the images to erase my morbid thoughts.

When Christmas came, I announced to everyone that I would not be accepting presents this year. If Nikki didn't get to have a merry Christmas, I was determined to make mine as mundane as possible. On Christmas Eve, Sydney and Ellie helped me buy a bunch of Poinsettias, and I stationed myself in the backyard with Gemma's garden tools, the light breeze hitting my back. Nikki had loved Poinsettias, because when she began to see them it meant that Christmas was coming. I laughed out loud when I pictured her carrying a big basket of them toward Gemma in the grocery store.

"What's funny?" I turned around and saw Alec walking slowly towards me.

"Just thinking of Nikki stuff," I replied.

"Oh, I do that, too; sometimes it helps me get to sleep." He knelt down beside me and picked up a plant, "Poinsettias."

"Yup." I handed him a shovel. We didn't speak anymore, just planted until all the flowers had been put into rows along the patch of grass at the end of the garden. We sat there for a long time, staring at the plethora of red flora. "She would like this," I said.

"Yeah." He paused. "Do you really think she's not coming back?"

"I don't like to think about that."

"Yeah, me neither." So we just sat in silence, the soft heat of the sun hitting our backs. We were thinking separate thoughts, but at the same time, we were bound together. We were bound in our grief over all that had happened in the past year and in our slow, but inevitable acceptance of the fact that our Nikki really was gone for good.

I woke up on Christmas morning to find a small stocking hanging off of the end of my bed. A note was stuck to it reading, Santa Didn't Get the Memo. I couldn't help but be happy, digging through my stocking. I forgot to feel guilty as I contentedly sucked my mini candy cane.

Later I helped Mom make crepes for breakfast. Alec ate quickly, anxious to play with his new guitar. After he left, Mom and I sat down with our food, both hesitant to begin eating.

"It's weird, doing this without Nikki," I said, putting down my fork.

"It's allowed though, Quinn," Mom said.

"I just hate experiencing things without her... It feels like..."

"It feels like she should be here doing this, instead of you."

I nodded. "I don't deserve this, it doesn't feel right." I stood up and took my plate towards the sink.

"Quinn please. You can't keep doing this. You can't deny yourself because you feel responsible for what happened. It was an accident and if you keep putting it all on yourself, if you keep punishing yourself, I'm afraid of what your life will be like." She stood up and grabbed my plate, putting it back down on the table. "We are not leaving until you eat this meal, so get started."

I sighed. Part of me wanted to cry, the other wanted to laugh. My mother sat beside me as I allowed the syrup and butter to melt on my tongue. At that moment, I almost felt content.

I spent New Year's Eve with Sydney, Margo, Cat, Ellie, and Sara. We watched Dick Clark and drank Margaritas. I laughed as I counted down the minutes with my friends, but thoughts of Nikki were, as always, in the back of my mind. I wondered if my guilt would subside in the coming year, if my life would ever go back to normal. As I lay on the floor next to Sydney, I realized that in many ways it already had. What surprised me most was that I was allowing it to.

I arrived home the next morning tired and happy, excited for the charity volleyball game that night. My spirits fell, however, as I walked in the door and saw Mom and Alec sitting ash-faced at the table. Mom spoke quietly. "They found a body, a little girl. They think it could be Nikki."

I felt my stomach rise. I held back the feelings of nausea that were sweeping over me. *Just keep it together* I told myself. *You can't afford to lose it right now.* "What do we have to do?"

"We're gonna go down to the morgue," Alec replied. "But you can get ready for your game if you'd rather."

The game. I couldn't believe that I had actually been excited about some stupid volleyball game. "No. I'm coming."

I don't remember the drive to the morgue. Once we got there, only Mom was allowed to see the body. Alec and I sat in the waiting room. He seemed angry again; he clenched his fists and let out slow, controlled breaths. I didn't attempt to comfort him. I knew that even now some of his anger was directed towards me.

It seemed like hours before Mom reappeared in the waiting room. Tears streamed down her face; I felt them well up in my own eyes. It wasn't until she came closer that I realized she was crying tears of relief.

She knelt on the floor and embraced Alec and I. "It wasn't Nikki," she sobbed "It wasn't." We all began to cry then. They were tears of happiness, mixed with tears of despair. We despaired knowing that somewhere another family was receiving the news that we had been dreading for nine months, the news that for us had been postponed, but that we would most likely someday receive.

That night I stood in my room looking in the mirror. The trip to the morgue had taken its toll on all of us, but Mom and Sydney both thought that I should play in the game as planned. It seemed symbolic, somehow. Volleyball had been my passion and I had given it up after losing Nikki. If I started again, would it be like I was saying that what happened to Nikki was no longer important? I desperately wished that I could have seen her, gotten to know her, seen her grow up, heard about her opinions and her hobbies, found out what kind of woman she would have become. I wanted to fix her hair for the prom, help her pack for college, be her Maid of Honor. Realizing that she would probably never experience these things brought tears to my eyes.

As I walked outside to wait for Sydney, I thought about the difficulty of moving on. How does one find a balance between hanging on to the past and continuing to the future? I knew that my guilt over Nikki would always be with me, but as I walked outside, I realized that I was living my life, and that living was okay.

I allowed the warm air to hit my face, streaming through my body and out of my toes and fingertips like a spirit being channeled. I felt refreshed and allowed the heat to dry the wetness from my tears. I looked up, gazing at the small stars scattered throughout the sky. I smiled. If I looked hard enough I could make out a constellation. If I allowed my mind to alter the stars the tiniest bit, they almost took the shape of a little girl. She was running, strawberry hair flying off of her head, hurrying to dive effortlessly into the cool water. I could almost hear her call to me, her voice becoming faint as she moved farther and farther away. "Quinny, hurry; come watch my dive!" I wanted to call back to her, to follow her wherever she was going, but I could no longer make out her shape. The stars seemed to be shifting. They dispersed into shapeless dots simply lighting up the sky.

I saw Sydney's car pulling around the corner and I waved, running towards it. I hopped in, and as we drove away, I stuck my hand out the window, allowing the breeze to hit it. My mind was filled with thoughts of volleyball, the future, and, as always, the little girl, joyous and invincible, in the pink ballerina bathing suit.

Rust

Rachel Polley

We didn't talk to each other. It was obvious that he was pretending to concentrate on the road to avoid my gaze. Did he like what I had worn for him? It had taken me all morning to put together, and I even matched my lipstick to the shade of pink in my shirt. I don't think he even noticed.

I looked out of the window and watched nothingness. Sometimes I looked at the rows of corn fly by me; sometimes I drew back to stare at my own reflection in the dirty glass. I really wished he would talk to me. Usually I couldn't get him to be quiet, but the only thing he had said all morning was hello.

Maybe he was just nervous. He didn't sound nervous on the phone last night, though. In fact, he sounded excited. We had only been seeing each other for three weeks, but he told me that when two people are in love it shouldn't matter how long they have been together. When he put it like that I guess it made sense. I let him pick me up, and there I was in his red Buick.

It took twenty minutes to get there. He had mentioned to me once that he lived in the country, but this was more of nowhere than country. The road in front of his house wasn't paved, and I could hear the rocks spread underneath the weight of the car.

He pulled into his drive. I had to take off my sunglasses so that I could see. Dozens of trees filtered out the light, turning a beautiful march morning into a gloomy evening. His lawn was a disgrace; brown patches lay scattered about, and the grass that was still alive was in desperate need of mowing. There was a rusty Ford dead near the edge of his property, a haven for weeds and snakes.

He parked his car in the middle of this mess, not even bothering to pull up to the house or stay on the dirty path that served as his drive. The car door squeaked on its hinges and I stumbled out of the front seat. He ran up the stairs to the front porch, threw open the screen, and unlocked the front door. We were alone.

The house was pitch black- you wouldn't have ever known that it was still early in the afternoon. He didn't turn on any lights, though. He told me to wait in the living room. He was going to start the hot tub. My stomach started to turn. I walked over piles of trash on the floor- how could his parents live like this? - and cleared off a spot on the couch. I closed my eyes, counted to ten. I heard a clock ticking somewhere. I hated clocks; they made me nervous.

I heard water running. I had thought the hot tub was outside, so I wore a swimsuit. Now I felt even more awkward; it was clear that the water was running from somewhere inside. I considered going

into another room and taking my suit off, but I was sure he would understand. I got off of the couch and followed the sound of the water. It led me to the master bath, where I discovered that the luxurious hot tub that I had been dreaming of was nothing more than an ordinary bathtub that had seen too many dirty feet. He had mounted makeshift jets himself- his prized "hot tub." It looked far too small for the both of us, and though the water had been running for several minutes, it was still shallow. Shallow and a dingy red. Brick red flakes hung suspended on the water's surface.

I had never seen anyone naked before, in person. I had imagined what it would be like to see him - taking off his shirt, his pants, looking at me with his dark eyes. This was real, though, not some fantasy I had constructed in my head. I stood there staring, not for lack of manners, but because I could not believe it was really happening. He turned his back to me, looked at himself in the vanity mirror, and removed his clothes. I was surprised to see that the bronze tan that coated his forearms faded to white as it ran down his body. His chest was not as defined as I had pictured it, and in fact, had a slightly caved-in quality. His stomach protruded over his waistline, reminding me of my father's own beer belly, and his legs were hairy and too small. There was a long scar running down his back. I could see him smiling at me in the mirror.

He turned and came to me, grabbed my hand and asked me to take off my clothes. My hands shook as I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it to the floor. He saw that I was wearing a swimsuit- it made him smirk, but not smile. I felt so naïve. I had never been naked in front of a man before. I eased into it, tried to act like I had done this before, that I was completely comfortable with myself and with him. I put on a smile when I unfastened my pants.

It was then that I noticed the mirrors all over the bathroom. There were two natural vanities, but the two full-length mirrors at either end propped against the wall looked unnatural. I suspected that he had put them there. I couldn't help but see myself in them as I walked towards the tub. I didn't like what I saw. I shook it out of my mind, instead focusing on what was to be a special day.

The tub had finally finished filling up. The water was red. I was afraid to get in, fearing that the rust would stain my skin. The steam coming off the water began to fog up the mirrors, preventing me from seeing my disapproving face any longer. I dipped my foot in the water; it burned and I jerked my foot back. He turned on some cold. There was more rust in it, more red.

When the water had cooled, I lowered myself into the tub, curling into a tight ball as he sat along with me. Embarrassed, I tried to cover up my breasts, but the effort was wasted- he kept putting my arms back

down. He looked me over, his eyes tearing into my skin. Why didn't he tell me I was beautiful?

My skin was already pruning when he finally made his move. He wanted to know if I was ready. My voice quivered: I said sure, yeah, that was fine, and I started to get out. He immediately pulled me back down and said that he wanted to do it here, in the tub. I really didn't want to do it there in the cramped bathtub with the rusty water and the mirrors all around. But I said yes. I just wanted to please him.

I had no idea what to do. I clumsily crawled toward him, my feet slipping underneath me as I tried to lay myself on him. There really wasn't enough room, and yet he kept moving me around, trying to find a comfortable position. The water sloshed around us, the red water spilling out onto the linoleum and soaking into the bathmat. It was a grotesque sound, and my stomach churned with each wave. He was maneuvering me around with my arms, and he was holding them tight- too tight. I just wanted to get out.

He let me go. There were marks on my forearms from where his hands had been. They were bright red, but fading fast. I hoped he didn't bruise me. We sat there for a moment in awkward silence, and then he suggested we go somewhere else. He got up first and left the room. He didn't even help me. I sat there for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts, and then got myself up and followed him. Surprisingly, I saw that the door to the spare bedroom was opened. It was completely dark, and I could just make out a shadowy figure near the window. I wondered why he hadn't gone to his room.

I cautiously stepped through the doorway, and that's when he lunged at me and pushed me against the wall, pressing too hard against me, kissing me all over. The kisses were lusty, greedy, rushed. I wanted to take my time. He wanted something else.

He suddenly let me go. As he walked out of the room, he turned and told me to lie down on the bed, that he was going to get a condom. He made some joke of it: if you're feeling good you should wrap your wood. He smiled, but I didn't laugh.

I felt sick. The bed was huge; I didn't have to walk over to it so much as step up onto it. The mattress sunk in as I crawled towards the center, swallowing me whole. I felt strange there by myself in the middle of the bed lying on a thick pile of blankets. I considered striking a sexy pose for him, but quite honestly, I didn't feel very sexy.

It took him almost five minutes to come back. He had a small object in one hand- I assumed it was the condom- and a white towel in the other. He said he had tried to find one in another color- the blood would stain on the white, and he might have to throw it out. But, he said, it was better that ruining the sheets. I didn't know there was going to be blood. No one ever talked about the blood.

He put the towel down first, then laid me on top of it. He didn't even waste time with kissing now. He got on top of me. I felt suffocated by his weight, and my face was buried in his acne-shrouded shoulder. I could hardly breath. There was no stopping now.

I felt a horrible pain, a stabbing, a tear, a burning. This was what I had been waiting for? I was hurting, and he was hurting me. He didn't ask if I was okay, didn't even care. He was in this for him, for how he felt. He just kept going, eyes squinty, mouth in a crooked leer, breathing heavily.

I had been so innocent. Now I saw myself just as dirty as I had looked in the car window's reflection. I saw him, uncaring, unkind, using me. I wanted to tell him to stop, but I couldn't. I didn't want to sound like a prude, or scared. I thought it was against the rules to tell him how I really felt, so I played pretend just like I did when I was a little girl. I didn't know women had to play pretend, too.

The hurting seemed to go on forever. I remembered hearing from the girls at school that sex is very short and sweet. Somewhere this seemed to have gone terribly wrong. There was nothing wonderful about what I was going through. I just laid there on that bed, my spirit being swallowed by it and him. I tried not to think about something that I had thought about so much.

He finally got off me. He must have finished. He didn't roll over, didn't talk to me. He just got up and left. He went into the bathroom and shut the door. I heard water running- was he taking a shower? And there I was again, alone and empty.

He didn't say he loved me.

I didn't even want to wait for him to shower; I just wanted to leave. My whole body was trembling, not from the cold, but from what had just happened. There was a throbbing, and aching pain coming from where he had been. I reached my hand down to touch the hurt, and as I pulled my hand back, I saw the blood on my fingertips. I wanted to be sick. It was the color of rust, and I laughed.

Finish at Canaveral National Seashore

Katherine Vaccaro

On a summer afternoon in 1995, I hesitated on a wooden dune ramp, feeling the ocean roar beneath me. I breathed in the salt spray of natural Florida, yet barely glanced at the Atlantic as it rolled onto Playalinda Beach. Instead, I looked at the nudists doing their Saturday thing and wished this were a normal day.

On a normal day, Eddie and I would head down to the beach. We'd smile at the volleyball players. We'd nod to the sunbathers. We'd dodge through the fishing lines and around the bait buckets near the water's edge. We'd pick our place and stretch out to soak up the sun.

Not today. I shivered in the August heat and brushed my hands over Eddie's old shirt. I'd found it the previous weekend, while cleaning out his end of the closet. It dated to the Sixties, long before we met, from his days in a Key West sports car club, the *EcurieVitesse*. I found the club's name, French for "Speedy Team," exotic and liked that it was embroidered on the back. But I'd chosen the shirt for its front. Eddie had sewn a patch above the pocket – a BMW roundel – and embroidered his name beneath it.

I touched a cardboard box I'd set on the ramp's wooden rail. I'd been disappointed when Eddie's ashes arrived in such a boring container, the result of obeying his request for "the cheapest cremation possible." So I'd added a curly, rainbow-hued bow for the journey. The box beckoned me to pick it up and get going, but I couldn't. I turned toward the parking area where our friends were gathering after the drive from Orlando. I smiled. So many had joined me for this last adventure.

When Eddie stated his memorial wishes, he left the guest list to me. I'd wavered. We seldom mentioned our love of what he and other purists refer to as "naturism" but most of the world calls "nudism." Holding his memorial at a nude beach would jolt our friends, just like the letter he'd written to announce his passing when most hadn't known he was sick. I'd even fretted about turning us all into criminals. Nudity is illegal in Brevard County and the Sheriff's department sometimes raids Playalinda. Fortunately, Canaveral National Seashore is federal land and the National Park Service doesn't enforce local laws, so the only threat comes from the occasional local forays.

Unable to decide who might be offended by Eddie's final wish, I'd invited everyone, even my parents and Eddie's family. We'd caravan from Orlando to Playalinda together, clothing optional once we reached the beach.

I watched our friends head toward me, amazed at how many had responded to Eddie's unconventional request. They wore shorts, t-shirts,

hats and sandals. Some Eddie had known since the Fifties. Mensa friends. Car freaks. Old Navy buddies. And one face that choked me up: Eddie's half-niece Brenda, living proof his family had survived.

I checked the pocket of my baggy shorts, wishing for a tissue but knowing I wouldn't find one. I'd long counted on Eddie to carry a white cotton handkerchief I could borrow anytime. No more.

I swallowed my tears and picked up his ashes. "Let's go," I said. I marched down the ramp and pushed through the soft sand blown up at its base, then headed across the beach to the hard-packed sand near the waterline.

I feared our long line of clothed invaders might prompt the volleyball players and sunbathers to cover up. They did pause to watch us, but their expressions displayed more curiosity than alarm. I focused beyond them.

Unlike most Florida beaches, with their motels and hot dog stands, Playalinda offers the purity of sand, sea and dunes. I looked over my shoulder at the space shuttle pads, so near that the beach closes during launches. Eddie and I agreed that Playalinda justified some of the money we gave the IRS.

I pulled back my shoulders and sucked in my stomach. Though my 40th birthday was less than two months away, I was at my best. In my fifteen years with Eddie, I'd gone from pudgy to muscular. In the weeks since his death, I'd leaned out even more, eating little and sleeping less.

The sea breeze blew my long brown hair across my face. I pushed it away. Normally, I wore it up at the beach, but Eddie had liked it best this way, loose and free.

"Slow down, Kathy," my friend Keith called, a few steps back. He nodded at the others, much farther behind.

I laughed. "You sound like Eddie on a road rally." I relaxed my always-impatient pace. Unlike me, Keith wore neither a hat nor sunglasses. His blue eyes squinted against the harsh summer sun, its midday rays glinting off his thick silver hair. Eddie and I had met him at a Mensa Christmas party when we were newlyweds and Keith's hair was ash blond. I'd barely noticed the change over the years, but did today. Keith's aging well, I thought. He'd faced some hard times emotionally and financially, yet never lost his optimism. It showed in the smile lines around his mouth and eyes.

I bounced the ribbons on Eddie's box. "I wish he'd left me more instructions. I'm not as good as he was at driving by the seat of my pants."

"You're doing fine." Keith glanced back at the others. "How far do you want to go? I don't think we should make it a long walk."

I sized up the beach, with its evenly-spaced sunbathers. "Let's find a clear spot so we don't bother these folks any more than we have to."

Spying an open area near a lone man on a towel, I pointed. "That should work." I moved toward it, my steps slowed by the soft, dry sand, then set the box down.

Even though our parade stretched back to the beach ramp, I decided to undress. I shucked off my clothes, but kept on my Audrey Hepburn tortoiseshell sunglasses and the straw planter's hat that was one of Eddie's and my trademarks, its flat crown and brim serving well in sun or rain.

"Let's make a circle around the box," I suggested.

My brother Doug and his wife Mary, my ever-faithful supporters, nodded. Though neither they nor Keith took off their clothes, about half the rest of our friends did. For many, this marked a first. Soon, those who remained clothed stood out more than those who'd undressed.

Our circle continued to grow. The total number – several dozen – surprised me. Several held cameras, which broke a nudist rule. I didn't care. I wanted this documented.

The man who'd been sitting on the blanket when we arrived stood up and edged closer.

Back in Orlando, I'd passed out index cards with quotes meaningful to Eddie. And I'd invited everyone to speak from their hearts about him, too. "Who'd like to start?" I asked.

Our friend Rick waved a hand. "I will." Like Eddie, Rick tended to be quiet in groups, but today his voice rang out. "Some people take more from the world than they give. Others give more than they take. Eddie was a giver and I'm fortunate to have enjoyed his gifts."

Others followed, reading poems and quotes that stressed self-reliance. I soaked up the words, each voice connecting me to Eddie's . . . the easy Carolina lilt of the family who'd befriended him during his Navy recruiting days . . . the murmur of our young Orlando neighbor Melissa, today eclipsed by her Adonis boyfriend . . . the earnest young BMW disciple, Scott, the closest Eddie got to having a son . . . the hesitant pacing of Bob, the shyest of his car buddies.

"Eddie Hardman changed my life," Bob began, his tone soft and southern. "Please let me offer an example that sounds insignificant, but isn't. I've always liked performance cars and driven them hard. But I never used my seatbelt. One day, I took a ride with Eddie and he refused to start the car until I buckled up. Since then, I've always worn my seatbelt. I think of Eddie every time I do."

Everyone waited, probably expecting Bob to report he'd escaped death in a car crash, thanks to this change. But that hadn't happened, nor would it have reinforced how Eddie worked. As Bob and many of the others knew, he sidestepped trouble in advance.

I glanced down at the sand, pondering the meaning of Eddie's life. Did it boil down to clean handkerchiefs and seatbelt warnings? No, they only pointed toward his inner truth, as the route instructions of a road rally keep a car on course and on time. His favorite saying vibrated in my

mind. Life isn't fair. And luck has nothing to do with it.

My tears started again. To calm myself, I focused outside our circle. I noticed Kim, the best photographer among us, shooting as we spoke. I noted she was taking care not to capture any strangers in her lens and smiled at her.

A little beyond the rest of us stood two of Eddie's Navy buddies, as uncomfortable here as the nudists were with our cameras. One was a retired officer, an ex-pilot in Eddie's first squadron. The other was a bandy-legged fellow named Paul Hatcher, who'd taken Eddie under his wing when the young E-2 reported to his first duty station in Jacksonville, Florida. I admired them for braving conditions that were the antithesis of military formality.

I refocused on our circle. Brenda, Eddie's half-niece, held up the last of the cards I'd passed out. She resembled him the most among his relatives, with the same dark hair, same slim body, same sparkplug intelligence. As a kid, she and her family had made several trips from West Virginia to Florida in new Fords purchased at the dealership where Brenda's father worked. Their visits showed a young Eddie that he didn't have to stay poor all his life.

Brenda started reading. The poem was one of the few I'd found in Eddie's study after his death. It's probably the best-known excerpt from *The Rubiyat of Omar Kahim*.

Come fill the Cup and in the fire of Spring
Your winter garment of sad repentance fling.
The bird of time has but a little way to flutter
And the bird is on the wing.

The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on; not all your Piety nor wit Shall lure it back
to cancel half a line, Nor all your Tears wash out a
Word of it.

Watching her speak, I noticed that Brenda's shoulders hunched more than Eddie's, that her voice carried the West Virginia twang he lost as a child. Yet she lent the words the same clarity he'd have given them.

When she finished, a beat of time told me, It's your turn. I offered two tributes to love I'd treasured since age 16, never suspecting then how true they'd become for me now. Through my tears, I forced out the last stanza of the second one, by Yeats.

Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars

I lifted my wet face and searched the sky for Eddie, but saw only cottonball clouds dotting a blue sky. Already, they were tinged with grey, building into late afternoon thunderheads. I made myself concentrate on our friends, aware that I needed to close the ceremony. But I couldn't stop crying.

My longtime friend, KJ, rescued me. She stepped forward, her voice ragged as ever, and read a poem that hinted at reincarnation. I knew she and Eddie had discussed this belief and he'd rejected it. I wished he was wrong and she right, but I doubted it.

I opened the box and lifted out the plastic bag full of his ashes. I hadn't looked at them before and was surprised to see that they were the color and texture of Playalinda's coarse sand, not at all like ashes from a fireplace, as I'd expected. Seeing them transformed my mood from grief to gaiety. Eddie had stressed that he wanted me to be happy after his death and this was my first step toward fulfilling that wish.

"It's time to scatter the ashes." My voice sounded like I held a birthday cake, not my beloved husband's remains.

Someone produced a knife to cut open the bag. We trooped down to the water's edge and tossed handfuls of Eddie's ashes into the low surf. They disappeared into the breaking waves, indistinguishable from the beach sand. I laughed straight from my gut, standing free and strong as he'd wished.

When we reassembled by our clothes, I thanked my friends. "I know it would have meant a lot to Eddie that so many of you came."

While the others dressed, I slipped back to the water. I searched for a last connection to the man I loved, but saw only sunlight sparkling off waves. I pressed my hands to my heart. It contained all that was left of Eddie.

A shadow moved across the sand. I expected it to be a friend and jerked with surprise when I glimpsed a stranger. It was the man who'd been sitting nearby when we arrived. He wore only a red ball cap, yet his straight spine and rounded shoulders whispered "gentleman" to me. I nodded in greeting, following the nudist courtesy of looking him in the face instead of further scrutinizing his body. I remember mostly his eyes, pale and sunglass-free under the hat brim. They held mine with an intensity that told me something important was happening.

"I want to thank you," he said, his voice soft as sand. "You've inspired me to hold my own memorial service here."

I smiled with delight, but waved away the compliment. "Sorry, but I can't take any credit. This was my husband's idea."

"Oh?"

"When we asked him what he wanted for a funeral, he said he'd like to have his ashes scattered at Playalinda Beach by nude women."

The stranger laughed. "Sounds nice, all right."

"I pictured a couple of us, at twilight on a deserted beach."

"Why'd you change your mind?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe because today wasn't for him but for me. I need all the support I can get."

"I doubt that." The stranger tipped back his cap and studied me.

I shifted uneasily, remembering I no longer had a protector at my side.

The stranger's smile reassured me. It lit his face with the same fuel as his gaze. "Your husband was lucky. I wish I'd known him."

"It's odd you'd say that. I've always thought Eddie's life would make a good story. Maybe now I'll write it."

"You do that. Although I'd be more interested in reading about a young woman with the courage to hold her husband's memorial at a nude beach."

"Oh, no." I tossed my head, my long hair veiling my breasts in an instinctive gesture of modesty. "His childhood alone outshines my whole life."

"I wonder."

He left me alone at the water's edge.

The Shelf Life of an Artist

Matt Rothschild

At home, in my room, I have always kept several things vital to my existence. There's a mountain of books, ranging from art theory to *How to Succeed in Porn Without Really Trying*. A set of thirteen different dictionaries sits across my bed—just in case one is wrong (and I desperately need the correct definition of "obsessive compulsive"). The rest of my desk is awash in papers and magazines dating back to the fifth grade, bottles held for recycling ransom, and assorted gifts from the ghost of Hanukkah past, evil little trinkets that even eBay won't take.

My CDs are as varied as my books, with artists like Bach, U2, and Orgy. (Orgy, strangely, has found its way conveniently close to the porn book.)

Over the years I hung prints and vintage posters over the walls. Once, there were even more posters, but in a rare gesture of sympathy, I donated several to a friend who was decorating his apartment. To be honest, it was more selfish than that—I was tired of the delicate owls that colorfully graced his walls. And the posters I gave him were my old favorites—vintage 1920s, one of a handsome man looking out at the rock of Gibraltar from an Italian cruise liner; the other showed two men on a beach, sunning themselves. But years later, I realized, much to my chagrin, these were not men, but very butch women. The posters immediately lost their sentimental value.

The art remaining in my room are classic prints: Pissaro, Kandinsky, and Chagall. There is, however, one original painting by a young artist of great temperament, named Matthew Rothschild. This artist started painting at a fairly young age, and because of his brooding and intense nature, only releases a painting every few years, each more misunderstood than the last. The painting that I have is his first piece, *Gourd Number One*.

I am familiar with this artist to some degree; he represents my alter ego, Matthew The Misunderstood Artist, a distant relative of Mr. Matt, the Misunderstood Kindergarten Teacher who uses his students as slaves, for endless refills of grape juice and rice crispy treats, his two drugs of choice.

I recently rediscovered "Gourd" in my garage. Immediately I retrieved the painting, and hung it in my room. This first masterpiece conjured up many interesting memories. I placed it on a shelf, recalling how I had painted it in my Paris art camp when I was seven. At the time, of course, I was more interested in securing a loft to welcome my throng of admirers, than actually learning how to paint.

Every morning I was driven to class, to a studio that overlooked a lush fragrant garden, and a teacher who grew more and more frustrated by the hour. I didn't care. Of this I was certain: No simple painting

instructor who held regular exhibitions and was celebrated in modern artistic circles could possibly understand the dark inner emotions I conveyed with my paint-by-numbers.

I showed up at Studio dressed in bandages, for that is how I too would look after cutting off my ear to give it to a prostitute. Van Gogh and I had much in common; we were both neurotic.

My grandparents probably considered this time away from me a godsend. When I traipsed around the house in a freshly dressed set of bandages my grandmother would roll her eyes. "Not this again. You are not going to cut off your ear and give it to a prostitute, Matthew. Now play with your blocks."

My grandfather looked up from his coffee. "Besides, everyone knows an ear is no present. Jewelry, young man, now that's the way to go."

The gourd piece was painted on my last day in the summer program. My instructor placed a series of fruits and vegetables on a table.

"Paint one," she said in a thick fake French accent. I think she was actually from the Bronx. "Zis well be yor fenal projekt."

I chose the gourd. And when she asked me why, I explained, at six years old, clutching the brush to my chest, "I choose the mangled gourd because of its deep resemblance to my soul." She walked away with her head in her hands.

My friends in the class all admired my inner torment, but for personal reasons decided to paint pictures of soft white kittens and houses with picket fences.

When the paintings dried, my grandmother picked me up, and studied my masterpiece for a long time.

She frowned. "Is it a UFO? I don't get it."

Behind us, my teacher agreed. "Though he mey never be a grate artiste, he well pozess a grate amownt of brushes to paint ads for supermarket, oui?"

"Wonderful," my grandmother said. "Just what I always wanted, a coupon painter."

How could they understand my work? "Do you know what goes on inside my bruised and battered body?" I asked with a face full of red embarrassment.

"Jump off the diving board and land on your belly again, did you?" my grandmother asked.

I threw down the brush and vowed never to paint again. The heartbreak of my failure was too much.

Later that day, my grandfather gave me some ice cream and a new telescope, with which I was determined to disprove every theory about space modern science held dear.

And as it turns out, we just used it to spy on neighbors, sharing our secrets and bowls of chocolate almond ice cream.

Yellow Sheets, and Olive Oil

Fiona Lapham

I was six hours off the plane from home, and sitting with three strangers at a small table. The restaurant was more than I had expected for a Trattoria. There was one on every corner of the city, and my guidebooks had told me that they were usually good, but not great. This one in particular had red-checked tablecloths, and tiny white candles. The room held five small tables, and one long one, where twelve very noisy Italians were feasting. The table was not set extravagantly, but with simple silverware, and delicate wine glasses. In the center of our particular one there was a small white dish with a few tiny flowers floating in water. The space on the table was for food, not decoration. No extra silverware, no flowers bursting in every direction so high you couldn't see across the table, and no napkins. When we had asked our waiter for a menu he had cringed, and shook his head.

"No, I think you do not need a menu, I will bring you food."

We raised our eyebrows and looked at each other, but as the saying goes, "When in Rome do as the Romans do." We were in Florence, but I figured it was close enough. I had come to Florence to study wine, and olive oil with three other adults from the United States. We were going to visit the Tuscan countryside for the next few weeks to learn all about these things hands on. I had read about the program in a food magazine, and it had fit in exactly with my break from teaching English to fifth and sixth graders. It was my first year as a teacher, and I was exhausted. I needed this trip, and I wanted to be reminded what learning could really do for someone. I was going to explore a new field. I wanted to learn all about the world of grapes, and olives.

When our antipasto had arrived an hour later we were already on our third bottle of red wine, and feeling freer in our conversations. Our waiter virtually threw the huge white plate down onto our table; he roughly pulled the cigarette from my mouth, and extinguished it in the ashtray.

"Smoke will ruin my food," he practically shouted. "Now you eat!"

He stalked away with the ashtray. Too buzzed to care about the strange behavior of our waiter, I stared down at the huge plate filled with colors. There were thin slices of eggplant, roasted red and yellow peppers cut into strips, artichoke hearts glistening in marinade, crostinis heaped with every thing from chicken livers to mushrooms, to coarsely chopped tomatoes with torn basil leaves. Everything had been drizzled with olive oil. Real olive oil, infused with the flavors of the land of Italy. I sighed over and over with pleasure at each bite I put in my mouth. Our conversations drifted in and out of the delirium of food.

"Rhode Island, and you?" I mumbled to the man on my left.

"I know nothing about wine yet, but I love drinking it." The woman across the table from me giggled to the other man. She had short blond hair that kept falling into her face.

David, the man next to me, clinked on his glass, "To the next three weeks, may we learn about wines of Tuscany, and discover the pleasures of real olive oil."

Lauren, the woman across the table, giggled again. "May we drink all the wines of Tuscany, and taste all of the oils of Italy."

Josh, the man across the table smiled widely at her. "I think you have already drank all of the wine of Tuscany tonight." We all laughed, and sank back into the food.

Over the next few weeks we would spend a lot of time together reminiscing over that first dinner. The meal went on and on from there, white beans in oil and vinegar, a pasta with truffle sauce, sea bass cooked to perfection with a simple lemon sauce, and lastly a tiramisu that could rival any dessert that I had ever tasted before that moment. By the end of the meal we had come to understand the ways of our gruff waiter. We didn't even think to question him when he placed tiny wine glasses with a silvery liquid in front of us after dinner. We took the glasses, toasted each other and the weeks to come. Again. The grappa was stronger than I had thought it would be, and my body felt on fire for a moment. Finally the food and drinks slowed, and our waiter took orders for cappuccino and espresso.

I stood slowly and teetered across the restaurant in search of a bathroom. My bladder had not been trained to hold whole bottles of red wine. After I had relieved myself I sat on the white toilet with my hand over my heart. It was beating quickly, and I realized I had been so engrossed for the past few hours I had forgotten to breathe on a consistent basis. The clean white tiles on the floor slid together, and waved in and out. I stood up and made my way shakily out of the tiny bathroom.

When I opened the door back into the restaurant a man stood there. He was one of the ones that had been sitting at the long table. He had soft brown hair, and the smoothest skin I had ever seen. Without saying a word he leaned down and kissed my lips. If this had happened to me at any other time, in any other place, I would have burst out laughing. But that night I just stood there and let a complete stranger kiss my drunken, red wine-stained lips in the doorway of a bathroom.

When I awoke the next morning entangled in his soft yellow colored sheets, I sighed with pleasure. The food that was still in my system from the night before had apparently not worn off. I was floating, suspended in a state of happiness. Somehow the feelings, sounds, and smells from the dinner had managed to slip through the darkness and into the morning light which was streaming through a window to the left of the bed. I rolled over to face the stranger of the night before. He was

still asleep, and snoring softly. I slid my hand into the crevice between the two twin beds that he must have pushed together at an earlier time. I tried to sleep, but as usual after a night of heavy drinking it was no longer possible. I turned over and looked up at the sky through the open window.

Florence was not as I had dreamed it would be. It was much noisier than I had imagined. Outside the window I could hear taxi's honking, and mopeds roaring by. The noise of the early morning traffic outside suddenly reminded me of the meeting. The evening before, my group had agreed to meet outside the Duomo in the center of Florence at 7 am. I glanced at the clock, it was almost 6:30, and I had no idea of how to get back into city center. I had a feeling that we had traveled quite a ways into the outskirts of the city the night before. Should I wake him? No, I thought to myself, I didn't even know his name. I didn't have any idea what I would say to him if I woke him so early to tell him I must go back to Florence. Instead I picked up my newly rented cell phone, and scrolled through the four numbers I had acquired at dinner the evening before. When I got to David's name I punched the call button and waited nervously for him to pick up. He answered in a sleepy voice. "David," I whispered, "I'm so sorry to wake you but I have no idea how to get to the Duomo." I paused for a moment. "I went back to that guy's apartment from last night."

He laughed. "Don't worry, we'll come get you on our way out of the city. Just tell me where you are."

I leaned as far out the open window as I could and squinted at the address on the storefront across the street. "Via Fienza, Cinquantotto, red, is just across the street."

"Ok, we are there. Be outside at 7:15."

Clicking off the phone I wondered what to do in the next forty-five minutes. I thought about sitting outside to wait, but the loud noises from the street drove that idea from my pounding head. I lay back down on the bed as quietly as I could. I stared at the ceiling. Suddenly his hand was grazing the line between my shirt and pants where my belly showed when I lay. Startled I turned my head towards the dark eyes. He had a smile on his soft lips. I ignored the feeling that began to rise in my body starting with the twisting of my ankles. I always twirled my ankles when I was insanely happy. Trying to escape the magical feeling of the night before, I sat up, and swung my legs over the side of the bed. Sleepily he rolled over on to his side, and shut his eyes again. Quickly I stood and walked around the bed to the open door. When I entered the hall of his apartment I found a pen. Quickly I jotted my phone number, and a thank you. I knew he wouldn't call, but for some reason I wrote it anyway.

Out on the street I ignored the headache that was slowly getting worse, and crossed to the cigarette machine on the other side. Sliding

three euros through the coin slot I punched in the number for Camel Lights. Sitting on the stoop below the address I had read earlier to David, I watched the smoke slowly twirling up from my cigarette. Shit, shit, shit, I thought, what have I done? In my hazy thoughts I tried to grasp a reason why I had slept with a stranger, on my first night in Italy. I had never done anything even remotely like that before. I had had a boyfriend through my entire high school and college careers. He had broken it to me that he had met someone else recently, and I hadn't minded. I had fallen out of love with him long ago. Since then I had dated conservatively, but hadn't slept with anyone else.

Something had taken over me the night before; the food, the wine, and the atmosphere. Staring up at the open window across the street I wondered about the man laying between the yellow sheets. I had been drawn to him for no particular reason that I could fathom. The car pulled up, I smiled at my new friends, and squashed into the backseat.

"Ready for the adventure to begin?" Lauren asked with a huge smile on her face.

"Ready," I replied, and we were off.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind. We visited vineyard after vineyard. I learned about the many wines the Chianti region had to offer. We visited olive oil manufacturers, and tasted the spicy newly pressed golden liquids. At one vineyard we stayed for the night, and had a feast with the owners in their villa on the hill above the rows of vines. At another we actually learned hands-on how to pick the grapes, and the process of transferring them to the presses. All of it was beautiful, all of it was magnificent, and yet our minds lingered on that first night's experience. Especially mine.

He had called the night after the first, and I, without even wanting, had agreed to see him. I had said yes before I'd even thought about it. When I'd hung up the phone I had wondered what I had just done. I didn't know anything about him. I wanted to call him back and tell him I couldn't see him again. I couldn't make myself do it, though. It was something in the stranger's voice that had made me say yes. Something about it had stirred some memory that had comforted my nerves.

He picked me up in his small car, and we went back to the apartment I had left just that morning. He was gentle in his every move. He poured a deep red wine, and asked in his soft broken English if it was okay that he make dinner for me instead of us going out. I nodded, and it began.

His hands moved swiftly, smashing the garlic with the side of a blade. He dumped a handful of salt into the boiling water. He caressed the eggplants lovingly, and sliced them into perfect circular disks. Olive oil smoked from his heavy iron pan. Basil, rosemary, and sage seeped into

everything. The smells that arose in the kitchen that night were more than I could take, and when one drop of sweat from his smooth skin fell into the sauce that was simmering on the left burner I lost it. The tiny droplet had steamed up from the sauce immediately and rushed through the thickly scented air. My sight, my smell, my hearing, my touch, and my insides seemed to all combine at once. I rose and floated across the kitchen to a passionate embrace.

Night after night, it continued. It was the food. It intoxicated me. Something that first night, in that food had awoken a deep desire inside me. Some nights we went to restaurants and tried little bits of everything on the menu, some nights we simply took a hunk of fresh cheese and a bottle of wine up to the hillsides of Florence. We drank from tiny plastic cups, and played music from his car. We watched the view, and talked of our lives. I told him of the only boyfriend I had ever had; I even wondered out loud to him if I should have married my first love, because I would probably forever compare everyone to him.

"In Italy we never marry the first love; there is no passion in a first love because you have not learned how to give your heart fully."

He told me of his family, his father never giving him any money. He had worked at a fruit stand for five years before buying it. He was now in architecture school and had sold the fruit stand to pay for it. In the mornings he went to the sports center to practice boxing, and to relax with his friends. Finally, on the fourth night I had asked him his name.

"Lucca," he had replied simply. "Alyssa," I had smiled back.

On the fifth night we went to a stand that sold one-euro Coronas. We bought a few, and climbed down onto the banks of the river. Near us a family of muskrats swam in the cool water. I frowned at them.

"Yuck, they look like huge rats."

He smiled knowingly, "But Alyssa they do not do any harm to any people; you are like a child to think this way about them. They are very nice."

He had a way of proving me wrong, and making it seem sweet. In my life I had surrounded myself with people who could challenge me. He, so far, had challenged me more than anyone I had ever met. Rain began to fall. I looked up into the sky, as the drops grew closer together. I stood and began to spin, holding my Corona bottle in an outstretched hand. He looked at me like I was crazy, and grabbed my hand.

"I love you"

I laughed in his face, and tried to pull away, but he wasn't joking. No one falls in love in five days, I told myself. He must be crazy. I figured he had said it to get me to stick around, but I wasn't going to. I was going to end it. Soon.

It went on and on, though. My last week in Florence, I told myself it was finally over, and soon my feet would be back on the ground. He made dinner again; I brought wine, the one that had been my favorite of

all the hundreds of wines I had tried. It was called Monte Villa, and had a thick, woody taste. He cooked what he said was his special meal; he told me it was his grandmothers favorite. Lobster stirred into a thick creamy sauce with pasta al'dente. Fresh artichoke hearts sautéed in the best olive oil, seasoned with garlic, and lemon. Crostini heaped with sausage, and strachinno cheese. Tiny dishes, each filled with samplings of the best the ocean has to offer. There were tender baby octopus' in lemon sauce, small snails drowning in a thick brown substance, oysters stewing in their own magnificent broth, and strips of crab meat with a flavor I couldn't even name. As usual the food compelled me to do things I normally would not even allow myself to think. Later, lying between the yellow sheets that made his room have a comfortable glow of light, he had brought one glass of Sicilian dessert wine and a bag of biscotti cookies. He had dipped a cookie slowly into the wine, letting it soak just long enough so that it wasn't soggy. He had fed it to me with such tenderness; I suddenly felt what it would be to lose him. Later, we lay in the crumbs, and made love slowly, taking out time to enjoy each other's bodies. When we were through, he looked at me, and asked me to stay. He said it simply, and I looked back. "I love you," I said, without even knowing it.

Surprised at myself, I turned away from him and tried to breathe more slowly. I squeezed my eyes shut, and tried to think. All my life I had done the right thing; I didn't just run off to foreign lands and fall in love with random men. Why, all of a sudden, did I want to take everything I had ever believed in and throw it away? It was only a fleeting thought.

My airplane flight was at around five in the morning. I had said goodbye to him the afternoon before. We had driven to a beach a few hours outside of Florence, and eaten a late lunch. The last night I had spent with my traveling companions. We said goodbye, and as it always is leaving somewhere, we promised to keep in touch. I knew it would only last a few weeks, and then real lives would take back over.

In the morning I made my way to the airport, and was standing in line when he appeared. He didn't say anything; simply held out a tiny bottle. Slowly I unscrewed the top and dipped my finger into the liquid. When I lifted my finger to my lips I couldn't believe it. Nothing had ever made me feel that way before, all the affects the food had had on me in the last month evaporated. This was a new intensity. There was no one in the airport but us, my eyes were fixed on his, and I couldn't move. I felt as though the floor had fallen out from underneath me, and been replaced by sky. I could smell all of the food I had eaten in the last few weeks; it was more beautiful than anything I had ever smelled. I could even see the smells; they swirled in colors between us. Some were thin and wispy, some thick and almost opaque. Colors corresponded appropriately with their foods; I could see the olive oils; they were red

and tiny like pieces of hair shimmering through the air. The antipasto meats were maroon and thick like ribbons at Christmas. Sounds of Italy floated through my cars at an extreme level as well. A woman yelling at her child, a taxi honking, a moped roaring, a knife chopping, and food sizzling. I heard the bells of the Duomo, the shouts of the World Cup, and Shakira playing over and over. All of this I could take.

What I could not take was the feeling inside me that had turned my cheeks red, and made my ankles begin to twist. He was the antidote, and I fell into him. I had tried to escape him, but I was in love. Reality was no longer something to return to. It was simply here.

Colophon

Brushing is the student submitted, judged, and published literary and fine arts journal of Rollins College. The trim size of the 2003 edition is 6" x 9" with a spot varnish printed on Lustre dull 80 lb. text creme. The cover is printed on Lustre Dull 80 lb. cover creme. The Baker Press printed this publication. They are located at 3606 Silver Star Road, Orlando, FL 32808. The titles of the works are set in 12 point Adobe Garamond typeface, whereas the artists' names is written in 10 point script, and the body copy in 10 point Adobe Garamond typeface. The *Brushing* office is located on the student media floor of Mills Memorial Center. The address is 1000 Holt Avenue, Box 1406, Winter Park, FL 32789. The staff can be reached by phone, (407) 646-2171. Visit *Brushing* on the internet at www.rollins.edu/brushing/home.htm. A committee of *Brushing* staff reviewed and selected all works included in this publication. Copies are distributed on campus free of charge.

