

FALL 2004

genesis



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Cover: **Best of Art** "Lulu and Steve" Joe Bieschke
16"x20" Oil on Canvas

Back Cover: "Placid Rage" Jane Parrish Cooper
4'x4' Oil on Canvas

Editor's Note

Welcome to the newly designed genesis. This semester's issue was created entirely by a brand new staff. We truly hope you enjoy the new design, as we spent endless nights sacrificing studies and sleep by the light of our computer screens for the good of the genesis. This semester also invited new submission guidelines and options, which cost the editors nights of Starbuck's and Snickers, as we sifted through stacks and stacks of submissions. We have also taken the design and layout to the next level by recruiting a designer to set a foundation for future issues.

The IUPUI artists and writers featured in this semester's issue will take you into a world beyond the canvas and the page with fresh new talent. We are proud to have been a part of this magazine and thank every writer and artist who submitted a piece of themselves. We truly hope you enjoy the magazine and we look forward to next semester's issue.

genesis—the origin or coming into being of anything; development into being, especially by growth or evolution; the process or mode of origin
the ~ of a book

genesis

art and literary magazine
of Indiana University-
Purdue University
at Indianapolis

Volume 37, Issue 1
Fall 2004



"Untitled" Erin Swanson
30"x22" Acrylic on Paper

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Acknowledgments

Genesis would like to acknowledge the following people who have helped make this magazine a reality:

IUPUI Campus and Community Life
IUPUI School of Liberal Arts, English Department
Robert Rebein and Jim Powell for their excellent leadership
Ed Norman for design template and support
Renee Rule for web support
Western Publishing for their quality printing services

Eve's Daughter

Dottie Hutcherson

I want my piece of the fruit
you dared to savor.
I want to roll it around
in my hand
-between my fingers-
feel its forbidden flesh
on my pious skin.

I long to sink my teeth
into its side
and swish its
seductive self
around my tongue
-against my cheek-
to swallow deeply
and know.

My Life is What I Want it to Be

Dottie Hutcherson

When I was fifteen and thinking about the future, I saw myself solitary in the city, studio apartment, Ramen for dinner. I figured I'd come home and read until the high-rise windows darkened. My bathtub would beckon me with bubbles, I would slide into my second skin cotton pajamas, slip between my sheets, and embrace the vacancy.

And now that I've passed twenty, the single place setting is daunting, a haunting reminder of the children never conceived, the man never kept. And I fantasize about fifty, silver in my hair, creases on my fading skin, and I know that I can be this allbymyself, enduring.

Gun Alley

Alex Mattingly

I.

The song playing when I died was The Four Tops' "I Can't Help Myself." The chorus was halfway done when a patch of black ice sent me into a bridge wall. I was going ninety and hadn't fastened my seat belt so I could reach the bottle of vanilla rum I'd hidden in the back seat.

I lay tangled in the steering wheel, legs broken, glass spilling blood from my face. As the radio sputtered to silence, so did I.

We're connected to things we don't understand.

II.

The best thing about being dead is living again. I lived my life through twice more before the novelty wore off. A better way is to divide it into pieces, to live tiny spans over and over. Divide it so it can be studied and scrutinized in a way not possible in life.

You don't know you're dead, when you're reliving. You can't remember the future, can't change anything. It's better that way. When I held Marginale's hand for the first time again, I didn't know what I'd do to her. There was no anger or guilt, no moment of despair. Just the wild sensation of skin on skin, the wash of my pulse in my fingertips, her thumb's softness running against the hairs on my hand like a breath over water.

III.

My dad called her 'Gun Alley,' poking fun at her name as well as his hearing problem. One ear was deafened in a factory accident, and when I introduced them he raised an eyebrow at me.

"Mard Gun Alley?"

"Marginale," I said, trying to enunciate the syllables without separating them. She smiled at him, nervous, her large cheeks turning red beneath dark skin. She was Korean, adopted through an international agency. Marginale was a strange name, but had nothing to do with Korea.

She just had strange parents.

In our last month together, I sometimes called her 'Gun Alley' in anger. I wanted the ridiculousness of her name to shame her, to be my trump card in any fight. Those were the only times she said "Fuck you." I always hope she didn't feel bad about that after I died. She's not around to ask yet.

I hope she's happy and safe. I hope no one calls her 'Gun Alley' ever again.

IV.

When I relived my fifth year, I heard the same song playing from when I died. At five, it must have been the first time. My dad was dancing with my mom in the kitchen. I was watching, throwing my shoulders sideways, back and forth, like a deranged piston. I thought I was dancing, too.

Dad mouthed the words with exaggerated gusto, sometimes breaking down and singing, which always pained my mother and me. He only laughed and scooped her up. He was always so powerful, but at five, he seemed a titan. No one was stronger than my dad. Maybe that's why I ran so fast when I got older. I never admitted I was so much less than he was. I just ran and pretended comparison was impossible, that if I met success it would be so uniquely attained he couldn't hope to know if I'd made it or not.

I didn't. But at five I never ran, unless I knew he was going to catch me.

V.

Marginale kissed me, eyes closed, and for the first time, slipped her tongue into my mouth. The stars were out, but the porch light was blinding. My chest felt sore when she pulled away. I couldn't understand

why it hurt. Holy shit, I thought. This is what tongues are for? Now, tasting food was a wasted, valuable resource.

I lived that moment one hundred and forty-three times. After the last, when I left my body to think, I recognized it as the moment I was first loved by someone who wasn't obligated.

When I understood, I went back, thinking I might live it one hundred and forty-three more, but saw something new. I'd been trying so hard to understand my own sensations that I'd never caught her eyes, the wet sheen reflecting images of the porch lamp. Marginale was crying, and she was crying because she stopped feeling alone.

VI.

Someone spoke to me while I was between moments of life, a man whose heart attack had killed him before he hit the floor. He was kind and gentle, but we all are when we're dead. We'd never met alive.

"I go back to see my daughter," he said. "When she was small, just a bean pole, we used to roll down hills. I found a grass stain behind her left knee I'd never noticed before, shaped like Brazil.

I stopped when she got older. It seemed silly, rolling down hills with a grown girl. I wish I hadn't. Those would have been nice memories to return to. It's selfish, but I want her to be here. I want her to come relive it with me."

"What if she doesn't want to go back as often as you?" I asked.

"She only has to go once," he said. "If she goes once, she'll be there every time."

VII.

Once, I relived the fight that started my drinking the night I died. Marginale was long gone by then, and I was with a woman who hated me

because I had nowhere else to put my anger. We were both too lonely and scared to hold ourselves up, so we fought to stay standing.

To a point.

I had learned it was easier to be hated than loved because you can always deserve to be hated. Hate's a poor substitute, but at least you matter. Anything was better than apathy. Anything was better than knowing someone could walk away from you without another word. I only had to relive that fight once, and I understood everything it could teach. Hate is a simple lesson.

VIII.

Marginale tuned in to an oldies station, because she always knew the lyrics and I didn't. Her voice was loud, but she carried a tune about as well as my dad. I sang "Ooh, yeah yeah yeah, ooh," as best I could until the chorus, which I usually knew from movies or commercials. Singing along only encouraged her to be louder, and soon we were drowning out the radio, the beat lost beneath our bellows.

A chocolate cone was her microphone, a fudge coated spoon serving as mine. We sang into them with brutal intensity, eyes crumpled, free hands gripping the air in feigned passion.

"Sugar pie, honey bunch," she sang. "We could learn the fancy tea,"

I guessed.

She laughed her way through the next line, which left me the dangerous one.

"I'm a fool in love, you see."

It would be another week before we said it on our own, but there wasn't anything subtle about my delivery. The song had played its trick and



"NYC Cut Out" Jackie Stout
8"x10" Photograph

the truth was out. Marginale didn't harp on it. She just laughed and sang.

IX.

Angry, lonely sex on a cold night in June. Marginale will know within twenty-four hours. This is desperation. My desperation to turn back time, as though something this horrible could finally sever who I've become from who I wanted to be.

I can't remember this woman's name, and I spend about half our time in bed thinking about the party that night, about introductions. I'm reliving an attempt to relive, to move backwards. It's so much easier when you're dead, but life is only malleable when you're alive. There's always a trade-off.

There's no music here. No soundtrack to this vile night, when there was nothing familiar in myself anymore, nothing worth love or care. Nothing lasted long after that. Not even me.

X.

Lately I've been reliving the last four minutes of my life. The delicacy of your moment of death is staggering. The events that must occur in sync do so with the timing of a clockwork infantry. No detail is insignificant, no component independent. That song meant something.

That song had to play for me to die. I just don't understand why.

Maybe there is no understanding. Maybe I'm wasting my time, pretending to be a sleuth obsessing over details that aren't there. Really I'm waiting for Marginale.

Time doesn't pass while you're reliving something. In real time, it's only been a few years since I died, despite the lifetimes I've revisited. I want to have her here with me, I want her to hold my hand again for the first time.

I know it's selfish, but I can't stop going back to that moment, carved beneath eternity like a bomb shelter. Yet it's tainted by knowing her eyes are so much younger than the ones I'm using. She can go spend eternity reliving what she likes. It doesn't matter, if she just gives me that moment.

She only has to go once. ■



"Bridge at Night" Josh Flynn
8"x10" Photograph

The Bridge

Andrea Fogt

A discarded lunchbox, violated tree bark,
impromptu furniture constructed
next to the dilapidated monuments interrupted
by graffiti covered in snow melting down
to the wheels of a Firebird mumbling like
the drunken fool with her court of mangy, squawking
turtledoves and aluminum cans. On the ground
beneath the rotted rungs of the railroad tracks spilled
liquor puddles in leprous indentions/footprints
sculpted by an army of glossy red Doc Martins and hot pink
Chuck Taylors marched by boys and girls with black
shoe polish hair. Having rolled together in burs
and poison oak, they say sex is like mud, viscous
and moist, burying a graveyard of broken
bottles in a city of half-smoked cigarettes.

Waffle House

Andrea Fogt

Late-evening banter ricochets inside
the dusty yellow walls. Lonely truckers driving
sentimental small talk, hanging heavy red and
black checker patterned faded flannel beside long
leather coats lined with rose colored satin belonging
to girls in black velvet and lace bell-sleeved
peasant tops, holding French cigarettes between
stained teeth and ruby lips pouting prettily at the
passing pacifist swinging swollen hemp, woven
pouches pregnant with American Spirit, vegan advice,
honey for their green tea, black tea, orange tea, tea laced
with Saint John's wart and ginseng all sipped when not
filling pockets with phone numbers, like postcards,
like promises getting bigger every time. They leave
a dirty table and a generous tip. The Waffle House is empty
by dawn, windows wide and staring at the highway
and all of the people who can't sit still.

Your Family/My Family

Kay Castaneda

My family only gets together because it's my idea.

Your family puts on grand fiestas every evening with tables full of carne asada, frijoles rancheros, red and green tamales, and salsitas. Once in a while, when one brother takes his wife and children to visit the in-laws in Valparaiso, the house is still crowded. Your mother folds corn tortillas with melted queso, plops them on green flowered plates she bought from the artists in El Mercado Centro de Fresnillo, and runs to deliver them to her sons in the order of their birth.

My family comes over when I invite them.

Your family snuggles five on a loveseat; three nephews on top of one another in Eddie's brown recliner; tiled steps lined with cousins, nieces, neighbors, aunts from El Paso, lovers, the carpenter, the meat man, and los amigos. People lean against arched doorways, on black iron handrails, stone ledges, red clay porches, carved wood footstools, tiled fountains, brick walkways, mosaic-covered cupolas, and still more people enter the house.

My family sits in the dining room.

Your family has so many women that all the men and boys sit happy around the tables and the bar, each with his female servant to set down his meal. Las cunadas scoop ladles of clear beef broth into large white bowls, their hands wrapped on the sides, trying not to spill any of the liquid on the floor or the men's feet. The women set down plates of beef, lovingly shredded and pulled with their own hands and clay bowls of chopped onions, serranos, limones, and fresh oregano.

My family gets in line for the buffet.

Your family goes downtown, brings home Johnny and Las Estrellas, waves a thousand pesos (one hundred dollars) if the band will play all night in the garden. They strum their guitars, take turns singing requests while the accordion player leans on the orange wall. Your mother rounds up the band, lines the men up side by side on the front steps as if they are her obedient children, and serves frijoles rancheros with bacon to them all.

My family sits back down at the table and eats.

Your family passes out cerveza fria and tequila to the members of the band, lets them drink their fill, stuffs rolled-up tortillas with Mennonite cheese and salsa roja so hot they have to drink more beer. Johnny and Las Estrellas throw down their bottles, grab their instruments, and the bass player remembers tunes from the ranch and the Revolution. The old people march the kids around the patio to la musica antigua.

My family tells me that my food is good.

Your family eats spice cake while they're dancing. The teenage nieces cut chunks of cake, stand close to the dancers, shove the sweet stuff into mouths when each partner twirls around. All the family calls the cake-servers, they raise their hands, signal for more. The girls run out of the kitchen with the second round.

My family agrees to eat a slice of my apple pie.

Your family kisses at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, Christmas, Valentine's Day, weddings, birthdays, saint's days, baptisms, anniversaries, federal holidays, graduations, feast days, holidays, going away, and coming home. They kiss and smooch and hug and squeeze and grab hands even if they just saw each other the night before.

My family thanks me for cooking.

Your family passes out invitations—tomorrow for Julieta's birthday, the next day for the baptism of Pistos' baby, Friday will be Sammy's quincenera, Adriana's wedding on Saturday, chilis rellenos on Sunday, next week for relatives coming from San Jose, California, and next month, Yolanda's coming back home from Los Estados Unidos.

My family says they will see me later.

Your family follows each other out into the street, throws kisses, bids adios, and wishes for a safe return. Your mother makes the sign of the cross on each one leaving, says a prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint Teresa, La Virgen de Guadalupe, El Espiritu Santo, and all the guardian

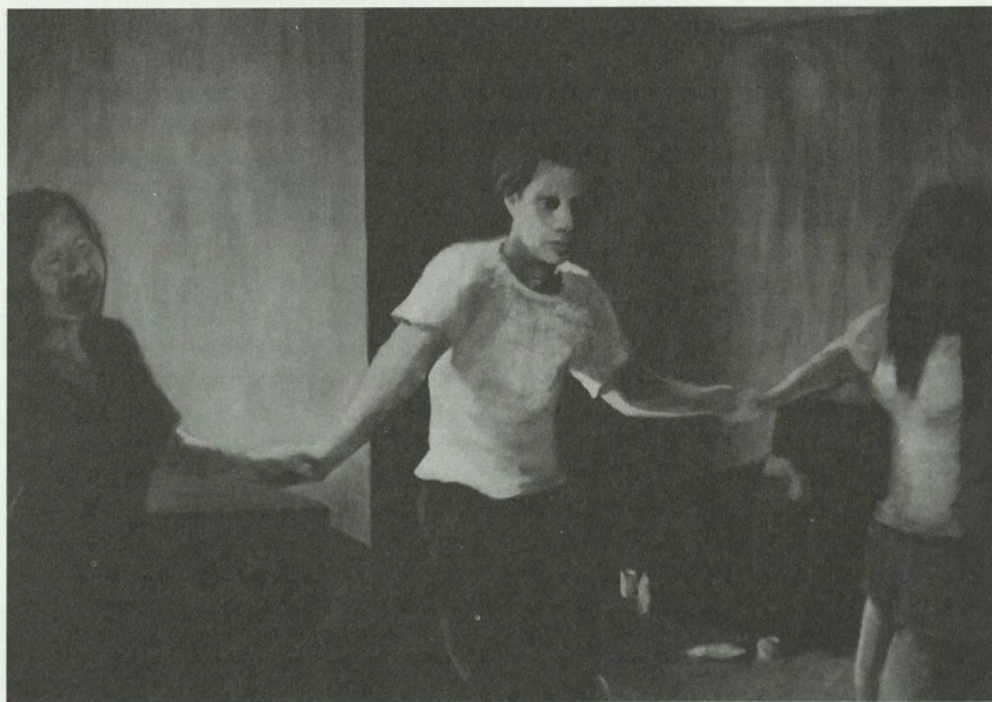
angels of heaven and earth. The people leaving the party line up for their blessings, first the men, the women, the children, the employees, and last, the dog.

My family gives me a quick hug.

Your family only goes to their individual houses to take a bath, sleep in their own bed, and make more nieces and nephews and cousins. They go to their own little homes just to pick up more energy and to plan the next day's party. What should we eat? What should we wear? What should we drink?

But never to question the guest list, never to cross out a name if there's a little bad mood. They wake up each morning and the list grows longer.

My family gets smaller. My table has empty spaces. My food goes uneaten. ■



“White Boy Dancing at Chin Wedding Party” Eric LaGrange
36”x30” Oil on Canvas



Magic

Kay Castaneda

Tony likes to play games with cards.

Our little nieces and nephews, when they reach the age of eight or nine, love the games most of all. They call on the phone to ask,

Uncle Tony, can I bring my friends and you can show them your card?

They line up, boys in striped shirts and girls with pink headbands, not shoving, waiting to see a real, live alien.

Tony reaches into his pocket, takes the green plastic card from his leather wallet and pulls it out of the clear vinyl sleeve.

Their mouths drop open, round as letter O's, when they hear the words they came for.

So Tony tells them, I am an alien.

Still, they stare, not speaking when he asks, Want to see my ID?

The little ones gather, waiting to see the picture of a green man with slanted eyes and smooth skin, like the ones they've seen in the movies.

Tony holds the card in his hand, lowers it to their eye level, moves it left to right, right to left, from one end of the lookers to the other.

The quiet becomes overwhelming until the bravest kid,

the one most fearful before he walked in the door,

blows out all his breath in a blast of relief. He giggles,

and the giggle spreads to the girl next to him,

then the other until all, every one of them, stand there laughing.

The laughs change, turn into squeals, the children jump, push, grab the card, pass it from kid to kid on down the line.

Where'd you come from? They stand in front of him. Mexico, Tony answers.

To the kids, it's the same distance as Mars,

and to them, just as wonderful and far. They crowd him, pull his shirt,

Uncle Tony! Uncle Tony! They beg him, Can we go there?

Do they have pizza, hot dogs, Pepsi, cartoons?

He takes his card from them, places it back in the plastic protector.

And little Casey, our youngest niece, throws her shoulders back with pride at the thrill of the joke and how it works every time.

"It Was Real" Jackie Stout
20"x24" Acrylic on Canvas

Jackie Stout

Cul-de-Sac

Clint Smith

“Come out, Neville!”

—*I Am Legend*, Richard Matheson

Started digging
by myself.

Started digging that moat around my house—
at first with my fingers, then a shovel.

Wheeling out a wooden cart to fill with dirt.

All this because my neighbor’s cow got tired of
eating my grass and ate my dog Jupiter.
Then the owners gobbled up their bovine
pet to get rid of the evidence.

The woman married to the man next door
spoke to me one day—she complimented
the appearance of my yard. I tried being
polite: *It hasn’t been easy.*

Her children are the ones who always win
the staring contest. For fun, her little son
sticks the garden hose in his sister’s
bathing suit, and she smiles with a mouthful
of broken chalk. Ladies nearby shop for white
shoes, Halloween costumes, and swap wife
diaphragms. I nodded when they would talk.
The woman: *We are the best kind of birth
Control.*

The man next door is trying to breed wild
boars with horses, so all his equine can
have tusks. Night noises are awful—horses
neigh, boars giggle, and I watch them wiggle

their snouts. My family broke my heart when
they said: *You are being pretentious.* I am
running out of room to dump the dirt, and
I miss my dog. So I started digging.

“Leopard Mask #2” Josh Flynn
8”x10” Photograph



Declined

Megan Kinyon

When I was a little girl, I never used to sit around with my playmates and declare how much I wanted to be a welfare mother when I grew up. In fact, none of my friends did. They dreamt of being dancers, actresses, doctors, and fashion designers. The sad thing is, I don't remember what it was I did say I wanted to be. Time has caused those hopes to not only collapse but also their memory to completely escape me. If I saw my childhood friends now, I'd be humiliated. I imagine them all with picture-perfect husbands, houses, cars, and well-fed children. I bet they have jobs that pay the bills and then some. I try not to be jealous of too many people. I think it's awful for one's self-esteem, but I find myself jealous of what they might have.

Perhaps I should explain my situation. I'm a poor, single mother. I was married, but then ditched. His name was Eric and I had thought we were locked in a high school sweetheart type romance. Shortly after Mia was born, he upped and left, claiming children weren't something he wanted. It stung for months, until one day, while I was vacuuming the apartment floor, my eyes moist and raw, I looked at Mia. She was sitting on the floor with a couple of her toys and giggling insanely at how the vacuum cleaner made the toys vibrate and jitter around.

I turned off the vacuum to listen to her laugh. I realized that it was okay that Eric left. He had not left me alone. I would always have Mia.

Mia is my two-year-old daughter. She has thin, wavy light brown hair and gorgeous dark blue eyes. She's well-behaved, but seems to get wild at the worst moments. Just when I feel like I'm ready to strangle the next person who disturbs me while I'm paying bills, there's Mia to turn the ceiling fan on, blowing all the envelopes and checks all over the room. She's only a child. I don't want her to grow up just because we're in financial trouble. I want to take it all on my shoulders so she never has to carry any of it. This makes everyday life a bad dream I have to live from start to finish every morning.

The biggest issue I'm dealing with right now is trying to maintain a good job.

I work as a front desk assistant manager at a local hotel. There's no glamour in my job. Nobody I ever knew grew up claiming they wanted to work in a hotel. The job pays the bills, sort of. Mia goes to a woman's house nearby during the days to be cared for. This woman, Anita Wiley, is slightly older and a bit eccentric, but from what I've seen of her she seems very young at heart and in love with the kids she watches over. Unfortunately, the childcare she provides, which is on the lower end of general childcare prices, is putting such a strain on all the other bills I pay that I'm ending up a little bit more in debt every month. It scares the shit out of me, but working more isn't an option. The irony of it has me trapped. The more I work, the more I owe Anita, as if every extra dollar I earn will never exist.

My greatest fear is numbers. This sounds strange, I know. I don't pee my pants at the thought of a number three chasing me. I fear the reality and the meaning of numbers. There's always a number to tell me how much I can or cannot spend. There's always a number to tell me what I've earned, which impresses me until I realize I will never possess any of that money. Everything I work my fifty hours for will pass right through me like a transparent cloud and fall into the solid hands of my landlord, or the electric company, or even Anita Wiley.

So take it from me: life isn't always going to be like you wanted when you were a child. You're not always going to get what you think you can work hard enough to get. You might not live comfortably, or securely. And it won't be because you're a bad person. You might just end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and find yourself more desperate than you've ever been. I can only hope that life for Mia is what she wants it to be. That's my goal. It's a lot nobler than I feel like I am. But what is a noble goal if it can never be attained? I simply don't want to be a disappointment to my own daughter.

I woke up to the sounds of cartoons. Loud crashes and childlike sound effects echoed from the living room. I looked at the clock and wiped my eyes, gradually opening them wider. I heard Mia singing in front of the television. I simultaneously adored and despised her innocence. I loved and hated that she didn't know what today meant for us. She had woken up to treat it like any other day. It was as if I assumed that a day like this should undoubtedly begin with utter silence and sadness, and continue that way every hour until we closed our eyes to sleep again.

Certain things you just pay respect to in odd ways. Today felt like one of those things.

I got up and threw together some breakfast. Before I knew it, we were sitting at the table, Mia sitting on her knees, dancing and humming, while occasionally grabbing a spoonful of Frosted Flakes. That's how time works when you're on autopilot. You find yourself at the table, or you find Mia's lunch packed before you even realize you'd sat down to do it. Those choppy scenes that made up my day made me feel so incomplete. I longed for the smooth transitions that everyone got to experience. It's a weird thing to wish for. Who hopes for those moments when they're driving somewhere? Well, I do. I hate just finding myself at my destination and not quite remembering the trip.

I ate a few bites of cereal, and then sat, staring, a lit cigarette between my fingers. I flicked my fingers and dropped the ashes into the soggy cereal and milk combination. The sunlight, although I can't describe how much sunshine annoyed me that day, came through a gap in the blinds and illuminated the cloud of smoke. Mia's hair glistened.

I thought about everything I would say. I thought about how Mia and I would dress. How would we appear to someone else? Would the people I drive past read it on us? Would they think to themselves: She and her daughter are far too polished. I know exactly what they're up to today. Even if no one so much as glanced at us in passing, I knew that all day I would feel eyes on my daughter and me.

The thought made me cringe. I shook my head and took a deep drag off of my cigarette. Don't worry, they were a gift. A friend saw that I was stressed and bought me a box. She suggested I only smoke in emergencies and never again ask for another box.

"That way, you can remember these little suckers fondly. They won't kill you. They'll just have helped you through some rough times in your life," my friend Lindsey had said. Her mother had died five years before of emphysema. Her doctors declared that it was a result of her chronic

smoking. Since then, Lindsey had an unusual, psychological relationship with cigarettes. She attended therapy monthly, but I thought what she said about cigarettes was right. I didn't need another enemy, or another thing to fear. I needed something to help me through, and at this point, I would take whatever I could get.

"Mia, hunny?" I said. She unglued her eyes from Bugs Bunny and looked at me, waiting for what I had to say.

"Why don't you go find your prettiest dress and shoes and I'll come in and help you put them on." She nodded her head and jumped off the chair, pattering down the hallway to our room, mumbling something that sounded like 'dress-up.'

I grabbed the folder of information that I had organized and reorganized about eighteen times. Pay-stubs and copies of old bills were filed against each other. I flipped through everything inside once more, and then tapped the bottom of the folder on the table, straightening the papers inside. I don't want to do this, I thought. But if I have to, I want everything to look as clean as possible. I felt self-conscious and stupid. Nobody goes to a welfare office to impress the hell out of anyone. What they want is sympathy, or to make a bad impression. My desire to make us the best looking pair to walk through that door was my first mistake.

We pulled into the parking lot. Surrounding us were junky cars with different-colored hoods and doors, rusted exteriors, and ratted interior fabric. I swept a hand over the dust on my car's dashboard, and blew it out the window. Mia had fallen asleep in her carseat during the half hour drive. I took a cloth diaper and wiped the drool from her shirt, combing back her hair and re-tying her shoes. After picking her up, while grabbing my purse and the diaper bag, I locked the car and we made our way toward the double doors. Outside was a man in a neon construction vest smoking, watching after a child that was playing in the front garden's dirt. Mia and I ventured through the doors and into the lobby. There were several young girls, some with babies, seated in the waiting room.

The carpet was dreary and the wallpaper pattern felt cheap and insulting, as if to challenge me. Who cares what I look like? it said to me. Nobody's going to be looking at me as long as you're here. A local radio station chattered from behind the desks. Great. Talk radio and a welfare

Certain things you just pay respect to in odd ways. Today felt like one of those things.

office. This just might be hell.

“Ma’am!” yelled someone behind a desk. She held out a clipboard, with a pen stuck in it, in my direction. I quickly took it from her and sat back down. I heard her mumble, “Take a seat, fill this out, and return it when you’re finished.”

I sat down, Mia’s head resting on my shoulder. I gently put down my bags and tried to juggle the clipboard and Mia. It took me about fifteen minutes to fill out everything, the numerous forms required. Name. Address. Monthly income. Routine expenses. When the forms were completed, I took one last look at them, and then carried the clipboard over to the woman

who had handed it to me. She was a middle-aged black woman with smooth skin and a tight ponytail. Her bright red lipstick distracted me as she told me to take a seat and listen for my name to be called. She never once looked at me. Her long purple fingernails clicked wildly on the keyboard in front of her, while her strong perfume followed me back to my seat.

I can not explain why I could suddenly breathe easy for a moment. Although this woman seemed completely uninterested in the way I had prepared Mia and myself, the fact that she was a woman who smelled nice and looked done-up comforted me. I cannot make it clear why. I almost felt like there should’ve been an understanding between us. I wanted some sort of acknowledgement from this woman that she understood. I wanted to see in her eyes she knew only the worst of times could’ve brought me to



“A Room with a View” Jackie Stout
8”x10” Photograph

She had black eyes like I’ve never seen before. From her posture, I could tell she had a meaty figure and tight-fitted clothing. The thought of baby-weight bounced through my mind and I actually felt bad for her, grateful of my metabolism, as if it were something I had control over. She looked at the books I’d pulled from the diaper bag with a mixture of annoyance and longing, as she patted her baby’s back. She offered me no smile as our eyes locked. It didn’t matter if she didn’t speak English. It didn’t matter if she didn’t have a job. She just looked at me like she didn’t comprehend me, and I knew I must’ve been looking at her the same way. I turned my head quickly back to the little book. Pictures of blue cats and oversimplified faces were all I saw.

I refused to lift my eyes until our name was finally called, but the woman’s image seemed immovable. Looking at the clock above one of the

her desk. I would’ve done anything for her acceptance, and for her to see me as what I was, not what I must be, just because I was here.

Mia awoke and I took out some books from her diaper bag to read to her as she sat on my lap. She was shy around strangers, so I could only imagine how she felt. She’d fallen asleep in the familiarity of our car and had opened her eyes to this foreign world. She could feel that I didn’t want to be there, and I wanted her to observe and memorize as little of this room as possible.

I glanced up to see a Hispanic woman a few seats down. Her hair was richly colored, but frizzed.

desks, I realized that we'd been waiting for close to two hours. Mia seemed relieved that we were moving, but disappointed when she found we were just going to sit down somewhere else. Nonetheless, she was still and wordless.

The woman who called our name was not the woman who had given me the clipboard. Instead, as I was sitting before her, she looked me up and down very briefly, and then asked me a series of questions, verifying information on the forms I'd filled out.

"All your information has been entered," she began. "Here's a copy of your official application. If you see anything that's not correct, please tell me right now. If not, you are free to go. You should expect a letter from us within five to seven business days. If you have any questions, there will be a telephone number at the bottom of the letter. You may call at any time during our office hours," she said, adding, "Thank you and have a nice day." I was insulted by the robotic quality of her spiel, but I knew this was no place to complain to a manager about service. With my belongings in one hand, and Mia's little hand in the other, I made my way to the door, keeping my head as high as I could. Just before I reached the door, I glanced at the Hispanic woman with the baby again. Her eyes met with mine instantly. Everything in the room stopped, or so it seemed to me, as I felt drowned in her black eyes. Her expression never changed from indifference.

In the last place someone would have a self-discovery, I realized who I was. I was no better than anyone in this room. I'd done nothing more difficult. Hell, half of these women probably struggled with what I struggled with times ten, for every moment of their lives. Some of them probably had much less than I had to work with, and this made them so much more in my mind. Everything about their loneliness, their emptiness, and their struggle to survive painted them as the most amazing people I'd ever seen. As much self-defeat as it took for me to pack my things and walk through this door, I was naïve, and unable to comprehend what it took for some of these women.

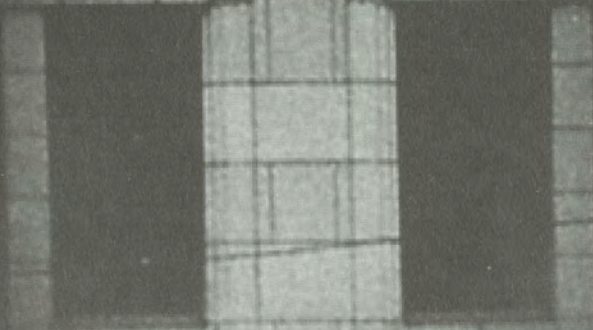
On my way out the door, I dropped the book Mia and I had been reading into the basket of ripped magazines and incomplete children's stories. I didn't look at the deep-eyed, Hispanic woman again, but I figured that she must've gone to get it as soon as I was out of sight. I didn't do it out of charity, or at least I hoped I didn't. That would be the least I could've done for my fellow applicants. I think I did it because I felt that luxuries belonged to someone else. I had enough. The only thing I was struggling

for was money, and that didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. It wasn't charity, I try to tell myself. I just didn't need it anymore.

On a Saturday afternoon, out in the playground at my apartment complex, Mia is swinging. I am standing behind her and gently pushing her soft back. We had played in the sandbox, making laughable masterpieces. And the rest of the day would be filled with ice cream, a picnic dinner, a visit to the mall where Mia and I will get new outfits and some new books, and a late-night movie, completely disregarding bedtimes and rules. But for now, Mia's swinging. She's just happy to be cutting through the breeze back and forth. And I'm happy that she's happy.

Up from the swing set, through our apartment window, into the kitchen and on the table sits a letter. A copy of my official application, stamped with the word 'DECLINED.' There were other sheets of paper that came with it, explanations and suggestions, but I threw them away. This letter has been sitting on the table for over a week, but I don't have the heart to move it. ■

Coca-Cola



I do what I want

Beth Mink

Just because
I cook
his
stew
wash his underwear
and
when he carried the
mail I'd smell the
sweat in his shirts
just because I
put him through college
had his sons
sew and clean
and dress to please him
and think he comes first,
doesn't mean I'm not a feminist.
it doesn't have to be a word
synonymous with grinding
men into the dirt
or wiping your
ass with them.

Tender Cheating

Teri Tucker

Originating as mere coincidence,
it was me thrown in with you.
Emotive subject matter filled
the thinning space between us.

A draft beer for you, some wine
for me. I spoke with the uncertainty
of a left-handed batter at the plate
for the very first time.

I stood leaning against you,
operator of acceleration.
With your girlfriend sleeping
down the road,
you let me glide into this irony

without thinking twice about our friendships.
We deserved acclaim for being ourselves,
but accreditation was scarce
from anyone besides each other.
No one knew you like I did.
You were my own Abigail, helping me
air out my emotions like laundry on the line.

You came into my life so fast
like a doctor at the ATM of life
holding the fragile new babes.

Shallow breaths have elapsed,
and you're single once again.
The past brings forth knowledge learned,
and I can't kiss you with wine-stained lips.
My life is full now, with a man of my own,
but you've found your way into my head.

The Horse by the Navigation Wheel (from Cindy's Bedtime Story)

Michael Springer

Then with a start, Cindy woke up. Just as she was about to say something generic about how it had all just been a dream, she looked around to see she was laying on a large bed. The large bed was on a rather large ship. The large ship was floating through the air. The air was right where it usually is: around all the stuff.

"Where am I?" said Cindy.

"Over there!" said a horse that was standing by the navigation wheel.

"Who are you?" said Cindy.

"I'm a horse," said the horse.

"Well, are there any people on this ship?" said Cindy.

"Nope," said the horse. "Just me and that horse over there."

Cindy looked and there was a horse over there.

"Where are we?" said Cindy.

"In the air," said the horse.

"Is that as descriptive as you get?" said Cindy. As she was looking down, she saw that they were still over the forest. She had an odd feeling that it was the same forest she'd been crossing before. Then, she said, "I'm trying to get across this forest. I'm going to Serra. Could we fly toward it?"

"I don't know where Serra is," said the horse by the navigation wheel.

"I think it's north," said Cindy.

The horse used its nose to turn the wheel a bit.

"Say," said Cindy, "How on earth is this ship flying?"

The horse didn't respond for a while, and Cindy thought it wasn't going to. Then, it said, "It's really humid."

"Oh," said Cindy.

The horse was silent for a bit. Then, it said, "As long as the humidity stays above 28 percent, we should be fine."

"What if it falls below that?" said Cindy.

"We'll plummet," said the horse by the navigation wheel.

"What's your name?" said Cindy.

"I don't know," said the horse by the navigation wheel. "My master gave me one, but I've forgotten it."

"That's rather forgetful of you," said Cindy.

"I suppose so," said the horse. "But, you know what they say?"

"No," said Cindy, "I don't know. What do they say?"

"An elephant never forgets," said the horse.

Cindy paused a minute, hoping there was more to it. When she'd given up, she said, "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well," said the horse, "If an elephant never forgets, then it's only logical that a horse always forgets."

"That's not logic!" said Cindy.

"I suppose logic isn't the right word. I suppose ironic is more what I was looking for."

"It's not ironic, either," said Cindy.

"See what I mean?" said the horse. "I can't remember a damn thing."

"Watch your mouth," said Cindy. "This is a children's book."

"Whoops," said the horse. "I forgot that, too."

Cindy got the feeling she shouldn't ask the horse any more questions. After a while, the horse said, "I suppose you can just call me the horse by the navigation wheel."

"That's quite awkward. How about we abbreviate it? I'll call you H.B.N.W."

"What are you gonna call me?" said the horse over there.

"H.O.T.!" said Cindy. Then, turning to H.B.N.W, she said, "You know what a navigation wheel is and you can fly a ship, but you don't know your name?"

"I know some things," said the horse by the navigation wheel.

"The problem is, I don't know the rest of the things."

"That's quite a problem," said Cindy. "I'm the same way, but I think I know more things than you."

"Like what?" said the horse.

"Horses can't talk," said Cindy.

"You're right," said the horse. "I didn't know that."

There was a long silence, and the horse wandered away from the navigation wheel to eat some hay. Then, he walked over to Cindy.

"Are you sure horses can't talk?" said the horse.

"I'm pretty sure," said Cindy.

"Well," said the horse, "I'm not going to believe you until I see some good hard evidence."

A bird flew up and landed on Cindy's shoulder. She started stroking its back.

"Do you even know the woods we're flying over?" said Cindy.

"Of course," said HBNW. "That is the Funny Woods."

"Why do they call it that?"

"Because things don't happen in the normal way here. For instance, random things can happen in the middle of the plot without any hint of meaning, and then the plot can go back to normal in the next chapter like nothing ever happened."

"Astounding," said Cindy, not quite believing him.

"Hey! I've remembered the word I was looking for," said the horse by the navigation wheel.

"What?" said Cindy.

At the exact moment between Cindy saying "what?" and the horse responding, the humidity dropped to 27 percent.

"Coincidence," said the horse, as the airship rapidly dropped out of the sky, Cindy hovered in the air, watching it fall. ■



"The Laugh" Daniel Kinkade
11"x14" Photograph

A Warm Day in February

Michael Springer

A tease,
a smile
as the pale dress shifts,
showing just a little leg,
just a hint
of what you're waiting for

Night

Daniel Kinkade

Running
in dark alleys
while the stench of the
city splashes upon
my feet.

Leaving
bloomed into the choice
I offered myself
over the future of
breaking.

Beggars'
bony fingers reach
and I have nothing to
give them from my
empty heart.

Midnight
slithers over my back
whispering me bloody tales
of the streets and the
darkness.

Your love
grew so tainted and
wrong for me that the
slick metropolis feels warm
to touch.

The walls
tower above me to
protect these bruised
limbs and this battered
body.

Screams force
from my mouth into
the virus air of indigo
steam and gasoline with
no words.

Primal
anger colors my new
descent into the unknown
tomorrow and territory
so raw.

From My Lips

Daniel Kinkade

tonight,
when you entered
my golden private

moving,
inside my dreams
and my lower belly

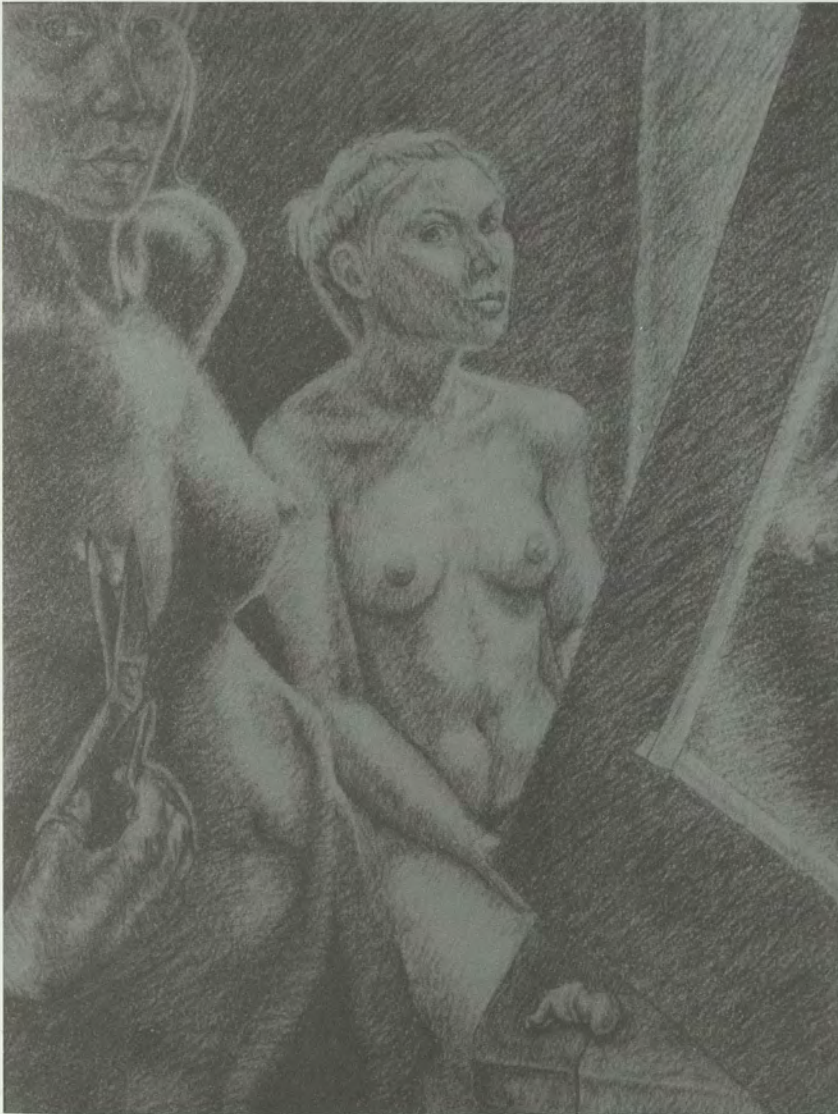
whispers
escaped my lips
falling into your ears

lying
as I told you that
I loved you so secretly

lusting
tinted these eyes
and senses of mine

knowing
that the words
intensified the end

fearing
the next encounter
of bending the truth.



"Self Portrait with Fetus" Carrie Rebecca Armellino
22"x30" Charcoal on Paper

Black Market Words

Josh Flynn

Writers in trench coats sardined in abandoned warehouses. Undercover angels with shorn wings, baskets of nouns and adjectives held underarm, tossing intellectual highs with great aim. Poets duck and grab, punch and pull, desperate to catch the angel's stolen goods, black market words plucked from God's infinite vocabulary. Words which make the air thick, waiting to be corralled by periods, commas, exclamations. The angels give elitist smirks as the writers struggle, words clinging to fingers, crumpled in palms like a hundred drafts trashed, exiled to wastebasket bottoms. Words stuffed in pockets, words spread across the floor, anxious poets analyzing and arranging, deciphering, combining, looking for new metaphors which lead to instant fame, leaving them asking, "What can we give back to God for all the poems we have stolen from him?"



"Village #1" Andrew Leonberger
8"x10" Photograph



"Village #2" Andrew Leonberger
8"x10" Photograph

Overly Preoccupied With Sex

Jen Anderson

My parents gave me the “how babies are made” lecture when I was eight. From conversations with other friends, this seems a bit early. In a reaction that would later be an ironic twist, I told them they were lying, it was gross, and no one would ever do that. Over the following months the whole idea of sex concerned me, well—not the whole idea. The physics of sex concerned me. My parents, as I imagine many parents do, explained sex in terms of the heterosexual missionary position. “The man lays on top of the woman” etc... As much as it pains me now to admit, I tried to picture my parents doing this. My saving grace may be: in mental pictures my parents were fully clothed. They even wore shoes. My father was considerably taller and heavier than my mother, as were most married couples I knew. The idea of the man lying on top of the woman, nose to nose, toes to toes, arms at their sides, led me to one conclusion: there was no way that a woman could breathe during sex. She’d get squashed. I knew this because my sister sat on me once when we were fighting, and I could barely breathe. And if she was only five...

At nine I got my first bra. Not only did I have to put it on backwards to fasten it, I was a little fuzzy on the logistics, as well. At school, Brittany said that Sister Agatha had “saggy titties” from not wearing a bra. I didn’t want to look like Sister Agatha, who resembled nothing so much as a basset hound in a habit, so I wore that bra dutifully. Even to bed. I slept in that damned thing for almost a year, changing in the bathroom at slumber parties, before my mother caught on.

I don’t know if my parents actually told me not to repeat the procreation lecture to my sister, or if I just knew she wasn’t old enough yet to know the great mysteries of existence I was privilege to. Whatever the reason, the burden of knowledge strained our playtimes. Namely, it interfered with Barbies. My sister’s Barbie (named Barbie, we both lacked creativity) was

Best of Issue: Prose

always having babies. My suspension of disbelief could accept that the dollhouse people were Barbie’s babies, albeit with overly long legs and fully dressed in grownup clothes. Barbie seemingly spawned hard plastic midgets who sported injection-molded seventies haircuts and inherited none of her Playboy bunny attributes. After my sister’s Barbie had birthed an entire family of babies, I asked who the father was, a reasonable question as Barbie’s latest bundle of joy sported a handlebar mustache and an ascot. She informed me that there was no father. When I insisted there had to be a father, she insisted right back that there wasn’t. While I couldn’t blame Barbie for her lack of interest in my brother’s “Sport & Shave” Ken with his Magic Marker beard, it annoyed me that my sister wasn’t doing it right. As the argument continued, both of us equally stubborn, I wanted to scream, “But I know where babies come from! Mom and Dad told me and there has to be a dad!” But I couldn’t. I just had to sit there with my mouth shut.

In addition to the lecture on the living room couch, I remember having four sex-ed books. A doctor and a teacher, my parents adored audio/visual aids. Had Disney made a facts-of-life read-along book with Tinkerbell chiming on cassette when it was time to turn the page, I would have had that, too. The first book they gave me had soft-edged pastel drawings and even softer words. It explained where babies came from but was rather vague on specific details—the woman breastfeeding the baby didn’t even have nipples. At the same time my parents gave me my favorite of the four, Stan and Jan Berenstain’s (of the Berenstain Bears fame) “How to Teach Your Children About Sex...Without Making a Complete Fool of Yourself.” I still have it. It was intended for parents, of course, but wasn’t above my eight-year-old head. A few years later I got a book on puberty. It had cartoons, but it also had realistic drawings of girls (and boys) in various stages of development. The older girls leaned more to the well-endowed end of the

scale; I don't really remember the boys all that much. The fourth book was the one they handed out in church youth group when I was twelve. This one had photographs. Not only of naked people, but of bizarre looking contraceptives, as well—IUD's were clearly not designed by Calder or Brancusi. In some ways, this was probably the most important of the four books. In the chapter on homosexuality, which none of the others even mentioned, it said, "some degree of same-sex attraction was normal in early adolescence." Never mind my girlfriend and I having undoubtedly crossed that dubious line of "some degree" in those dark hours on the floor of the walk-in closet—the book said that I was normal.

Despite my mother's passion for education, she flunked the anatomy portion of parenting. When I was learning the names of my body parts, she taught me the word *tutu* in place of the more technical *vulva*. I don't know why I hold her solely responsible for this. My father could have been equally culpable. Perhaps the backlash of *tutu* prompted his later insistence that my brother say *urinate* instead of *pee*. This almost caused a wreck when, at three, Brian shouted from the backseat, "Stop the car, I gotta *marinate*!"

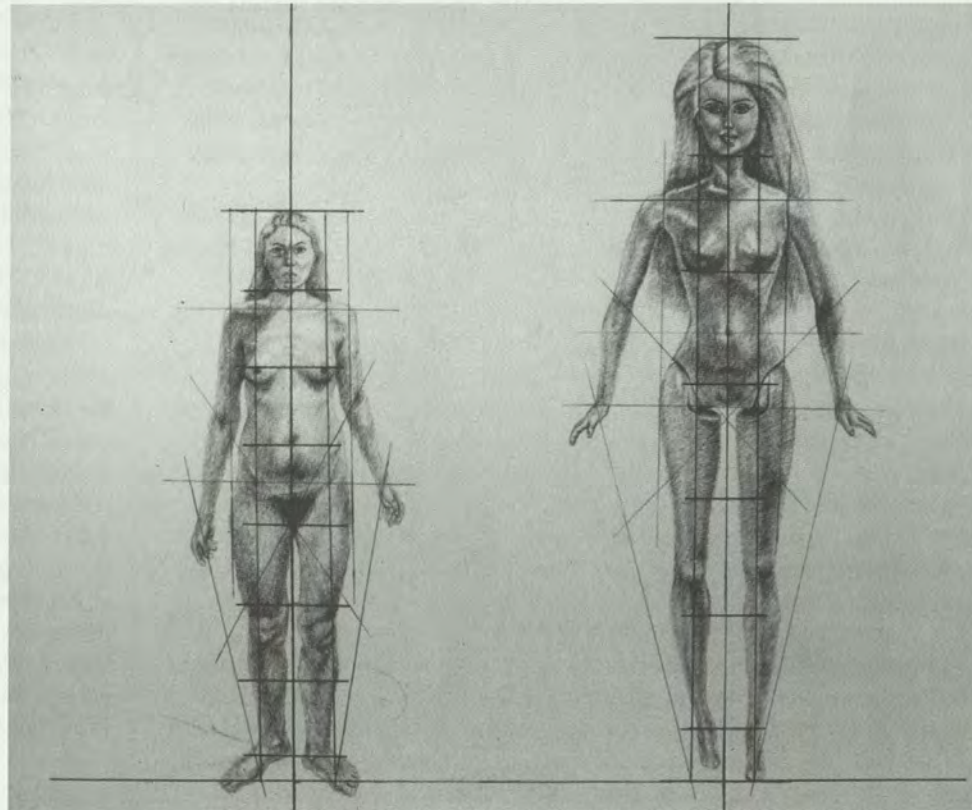
But when I was two and still an only child, I learned that I had a *tutu*. I didn't question it. This is your *tutu*. This is your foot. This is your nose. Touch your nose. No one talked about "private parts" in preschool, so my vocabulary remained unchecked.

At five, my mother signed me up for ballet class. We went to Montgomery Ward and bought my ballerina outfit: pink leotard, pink tights, and Capezio ballet slippers with elastic across the instep. I think she even twisted my long, blond hair up in a bun so I'd look like "a real ballerina." But when I walked out of that overheated, mirrored room after the first class, I was more than a little confused. "Mommy? Mrs. Morrissey says she has a blue *tutu*. And a green one. And a red one. And a yellow one. And she's going to bring them to class and we can all try them on!"

I don't know how my mother talked her way out of that one. I do know at age twenty-four, when I came out to my mother, I reminded

her: I was told we could try them on.

In sixth grade I occasionally ate lunch with Tracy, a seventh-grader with bad skin, who I remember solely because she loaned me her mother's Harlequin romances. She told me they were dirty. I couldn't figure out those Harlequin women. They were always yelling, "Take me!" or "I'm coming!" but they never went anywhere.



"Comparison" Carrie Rebecca Armellino
22"x18" Pencil on Paper

Dory had blue eyes and dirty-blond hair cut in a pageboy. She lived in worn jeans, dirty sneakers, and a succession of K-Mart t-shirts. Her father's farm was next to the riding stable where my sister and I took lessons. Somehow our parents knew each other, so we would occasionally stop by after our hour-long horseback trek through San Antonio's version of Hill Country.

I don't know who suggested the first sleep-over; it might even have been our parents' idea. Her family came over for dinner. It was agreed that we would take Dory home on our way to riding lessons the next day. While the grownups chatted over coffee, Dory and I went in my room to play. We started with Barbies or a board game, but ended up on the floor of my closet with the lights out. I don't remember if we actually told ghost stories or if that was just the lie we made up in case our parents came in. At some point she suggested that we practice kissing. "You be the girl, and I'll be the boy," she said, boy being shorthand for aggressor. As the months progressed, so did our sessions in the closet.

A few details from those nights remain: the moon through her bedroom window, bright enough to cast shadows, the marks left by the elastic neck of my nightgown when she pulled it down to my elbows, her cautious fingers pressed against the underpants I wouldn't let her remove.

If our parents had been more observant they would have known something was going on. We couldn't wait to be alone, whenever one of us visited we would spend hours shut in a room together. It was easier at my house. I had the walk-in closet and my bedroom door squeaked, a warning to sit up and compose ourselves before someone came in. The "ghost story" ruse was either convincing or just so preferable to the truth that my parents chose to believe it. For Christmas that year I got books by Poe and Hitchcock.

Sometime between eleven and thirteen I discovered porn. First, I found the chapter on photographing nudes in the Time-Life series on photography. In grainy, black-and-white photos, naked women with elaborately coiffed hair posed beside chiffon drapes, staring dreamily off somewhere to the left of the photographer. Since I still got a thrill from looking up "fuck" in the dictionary, this was quite something. And it was in the family room!

In the master bathroom of the house where I babysat, back issues of

Southern Living and Ladies' Home Journal did a poor job of concealing the Playboys. I remember these magazines as curious rather than titillating. The thrill wasn't exactly erotic, it was knowing that I wasn't supposed to look at them. I held my breath as I unearthed each issue, frantically memorizing the exact placement of the other magazines, the precise angles at which they were tossed back in. God forbid a subscription card should fall out in the process; for all I knew, those were bookmarks. Each time I left, that bathroom had the most meticulously arranged magazine basket in the state of Texas.

Playboy was a step up from sex-ed books, if only because the photos were in color. Farm girls with gravity-defying breasts stood backlit against the prairie sunset, golden hair blowing in the breeze as they hiked up their denim skirts to prove they were natural blondes. Exotic brunettes with waist-length hair laughed in outdoor showers as the water spilled over them, their artfully disheveled swimsuits concealing nothing as the camera zoomed in on the water droplets clinging to their pubic hair. I wondered if I would look like that someday. Even if I did eventually look like Miss August, I knew there was no way my riding instructor would ever let a centerfold model ride naked and barefoot in her corral.

In seventh grade, Jennifer M. and I found her father's stash in the floor of his bedroom closet. He apparently preferred the much raunchier Hustler to the rather innocently voyeuristic Playboy. Not brave enough to take one of these to her room to examine it, we crouched on the floor ignoring the dirty clothes and the sour smell of loafers worn too many times. I still remember one photo spread called "Tina's Licking Lesson," a subject definitely not covered in the parentally-provided literature. Another page detailed, in cartoon form, a dungeon dedicated to the dubious delights of hot wax. Our foray into kink was cut short when her younger brother barged in. We jammed the magazine back in the pile, no time for my fastidious rearrangements, and pretended to have been hiding from him. Her parents never said anything about it, but the next time we looked the closet floor was bare.

I don't know at what point my Barbies came out, though I know they beat me by at least a decade. I remember it as being about the same time that I got a "Dream Date" Ken doll who came curiously attired in a tuxedo shirt with a plastic jacket and dress shoes without socks. The detachable

Our foray into kink was cut short when her younger brother barged in.

bright pink cummerbund hid the seam that attached his pants to his shirt. Without his jacket and cummerbund, he appeared to be wearing very formal pajamas. He actually spent most of his time separated from his jacket; Barbie decided that it looked quite nice on her, wrapped snugly and tied with a hot pink scarf, which matched the permanent boutonniere. With some fuchsia sling-backs, she had the sexiest, and shortest, mini-dress on the block. Mattel would have never okayed that outfit for their plastic princess.

I never had much use for Ken. After removing his jacket, I threw him under the bed until it was time to clean up. My Barbies didn't need boys; they had each other. In a bit of pre-pubescent prescience, his one featured role was voyeur. Like the men who would approach me in bars twenty years later, he wanted to watch. He would stand propped against the wall, showing off his whiter-than-white teeth while Barbie and her girlfriend sixty-nined in the pale pink Murphy bed of the "Home & Office" play-set. They did that a lot, though most of the time without an audience. I didn't have a kitchen for them, or a living room set, so they didn't have to cook, wash dishes, or spend hours chatting with boring neighbors about mortgage rates and bridge clubs. Instead they spent their days changing clothes, dancing, and having sex. To this day they walk bowlegged, ankles unable to meet, plastic hips permanently off-plumb. ■



"Iris" Suzanne Merrell
16.5"x31" Oil on Canvas

Little India, Toronto

Zita Karkls

Best of Issue: Poetry

On the street corner
where you can get a grilled corncob for a dollar
wearing pale orange sari,
sari dirty from the week of work,
an Indian woman
will talk to you.

At the same time that the fire kisses the corn,
leaving dark marks in the places
where the passion has been too strong,
she will tell you her story.

While cutting lime through its dark green skin,
she will tell you her hopes,
the most important words whispering in her Indian language.

Her fingers will dip the half-lime into dark orange spices,
and rub the spices all around the corn.
The juices of the lime will leave the air smelling sweet and sharp.
The orange spices will burn your lips
as you leave
biting your corncob
the glitter of her earrings will be all you remember.

"Large Self Portrait" Carrie Rebecca Armellino
30"x49" Charcoal on Paper



Blue Potato Chips

Bonnie Meyer

When I pulled up to Mary Delgada's house, I have to admit I was a little staggered. My high school community service teacher had neglected to fill me in on what I should be expecting. There was no mention of slums, or ghetto, or anything of that nature. I was just supposed to deliver some Thanksgiving provisions to 1132 West 5th Street. This was the kind of place that you pull up to and the first thing that runs through your head is "don't forget to lock the doors." I was surrounded by textbook poverty.

I would like to describe her house as light blue, but there really wasn't enough blue paint left to warrant that representation. It looked more like blue potato chips glued randomly on old wooden siding. This was the kind of house that looked like it was sitting on a teeter-totter; any slight breeze could knock it off the foundation. The roofing was sporadic at best, and certain parts of the rusted gutters had become homes to various wasps and spiders. Other than the few insects, the lawn was depleted of anything remotely lifelike, or even green for that matter. The whole neighborhood seemed to be just an overabundance of cement and chain-link fence. Somehow I thought an eighteen-pound turkey with stuffing was the least of this woman's problems.

By the time I had closed the door to my car, I was already discouraged by my surroundings. I'm not sure whether it was inspired by guilt or just plain embarrassment, but I decided to leave my cashmere scarf in the car. After several deep breaths and countless attempts to find the words to break the ice with this woman, I slowly made my way to the driveway. With four grocery bags brimming with food, at least I wasn't going in empty-handed, but I still felt like it. There was no doorbell, so I struggled to knock without dropping any of the glass jars of cranberry sauce. Not that anybody would notice a new blemish on this already pock-marked community. While waiting for an answer, I saw a mouse of some sort scurry across the porch. Culture shock indeed.

Mary opened the door eagerly and greeted me with a smile the size of Mount Rushmore. Her grin was surprising to me. I was half

expecting to see some bitter old spinster on the other side of that door, just waiting to mentally tear apart a new high school student. Much to the contrary, Mary bestowed upon me a lovely "hello" and directed me to a spot where I could unload the groceries. Before I even had the first bag out of my hand, Mary had already begun zealously praising my high school and everything we had done for her. Of course, I didn't know how to respond. I really hadn't done that much for this woman. I had never met her before, let alone heard of her. These Thanksgiving groceries were my only association with Mary. I couldn't answer with just a mere "you're welcome." Those kinds of responses are for giving birthday gifts and Christmas fruitcakes, not the necessary means of survival. Humbly, I played it safe and remained silent. Looking around, it didn't seem like my school was doing enough anyway. It didn't seem like there was any convincing Mary of that, though. She held these small favors with great reverence. While I still couldn't figure out what this woman had to smile about, I did sense a deeper aim in her praise.

After relieving myself of the grocery bags, I took a gander at my surroundings. The wood beneath my feet was warped and discolored from the worn varnish. Each movement, each shift of weight gave way to a faint creaking sound. I could almost feel the earth beneath the floor. The refrigerator was the kind you always see in the sitcoms on Classic Nick at Nite. It looked more like an old decaying jukebox than it did a storage place for food.

The sullen mood was augmented by the lone sixty-watt bulb burning in the center of the room. A greasy yellow colored the walls, adding to the helplessly churlish decor. The furniture was bleak. I could literally see the skeletons of the couches and chairs. Their old wooden frames were visible through the deteriorating upholstery. There was nothing happy about this place, except for Mary. She was the only source of delight in this sadly weathered abode. I looked over at her, and she was still smiling. Mary motioned for me to come closer, and I obeyed, oblivious as to what would

comprise our up-and-coming conversation.

When I reached Mary's vicinity, she quickly reached inside a blue, metal desk and pulled out a stack of Christmas cards.

"Here," she said, handing me what I guessed at about 15 cards. "Give these to all the students in your class at school."

I looked down at the cards and noticed they weren't new. The envelopes had been sealed and opened, and the signatures on the inside had been either scratched or whited out.

"They are from last year, from my family. I don't need them, and I hate to throw them away. It is the only way I can say 'thank you.' Please, make sure your teacher gets one too," Mary said pleadingly.

"Of course," I said, clutching the cards tightly in my sweaty palms. "Thank you. I'm sure everyone will love them."

I figured that it had been awhile since somebody told Mary "thanks." She beamed when I did. Her eyes were still fixed on mine, like she had something more to say, but wasn't sure if she should proceed. I remained there in front of her, waiting, not saying a word. I wanted to hear what she had to say. This woman intrigued me, and I wasn't about to let her withhold why. So there I stood, staring into Mary Delgada's eyes, hoping that she would let me in on her little secret. Finally, she broke.

"I didn't used to take the things your high school offered me," Mary said, staring at the ceiling. "It made me angry that I couldn't take care of myself. If I couldn't do it, then I didn't want anyone else to either. But your teacher, and your classmates, they wouldn't let me say no. They kept coming back and coming back with more food and clothes. Each time I turned them away and each time I would become angry with myself that I couldn't accept your gifts. It wasn't until a few months ago that I called your school and asked them to come back."

"You see, I hadn't eaten in a while because of problems with my welfare checks. My son was visiting from the Army, and I had no food, no meal to cook for him. This boy, he has an appetite, too! I didn't want to let him know how bad it had become here. I didn't want him to hear my stomach growl. There are parts of my life that I don't want my children to see, and there are parts that I don't want to see. I decided to start taking the food. I decided that I couldn't let myself get so damned proud. I have to eat to survive and I'm not ready to leave this world yet. Anyway, I won't make you stand here and listen to any more."

Mary was tearing up as she opened the front door for me. I looked at her deeply, forcing a smile. My eyes were welling up too. These stories

weren't exactly your average chestnuts. Mary choked out another "thank you" and sent me on my way, Christmas cards firmly in hand. As I stepped outside into the dry cold, I hesitated. Once more I took in my surroundings: the bare yards, the cement, the teetering houses, and the peeling paint. Everything looked a little softer now, a little more complaisant. I wasn't in a different world. I wasn't an alien. The disquieted feelings I had felt before were gone. This whole place wasn't about locking your doors or keeping your valuables out of sight. This place was about people, people who have just as much sense and compassion as everyone else. Mary wasn't a disappointment or an outsider. She was just a woman who got the short end of the stick. There was not a damn thing in her life to smile about, but she grinned willingly anyway. I looked down at the Christmas cards in my hand, and realized that an eighteen-pound turkey with stuffing was exactly what Mary needed. I started the walk to my car again, wondering if Mary would like homemade or canned cranberry sauce for Christmas. ■

Cat Mummies

Karen D. Mitchell

Cara and I walked down Washington Street
to the Crystal Flash
her hair chlorine green
mine strawberry blond and cut so short
the principal always called me "son."

We bought a pack of grape bubble gum,
the most recent copy of Hit Parader
with a giant Mötley Crue poster inside,
two Dr. Peppers
and a box of cigarettes
shiny and smooth in its jacket.

We left the store, our goods in tow
July sun drooled on our pink backs
I tried to blow smoke rings
Cara cupped her hands over a small bag of pot
we agreed to sample it later behind the Village Pantry
where we could fly undisturbed
among glass slivers
and stray cats lapping ice cream puddles.

I sang "Live Wire," twisted a spoon ring
around my finger,
nearly stepped on the poor creature:
a dead cat
left so long it was a mummy
stiff as Vince Neil in tight leather pants
fur like grey ashes floating in syrup
eye sockets a well to Hades
yellow teeth bared in silent growl.

My skin peeled away and floated
to the asphalt
pink and red, glints of silver
like the cat Shane Whalen drug
through the alley with a rusty bike chain
while he sang it to sleep
with a cold rattling laugh.

I lost my ring, not sure where
but like to imagine
the sun shaped it into a silver crown
placed upon the noble head
of a cat prince
who sleeps in no grave
but still licks our feet
with his concrete tongue.



"Kelly with Leaves in her Hair" Josh Flynn
8"x10" Photograph

Asphyxiation

Karen D. Mitchell

I get dizzy whenever I walk downtown. Sometimes, as I wait for the crosswalk signal to change, I wrap an arm around the nearest streetlight, as if bracing myself for a tornado. City winds can be brutal. The buildings rub their sides together like giant cicada wings and create a wind vortex, a black hole that swallows anything foolish enough to wander into its domain. But my lightheadedness stems from lack of oxygen.

I hear a metallic hum as I creep along the street. Watch grey clouds swarm. Smell the industrial pheromones. The city's foul breath. I worry that I'll be sucked down a concrete throat and pressed into the pages of time like a bug in a child's biology project. I try to imagine my end. A flag that reads "Specimen No. 1" waves from a silver pin wedged through my neck. Sticky orange guts embrace the needle and glisten like a jeweled areola. What a way to go. Stuffed and displayed for the sake of science. Guess it's payback for all those butterflies my mother suffocated just so she could lock them inside glass frames that hung in the hallway and collected dust.

I snap back into myself and realize that freedom is often a chimera.

The skyscrapers lean over me with preying mantis claws, waiting to devour me with cold, callous teeth. You know how people look like ants when you're looking down on them from the top floor of a tall building? Well, I'm one of those ants. I can't breathe. The city has stamped down on my chest, squashing me all over the sidewalk. "You're an unwelcome guest at this urban picnic," she croaks. "Go back to your hill of dust and darkness." Her triumphant laughs ebb away as I melt beneath the sun.

I'm a child of wet, green, dark places, and the city knows it. I didn't recognize it at first, but the aches and gasps of my small insect body cry out the truth: Things have got to change before it's too late!

The body never lies and retains all memory, even that hidden deep within the cavernous mind.

I peel myself from the pavement and recover all my remaining legs that escaped rush hour assimilation. I slip inside my chrysalis, sigh myself to sleep and dream about wings of light that spirit me away to a land of wind. A haven where pink lungs can expand and fly and never again pound their antennae against the ghostly bars of an invisible cage. A place where breath is song and song is life.

I inhale the wind and learn to sing once more.

Grave Secrets

Karen D. Mitchell

My shoes knock cold granite doors
as I tread their damp, green roof
and wait for

 murmurs to tremble my eardrum
 specters to sweep across my feet
 invisible fingers to unlock my eyes
so I can see.

But the knowledge I crave
does not reside in
letters scratched in willow trees
petroglyphs carved on canyon rock
 epitaphs rubbed through white paper
with robin's egg blue crayon.

Barred from migration, the answer flies
through my fingers
like a luna moth's fine green powder.

Veiled in night's obsidian silk, epiphany slips
behind my soul
afraid to show its opal face.

My sighs stir the bitter air,
which melts to reveal:
no robin redbreast to unearth my key
no dove to buoy my tumbling ship
no raven to reason me back to
Truth.

Only the crow replies,
its stoic scream cuts through me
cold as a banshee's twilight wail.

My heart falls into slices
divides itself among phantom birds
until no fruit remains.

Only a stagnant seed
trapped inside a frozen tear
waits to be broken
by beating wings.

Miss Sally

Gaylie R. Cotton

During the years plenty
your front porch
was a welcome mat
for the behind of a talkative
little girl with family business to tell
In your aluminum chair
with a white towel
to bat away mosquitoes
Ladybugs and truths
you'd sit for hours
facing the summer sun
closing your eyes
like you were hiding a secret
Putting your nose
where my father said
it didn't belong
And I sat at your knees
tittle-tattling stories
of a drunken-raged father
and a mother's broken teeth
purple bruises and night cries
During those years of plenty
your children were obedient
husband was home
your chatter was full
and your bounty spread

But during the fall years
of famine and lack
you broke blood
sent Mr. Nun running
to another's arms
hunting for nectar
found in hand-friendly bottles
draped inside brown paper bags
Your children strayed
one cursed to die
for taking too much
after her father
Your front porch
felt hard and unforgiving
no longer appealing
to butterflies or soul-winners

The grass carpet doormat
proved not enticing enough
for the hard-headed soft-bottom
kid who sat at your knees.
The soft white towel
traded for armor and venom
the soft petals of summer's bloom
lie wilting at your feet

Commit to Memory

Gaylie R. Cotton

I want to remember
the snow-white hair
plaited against her soft
brown scalp
and marvel how it made
the transition from nap
to silk
covering her memories
like a blanket

I want to remember
the black globose moles
scattering her face and neck
like wild peas
catching on loose threads
that partially amputate

I want to remember the day
she planted herself
in our lives like a tall
black tree
me, an apple falling far
from the originator
of my big dimpled nose
and flaming red temper

I want to get inside
that covered mind
that place of mysteries
of secrets that don't spill
through her eyes
To peel back the white hair
plaited to her scalp
knock on her skull
tell her my name
and ask her where
has she been all my life

Trilogy of Love

Daniel J. Hook

Dunkin Donuts

A dollar an hour. Yeah that's right. A dollar an hour. I scrubbed toilets. Filled napkin holders and straw dispensers. Washed every piece of equipment in the place. For a dollar an hour. On good days I got to inject the jellies and custards into the cream-filled donuts. On the bad days I mopped every square inch of tile floor. Never cared that the mop water splashed onto the bottom tray of donuts.

A dollar an hour. I worked with haggy old women who hated their miserable lives. Listened to 'em bitch about their drunken husbands. They all wished the old pervert baker would hit on 'em. It never happened. He had a thing for girls. These old broads never got his attention.

Things livened up when they hired Ponytail the draft dodger. And Nikki. Ponytail was the new baker. Replaced the old pervert, who just disappeared one day. Not that anybody cared. Ponytail cracked up laughing when he heard I was making a dollar an hour. He was probably making every bit of three. But when ponytail laughed, you laughed along with him. Even if you were the joke. He had that way about him.

And Nikki. Every sixteen year old boy's dream. Twenty-three years old. Long black hair. Big dark eyes. Looked like she just got off a boat from Italy. I was hypnotized. And she knew it. I would have worked for 50 cents an hour.

Saturday morning. All the straw dispensers were packed. Ponytail asked me to help out in the kitchen. Nikki helped me squirt chocolate into the cream filled donuts. We laughed and flirted with each other. I showed Nikki the joy of over filling a donut. Chocolate cream splitting open and oozing from the sides of the donut. A little feather of chocolate splashed onto her cheek. Like a beauty mark. I wanted to wipe it off. But I couldn't. I would have worked for a quarter an hour.

Ponytail interrupted. Had to see what all of the fun was about. Stood

there looking at us like we were nuts. Laughing over an exploded donut. He gave me a puzzled look. Gave Nikki a puzzled look. Then he caught sight Nikki's new beauty mark and smiled. Bent slowly to Nikki's face. Licked the chocolate feather from her cheek. I clinched a fist. Wanted to drill the back of his head. But I froze. Maybe Nikki would slap him herself. She leaned away from him. A smile spread across her face and a lightning bolt nailed me between the shoulder blades.

I staggered from the kitchen. Ray stood at the other side of the counter. My only friend with a car. He asked me what time I was getting off work. I took off my red apron. Threw it in the corner. Now. Ray laughed. Told me to wait in the car. As I started through the door, I heard Ray tell the old hag behind the counter to give him six glazed. And he wanted the fresh ones from the bottom tray. I walked on out. Didn't have the energy to say a word.

Falling in Love

I have fallen in and out of love with many women. Most of them never even knew it. I once fell in love with a woman simply because she had long beautiful hair. I had never met her, but we stood in a grocery checkout line together. Of course the affair ended as soon as she paid for her groceries and left the store. Never saw her again. Then there was the woman who dissolved me with her smile. That one lasted as long as it took for the light to turn green. Oh, I can not leave out the Rand McNally lady who stocked the map racks at the Speedway convenience stores while I stocked the ice cream case. There really is no way to describe her body or how it made me feel. And she had these little freckles speckled across her nose. I did see her three or four times. We even talked to each other a couple of times. There was the woman with a voice prettier than a well-played fiddle. And the one with a laugh that made me laugh.

Don't make the wrong assumption. I am not a shallow guy who lusts after women only for their physical attributes. I have been in love with women for reasons much too complex to explain. A woman's mind. Another woman's wit. And the kindness of one. Sometimes it was just the way she made me feel about myself.

I have been told before that I fall in love too easily. A psychologist once told me that my problem with women was poor selection. Perhaps both statements are fair. I have tried to strengthen my selection process. Look deeper into the actions of the women I meet. But I fell in love again this week. And I never even saw her face.

It was mid-day and I had just picked up my car from the shop and needed to hurry back to work at the warehouse. Driving up U.S. 31 I had that overwhelming need for White Castle hamburgers. Things went my way. There was no one in the drive up lane. I ordered the number two meal with an extra double cheeseburger and a Red Pop. Through the sun glared window I could see the back of the lady working vigorously on my order. She finished and slid it to the cashier. Bagged and out the window in less than three minutes. (Record breaking by White Castle standards). As I pulled out onto Shelby heading towards Southport Road I pulled the first steaming double cheeseburger from the box and bit into sheer delight. I'm guessing that there were at least four pickles on this sandwich. Having been a victim of fast food screw-ups many times in my life, I assumed that the next two double cheeseburgers would be pickleless. But number two had more pickles than the first and number three was as well endowed as the first two. That's when I fell in love again. She was a woman who knew how to treat a man.

The idea of making a U-turn and heading back to White Castle stormed my mind. I envisioned myself walking in, swooping her up into my arms, and carrying her out the door just as Richard Gere took Debra Winger from the factory in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. But before I could turn around I looked over at the old pick-up truck sitting beside me at the light. The driver had strawberry blonde hair pulled up and clipped at the back of her head. We made eye contact and a wonderful smile spread across her face and the sun glanced off her high cheekbones. The smile was warm and sincere. Then she reached over to turn up Lyle Lovett on her stereo. The light turned green and we drove away.

Pieces

In a house I have never seen. I was who I am. She, I did not know. A beauty, who did not belong to me. Her skin was creamy and flawless in the Victorian way. Thick black hair and eyes like black marbles contrasted with her white skin. I was fully dressed, but the lady was not. She stood before me naked and smiled as if to say, "do what you will, because I know you will do what I want." She was right. I stepped closer to her, and with will and desire, my clothes vanished.

We kissed long with much passion. My fingers could not decide where to go and struggled between the choices of her black hair and skin smooth like warm white oil. We used every inch of our bodies to satisfy the other, although neither of us could be totally fulfilled. It seemed to be a competition for each of us to give all we could give, while taking all the other was giving. As Hemingway once said, "we made love like we had invented it."

Finally climax, or possibly exhaustion, was reached. We were lying across the bed, I nearly delirious, and she asleep. A loud knock on the door startled me, but did not rouse the lady. Not bothering to cover my nakedness I staggered to the door and asked who was there. From the other side, a deep voice told me to open the door or he would tear it from the hinges. His voice was strong, angry, and believable. I opened the door slowly, fearing what was on the other side. The voice belonged to a body that filled the entire doorframe. He took one step into the room, casually pushed me aside and said, "I will take her now." I showed no resistance.

He took another step into the room and looked towards the bed. In a much softer and sad voice he said, "Oh no. What have you done to her?"

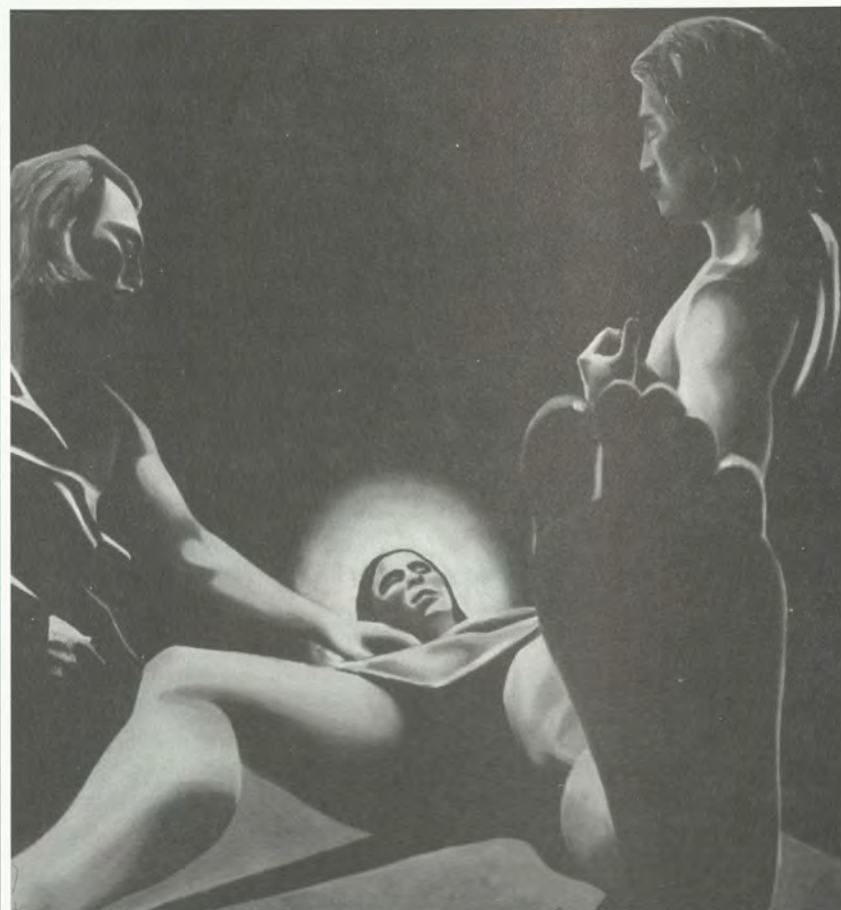
I too turned towards the bed. The Victorian lady was still there, but she was in three pieces. Not like a massacred body, but more like a disassembled mannequin. And yet she was still flesh. Lying across the pillows of the bed was the bottom part of her body. From the hips down. Diagonally was the section from the shoulders to just below the navel. Her breast and tummy slightly rising and falling as she breathed. Her head was in one corner of the bed. The black hair in disarray. Eyes closed and a slight dreamy smile on her lips.

*I fell in love again
this week. And I
never even saw her
face.*

As if this were a normal thing, I walked towards the bed without alarm. I picked up her mid-section and placed it against her hips. I turned her slightly and seemed to snap her back together like snapping a socket to a ratchet. I then picked up her head and softly snapped it back to the shoulders, again forming the beautiful woman. With confidence and pride, I looked up at the hulk who had intruded on our privacy.

The large intruder's head sagged on his shoulders. He turned and headed slowly back towards the door, shaking his head as he crossed the room. As he reached the door, he turned for one last look, and a tear ran from each eye. He closed the door softly.

I slid quietly into the bed beside the creamy-skinned lady. She stirred from her sleep as I gently kissed her neck, just below her ear. Slowly, the lady and I resumed our attempt to satisfy each other. ■



"Three of Me" Justin Patten
31"x33" Oil on Canvas

Open Windows

Jade Christine Roberts

i open the window
and feel the city morning sun
drip
across my skin
and trap my excitement into crystals
like the warm, sweet sap of trees
captures the mosquito
freezing life and energy into something
palpable
sounds from the market
on the street beneath my window
they shout words and
Laughter
laughter echoes strong off the brick
mountains that raise up around them
playing and lifting the sound
closer to heaven
behind me you stir
under the covers we share
and the clean white sheets
shift over you like a warm
and stormy, frothy sea
your Hands, ships
worn from work and weather
scarred from a hundred other Storms
other mornings when waking
wasn't so peaceful

i carry the sunlight to you
cupped in my steady hands
and let it splash over your sleeping face
in your opening eyes is a Singing
Thunder that shakes down these
concrete mountains
and swallows the Angry ocean
of your dreams
i am quiet and your hands are soft
against my skin, hard scars made supple
with the Gift of captured sunlight
smoothed like Honey over old wounds



“Pawn” Keeara Rhoades
11”x14” Silver Gelatin Print

A Promise and a Lie

Jessica Sauter

There are certain lies that seem able to permeate our realities with a deathly insistence. We tell ourselves these lies as a sick and unmentioned daily mantra, coming to accept them purely out of either repression or a truly jaded belief. Perhaps we do it to promote our chosen lifestyle as opposed to destiny, or maybe we do it for the sake of acceptance. I doubt I'll ever be able to secure the source of my own haphazard beliefs from time to time. Through observations of the world, parental practices and teachings, and early experience, we all become complexities harshly mixed with the truth and what we were taught to perceive as the truth, neither more present than the other.

My upbringing in suburbia was far from a nightmare, no matter how closely it is examined by the outside eye. Rarely did my parents ever fight, and if they did, it was in a fashion we found more humorous than deadly. Their relationship was loving and dependable, high school sweethearts and lovers forever. Despite their wonderful relationship, which daily showed their children that true love was possible, I found myself, as an early adult, questioning the possibility of love existing in the manner they portrayed so eloquently.

Watching movies of the made-for-TV persuasion, I was second-guessing the idea that love conquers most obstacles; and my abhorrence for romantic movies allowed me to buy into this belief, rather than what was portrayed in the latter genre.

However, sitting here now in the shade of evergreen trees, in a sea of fresh pine needles and inhaling an aroma that crosses between murky forest and cigarette smoke, I finally recognized that my paradigm of love was an unattainable emotion and it had shifted dramatically. Thoughts of mid-day naps, stroking her short, soft hair that always gently falls into her vibrant green eyes, or her nails digging into my back, evoked a secret truth from within my heart.

I find that I've lied to myself for most of my life. Similarly, when I was young and slightly overweight, my parents would comfort the wounds created by teasing peers by telling me I was big-boned. Accepting that as the honest truth, anytime anyone said otherwise I responded by echoing my parents: I am big-boned. Disproving my parents and my jaded, lying self, I dieted in high school and dropped pound after pound; I was left with a very elegant and feminine bone structure that managed to prove my theory of our tendency to lie to ourselves, and, unintentionally through our strong belief in our lies, we continually do the same to others. Our acceptance is so genuine that the fashion in which we lie to others is convincing enough to spread the delusion. However, acknowledging their own avoidance of truth had left me with hope, and so I must admit such lies can be founded, to some extent, in good nature.

Love is a topic I lied to myself about for too long. High school relationships, consisting of unhealthy indulgence in substances with men much older, seemed petty and worthless. My friends would speak adoration for significant others, while I stood by simply having fun and experiencing no grounded emotions. Cold-hearted, unemotional, those were the terms I used to justify my lack of connection. I never knew that love could sneak up on you, secretly waiting around the corner where it has been hiding and waiting until you acknowledge it. Love is not a complicated and time-concerned feeling. It escapes from within each of us, and we discover ourselves celebrating parts of life long forgotten in the rush of the world.

It shocks me that my mindset could have been convinced of love, if only our shells had collapsed in a timely manner. Acquaintances for years, a simple hello, how are you, as we passed each other in the store she managed, neither of us really certain of who the other was besides as a usual customer and dependable manager. Occasionally, she would suggest a new scent for me to sample, or we would discuss her remarkable ability to withstand the cacophony of smells that fringe somewhere between an 80

year-old woman's perfume and the scent country homes. Those days where the exception, and typically I was fending for myself, on my own, finding my favorite incense in its usual place and secretly watching as her eyes seem to dance with the candle flames with a magical intensity.

I had bought into the charade of heterosexual lifestyle entirely, to the point that I had no idea my true sexuality differed much from what anyone expected. Experimentation. I concluded that experimentation was why things were not as they seemed before I met her, but I wasn't certain about the strength of these feelings until I indulged myself in her company. In retrospect, as is often the case, it is clear to me that my high school sexuality was the basis of what everyone wanted of me. The picture perfect heterosexual family life that my parents put on display to convince everyone that it was the only existing form. I don't regret who I've always been, I simply regret not understanding it sooner.

The day everything changed for both of us was two long years ago. Yet, I still clearly recall waking up to my shrilling alarm and quickly dispelling the day with a simple flick of the wrist that never fails to put an end to the horrid noise. My body convulsed in a momentary shiver, which wasn't due to the cold. I could already tell the day was hot by the way the sun filtered into the room and illuminated various piles of junk. Rather, the shivering was simply my natural and accustomed way of greeting the world: a sarcastic, "I'm so happy to be awake." After the initial shock disintegrated, then hit the momentary anger experienced when analyzing the day's endless schedule before even fully awaking. A string of obscenities are usually muttered, as I finally decide that it is time to leave my momentary comfort for a shower.

My days had become full to the point that I was not certain when I could spare the time to eat, and the daily activities of showering and dressing soon disappeared into a well of lost memories by the time I returned home at night. Everyone else in my family had a respectively positive outlook, and they had awoken much earlier to begin their fantastic day. This left my house empty and lifeless, a comfort to one of my nature, so convinced of eternal solitude. I revered the suburban house, it's emptiness, and I prepared to leave it in an even more desolate state in order to fulfill my duties, as assigned by society and my unwillingness to stop trying to fool them into the idea of my "heterosexuality."

My intent was not unusual, and my expectations held nothing unordinary or unexpected, only my usual low and easily satisfied goals. I was

rather convinced that I was too consumed by my life to deal with emotional attachment with anyone other than myself, or any other form of drastic change in my fundamentally isolated nature. But it sneaks up on you, and the sly quality of love is what allowed it to affect our vulnerable, ignorant selves. I was standing at the counter with gun-shy eyes that were unable to tear away from the young woman's pale, round face. The complication with my attraction is that women, unfortunately, don't wear signs declaring their sexual orientation. Being someone who hates to offend, I never hit on anyone unless given the proper hints, and always with caution. My greatest fear was not rejection, but the disgust that would surely be provoked when a straight woman realized that a lesbian had just come onto her.

While I was transfixed on her, her glare the first of many to come, I could see her eyes curious as to the interest in her I'd taken. Vaguely aware that her voice was discussing jumping off cliffs in Mexico in the nude, my attention was focused on the brown speck in your left eye. Another day had dawned, and another friendly acquaintance-based chat was supposed to innocently follow my entrance into the Candle Cave. This time my charisma warmed in undeniable waves, and in one defined moment they crashed head and heart with lethal urgency, and our chat had extended into new territory, one enthused with euphemisms and other displays of wit and character.

By the end of that small conversation, she had come to appreciate my sarcastic tone and was willing to indulge in more conversation over coffee later that night.

Gliding out of the store and into the people-packed mall that resembled a cattle pen for shopaholics, I was thrilled by the possibility of a new friendship. Although I had admired her beauty, it was merely from the art perspective; I claimed romance was not the intent. One could not help but be aware, the way her smile erupted unexpectedly at unique moments and how her clothes lay tightly to accent her amazing body. Yet still, it was simply another invigorating chat over an even more invigorating coffee. But the innocent chat turned into a bond, which uncontrollably and gracefully became a relationship, one hidden from all except for us.

Debating with myself, I know that I couldn't deny the fact that we'd fallen for each other. There were times we tried to disallow our feelings as they intensified with every passing moment together, as we were both experiencing difficulty in accepting each other as both lovers and individu-

I've told many close friends that love is a tricky bastard, unpredictable and sly and unsuspecting even to the watchful.



“Untitled (Seeing) Keeara Rhoades
11”x14” Silver Gelatin Print

als. Except, stopping love from harboring our impressionable and fearful hearts, proved to be impossible. I’ve told many close friends that love is a tricky bastard, unpredictable and sly and unsuspecting even to the watchful. Recalling how Kristin and I had fallen in with the previously cursed “true love.” Truth with more truth than anything I have ever said since.

This was the beginning of bliss, years of bliss, and I couldn’t help but smile as I looked back over it. I had left the woods that had become my prison, a place I willingly lived in loneliness.

My car was in the parking lot, silent and dependable, much like my love for Kristin had always been. My car, I found with excitement, so much that it almost soothed me, but then I remembered how the world had been turned upside down countless times within the past few months. The world turned surreal, the world in endless spinning while I simultaneously stood ridiculously still in surrender. Since I’d learned of love, my reality was fixated through Kristin, and without her beside me my mind wandered away easily. All the doubt I had ever associated with love, the falsity that leads only to losing hope, had re-entered my mind, my life as soon as karma had stuck me.

Driving down familiar roads, roads I memorized long ago, I considered the reasoning behind it.

Growing up religious, the most persistent possibility always seemed like the easy way out, “God hates me because I’m gay.”

The radio attempted to distract me with my recently found obsession: light rock music. Cheesy songs about forever, something I never had believed in, exploded from the speakers and proved yet again to be a welcomed relief to the tension in my life. Turning the dial to maximum volume and singing along off-key, I smiled to myself, imagining the comments that Kristin would have chastised me with for this moment, for my signing, had Kristin been co-piloting with me. She would note that my voice most closely resembled any undetermined dying animal, and the perfect c

ompliment to the horrid singing was my pathetic nature for delighting in such “crap” . . .

Knowing these roads better than I’d ever cared to, due to weeks, days of similar trips, my mind wandered freely, without care as the car sped down the winding road. Weaving into other lanes, my greatest weakness, my greatest carelessness was embodied in driving that most closely resembled a tired drunkard. One would think the lesson was learned, and instead of singing loudly with open windows, with my blonde hair flying about like a halo, I was crouched over the wheel like an elderly woman, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the road, my speed, and the other cars.

All I had were these car trips and afternoons in the woods to comfort me, and so the importance in taking care of myself went out the window with off-key notes and strands of badly bleached hair. Ignoring what my manic driving was heading towards, I thought, if ignorance is bliss, then I should sell my picture to the Museum of Modern Art.

The smell is the worst part. It explodes into the enclosed space. A repulsive insistence incapable of avoidance. Every room was tinged with the scent of the elderly, the sick, and the dying.

The stench was both relentless and radically different from the smell of the candle store that had essentially led me here.

Medications laid around, promising hope to the hopeless, all except for me. It is in God’s hand, I told myself with my hand on the door. No matter how often I wished for the ability to do something, I knew I could not.

And with that familiar thought the sadness enveloped my life. It sunk through my heart, through the floor to somewhere in the ER below. It occurred to me that someone could possibly make better use of it in the ER, and my attempt to laugh only forced me to inhale more of the stale air. I thought of my chain-smoking lungs. Scratch the thought of donating able organs of any sort.

The door creaked, barely covering up the beeps of various machines, loud TV’s, bits of conversations and the soft patter of nurses’ feet. Attempting to avoid justifying the image already etched into memory, I glanced about the room for a few moments. I searched for new bouquets and balloons, hoping to find evidence of other visitors. Yet all the items creating the less than encouraging atmosphere were gifts, and the cards were signed in my sloppy writing.

This had become a daily ritual, a comfort, spending my time next to Kristin wishing she knew I was beside her. I don’t think she ever did.

Unable continuing denial of what would not disappear, I finally cast my tired and worn eyes upon her in the unwelcoming, cold and sterile hospital bed. Tubes and machines made her look like a sick human version of the hamster cages with the tunnels and wheels that creak, similarly to the creaking of the respirator. Her eyes were closed, her lashes gently resting upon her pale cheek, but her lips remained still as the breath escaped and re-entered. The way her black hair fell in chunks that framed her classically beautiful face reminded me of waking up beside her and thinking things were finally turning up for me. Tears welled up, and panic hit hard and almost rushed me out the door and down the elevator to my car. Anything to escape from the visits I'd endured for much too long. But I never turned away, and today it could not have been different.

I quietly lifted my feet off the shimmering linoleum floor, as if making too much noise would stir her, although I both wished it could and knew it unlikely.

My tall and sickly-thin-from-worry frame sunk effortlessly into the bedside chair.

All the thoughts that had run through my head during the day left me with unheard of ease as soon as I was once more by her side. Grabbing her small hand with the nicely manicured nails that once dug welcomingly into my back, the warmth of her palm comforted me while the lack of pressure concerned me. Inside I was eternally devastated, and this devastation was the first emotion I ever associated with forever.

Forever. Still I held small, shattered fragments of hope for Kristin's sake, and I'd been grasping onto that since her car had cascaded over the bridge with falling drops of rain five months earlier.

It was in that moment I knew I had forgiven her.

On previous visits I'd wished I could force her awake for an inquisition of sorts, demanding to know whether she had intended this. They say accident, but I knew better than others the hidden darkness that came with hiding us, and how her family had been more persistent in their questioning of our intimate friendship. Looking at her body, encased with soft blankets, I wished I could crawl in beside her, and the cause of everything no longer seemed important in comparison to her place in my heart. In my dreams, now my only release is when her eyes would sleepily open and she would turn towards me, encasing me with her warm, soft arms and kissing my shoulder.

These hopes would remain a dream now and I realize that. If she were to miraculously heal, my own inability to heal those fresh wounds would

worsen her convalescent. But she was alive. I had been only holding on to shards of hope that long because she had been holding on for something. It could have been me, it could have been her family, but I think she was holding on mostly for vanilla coke.

Laughter bubbles up from my smoke-parched throat and erupts into the empty room, daring those not present to question my behavior. How could I convince them of her vibrant lifestyle, from her dependence upon vanilla coke to the way she'd complain about the attention drawn by her busty chest, but still refused to thwart the behavior by wearing something she fit into? Kristin was funny like that, in ways where your mind would constantly be laughing and her eyes would taunt you for it.

My first thoughts of what to say were jokes, not to reveal my presence with a greeting or by admitting my love. Sometimes I did visit wanting to confess my love and dependence, a "wake the fuck up," my own gracious form of a brash alarm clock. I knew her infinitely, so well that it was almost as if we were talking in the silence. The imagined conversations held my true feelings, expressed genuinely, and her reassurance typically spoken with the wisdom considering my own mind's inner workings. Some occasions I would bore you with details of my day, but not that day.

Being content with simplicity was the predominant strength in our relationship, and today was meant for merely holding her hand tightly within my own. While holding her in the safety of my arms and hearing her whisper secrets to me in the dark fulfilled a deep need within me: it was to the point that dreams would only be detrimental.

At times she'd awaken from nightmares and reach over to be sure I had not left during the night. After one such night, I had turned to her and told her that I loved her too much to ever consider leaving, and that I would always try my best to sustain that love and stay by her side.

But I couldn't promise her forever due to my own disbelief in the theory. And while I was willing to be a heartbreaker, I was not willing to be a liar.

During that conversation her eyes welled up with tears, turned her eyes blue, and she cried because she couldn't lose me. She promised she would always be here to hold my hand and send me off in the mornings. It never

Being content with simplicity was the predominant strength in our relationship, and today was meant for merely holding her hand tightly within my own.

occurred to my self-centered mind that the tables would have turned.

I had been sick of attempting to justify my concern, displayed through daily visits and exuberant amounts of gifts. Attempting to mask the stale hospital smell with flowers proved unwieldy, the smell still penetrated every pore of my body. I leaned over and smelled her hair, expecting the floral shampoo, but instead I was greeted by the antibacterial scent of sponge baths. My eye fluttered against hers, and I imagined my life, as it was before, as something beautiful. People tried to make it easier by assuring that the possibility of Kristin's recovery was a "good one." But the wait was killing me nearly as slowly as it was her; and sitting there masking the mess I had become to continue hiding what we were, seemed too fake to continue. Shouting out our love would be perfect, but I knew I couldn't face the world of homophobes without her hand in mine as a display of the reality behind my message.

I had been thinking a lot, and the decision hadn't been easy, but the only thing that ever was easy had been loving Kristin.

Tears were flooding my bloodshot eyes, pouring down my cheeks and hitting the pink blanket and her exposed skin. If she were awake, the tears would have been wiped away, and thinking of this, my mind debated the decision I've already made.

The reality had become too real, yet my heart lingered here. I knew that when this moment arrived I would try and back down, change my mind, and stay here forever.

I wasn't convinced of heaven, any heaven, or of my being admitting to a place if it existed. Her laughter changed all that in a way. After a long day it would hysterically escape her mouth at my dumbest jokes, and any commentary on my part would receive her glare of death. I often entered unwelcome joke territory, and my finishing her sentences meant certain doom.

All of those memories had faded away like old photographs, yellowed and pale versions of their former selves and even worse ones of the reality they depicted. In their place was the inescapable smell of that place, those beeping machines, the absence of warmth, color, and movement in her body. It became obvious that if I continued to visit her in this state, I was risking losing the good times and happy memories, both abundant, and replacing them with the terrible loneliness I felt at her side.

Before the opportunity to capture my dream had presented itself, leaving was never considered. Now that it was a necessity for my own health and well-being, predicting what would occur as a result was terrifying.

Would she finally awake, and be unhappy with me for leaving her side? Or would my new life begin, without her, only to find her again years down

the road with someone else, just as happy and lovely as ever? None of these threatened the decision as much as the thought that if I left, Kristin might finally release herself, and as I began a new life, hers would end.

I hadn't promised her forever, and now I suppose that was a lucky strike.

Realizing I had endured the last of this place my feeble state could bear, I gently raised her hand to my mouth, and kissed it before replacing it gently to her slowly beating heart. It was the last time I would ever hold Kristin's hand in my own, and before I knew it, tears were flooding from my eyes and I was forced to steady my voice before saying what I had rehearsed, although I knew it wouldn't come out.

The moment had arrived, and every instinct in my body was fighting what my mouth was trying to convey. My eyes were glued to her figure, but for the first time not seeing her as she was, but as she used to be. Her heart beat within my own, and I could feel her breath on my neck – although she lay much too far away for that to be possible. Parched lips refused to give way to the good-bye I had to deliver. With one last painful swallow, I addressed Kristin with the hope that she would hear me. It was the last time I would ever hope for anything for the rest of my life.

"I never promised you forever, because I didn't believe in it. Now that I have been forced to envision my life without you, a loathing basic sadness has entered in your place. And that feeling has assured me of the forever I couldn't promise you years ago. I'm sorry I didn't understand enough to give you my heart and my promise. Missing you doesn't even begin to capture what I feel, and I can't continue to live that way.

"Watching you is erasing what we had, and I have to leave with something. If it isn't you, I want it to be a decent representation. One promise I can make now, although not what you requested, is that I love you with all my heart. No one will ever be able to understand me as deeply as you did, and so I know no further explanation is needed. I don't believe in good-bye...but once upon a time I didn't believe in love or forever. And you are the one who changed that.

"So, good-bye, Kristin. I love you."

Walking slightly slumped over, hoping for the last time I'd hear her call out for me, I grabbed the door handle, which likely had an imprint of my palm. You see, I wanted to look back, one last time, with all my heart, and I fought every urge to do so, because I was worried that I'd see your chest cease to rise and fall, and then I'd know for certain that I was the heart-breaker. But at least I was not a liar.

I will always wish I could have been, though. But I never promised you forever. ■

Contributors' Notes

Jen Anderson is a writer and infrequent painter, back in school studying English a decade after graduating from IU-Bloomington with a psychology degree. "The title of this piece came from comments I received from a classmate during a creative nonfiction workshop. I don't think she meant it as a compliment..."

Carrie Rebecca Armellino is a Fine Arts major at Herron School of Art. She is also a Resident Assistant on the IUPUI campus at Ball Residence Hall. Most of her work is either drawing or sculpture, with the occasional efforts in printmaking or photography. She hopes to graduate in May 2006.

Joe Bieschke is currently a freshman and majoring in visual communications at Herron. He currently works as an editorial cartoonist for the Sagamore student newspaper, and enjoys living on-campus at Ball Hall. Eventually, he hopes to display his studio work and design art for films.

Kay Castaneda returned to IUPUI to complete her B.A. in English--a senior at last! Her other roles besides poet, writer & student are: Tony's wife, Richard's mom, Edward's daughter, Connor's nanny and secretary of the family painting company.

Jane Parrish Cooper has developed a process for abstract creation, which might be described oxymoronically as "devised automatism." The artist begins with a simple geometrically designed layout and works into the canvas as ideas are brought forth from the subconscious while listening to compelling music (from classical to techno). The artist enjoys risk-taking and considers each work to be an adventure. She is a senior at Herron School of Art and Design.

Gaylie R. Cotton is a junior pursuing a degree in English. In her spare time, she likes to relax and let poetry write her.

Josh Flynn is an English major and a photographer.

Andrea Fogt is a painting major with a minor in creative writing.

Daniel J. Hook is a fifty-year old student who works because he has to, goes to school because he wants to, and can't decide on a major because there are too many choices.

Dottie Hutcherson is a first year graduate student in the IUPUI English MA program. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and writing from Indiana Wesleyan University in 2004.

Zita Karklis is in her second year at IUPUI as a part time student. She is from Latvia, majoring in English with a specialization in literature. "I love the smells and warmth of Indiana autumn."

Daniel Kinkade is a sophomore. His major is French and European History. He is from Leitchfield, KY. Daniel's greatest inspirations are French culture, Maya Angelou, Madonna, and Christ.

Megan Kinyon is a 19-year-old full-time student at IUPUI, majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in Sociology. She works at a salon most of the time she's not in school and also does filing work for a financial advising office on the north side of Indy. She's dying to get a job in her field someday soon and will eventually, if it kills her, be a published author, poet, and possibly professor one day.

Eric LaGrange is a Junior painting student at the Herron School of Art.

Andrew James Leonberger is an individual interested in the indulgence of art. Intriguing others and inspiring imagination and emotion is his goal with his creations. Andrew's works usually have an offbeat spin to them or are of a comical satire genre. Twisting ideas and words is what makes his work worthwhile. Getting his hands into something new that he doesn't really understand is exciting and is what makes him want to produce more art. The more methods and materials he knows the more he can show his ideas. It would be hard for someone to find a time throughout the day that he's not doing something of the sorts.

Alex Mattingly: Save your swoons, he's spoken for.

Suzanne Merrell currently works for IUPUI and is enrolled in Herron School of Art. Awards include the Donald M. Mattison and Adah Broad-bent awards from Painting faculty and an international travel scholarship from Herron. Her goal is to complete a BFA in Painting. The date of completion is contingent upon ability to juggle studies, work and life. She believes that perspective is one of the most intriguing concepts in art; a dual meaning conundrum. The visual and physical realities of perspective alone present technical challenges. The technical invites observers to see through an artist's eyes. The ultimate challenge is in translating the concept of perspective as a personal point of view. Perspective that captures spiritual and emotional qualities invites observers to interact with the painting in a personal way.

Bonnie Meyer is a third-year English major at IUPUI.

Beth Mink is a foundry electrician with a husband, two sons, and three dogs. arf. arf.

Karen D. Mitchell shares the most important things she learned over summer vacation: (1) woodpeckers have kickstands (2) hares really do go mad in March and (3) the definition of paranoia: "the suspicion the Universe is a conspiracy on your behalf" (John Perry Barlow). She is an English major and hopes to graduate before she reaches retirement age.

Justin Patten is an art education major that intends to erase the claim that "those who can't do teach."

Keara Rhoades grew up in Newcastle, Wyoming. Keara moved to Indianapolis in June, 2000 after graduation from Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska with a BA in English, journalism and graphic design. Indianapolis offered her a career opportunity as a graphic designer. After two years, the absence of creativity and the results of cubicle confinement demanded that she continue her education: this time in fine art. She is presently a senior in the photography program at Herron. Keara will graduate in May 2005 and plans to spend time abroad thereafter, either by studying or teaching English.

Jade Christine Roberts is an English major and has been writing poetry for three or four years. She's found it to be the ultimate outlet for excess emotion and energy. She's inspired by everything around her, from family, friends and work, to late night infomercials and campus evangelists.

Jessica Sauter is a sophomore transfer student from Purdue University majoring in psychology.

Clint Smith is an Honors Graduate from The Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, Le Cordon Bleu, and is currently the chef instructor in the culinary arts and commercial baking departments at Central Nine Career Center. He is also the events director for Big Car Media – an organization that highlights the talents of writers, musicians, and visual artists in central Indiana and the Midwest. He is an IUPUI student seeking his bachelor's degree.

Michael Springer was born prince of India, in a house his father built. Michael has led a long and productive life. He renounced the Indian throne and joined a Shaolin monastery in China, introducing the monks to Zen Buddhism around the year 450. He was a renowned violinist, sometimes said to have made a deal with the devil to achieve his level of prowess, and made over 10,000 contributions to the Oxford English dictionary while in a hospital for the criminally insane. A man of wealth and taste, he is currently working on a BA in Philosophy and English.

Jackie Stout is an expressionist painter and photographer who is gradually working toward her B.A. in English. She served as an editor of *genesis* in the Rufus Reiberg era. She is a contributing author to *Home Educating Our Autistic Spectrum Children*. Jackie paints and writes in her studio at the Stutz Business Center in Indianapolis. She shows a few times a year, and was most recently involved with *Women and the Arts* in the public painting project "The Wall of Expression."

Erin Swanson is from Indianapolis and went to North Central High School. She graduated from Ball State with a BFA in painting in 1999. Erin is at Herron working on her BAE (Art Ed) degree. She is a painter inspired by shapes, color, and form. She uses her art to make philosophical and social statements.

Teri Tucker will graduate in December 2004 with a bachelor's degree in English. She is 26 and hasn't always accepted her nontraditional status as a student. Now that her college career is coming to an end, she is ecstatic. After a couple careers and numerous part-time jobs, Teri has finally decided on the career choice of editing, but she isn't sure whether editing will be the love of her life. She would like to use editing as a stepping-stone for further enrichment of society, whatever that means.

Invitation to Publication

Spring 2005 Issue

Accepting Submissions: January 10th

Deadline: Wednesday, February 16th by 5:00pm

\$100 Prizes for Best in Issue for Poetry, Prose, and Art

E-Mail Submissions:

Starting Spring 2005, *genesis* will expect e-mail submissions of all genres (poetry, prose, and art) to genesis1@iupui.edu. If possible, name attachments by the titles of the submissions. Be sure to include titles, specifications, contact information, and a short biographical note (no more than fifty words) in the body of the e-mail.

Writers' Guidelines:

Poetry and prose submissions must be sent via e-mail as Microsoft Word attachments. All genres should be typewritten, single-spaced, containing no more than 3,500 words. Shorter submissions are preferred. Please do not place your name on the manuscripts.

Artists' Guidelines:

Art submissions should be sent via e-mail as high-quality .jpg documents. Clearly label your artwork with title, medium, and size. Original copies and slides will be considered, but high-quality e-mail attachments are preferred. If you send original artwork or slides, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope so your artwork or slides may be returned. Please note that all art, except those which go on the front and back covers, will be reproduced in black and white.

E-mail any questions to genesis1@iupui.edu

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