veritas & vanitas

a journal of creative nonfiction

the ohio state university at marion

2003
veritas & vanitas
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A Few Words... on the 2003 issue

My charge was simple: Teach a course in the writing of creative nonfiction and then help the students in the class publish a journal that would feature the best of their work. Oh, and please do it in ten weeks. Ah-okay. No problem, man.

On our first day of English 568 (Creative Nonfiction Writing II), Kristin, who always keeps me honest with her pointed questions, asked about the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Great question. Here’s what I wrote on the board:

_Fiction tries to make it up, more or less._

_Nonfiction doesn’t try to make it up, more or less._

That, in a nutshell, a crude nutshell to be sure, is the clearest and most concise distinction between these two genres of writing I know. The tricky part, of course, the gray area, lies in the “more or less” part,” but I didn’t want to get too confusing just yet by talking about those mongrels of genre such as autobiographical fiction, fictional memoir, and the like. It was, after all, the first day of class; there was plenty of time for confusion afterward. And, I reasoned, the “more or less” part would be best understood through practice, through the writing itself rather than through a huff of professorial statement (Indeed, I was right).
And then there was that pesky “Creative” part of the course title, *Creative Nonfiction*. I still had to deal with what that meant. For, doesn’t all good writing, from our term papers in any class from American Literature to Zoology, to our best e-mails, to the poems and the stories that some (most?) of us at some points of our lives feel compelled to write, doesn’t all of that good writing contain the fires of creativity within it? Yes, to be sure, but this is creative nonfiction writing. “How is that sort of creative writing different?” Kristin asked. Trying to stall a bit, to buy time so that I could kick my mind into overdrive, I replied, “Good question” (thinking that it certainly looked like this first class might be a long one).

Well, here’s the answer I hazarded, helped some by Bill Roorbach, the author of the excellent text we were playing with in the course, *Writing Life Stories (How to make memories into memoirs, ideas into essays, and life into literature)*. Creative nonfiction (Sometimes called *literary nonfiction*), simply put, is writing that dares to be great. It is writing in the essay form (essay, from the French, “essayer,” to try). That is to say, creative nonfiction is writing that, more or less, doesn’t try to make it up and also tries to have an effect on a reader and listener that literature has: To move, to amaze, and to propel one into an experience and a character in the ways that literature does. It is, in short, writing that is meant to last, to exist in splendor beyond the moments of its making, to be savored over again, to live and breathe for a long time to come.

You know, *to last*.

What follows in this good journal, *Veritas & Vanitas*, is much wonderful writing, writing that lasts, fine and proud contributions to that genre, creative nonfiction. Justin Bell’s words, for example, will rustle through the underbrush of your heart as you read about the life and death of a young woman he loved (and loves still, it appears); Rosalie Benet ably captures the sights and smells and feel of her grandparents’ farm from the point of view of a little girl, a long gone world that she inhabited sixty years ago; Rachel Bond’s powerful rage at being compelled to believe in something of which she wants little part will anger you as well as make you laugh; Aaron Cook so astutely conveys the gritty, earthy feel of young men trying to prove themselves on a gridiron battlefield that you’re liable to feel sore after you read it; Kristin Crump movingly shows us what drives a young woman to join the navy, and then she takes us the into the world of a frightened young recruit in her first days at boot camp; Mandy Lewis paints a bittersweet portrait of her grandfather and then makes us ache for her as she shows us his last days; Lee Ann Pfleider’s piece of
cultural criticism of the world of crazy NASCAR fans is a hoot and a holler and a belly laugh rolled up into one big guffaw; and Shawn Young’s tour de force challenges us in the reading but succeeds wildly to show us someone in an extreme state of mind and heart who comes back from the precipice to tell us what it was like. Writing these words, a few days after the final class of our ten week quarter has passed, I can honestly say, not so much as their humbled professor, but more as a colleague, a fellow writer to those that follow in these pages, that Justin, Rosalie, Rachel, Aaron, Kristin, Mandy, LeeAnn, and Shawn have succeeded in fulfilling their burgeoning promise more than I could have imagined that first day of class way back in frigid January, as I looked out over their expectant, questioning faces. What follows are their words, their voices. May you, gentle reader, enjoy and savor them all, every last one.

We would be remiss if we didn’t thank some other good folk for their help. Justin Bell deserves much of the credit for the cover and the layout of the magazine. Kelle Gabriel, busy as she is as the Life Style editor of the Marion Star, took time out from her busy schedule to help with layout and design matters, as well. Justin and Kelle are both generous and good spirited souls, and we thank them. Dean Dominic Dottavio and Associate Dean Greg Rose have always shown generous and good-natured support for our two creative writing magazines on campus, Veritas & Vanitas, and its gentle cousin of poetry, fiction, and visual art, Cornfield Review. We are very grateful. Cathy Purdy at BookMasters was helpful, friendly, and patient with my beginner’s questions (“So, perfect binding is the one without the staples, right?”). Thank you. Of course, my fellow colleagues Marcia Dickson, Anne Bower, Jacki Spangler, Lynda Behan, and Scott DeWitt have all lent their hands, their humor, their good editorial eyes, and their unbridled enthusiasm over the years to Veritas & Vanitas. They are wonderful (and a joy to work with). And last but not least, Justin Bell, Rosalie Benet, Rachel Bond, Aaron Cook, Kristin Crump, Mandy Lewis, Lee Ann Pfleider, and Shawn Young deserve our thanks for their good words, their respect and sense of commitment toward one another’s writing, their good hearts, and their hard work. Thank you all.

Stuart Lishan
March 15-16, 2003
"I can’t believe you bought this."

The surprise on her face was tempered with confusion. She was slightly annoyed. Annoyed not by the gift. Annoyed because she did not know how to respond to the gift. How is a fifteen year old girl supposed to know the proper thing to say when what she is convinced will not happen, happens?

"You said that you wanted it."

I was seventeen. She was my first girlfriend. To say the least, she fascinated me.

"I know, but I didn’t think you’d buy it. I thought maybe Mom and Dad."

"Well, it was the only one that the store had so I guess I beat them to it."

"They wouldn’t have bought it anyway. It’s seventy-five... I can’t believe you bought this."

"The lady at the store wanted me to tell you ‘Merry Christmas’."

"She remembered us, did she?"

We were not the only high school couple who admired the bracelet in the weeks leading to Christmas 1991. Or so the saleswoman told me, and subsequently sold me. I emptied my withered bank account upon hearing that there were others in the market. All I could think of was my girlfriend’s love of dolphins and silver jewelry. Finding this
chain of glittering silver dolphins was serendipitous.

"I don’t know if Mom and Dad will let me keep it."

"Why not?"

"Because it’s seventy-five dollars! They’re going to think that you’re selling drugs or something."

Apparently, seventy-five dollars was a fortune to her.

I laughed. She giggled.

"No, they won’t," I assured her.

I convinced her to allow me to put it on her wrist. I fumbled with the delicate clasp. With her help, I solved its puzzle. It slid an inch or two down her thin wrist and settled into what would become a familiar place.

She wore the bracelet everyday for the rest of her life.

"Wow. I so totally cannot believe you bought this."

August 19, 1998

"Aren’t you Justin Bell?"

The question was asked by a young man seated at the conference table behind me. He had waited for me to return from a fifteen-minute break in our orientation class. Then he approached, believing that he recognized me. To my dismay, he did.

This person was entirely unfamiliar. His stocky body, full face, dark framed rectangular eyeglasses, scattered whiskers on his chin – nothing brought memories of him to mind.

"You don’t know me, I’ll bet. I’m Aaron. I was a couple classes behind you in school."

"Oh."

My intention that Monday morning was not as much to prepare for a new career as it was to escape a persistent shadow. The photograph of a girl I once knew found its way to my pillow during the previous night. She looked at me with a hazel gaze. I owned no remnant of her touch, no residue of her scent. My body ached for a particle of her to taste.

I smiled and shed tears in consecutive seconds. Clenched my jaw to stifle my trembling chin. Inhaled through a snarling wall of rigid teeth. Felt the ice melt, then crystallize again in my glacial blue eyes. Believed that she was there, then knew that she was gone.

My hand moved with its own designs and returned the photograph to its place atop the nightstand. My eyes lingered upon her warm teardrop face, posed by a deft hand to tilt slightly to the left to recreate the way she would approach me before we embraced. Her glistening lips parted and proud of the milky white teeth they caressed. Her delicate wrists supported
her chin. The right wrist decorated by the silver bracelet she wore every
day after that first Christmas we shared just five years before.....

Such was the gauntlet of memories through which I passed,
scarred and beaten, every morning during that year and a month of dying
and loss. A rebirth was in order. I wanted to start something new,
something unspoiled by the past.

Aaron had the hint of decayed days about him.

"I think a few of us are going to Subway for lunch. You’re
welcome to come."

"Sure."

I replied before thinking. I leaned back into my chair, feeling
like a saturated sponge. The shadow I meant to avoid was tugging at my
heels once again.

October 1, 1992

"Is Justin there?"

I recognized the voice, though the audible sadness dramatically
afflicted its usual bubbly quality. Lindsay was my girlfriend’s best friend.
She was in possession of an inexhaustible reserve of teenaged feminine
energy, and her unfailing type-A personality fueled her daily crusade to
make the people around her happy. Lindsay was the impetus, the
matchmaker who brought my girlfriend and me together. Before Lindsay
went into action, I was the merely the focus of an undisclosed crush in the
heart of a girl I did not even know existed.

The voice that came from the phone was uncharacteristic of her
propensity for exuberance. What Lindsay shared with me at that moment
was a shaft of darkness shot point blank into the heart of our unprepared
teenaged lives.

"Justin, Chris just called me."

"Yeah?"

"Her mom died this afternoon. About an hour
ago."

Lindsay was fighting tears.

I don’t know what I was fighting at that moment, but I most
certainly wanted to destroy something. I wanted to strike something as
hard as I imagined Chris had just been struck. This girl who fascinated
me to no end, I’d watched her crumble under the unyielding, building
sorrow and worry she felt for her mortally ill mother. This thing that
killed her mother so slowly, so ruthlessly, did not have a face. In my
maudlin, distrusting seventeen-year old heart, I saw such faceless,
rampaging hurt as cowardly and unstoppable.

My rage and weakness compounded upon one another. I envied
the power of the illness that took Chris’s mother. I wanted to obliterate
something intangible. I wanted to crush something unobtainable, something unrecognizable. A new understanding of mortality was taking shape in my mind. Life was taking the shape of injury and impotent anger. I felt that Chris and I, and every other soul, had been cheated.

And worse, I knew that as angry and as hurt as I was, what I felt was nothing compared to the sixteen-year old girl with whom I was so fascinated.

In that moment I understood what that fascination was. In that moment I understood what it meant to ache beyond all common sense and personal gain for the safety and happiness of someone other than myself.

It was at that moment that I understood what it is, what it takes, to be in love.

July 7, 1994

There was an alleyway behind her house that I would sometimes haunt on summer nights. She was seventeen and subject to the curfews and rules of her father. I was nineteen, home for the summer from college, and hindered by a job that required me to punch a timecard five days a week at seven in the morning.

Despite this early morning responsibility, I often lingered in that alley past midnight, just staring up at the light in her second story bedroom window. The place where I stood on the black, steaming pavement provided only a view of her bedroom ceiling and the corner of a painting I’d done for her that hung above her bed.

But every so often (and there is no way that I can relate to you the earthquakes my heart experienced at moments such as this!) the tiniest portion of her bent knee became visible above the window sill. To catch a glimpse of her tanned skin, and maybe the corner of a book opened upon her lap, was too much to bear. I wanted to scale the wall of her father’s house and slide into her room, turn on the light and fall into her bed, into her arms, into her. Feel her body next to mine. Whisper into her ear. Kiss her neck and hear that songbird laugh which never failed to break my heart as it thrust atmosphere between my soul and the pitiable world. Listen to our lean limbs rustle the sheets as we slide along each other’s contours. I wanted to love her, and to let her know that I loved her.

I never climbed that wall.

The closest I came to climbing the wall of her house was this: On a particular night in July, she turned off her light, but I was not ready to let her go to sleep.
My foot found a loose pebble of asphalt in the darkness. I picked it off the ground and turned it over a few times in my fingers. I lobbed the little stone in a graceful arc through the darkness. It glanced with a CLICK! against the black pane of glass. I did this twice.

Light filled the window and Chris’s silhouette was photographed in its frame. She opened the window silently, unsure.

I stepped into an obtuse angle of silver street light. The world at night was colorless and dim. Except for the golden glow behind her.


“Don’t go to sleep yet.”

“Okay.”

It is one of the many mountains on a continent of regrets that I inhabit, that I remember almost nothing of what we talked about in that stolen moment. In a besieged crystalline corner of my cracked heart, I hold onto hope that there is a heaven. Every other part of my being denies this, but a sliver of that night survives in my memory, and that bolsters my hope that in some ethereal melange of grace an angel will recall for me the entirety of that night. Until that moment, I’ll have only this.

“You know that you’re crazy, right?”

“So you say.”

“Yes, I do.” She giggled.

“You know that I’m in love with you, right?”

“So you say.”

“Yes, I do.” I did not laugh.

“I love you, too.”

My heart. My heart.

“So, can I go to bed now?” That songbird laugh.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

She closed her window. Her silhouette shrank. The light went out.

I stepped back into the darkness of the alley, turning my back to this scene that now I wish I’d never left. I walked through shadows that at that moment seemed not so dark.

Pausing for a moment, I noticed, maybe for the first time, that one of the shadows slanting through the alleyway was cast by the funeral home where Chris’s mother was taken just a year and a half before. A liar, or a more intuitive person, would say that he felt an ominous chill coil around his spine.

I did not.
February 17, 1997

"Can't we just go?"

Her voice was so small and heart-breaking, strangled by an unspoken terror of public places. We sat in the center of a shopping mall food court, at a wobbling fiberglass table scattered with crumbs and paper napkins.

She pulled the hood of her dark blue sweatshirt over her shaved head. Her eyes melted into the blue shadows beneath the hood. Her shoulders hunched, she tried to hide from the eyes that she felt were always on her.

It was ten o'clock in the evening. The mall was closed. She and I were alone in a deserted space.

She still felt the eyes.

"Chris? What's wrong with you?"

The hood began to close over her entire face. Her ghostly, soft hands wrapped around the ends of the drawstring. She pulled the cord tight and slow until the opening that framed her frightened face constricted into a strained black hole.

"Chris? I don't know if I can do this anymore."

She shrunk further into herself.

"I want you to live with me. But I can't do it if I'm going to be terrified every time I come home that you'll be dead in the bathroom."

No sound came from the closed hood. I could not even sense her breathing.

"Chris? Please. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do."

She disappeared.

August 19, 1998

"So you used to go out with Chris...Chris...I can't remember her last name." Aaron snapped his fingers and he spoke with his mouth full. "Chris something, right?"

I put my sandwich down upon the plastic tray in front of me. I finished chewing and I swallowed, brushed a paper napkin across my lips and replaced it in my lap.

"Yeah," I said.

I bit the inside of my lower lip. I had an unsettling idea of where this was leading.

"I heard she killed herself."

I said nothing. Aaron was not dissuaded by my silence.

"I mean, I heard a lot of different rumors," he said. "You guys broke-up after you graduated, right?"
“Is that a rumor that you heard?”
“Nah,” he continued, speaking through another mouthful. “I just assumed that you guys broke-up.”
“You assumed wrong, then.”
“So you guys were together when...?”
“Yeah.”
“I didn’t know that.”

There was a moment where the conversation between Aaron and I ceased. Men and women in business dress crowded in around our table as they pressed into the air-conditioned hopelessly under-sized restaurant for the lunch-hour. I recognized some of those waiting to be served as people from orientation. I remember thinking that there was no way these people would have time to get their food, eat it, and get back in time for the afternoon session. Part of me wanted to make sure I told the director of the class that some of us would be late due to the ridiculous crush of people in the little restaurant. But I found myself being pulled back into that familiar darkness that I was trying so desperately to escape, and the lunchtime pitfalls of strangers lost any significance to me.

“So what happened anyway?” Anyway. He said anyway like he was sick and tired of my withholding the intricate little details of my girlfriend’s death. A girl that he hadn’t seen in more than three years and wouldn’t have crossed the street to say hello to. “I mean, I heard that she was in South Carolina when she did it. What was that about?”

“North Carolina.”
“I heard she’d been doing a lot of drugs. Pot and shit like that.”
“No. She wasn’t.”
“That’s what I heard.”
He paused to slurp his orange soda and politely stifled a burp.
“So how’d she do it?” he continued.
“I don’t know.”
“What do you mean?”
“I never asked.”
“So you never asked? That’s kinda abnormal, isn’t it? I’d want to know how if it was my girlfriend.”

“She died. I guess I didn’t know there was a normal way to handle it.”

“I heard she used a shotgun.”
“You motherfucker.”

He stopped in the middle of a bite. I shoved my plastic tray and its contents across the table and into his lap.

“Motherfucker,” I said again, this time leaning across the table into his space. My fingers on both hands coalesced into fists. I turned
and shoved my way towards the door as our corner of the tightly packed faux-deli achieved a stunned silence. Two men shoved me back as I moved through the crowd. I looked them each squarely in the face. They shrank back and let me pass.

I was getting out.


That word gave an added dimension of horror to the manner of her death. A new shadow took shape in my mind. A threat to the permanence of her beauty. How could I look at that photograph at my bedside again? Fuck him. Fuck him for all of this.

His word faded as I stepped into the smothering heat. My eyes closed tight, for the sun was deadly bright and all of the shadows in the city were burned short beneath the foundations. I’d left my dark glasses on the table. I shielded my eyes with my hands. His word was gone but its impact was flushly felt upon my heart and soul. Another thing came to mind. Something I had heard this day. This day when I thought I could start it all over. This day when I thought I could leave it behind. Another question came to mind. I asked it of myself.

* Aren’t you Justin Bell?

*July 3, 1997* 

“Hello?”

“Hey, Justin.”

“Hey! I was just about to call you. What are you doing tonight?”

“I’m getting ready to go.”

“Where?”

“North Carolina.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m going to see my brother.”

“Chris, is that a good idea?”

“I think so.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m good.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“It’s okay.”

“Who’s going with you?”

“I’m going by myself.”

“I don’t think you should.”

“It’s okay.”
“What if I went with you?”
“You can’t.”
“I’ll get someone to cover my shifts at the club.”
“No. I’ll be fine.”
“Chris…”
“I’ll be fine.”
“This is not a good idea.”
“Why do you keep saying that?”
“Because it’s not.”
“Why?”
“Because…I don’t know if you’re…I mean…are you…?”
“Justin, I’m fine.”
“Does your dad know about this?”
“Yes.”
“When are you coming back?”
“I don’t know if I will.”
“What?”
“I haven’t thought about it.”
“So what then? You’re moving to North Carolina? Just like that?”
“No. I just don’t think I’m coming back.”
“I don’t understand.”
“I’m fine.”
“I know, I know. But…this is…”
“This is what?”
“This is not a good idea.”
“Justin, don’t say that again.”
“Okay, I’m sorry.”
“Don’t apologize.”
“What if something…happens?”
“I’ll be fine.”
“What if I never see you again?”
“We’ve kinda grown apart anyway.”
“We talk almost every day.”
“But we haven’t seen each other in five months. Not since February.”
“You won’t let me come see you! And…and when I do…”
“I don’t want you to see me.”
“Why not? You’ve never told me why.”
“I just…I just don’t want you to.”
“But you said that you’re okay. Why wouldn’t you want me to see you if everything’s okay?”
“Justin. I love you. Trust me.”
“I love you, too. But, how can I trust you when you might be still...”
“Still what?”
“Still...you know.”
“So then you don’t trust me.”
“I do. I always have. You know that.”
“Then let me do this.”
“But...”
“But what?”
“But...I love you.”
“So you say.”
“Yeah, I do.”
“I love you, too”
“So you say.”
“Yes, I do.”
“Don’t hang up yet.”
“I gotta get ready.”
“I know.”
“Goodbye, Justin.”
“Chris...”
“Goodbye.”
“Chris...?”

I held the phone in silence. Fireworks began in the distance. I didn’t ask her if she wanted to watch them with me.
“Chris...?”
And I didn’t say goodbye.
So I’ll say it now.
It won’t make sense. The voice isn’t mine.
But who else could it be?
*Aren’t you Justin Bell?*

*December 34th*

No. No you can’t come inside yet. Give me some time. Let me fold these towels, these sheets, these clothes that are scattered. No. Trust me, I’m fine. Give me a moment, a moment. Okay. Now come in.
I’m standing right here.
I’m right in front of you.
No. Right here.
Just...will you...just STOP!
Stand still for a damned minute.
I don’t have the luxury to be young and at your side in this world.
Not in this world. Bad luck I suppose. Gone. Goodbye. Going to have to live with it, I guess. I’ll believe what I want to about you. And what are you going to do about it? And what the fuck were you thinking?

My god, the filth that comes out of people’s mouths when they are trying to remember for someone else. When they can remember the eyes they want to see but they can’t remember the look in those eyes.

It’s over. It’s lost.
A year and a month of dying and loss.
It’s late. It’s done.
A year and a month of nightmares and sun.
The ash tree leaves on the ground. These are gifts that are given, she tells me. These are favors that are granted. Dead leaves are ghosts, I tell her. Corpses that are blown around in the wind. Soulless, but they have motion and they congregate. ’Tis their fate. Like the people on the bus, you say. They are all in pain. And they want you to die, too. You laugh that songbird laugh.

I laugh, too. Then I say that you’re wrong. They are all just so tired. They should stop riding the bus. Take the trolley car instead. Breathe the air.

The coffee in the styrofoam cup gives up ripples in the rain. I’m getting wet and I have nothing for my head. I’m tired of talking to her on the phone. There comes a time when the words mean nothing until you speak them face to face. I am chilled by the April midnight air and there is little light here on this shimmering, rain-soaked avenue. I see her light go out in her dorm room. She’s so ashamed of what she’s done to herself. Her arms, those beautiful arms, with their scars. There are more scars every time I see her. Please don’t be ashamed to let me hold those wrists in my own frightened fingers. Let me trace the scars, the dead tissue, with my fingertips. Let me trickle my touch along these wounds until the damaged nerves forfeit their numbness and you can feel me again. Don’t be ashamed.

The payphone goes dead and I realize that I have not been speaking at all. She must have assumed that I was gone.

The coffee has a rusty taste after the rain has fallen into it. Acidic, like the bite of an old razor. I go into a bar with a three piece jazz band playing slow songs in a corner. The people in this bar used to know her. This was a place she used to go when she used to go places. I order no beer to drink. I start to make deals with God for God to relay to her. Let’s compromise. You stay alive and I’ll not make you ashamed by looking at you. It’s too hard for you, I know. But please, just agree with me. I’ve fallen so far down from the places I’ve been. That’s nothing compared to the way you are going, the places that wait for you. Promise me that you
will go on walks when you are thirty. Promise me you’ll go places and meet people. Promise me you’ll move to a city with a streetcar, and you’ll ride it whenever you can, whenever you start to feel ashamed by your scars. I don’t ask you to heal. That’s too much to ask of anyone. Just live. Right here or far away. I can’t do it for you. I can’t make you see your young face in the mirror and the innumerable number of things you have not lost.
An Angel Unaware:  
Memories of My Grandparents' Farm

Rosalie Benet

It took 20 minutes to get to the dusty road where their farm lay, the first two-story white clapboard with a touch of gingerbread on the right, and the washhouse a garage-like clapboard structure, the barn that beckoned me to play in its hay.

When we turned into the driveway, Cheetah, a Black English Shepherd dog, came bouncing out to greet us wagging her bushy tail and panting a happy grin. Cheetah was Grandpa’s helper and my constant companion whenever I was outside—she wasn’t allowed in the house. They got Cheetah especially for helping out at the farm and Cheetah brought in the cows. I was amazed at how she sped down the rutted lane to where the cows were and marched them back down the lane and into the barn a few minutes later. As we walked toward the barn, I looked up at him and asked,

“How did she know to do that, Grandpa?

“Well, she does it naturally, that’s how she’s made,” he said, catching my hand in his.

Grandpa was a stout big-boned man with white hair, and a sense of humor. I remember Grandpa was a big eater; he liked pork chops with the fat untrimmed and bacon. That was the secret to his voluminous figure—that and the chocolate-covered caramels with nuts that he ate after dinner and after dessert. It was funny—he really liked fat; I thought it was disgusting, but I shared his love for candy.

Grandma, a tall take-charge kind of women who always seemed
to have a serious look on her face, a worried look, a concerned look, a kind sadness of what life had dealt her: A daughter who married a no-good son of a gun, and who had multiple sclerosis, and a grandchild that was retarded. Grandma had been a schoolteacher and now she was a farmer’s wife. In spite of all that, she was a meticulous housekeeper and seamstress as well as a very good cook and gardener.

Grandma said, “Well, come along now, Rosalie, let’s get a chicken for dinner.”

Out in the sunlight, Grandma went to the washhouse where the hatchet was stored and laid it on the back stoop. I followed as she strode toward the chicken coop, a simple planked-tongue-in-groove-flat-roofed structure for the chickens surrounded by a gravelly dirt yard and a wire fence. Hay-covered, deep shelves lined each wall where the hens laid their eggs. She selected one of the white Leghorn hens. Cornering it, Grandma caught the flapping bird in her apron while the skirt of her cotton housedress whipped around her barely bowed legs, wisps of short permed hair flying and carried it upside down by its legs to a grassy area in the backyard Cheetah’s entranced look—the cocked head and wrinkled eyebrows, the perked up ears, the panting that looked like an evil grin—let us know she could catch that bird anytime, just give the order, as if grandma’s bird-catching method were somehow inept. Resting the bird’s head and neck on the ground, the raised hatchet came down severing its head from its body; Grandma stepped back and waited as it flopped and fluttered around uncontrollably on the lawn, soiling the grass with its blood until it stopped its frenzied convulsions. On the back porch, she dipped the whole chicken into a big pan of scalding water to loosen the feathers; the musty smell of wet feathers infected the air. She removed the now malleable plumes by the handfuls until it was completely defrocked. Plunging her hand deep inside bird, she grabbed the soft intestines, pulling them out in one swift motion then peering into the cavity for stragglers. She gave some to Cheetah then threw the rest into the slop bucket for the pigs. “Shoo! Cheetah, shoo! Exclaimed Grandma. Cheetah obeyed and turned away sauntering toward the barn. Grandma pumped cold well water over the chicken to rinse it, the cast-iron handle squeaking as she pumped.

“Now then, she said with a satisfied look, wiping her hands on her apron and pushing back stray hairs from her forehead, “let’s go inside and cook it.”

Longer than it was wide, Grandma’s kitchen was immaculate with a sparkling linoleum floor. The electric stove had a well that contained a handled bucket for keeping soups and stews warm and occupied a space, along with the refrigerator, on one side; the sink, window, and cupboards
lined the wall on the other side. At one end, sat the breakfast nook with a rectangular oak table and four oak chairs, and a window covered with homemade yellow dotted Swiss curtains and Venetian blinds, overlooking an arbor graced by red rambling roses.

Inside, Grandma removed the heart, the liver, the gizzard and the neck. She split it down the middle with a sharp knife that would cut through bone deftly separating the legs, breast, feet, wings, and tail into separate pieces. Now, she floured and seasoned each part and put them in the electric roaster. The fresh apple pie she made earlier that morning with apples from the orchard sat on the counter, cooling. Smells mingled and drifted around the kitchen seducing the unsuspecting. The yeast rolls rose under a damp cotton towel. Turning on her heels from stove to sink to cupboard and back again, she quickly prepared the noon dinner. While the chicken and potatoes were cooking, she took out a clean and pressed white tablecloth and spread it out on the table along with silverware and matching napkins for three people. She set the already peeled potatoes on the stove to cook. When they were done, she whipped the cooked potatoes with her with a Sunbeam Mixmaster into fluffy white mounds, adding warm milk, butter and salt; and for looks a glob of butter on top, which proceeded to melt down over the top in rivulets the sight of which made your mouth water. Grandma brushed the rolls with butter then put them in the oven to brown; by this time, the chicken was done. "There, now, lets put the food on the table, and we’ll be all set for when Grandpa comes in from the field; he should be here right now, "You go sit at the table."

The town grain elevator’s whistle blew, heralding noon, Grandpa showed up with an appetite after working since dawn under the unrelenting sun. He washed up then sat down at the table offering each dish to me, "Take something of everything," he said, before dishing himself big mounds of mashed potatoes followed by gravy, rolls, vegetables and of course, chicken.

"Now eat, honey, you want some jelly on that roll?"
"How’s it going out there? Grandma asked.
"Field’s dry, a lot of dust. Hope we get some rain soon. Let’s turn on the radio and get the farm report."

He groaned as he reached over, the table denting his considerable girth, to turn on the radio, a Philco domed-shaped mahogany radio that was always there on the table, set to WMRN. After listening intently, Grandpa announced that the forecast was for rain tomorrow. "Good," he said, "But, that means I have to plow until dark. Get as much plowing done today as possible."

Grandma said, "Finish your plate, Rosalie, and then we’ll have some apple pie."
She cleared the table and brought the pie, cut it into eight pieces and served it on dessert plates (Grandpa had two pieces) with coffee, cream, and sugar. There was lemonade for me.

Back then, in 1943, Grandma had an old Singer sewing machine with magical drawers holding all kinds of colorful threads. As the rain hit against the windows, I opened the intricately carved drawers of the treadle machine to an array of colored spools of thread, picking up each one and marveling at it. The needles came in different sizes and, oh, the buttons! Round ones, odd shaped ones with two or four holes, big, small. Why, there was a button just like on a dress she had sewn for me! In another drawer, I came across a thimble, straight pins and needles stuck in a pincushion, and a yellow and black cloth measuring tape! And in another, scissors, remnants of cloth like in Grandma’s quilts.

I remember Grandma and Grandpa got up at dawn to the cock’s aria. If I got up early enough, I could watch Cheetah go get the cows and Grandpa milk the cows; or gather eggs and spread chicken feed with Grandma. Grandpa reminded me to stay away from the rear of the cows or they might kick me, and he said they could kick sideways as well as backwards. At first, he milked by hand until milking machines came out. I watched as Grandpa sheared the sheep while Grandma held them down. Grandma made warm comforters filled with the wool. It was fun to go with Grandpa to slop the pigs. The slop looked runny and yucky but the pigs loved it. Sometimes there were cute baby pigs, nursing at a sow’s teats. But, the adult hogs’ mud-rolling days were numbered and the time neared when they would be taken to the slaughterhouse to be butchered. Eventually, they found their way into our freezers wrapped neatly in waxed butcher paper labeled “pork chops”, “ham,” “sausage” or “bacon.” Once, I climbed up a ladder
to the top of the corn silo, looked down into the heaped mass of hard kernels of corn imagining what fun it would to jump in there and wallow. Grandpa took me aside and warned me that if I ever fell into it, I would suffocate and die. The corn would swallow me up squeezing the air from my body. That made me realize the farm could be a dangerous place!

I remember the washhouse that harbored a Maytag washing machine, a wooden workbench, blackened by use, cans of oil, a sledgehammer, hatchet, and burlap bags full of seed and dark oily rags. It exuded a mingling of odors which smelled like soap, burlap, automotive grease, and oil. The wringer washing machine was to the left as you came in the door and sat on a concrete floor next to boxes of Duz and Drift detergents lined up on the shelves. The workbench sat on the right wall with tools that Grandpa used for his car and tractor. Two small windows provided only dim light. I looked around for something to do; I spied some matches, but I grew bored playing with them and left the washhouse, leaving Cheetah behind. I must have been an angel unaware, because what follows here was told to me. I have no memory of it. Grandma had heard Cheetah frantically barking inside the washhouse. She went to the washhouse to let her out and encountered flames licking out into the air when the door opened. Cheetah bolted out hot, with smoke rising from her singed coat. Alarmed, Grandma called the fire department. Smoke and flames shot through the roof and firemen soaked the house with water afraid that the house, too, might be involved in the fire. The house was saved, but the washhouse was badly damaged. A fireman told my grandparents that someone had been playing with matches, and the oily rags only helped it along.

I don’t remember their exact words when they told me Cheetah had barely gotten out of the fire alive. They didn’t scold me; but, I remember one thing, I felt relieved that they didn’t. Grandpa always teased me after that about how Cheetah got her eyebrows singed and how she was now a black dog with tan eyebrows. And we would laugh. Perhaps he was covering up the fact that Cheetah’s poor eyesight was caused by the fire. In her last days, she was almost blind. She died of old age, and my grandparents replaced her with two similar type dogs. Once I could laugh about it, but bringing it back like this makes me cry. Now, I realize Cheetah must not have been very useful after her eyesight was affected, although she still had many years to live. And my dear grandparents, bless their souls, must have known that holding a child responsible for a disastrous fire could not serve any purpose. That’s how they were; and I am grateful.
Swarm the Sinner

Rachel Bond

After many irritating attempts to lure me back to church, my aunts finally persuaded me to attend the “Friends and Family Day” service one Sunday in October. I hadn’t gone to church for years, not since grandma died, but my aunts’ enthusiasm about their new place of worship tempted my need for a sense of belonging. So, that Sunday in October, I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on a comfortable pair of jeans, my favorite black baby-doll tee-shirt and black knee-high boots and drove down Rt. 4 to the newly built church.

The tinted glass doors of the building glistened with morning sunlight. I took one last puff from my Marlboro Light, dropped it on the concrete landing, and smudged it out with my foot leaving black ash and charred tobacco in a trail. As I wrapped my hands around cool metal handles, a middle-aged man in a crisp gray suit flung open the door. He smiled and nodded as I wandered into the lobby. Staring at the noisy mass, all fancied up in their Sunday best, I glanced down at my jeans. Squirrelly giggles and impish groans cut through the murmur of the flock. I looked up to see a group of three, scrawny boys running in reckless circles, tripping and tackling each other with no thought of the people near them. Ahead, at my left, stood an oversized kitchen counter, gray like the rest of the room and above it, a sign read “Welcome Center.” My overweight Aunt Hope and Uncle Steve managed the booth, busily arranging pamphlets and books. Before I could take two steps toward them, a swarm of church-goers surrounded me with wide, hungry grins.
pasted to their faces. Each took their turn touching me, each in their own way, but all were oppressively zealous as they bombarded me with prying questions.

"What brought you to our church?" said a man with caramel colored skin as he grabbed my hands in his and smiled sheepishly.

"My Aunts, Hope Ph—"

"Can’t you feel the anointing in this place?" A fat woman in a tight, Pepto-Bismol pink dress embraced me.

I couldn’t breathe.

"How old are you?" an old man gnashed his tar-stained teeth at my face and his breath assaulted my nose with the scent of stale beer.

"26."

"Are you single?" He rested his cold bony fingers near my neck. My skin crawled.

"I have a husband." I moved closer to the woman in the pink jumper who wrapped a jellied arm around me.

"Why isn’t he here with us today?" His eyes turned to slivers. I forced a smile.

"He’s at work."

A burly gentleman, smelling of strong spicy cologne power-walked over to me.

"Welcome young lady! Welcome to our church!" He thudded my back.

"Make sure you sign our guest book," he whispered, casually motioning to the Welcome Center.

I scurried over to my aunt and uncle who instantly smiled and scooted the guest book toward my hands. The skin beneath their eyes sagged with the hue of slightly healed bruises. Aunt Hope leaned across the counter, her eyes brightened as she whispered.

"I am so glad you came."

As I signed the book, Aunt Wendy, sporting a scarlet suit dress, waltzed next to me and cuffed her hand around my ear.

"Maybe now you can make your life right with Jesus."

I smiled and nodded.

"Maybe," I said as I shuffled toward the sanctuary’s heavy wooden doors...

*Maybe? I said, Maybe? Why didn’t I say what I was thinking?*

The glow of track lighting seemed to soften the starkness of the sanctuary, blurring the straight lines of the black, metal-framed chairs and recorded instruments played softly in the background.

*A place of worship is supposed to be peaceful, not belittling. You spend so much time making your life right with Jesus that you forget*
about making your life right with people who actually exist.

The sobbing prayers of those kneeling at the carpeted steps, leading up to the stage, broke the silence of the room. I sat down as delicately as I could, but the chair puffed out air and my jacket clinked and swished.

Instead of getting to know me, you judge me and fling Bible verses at me. It hurts when you do that. I assumed that you could simply love me for me. It’s how I love you...all of you...even the track marks on the soles of your feet or your living with one man while married to another. Just love me...like Grandma did. That’s all I ask.

There was a faint smell of fresh paint and new carpet. I stuck my hands beneath me and waited.

Grandma...

My eyes began to quiver and a dull pain twisted in my throat.

More-Grandma, I miss you.

Though my mouth was dry, I forced a swallow and hot tears filled my eyes. I burned from the inside, out.

I miss spending the night with you and going to church together the next morning. I miss your burnt toast. I miss the way you told me about “Daniel in the Lion’s Den.” I miss the way you made me feel...like I was special. You always gave me my own cup of coffee as you’d quote the plaque that hung in your hallway. “I know I’m somebody ‘cause God don’t make no junk.” You helped me make my own bed right next to yours, piling up a bunch of pink blankets on the floor. I miss the way you tucked me in...

“Are you as snug as a bug in a rug?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Jesus, keep my little one safe from bad dreams.”

“And my ‘More-Grandma,’ too...and, please, make her diabetes go away.”

You’d listen to me like I was as wise and as grown-up as any adult; you always took the time to ask me what was going on in my life; you understood me; you understood what I needed; you covered me with hugs and kisses and laughter. Why did you have to leave me? When you died, Jesus and God died with you. I still need you.

The doors opened and the loud chaos of conversations washed in like ocean waves crashing onto the shore. I took a deep breath and wiped the tears from my face. The stench of mixed perfumes and body odor floated with the flock. As I watched for my aunts, people began to mingle in little groups. They nodded their heads, shook hands and smiled at one another as they carried on their discussions. Some sat and stared ahead while clutching their Bibles.

Swarm the Sinner 31
"Hi Honey," said Aunt Hope.

"Aunt Hopie! I didn’t see you guys there. Are y’all gonna sit with me?"

"Of course we are."

Aunt Hope and Uncle Steve sat next to me; Barry, who was visiting from England, said "Hello" and sat beside me on my left. My Aunt Wendy, with comically teased up hair, and her redneck boyfriend, Ranger Dave, planted themselves next to Barry. Aunt Wendy crossed her legs, and daintily placed her Bible-filled hands on her lap.

Girly fussing, squiggling, and chitter-chatter sizzled directly behind us. My mother’s tone, alto ranged, hushed the girls.

"You all need to be quiet now...I said, Shhhh!"

"Aw, but Miss Merry..."

I shifted around and saw my mom staring one of the girls down. Her eyes were wide; her lips flattened to thin lines; her posture was rigid and straight. She pointed a finger at a girl in tight wiry pigtails. Holy shit, Mom brought her charges from the girls’ home...I hope they don’t hurt anyone. I waved and Mom smiled.

One by one, the stage filled with choir members, a keyboardist, a couple percussionists and a guitarist. The pastor, a tall, lean man with dark hair and a goatee, jogged up onto the stage, smiling as he greeted us.

"Good Morning!"

"Good Morning!" the crowd spoke in unison.

"It is so nice to see all these shiny new faces here this glorious
morning. We have a special service for our friends and family members today and I trust that all of you will enjoy yourselves. Will you please stand for prayer.”

People shuffled and stood. I followed suit until they closed their eyes and bowed their heads. The pastor’s voice grew intense and loud and most members raised their hands with palms outward crying, “Holy Lord, Thank You Jesus, and Halleluiah,” until the minister ended the prayer with, “Amen.” The instrumentalists immediately began playing a bouncy tune and the choir swayed, danced in place and clapped their hands. Above them hovered song lyrics projected from the back of the room and people danced in a step-touch fashion, arms raised upward as they sang with the choir. Not knowing the songs, I just stood there with my hands clamped together. The more they sang, the more they celebrated and the more I closed up into myself. My forehead grew tight and I folded my arms.

When the music died down to simple chords, the pastor stepped forward and mentioned that the children were to go outside to ride ponies. I wanted to go with them.

With a thud the main doors opened and two groups of mourners carried caskets down the aisles toward the stage. The minister spoke.

“The group on your left are the unbelievers and those on your right are the saved…”

The group closest to me wailed and moaned, gritted their teeth, and their bodies trembled as they grasped at the casket that carried their loved one. The other set of mourners wiped tears from their eyes in silence,
their faces loose with slight smiles, and one of them patted their loved one’s coffin.

Goddamn it! I can’t believe this! A fucking special service! Those manipulating assholes. “Come to church,” they said. “We’re having a service to welcome our loved ones,” they said. Bullshit. It’s all fucking bullshit.

Once the mourners reached the stage, they placed the caskets down and opened them...a man laid in each, both pretending to be dead. A spotlight burnished the saved man’s coffin and white smoke drifted about the stage. A man in a white cotton robe and a gold band around his head came through the mist, stopped at the casket and held out his hand.

“Arise child of God and follow me.”

The saved man reached up, took his hand and followed him out a side door. Then the lights went out; hot, white strobes flashed and figures draped in black slithered up to the unsaved body and dragged him out of the room. Mom’s group of teenaged girls screamed uncontrollably, “I don’t want to die! Oh, God! Don’t let me die!”

Snow covers the ground now and the wind teases me with its hint of spring. My aunts have not spoken of church to me since that special service in October and I go about my search for peace in peace. The New Testament says, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” This is my Christianity. This is the heart of my searching. My aunts claim they have found God and maybe they have...it isn’t my place to judge what is in their hearts. I have hope, though, that one day they will show me this instead of preach it to me.
Friday Night Lights

Aaron Cook

In many small towns across the country Friday nights in early fall are anything but normal. Communities come together to support their local high school football teams, and parents cheer as their children win or lose. The journey through a high school football season is filled with a roller coaster ride of emotions and events.

"Seniors this is your last shot at winning a fucking state-championship! Leave every goddamn ounce of effort on the field tonight! All you underclassmen play your hearts out for these seniors—you’re about to make everyone proud. Remember, no matter what happens tonight in battle, it was my pleasure to coach all of you—blood, sweat, tears, we’re family. PLAY HARD!"

The cold wet air crashes into my face as I walk outside into the November night, hand in hand with my follow teammates. My eyes show confidence, fear, anxiety, and excitement—my body expresses every human emotion. The heat from the lights burn through my soul as I step onto the damp, freshly cut grass. I grab a quick slurp of rusty well water; the after taste mixed with plastic causes me to spit profusely. I snap the chinstrap onto my helmet, the flimsy metal clip splinters. "FUCK," blood trickles down my ring finger onto my hand. "I need a new chinstrap—this fucking thing broke again." Taping my finger, I furiously walk past the bench preparing to take the field.

"Are you ready to play Aaron?"
"Hell yes Jon!"
“Good, let’s kick some ass and go home.”

I nod.

The moisture on the grass creeps through my cleats onto the tape supporting my ankles as I take my position on the tundra. Piss orange and brown jerseys head toward me as the other team takes the field. “Hey twenty-seven, are you ready to…” My ears deafen as the football is placed on the orange tee, waiting to be reunited with me. Blurs and flashes of reds, blacks, oranges, and browns pass quickly across my pupils as I take one more glance at the crowd. BOOM! The football lands in my arms, snapping me from my pre-game daze. I run up the field towards my teammates. CRACK! I am derailed from my left side by someone who out weighs me by one hundred and fifty pounds. I slam into the cold, hard ground and slide four or five feet.

“You better enjoy that spot tonight Cook—that’s where you’ll be spending most of your time.”
“Kiss my ass, you guys suck!”
“Bitch. You’re not real champs!”
“Really? Wanna see my ring.”

I smile. I am told to go back to the huddle by an older gentleman wearing black and white strips. Looking at my teammate’s faces in the huddle I know this is going to be a fun game.

The quarterback looks around the huddle and screams with his usual cadence “Wing right sixty-four tailback slide, on four!”

I run to the line of scrimmage. I look at the white chalk line as I set my feet directly across from my opponent, and his mouth.

“Cook, I am going to kick your ass this year.”

Trying to ignore the idiot across of me, I hear our quarterback say, “Down, ready, two, four…”

CRACK! I catch a closed fist under my facemask. I rip through the swinging arm of my opponent and gain a step on him. Loud sounds go up over the crowd, which is my signal to turn around because the ball is twirling through the air towards my hands. Catching the ball opens up the cut on my ring finger, but I shrug off the gash and run towards the goal posts. Suddenly, I feel the sensation of fiberglass crashing into my skin as I absorb a hit on the knee from a linebacker who forced his way up the field. I fall to the ground.

“Sixteen yard gain—First Down!”

I push up with my bloody hand, gaining my balance, I walk back to the huddle picking chucks of turf out of the cross bars of my black facemask.

“Slot left forty-two trap, on two.”

Calmly walking to the line of scrimmage, I quickly glance over
the defense.

"Down, ready, two."

I fire out of my stance and head up the huge hole that our linemen have provided.

"SHIT!" My legs snap out from underneath my body, and I collide with our fullback who is tackled for a one-yard gain. I missed my block.

Dazed and bewildered, I pop up off the ground not knowing whom I was supposed to block or, who the hell blind-sidened me in the legs. I stumble back to the huddle as a high screech cuts through the air, "Timeout black."

A few steps away, one of my teammates looks directly at me, and we both know coach is about to blow his top.

"What the Fuck are you guys doing out there? Seniors, you do realize this could be your last game?" coach screams as we approach the sideline.

"Yes sir!"

"Well then play like it DAMNIT!"

I grab a towel and apply it to my face—only to realize it’s drenched with someone else’s sweat and is partly covered with blood. "Damnit man, who the hell left this here?" My eyes quickly scope the sidelines for someone brave enough to claim responsibility. No one does.

The towel travels through the November air as it leaves my hand, bouncing off the old wood bench that stands alone. Grabbing my helmet, I force it over my ears and jog onto the field. I slip my grass and dirt covered mouthpiece over my teeth, and as I approach the huddle, I realize that my teammates are chaotically looking for someone to cross the orange pillions to shut up both our opponents and our coaches.

"Forty-six boot pass, on ready."

Setting my feet onto the smeared white line, I look into the eyes of the defensive back, not knowing if he will beat me or if I will beat him.

"Down, ready!"

I release down the sidelines and head towards the endzone. My eyes go in and out of focus as the streams of brightness shower down from the new light bulbs providing a break from the Friday night sky. Fluttering through the darkness, I see a small brown object coming my direction. My opponent stretches my jersey as he grabs my sleeve in an attempt to throw my concentration. Taking a small step, I push my white and black shoes off the ground and reach for the ball. Slamming into the ground my right arm feels the pressure of hot metal piercing my skin as my opponent’s steel-tipped cleats are buried into my flesh. TOUCHDOWN! I pop off the ground only to be quickly tackled my ten other guys who are more joyful than I. Tossing the ball back to the ref, I
hear the sounds of bitterness coming from our opponent's crowd standing around the field.

"I hate this team—man, back when we played we would've kicked their asses, and I can’t believe my son is losing to them!"

"Ya, now-a-day, kids don't know what high school football is all about."

"Yep, we would have kicked their asses!"

I walk back to the sidelines laughing, thinking about the two fathers living in the moment. I see my coach coming towards me with his usual disturbed face, but this time he smacks the side of my beat-up helmet and smiles.

"Hell of a catch, way to go up and get it!"

"Thanks coach."

I walk over to the bench and sit down for a little rest. My mind can't help but wander back to the two fathers who can't seem to outlive their high school playing days. I feel a bit sorry for their sons because I know they will probably get screamed at when they get home. Sitting on the bench, I realize I'll probably spend Saturday black and blue. I think back to the days of peewee football. My eyes slowly glance at the other seniors, and I realize these are the same guys who were beside me back when we were five. Back when football was about the kids playing it, not the fans. The scoreboard runs out of time. I pick up a dirty towel and throw it over my head. I carry my helmet in one hand and a half full water bottle in the other. In a gesture of sportsmanship, I walk across the field to shake the hands of my victorious opponents. I watch as the tears run down the faces of my friends, who worked hard for years to get to this point, only to be defeated by the scoreboard, and only to fall short of expectations set by fans who ultimately forgot the real reason for high school football.
"Are you sure we're in the right place?" I asked, directing the question to John.

"This is where the guy said to wait."

We came in on the plane together from Columbus, and now, standing outside in the cool Orlando night, I couldn't believe in a little while we'd be in boot camp. There were six of us. I was the only one older than eighteen. I only remember two of the others. A guy named John with dark hair, from somewhere in the Dayton area, and a girl, her name is a blank, but she was from the same vicinity as John. They had talked about common acquaintances on the plane. She was blond and slightly overweight, but not enough to keep her out of the Navy.

After getting off the plane we had spent some time wandering around until we finally found the phone the guy at MEPS had told us about, and John made the call. He told us we were supposed to wait outside and a driver would be there to get us shortly. That suited me fine since standing outside meant I could smoke the few cigarettes I had left, before giving them up for the next ten weeks. It took longer than I expected for the driver to arrive. I chain smoked at least six cigarettes; hurriedly inhaling, hand shaking, constantly flicking ashes, then throwing it to the ground and stepping on the still glowing butt while reaching for the pack to light another. The blond girl stood beside me doing the same. During our trip we had all shared stories of our families and where we were from. Now though, conversation eluded us.
“You nervous?” the blond girl asked me.
“Scared shitless. You?”
“Yeah.”

I’d started to worry we’d done something wrong when a long white van pulled up. It was the kind they use for transporting prisoners; non-descript white, small blue serial number on the door, government license plates. We picked up our bags, opened the doors and climbed in. I remember very little about Orlando from that drive. Except the palm trees. The street lamps illuminated them, laid out in straight lines parallel to the road, so different from the Oaks, Maples, and Pines I was used to seeing in southern Ohio. I watched as they flashed by, staring out a side window, hoping for a glimpse of anything I might call familiar. Before long, we made a right and passed a large white sign that read Naval Recruit Training Center Orlando in black letters. Then we were passing by a security gate, a small cube of a building on the left where a uniformed man waved us through, between low white walls on each side of the two-lane road.

We traveled a short distance before the driver pulled up in front of a two-story tan cinder block building. Tinted window lined the front and a set of double glass doors waited for us, with a grayish-white sidewalk leading up to them. On the sidewalk waited two sailors.

“Okay, come on, come on. Line up with your toes on the line,” yelled one of the sailors as we got out of the van, pointing at a crack in the sidewalk.

After we lined up, he stood in front of us, facing us, while his partner did the same at the head of the line. “When I tell you, turn to the right. We’re going inside and you’re going to wait to do your paperwork.” He looked at us briefly, then, “Right, face.”

I could say we marched to the building, but that would be giving us too much credit. Instead it would be more accurate to say we walked toward the doors, trying not to step on the heels of the person in front of us.

Once inside the building I found myself in a cavernous room reminiscent of a high school cafeteria: white cinder block walls, light grey linoleum tiles on the floor, the space interrupted occasionally by large square support columns. The smells of floor wax, cleaning solutions, sweat, and fear blanketed everything, creating an almost visible vapor. I felt its clammy touch on my bare arms.

We were not the only ones arriving that night. Several already formed lines of new recruits waited at wood veneered folding tables. People in uniforms sat behind them in grey metal collapsible chairs, and others walked around with files and clipboards.

We went toward the tables and were divided into different lines;
men on one side, women on the other. I kept my eyes straight ahead, until it was my turn.

"Last Name." A uniformed woman asked me as I approached. "Smeeks."

"Look these forms over: home of record, life insurance information, rank and grade. Make sure it's all correct. Especially your social security number. Check it on every form. If it's all correct, sign here," she said without looking up, absently indicating a straight line at the bottom of one of the pages. "Then take this," she continued as she handed me a small plastic cup, and pointed toward a large open doorway behind her, "over there. Go to one of the petty officers inside the doorway. She'll be your monitor for the drug test."

I carefully did as I'd been told, signed on the appropriate line, and headed toward the doorway. My recruiter had warned me this would happen, so I hadn't been to the bathroom since I'd stepped off the airplane. Others hadn't been as lucky. Just outside the doorway were several men and women doing jumping jacks near a water fountain. As I walked into the bathroom another uniformed woman approached me.

As I looked at her, she said, "Do you have to go? If you don't, you get to join them," she motioned in the direction of the recruits I'd seen doing exercises.

"No, I mean, yes. I have to go."

"Well, get to it," she said. She directed me to a stall with no door, and proceeded to stand in front of it, watching me. I tried to keep my head down, gaze directed at the floor in front of me, pretending she wasn't there, and hoped I wasn't shaking so much I missed the cup.

I did what I had to do, handed her the now, thankfully, full container and proceeded toward the next doorway. Inside waited yet another uniformed woman. She handed me a stack of clothes: two white tee-shirts with navy blue cuffs and collar and a large Navy emblem in the center, two pair of navy blue sweat pants with the same Navy emblem on the left leg, and two pair of navy blue gym shorts, no emblem.

"Take off your civilian clothes and put on a pair of the shorts, sweat pants and a tee shirt. Pack your civilian clothes in your bag, then go into the berthing area and find a bunk," she said, motioning toward the final doorway, before turning to another recruit behind me.

By the light coming from the bathrooms, I vaguely made out the shapes of rows of bunk beds, most of them occupied, but I crept around until I found one empty. I changed my clothes, put my carry-on bag and shoes under the bed and crawled beneath the thin wool blanket. Before dozing off I remember wondering, not for the last time, if I'd made the right decision ten days ago.
I reached out to grasp the handle of the sliding glass door. I felt the slickness of my palms against the duct tape my dad used to hold the wood handle to the metal frame. The door stuck for a moment before noisily sliding on its track, then I stepped into my parent’s kitchen. My mom stood at the sink, rinsing off dishes before loading them in the open dishwasher beside her.

“Hi mom.”

“Hi.” I watched the smile disappear from her face before she turned back to her chores.

I sighed and slid the door closed behind me, then quietly sat down at the kitchen table and reached into my jacket pocket for my cigarettes. In the months since I’d last been home things hadn’t changed much. The ever present clutter of junk mail and bills surrounded the floral centerpiece on the table, but a new light fixture resembling a wagon wheel now hung overhead and some new Home Interior pictures mingled with familiar ones on the log walls. In the living room the usual fire blazed in the wood stove, its orange glow showing through the soot stained glass doors and outside the picture window I could see cats curled up on the porch swing. Only the sounds of running water, our dog, Rags, barking in the yard, and my dad’s chainsaw somewhere in the woods farther up the hill, broke the silence.

“Where’s Kara?” I asked. It was unusual for my little sister not to come out and see me.

“Still at Jenny’s.” She kept her back to me and went on working.

As I watched her work at the sink I noticed she had more gray threading through her hair than I remembered, but she still didn’t look like a woman in her mid forties with two grown children and a third in elementary school. All my life I’d listened to people say how much alike we were. I’d never really seen it. She was a redhead, I a brunette. She had green eyes, I had blue.

“Didn’t have to work tonight?” she asked.

“It’s my day off.” I didn’t try to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

“Don’t you have school tonight?”

“No. I dropped out. Couldn’t afford the tuition this quarter. Tips from waiting tables just don’t stretch that far, not when you have to pay rent and eat too.”

Mom switched her energy to furiously wiping off the counters with the dishrag. I turned my attention to my cigarette, tapping it against the edge of the ashtray even though there were no more ashes falling. I
could hear the thump of her steel-toed safety shoes as she moved around the kitchen.

She stopped and leaned against the counter, finally looking at me, “Well, maybe next year you can go back. You should be able to qualify for a loan then.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Sure you can. The accountant said after three years you can declare yourself independent from your dad’s income and mine. With the little money you make you should be eligible for all kinds of grants and loans.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I don’t think I’ll be going back to school for a while,” I took a deep breath, “I joined the Navy today.”

She stood up straight, smiling, her eyes shining, and walked over to where I sat. After she gave me a hug, she pulled out another chair, sat down and reached for her own cigarettes. I could see her hand shake as she flicked the lighter to life. After taking a long drag, she exhaled and turned her attention once more to me. Her happiness lit up the whole room.

“What made you decide to do this?”

At that moment, more than any other in our stormy past, I wanted to tell her the truth. My motivations were not born from some noble or high ideals, but from self-loathing and a desire to put my life back together. Maybe she’d have understood if I told her I didn’t know myself anymore, and when I looked in the mirror the confident, independent, person I’d always prided myself on being, had been replaced with someone who had been stripped of any self-respect she had. I needed to start over and re-invent myself into someone who could have a future. Maybe even someone she could be proud of again.

Anyway, I needed the money for college. Getting my bachelors degree was the one dream that hadn’t completely gone away in the turbulent years since high school graduation.

I didn’t though. I kept my thoughts to myself the way I always had.

Instead, I simply said, “Well, I have to do something. I can’t wait tables all my life. Besides, Rick and I broke up and I have to get out of here. If I don’t, I’ll just go back to him again.” I turned back to my cigarette, nearly gone, and contemplated lighting another.

“You made the right decision. You should know by now he’s never going to leave his wife.”

“Don’t start mom. It’s over. I’m moving on. I came here to bring you some good news. Don’t ruin it. You were right all along, okay? Please, just leave it alone.”
We stared at each other for a few minutes, the silence stretching out again, but different from before. It still angered me to have to admit that the past two and a half years of fighting had been for nothing. She reached over and squeezed my hand, still smiling, before putting out her cigarette and standing up again. She walked over to the stove and picked up her potholders.

“I think I hear your dad’s truck. Will you walk up to his building and tell him dinner’s ready. We’re having pot roast.”

Over the course of the next day and a half I learned most of my information by listening to the conversations around me and mimicking the actions of girls who had been there longer. I’d never been very good at making new friends, preferring instead to hover about the perimeter, keeping my head down and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Later, I formed memorable friendships, but in the beginning all the girls in my future company seemed very young to me, with their enthusiasm, energy, and various accents. Even though I was only twenty one and, at most, three years their senior, I felt a lot older.

My first official morning in boot camp began as the lights came on and I awoke to the sounds of a woman yelling, “Revely! Revely! Time to get up. Move it. On your feet.”

In a sleep filled haze I slowly rolled out of bed and, following the lead of the girls around me, went to stand at attention at the end of my bunk. I could see there were perhaps twenty other girls in the room.

Once we were out of bed, the uniformed woman who woke us told us to get to work. I followed as the other girls all trudged to a supply closet to hand out cleaning supplies and floor buffers. I grabbed a mop when it was handed to me and tagged along after one of the girls with a bucket.

We cleaned for several hours, and then were told to stop and get ready for breakfast. We put our cleaning supplies away and we filed outside, getting in a loose rectangular formation with three rows, from tallest to shortest, then we marched to the galley.

Since we were new, we were the last ones allowed inside to get something to eat. By then most of the other recruits in boot camp had already left to begin their day’s assignments. After the meal, we again lined up in the same formation, and headed back to our barracks.

We were in what was known as the “P days”, or probationary days. We weren’t a company yet, nor did we have a company commander. We were only allowed to wear the sweat pants, shorts, and tee shirts we were given the first night, and we were not allowed to take showers. Some of the other girls had been there for four days already, waiting for the
company to be complete.

The next day, a man in uniform came into our barracks. He told us to gather our things and be outside on the sidewalk in five minutes. I pulled my shoes from under my bunk, hurriedly stuffing my feet into them, since I’d taken them off so I wouldn’t scuff the shine on the floor, grabbed my over night bag and ran outside. Some of the other girls weren’t as quick.

As they came out he grabbed each one of them by the arm and lined them up across from us. There were four of them in all. Then he began to pace up and down between our rows and the single row of girls.

“Evidently some of you think you can take your sweet time doing whatever you please,” he shouted. He had a slight southern drawl, and as he spoke his head came up and he looked from side to side glaring at us. “Let me enlighten you ladies. For the next ten weeks, you belong to me. When I tell you to be somewhere in five minutes, you will be there in three. Am I making myself clear?”

We hesitated for a moment, before yelling “Yes sir.”

That hesitation cost us. “When I ask you ladies a question, you don’t wait to answer. You fucking yell out. Now let’s try this again. Am I making myself clear?”

Immediately. “Yes sir.”

“Good. Now you others go and get in line. We’re going to your new home,” he said, before he turned his back on us and went to talk to a much taller man in a khaki uniform standing in front of a new company of men. When they were done talking he came and stood in front of us again.

“Left face. March.”

As we began marching he started a singsong chant, “Ya left, right, ya left, right left. Ya left, right, ya left, right left.”

Behind us I could hear the company of men marching to the same chant, sung by the man in the khaki uniform. We navigated the wide boulevard of grey sidewalks for several blocks until we came to a three-story rectangular building built of tan cinder blocks, like all of the other buildings on the base. It had windows down both sides and a white concrete staircase on the end with a door at each landing. Our company went up to the third floor; the company of men went to the second.

“Everyone find a bunk and stow your bags in the lockers at the end. Then line up beside your lockers, one person on each side and your toes on the line directly in front of you.”

The room was almost identical to the one we had just left, except
bigger. Half as long as a football field, it contained at least twenty bunk beds, the same white walls and grey linoleum. At one end of the room was the door we had just come through, at the other end was an office, and adjoining it, a lounge of sorts. A hallway led back to one side of the office.

While we were standing in line, our CC kept walking up and down the center of the room, looking at us. He wasn’t a large man, only about five feet seven, and medium built. He had hair the color of road dust in August, cut in short military fashion, a meticulously trimmed mustache, sharp features, brushed-silver rimmed glasses and breath that smelled of cigarettes and coffee. I had been too busy and nervous to crave my old addictions, until he got too close to me and I caught the familiar smell. An ache formed momentarily in the pit of my stomach.

“My name is Petty Officer First Class Hickman. I will be your Company Commander for the remainder of your stay here. You will address me as sir, CC or Company Commander.”

“Yes sir,” we answered without being told to.

“I want you all to file out and form up on the sidewalk. We’re going to go to get your uniforms. When you get inside, you will not speak unless directly asked a question by myself or one of the seamstresses.”

“Yes sir.”

We quickly left the room and by the time he joined us we were standing as we’d been told. After looking at us for a moment, he gave the commands and we began marching again. When we finally stopped this time, we were in front of yet another building, except this one was white and covered with wood plank siding, instead of cinder blocks. It had the air of being much older than the others.

As we filed inside pinch-faced older women in civilian clothes took our measurements for our dress uniforms. We were just more of the same old routine to them, as they shuffled us from one person to the next, writing down our measurements on an index card. When they finished, they directed us to the next area where we were given our sea bags. We were then told to place our index card in our mouth, holding the edge firmly with our lips, and walk from station to station, holding the bags open. In this manner we collected our gear for the next ten weeks with the least amount of hassle for the women who worked there. The canvas cylinders quickly filled with our dungaree shirts and pants, boots, a shoe shine kit, dog tags (filled out with our last name, social security number and blood type), a black swimsuit, a stencil (containing the same information as our dog tags, except for blood type), a black paint marker, a white paint marker and our all-important “Blue Jackets Manual”. This book became our Bible for the next ten weeks. It contained all the
information we would be required to memorize; ranks of officers and enlisted, the ten general orders, uniform regulations, shipboard duties and watch standing regulations.

When we were done we were told to stand outside on the sidewalk in formation and wait for everyone to finish. Then we marched back to our barracks, left our sea bags on our bunks, marched to the galley for lunch, and after lunch, we again marched back to the barracks.

Our CC entered shortly after us.

"Everyone grab your boots and stand on the line at the end of your bunks."

We quickly did as he told us.

"Now, I want you to stretch you arms out in front of you, parallel to the floor, holding your boots by the toes. I don’t want to see your arms move from that position, or you’ll wish they hadn’t," he said. "It’s time we got a few things straight," he continued. He’d begun to walk slowly up the middle of the room, past the large support beams, turning his head from side to side to look at each of us in turn to make sure we were doing as ordered.

"You ladies are in my Navy. When I say jump, you say how high. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Things will be different from this point on. It seems a few of you thought you could do things at your own pace this morning. This will not happen again."

"Yes sir."

Several minutes had passed, my arms had started to burn and shake from the strain, beads of sweat began to appear on my forehead, and against my will, my arms started to bend at the elbow, the upper portions slowly making their way back to my sides. I could see the same thing happening to other girls around me.

Evidently my CC noticed it too, since he stopped and walked over to one of the girls across the aisle from me, putting his face only inches from hers. They looked eye to eye. Her face was red from the strain, and her short dark hair clung to the sides of her cheeks, damp from her sweat. From my vantage point, I could see the terror on her face.

"Did I tell you could bend your arms?" he asked, although we all knew it wasn’t a question since his voice was rising.

"No sir," she replied.

"Then what the fuck do you think you’re doing? Get your arms back up there."

"I can’t," she said. Her voice shaking as much as her arms.

"You can’t? You can’t? Okay fine. Push-up position, now!" He
Kristin Crump watched as the girl got down on the floor on her stomach and raised her body with her arms and toes, then he started pacing again, yelling at all of us. “Do you think I should take it easy on you because you’re women? It’s precisely because you’re women that you have to work twice as hard as everyone else. Do you think when you get out in the fleet the people in your commands are going to take it easy on you because you’re a woman? If any of you think this is some kind of fucking joke, speak up now. I’ll have you on the next plane out of here, and you can go home to mommy and daddy and let them put up with you’re bullshit.”

At that point our CC stopped talking for a moment to let what he’d said sink in. During the pause, I had the urge to do exactly as he’d suggested; put my boots down, raise my hand and tell him he had a volunteer. Two things stopped me. The first of which was the fear I that he hadn’t really meant it. If I tried to take him up on his offer, not only would I not go home, but he would make my life even more of a living hell than it was already promising to be. The second was the fear that he really had meant it. I could just imagine the disappointment on my mom’s face as I got off the airplane, kicked out after only two days in the Navy. I couldn’t bear the thought of doing that to her.

So, I determinedly set my jaw, gritted my teeth, and straightened my arms. Then my CC began talking again. I almost changed my mind.

“…”In case it hasn’t occurred to any of you, you’re job now is to kill people, or make it possible for someone else to kill them. You had
better get used to the idea. It’s my job to make sure you’re able to perform that function, and believe me, by the end of your time here, you will be. If I ever hear any of you say “I can’t”, ever again, I will make this entire company sorry. You will be the best company on this base. You will run farther and faster than everyone else. You will be stronger than everyone else. You will be smarter than everyone else. And if you aren’t, not only will you wish you were dead, I will make you wish you had never fucking been born. Are we clear?"

“Yes sir,” we all screamed out.

After that he stopped talking, but continued to pace up and down the room. It could have been fifteen minutes or an hour, my arms burned so much from the strain, I lost all track of time. In the silence I could hear some of the girls breathing hard, whether it was from the exertion, or trying to fight back the tears, I’m still not sure.

“Alright, everyone put your arms down, place your boots under the foot of your bed and sit in a semi-circle at the front of the room. Except, for you,” he said, pointing at the luckless girl still in push-up position, “you will go in the lounge and remain in that position until I get tired of it.” He didn’t wait for her to respond, before he walked off.

She got up, tears in her eyes, and slowly walked into the other room, where we could all see her. None of us ever said the words “I can’t”, to our CC ever again.
"These are from when your Mema and Pepa came to visit us in Florida... this one’s when we went swimming at Cocoa Beach...”

Mom points to a yellowing Polaroid where Pepa is cradling Mema like a child above the water. Pepa is smiling broadly into the camera while Mema is smiling up at him. The camera didn’t catch - SPLASH- that came next as Pepa dropped Mema into the water with a laugh. She popped up from underwater and pushed Pepa in, starting a splashing frenzy between them.

“As a matter of fact, these pages are all from when they visited us.” Mom runs her finger over the many pictures filling the yellowing page before changing it to the next.

I immediately become entranced at the picture of Pepa hugging my five-year old self tightly while Mema watches us, smiling. He’s in his usual outfit; a white tee shirt over a white tank top and dark pants. His thick, plastic rimmed bifocals made his eyes look huge when you looked straight at him, and his chin stuck out when he smiled, causing the lines by his cheeks to get deeper. Pepa’s hugs always smelled like rubbing alcohol, Old Spice, and musty aged clothes.

I don’t remember any particular visit with my grandparents; I can only recall small dateless snapshots: Mema and me sitting on the floor playing Rummy while Pepa and Dad watch the Ohio State football game in the background... Pepa sitting me down and talking to me like a person, not a child... a special trip to the store with Mema and Pepa to
pick out anything I wanted, even candy...

When I was a child, my parents and I always lived at least a ten hour drive away from Mema and Pepa, so we usually only got to visit them about once every three years. Sometimes they’d come to visit us, but usually we went to see them. Mema would cook special five or six course meals, everything homemade; I’d stay up late watching television with Pepa; and there were always his stories, stories of Dad making the winning touchdown in the last ten seconds of the game, of Mema flipping out when she caught her first fish, of the first time Mema and Pepa met my mom—stories of days long before I was thought of.

When I was 12, my mother, father, and I moved to Ohio, and subsequently closer to Mema and Pepa. Before we were even settled, the Family (consisting of my two uncles, my aunt and my father) decided to move Mema and Pepa from Galipolis closer to the rest of the family in Marion so they could be taken care of easier. Leaving their home of forty years, their possessions limited to what the Family thought they needed to fit their small one-bedroom apartment, they began their life in Marion.

About twice a week, Mom and I would visit them. Taking them out to eat or shopping for them, cleaning their apartment or doing their laundry, we made sure they were taken care of. Five times a day, Mema struggled with Pepa’s rainbow of pills. Nurses came to check his blood sugar level and give him insulin shots, help him to clean up and dress, as well as make sure that he was eating. I watched Pepa move less and less from his futon and his eyes fade from a beautiful bright blue to an empty gray.

The parade of nurses increased until they were almost permanent fixtures in the apartment. Even with the ever-increasing amount of pills, Pepa never seemed to get any better. His fingertips were red and sore, and his arms above the elbows were bruised from the daily shots.

On one of his many doctors’ visits, he was hospitalized for pneumonia. What was supposed to be a two or three day stay turned into weeks, and then it was decided by the family that he’d be “better off” recovering in a nursing home.

Everyday, a member of the family would pick up Mema from the apartment and drop her off at the nursing home. She spent almost everyday there, rarely leaving his side. Mom and I would take her twice a week, and go in to visit with Pepa. He’d always sit up, smile, and try to entertain us. He’d talk about the latest stuff with the presidential election, the new bills being passed in Senate and whatever else he’d retained from his constant company of C-Span. He’d ask me how school was going, what I had learned that week, how was the weather out there… if you asked how he was doing he’d give you a quick “fine, fine” and change
the subject.

Late one afternoon, we got a call from the nursing home that Pepa was asking to see us. We dressed and piled into the car as soon as we could.

"You know that you’re Pepa is getting up there in years, honey... and you know that he is very tired now... eighty-two years of living really tires a body out...” Mom tried to look in my eyes to see if I was all right. I avoided her gaze.

“I know, Mama.” I whispered.

At the nursing home, sliding glass doors opened with a rush of old, sour air. We walked through the “living room” where still bodies inhabited chairs, couches and wheelchairs. They were all facing the television, although I don’t think any of them were actually watching. Down the long hallway we passed open doors revealing more still bodies in beds, chairs, and some just standing there. I didn’t want to see what was around me; it was too much of a reminder of Pepa’s situation... I didn’t want to believe that he was as bad as everyone else here, although in my heart I knew better.

When we reached his room, he was alone (Mema had already come and gone for the day) and he was lying in bed.

"Hi there, Pepa.” I tried to say as cheerily as possible. His small body barely made an impression under the collection of blankets on top of him. He turned his head towards me as his hazy, gray eyes looked in my direction and he smiled. He slowly struggled to sit up, his sagging skin hanging off of his small bones.

“You don’t have to get up, Dad. You need your rest.” Pepa slowly lowered himself back down, and when his head finally reached the pillow, he closed his eyes and let out a long, deep sigh.

“Come here, kiddo.” He slowly put his bony hand out to me. I took his hand and sat beside him.

“I want you to know that I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you... take care of yourself... and always, always learn. I love you.” He squeezed my hand gently and licked his lips, his dry tongue barely wetting
them. I bent over and kissed his wrinkled stubby cheek.

"I love you too, Pepa."

I gently hugged his small body and slowly walked out of the room. From the hall, I watched my mom sit beside Pepa and take his hand as I had done. I saw him talking to her, but couldn’t hear his soft voice. Mom just listened, and I could see she was crying too.

"It’s okay, Dad. It’s time for you to rest... you don’t have to hold on for us. We love you." He smiled, patted her hand, closed his eyes and took a deep breath and was still.

Although the memory of Pepa’s passing is the most vivid in my memory, I try not to visit it too often. I prefer remembering the big hugs that only Pepa could give, and his bright blue eyes that were too beautiful for words.
Candlepins  
Stuart Lishan  

What thou lovest well, remains,  
The rest is dross  
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee  

Good old Ez, Ezra Pound, cooped up in St. Elizabeth's, the psych hospital they put him in after the war, threading out his Cantos one by one. I think he must have been writing more from a place of wish than imperative when he wrote those lines, more from the stance of a summoning, wistful old memory conjurer than that of declaiming prophet on his rock. For sometime memory, like a devout, veiled Muslim who shutters herself in shadowed recesses behind closed doors as we enter her house, our pasts, leaves us to be entertained by her husband, our forgetting. Though he is very kind, sitting us down on the woven carpets in their living room, plying us with tea and bread and fruit, Pound I think was imploring her to be a little more forthcoming, and in the process of such impelling, she was.  

What thou lovest well. Birch Street, Park Forest, Illinois, in 1958, curvilinear street of attached white row apartments with black shutters. Splatter of a scraggly grass square in front of ours, muddy in the rain, it was two steps up from the little walkway of the lawn to the scaly concrete front porch with its rusty iron railing and the metal box where the milkman
placed his bottles. My older sister fell and chipped her tooth on one of those bottles, and the porch was where my friend Petey, sad eyed, horse faced even then, sat by me on the stoop and played a sort of checkers with the nubby black plastic front door mat. Petey, sagely rubbing his chin like some grand master, trying to decide his next invisible move, as clear to me as my memory of being carried down the wooden stairs of our apartment cradled in my mother’s arms, my hands clasped around her neck, my head resting against her breast.

The squat living room that served as our apartment’s entrance opened out to a narrow kitchen and a dining room. A brown camel back sofa slumped against the back window, nine adult steps across the unvarnished wooden floor from the front door, and a thick set of shelves, grayish off white, book filled, except for the top, where my parents placed cherished knick-knacks, stood against the stairs. One day my mother trundled into the house, her bowling ball bag in one hand and a trophy in the other. She tossed the bag into the closet with the coats and the Hoover canister vacuum, but she carefully placed the trophy — a golden statuette of a confident, long skirted woman striding up to the mark, staring out to invisible pins, bowling ball cocked behind her — in a place of honor on top of the bookcase, next to the gold plated ashtray and the purple and clay colored glass candy bowl reserved for company.

Birch Street necklaced those apartments. Big, fat 1950’s cars, like shiny toasters on wheels lumbered down that narrow roadway, choked with parked cars on either side. On Sundays, if the weather was nice, a blue Chevy Biscayne stopped in front of our apartment. My father, who never especially liked golf and only did it for the business contacts, gamely slung his clubs into its enormous trunk and climbed in the cabin with three or four other men. He laughed along with them as the car pulled away, and I ran outside, watching them from the little patch of lawn, squalling to go with him.

Melanie lived some houses down towards the interior of the development. My age, soft flaxen blond hair, she ran squealing as I chased her to touch that wavy blond flag, its blanket-like softness always just beyond my reach. Beyond Melanie’s house, along the sidewalk where a fat kid with a crew cut and I once traded football cards, sat the neighborhood sandbox, a large rectangular thing enclosed by a splintery log wall. Two knot-holed benches stretched along its longer sides. I loved the swirl of those knotholes. Kneeling in front of those spaces, I’d dribble sand out of my fists, like through the middle of an hourglass. I loved the warm, black, brown and white salt-like grains rubbing down against my palm, the mesmerized satisfaction of feeling lost in the drizzle of it, like looking into a fire, like prayer.
I've rarely felt such peace since. Once, maybe, when I almost drowned. I was eight, we had moved to California a few years earlier, and I slipped on a drain tile in our apartment building's swimming pool. I remember gliding down through the lavender water like a balloon slowly deflating, watching sunlight zig-zag through the hazy water above, the way a fish might calmly look up on a moonlit night. It seemed that I could stay there forever, outside myself, watching, vaguely curious about this boy drowning on a July afternoon in 1964. At the very bottom of the pool, dusk seemed to linger, like when the sun has just disappeared, but its glow faintly remains, a soft, purple-hued blue in those moments before evening falls. Finally instinct kicked in, and I kicked up from the concrete bottom, my swimming trunks ballooning about me like a jellyfish as I rose to the lighted surface and broke through, to see my mother sitting in her strapless one piece on her lounge chair, reading one of her mysteries, and calmly smoking a Kent.

My mom's bowling alley was the Victory Lanes, a cavernous place, forty lanes wide, a gleaming palace full of silvery metal and plastic, a great glare of yellow lights overhead, and a dark, forbidding cocktail lounge off to the side. Just off the main drag in Park Forest, Western Ave., it sat near the jewel market, where I learned the secret love of poking my forefinger through the cellophane wrappers surrounding the packages of ground beef layered in their white display cases. My mother never noticed. Even then, as a mother of young children, she had a habit of losing herself, dreamily humming to herself, a one noted "hmmmm" that trailed off, only to begin again as she leaned over the cool breezes of the dairy section. My dad, a carpet salesman, was away a lot then, traveling for days at a time, and my sister had already started at Dogwood Elementary. My mom didn't work then and was always easily bored with housework, far away from her family and her best friend Shirley in Philadelphia where she had grown up, isolated in this suburb of Chicago. Out of a desperate loneliness I think now, she piled me into our green Nash, a car shaped something like a tear drop, and made me her accomplice in her escapes to the lanes.

A time and site-specific love, it never followed her to California. After we moved to Van Nuys in 1960, in the midst of that smog-smeared San Fernando Valley sprawl of Los Angeles, my mother's unhappiness slowly spread like an unstaunched blossom of blood, and she rarely bowled again. These were years when my father struggled with what he called "going into business for himself," first with a disastrous picture frame business, a brief six months when my parents constantly bickered, and then, after fourteen months working for R & B Furniture as a salesman, he finally drifted into insurance. Money was tight and my mother went to work, first as a clerk selling jewelry in the Broadway Department Storein...
Century City, where she once waited on Lena Horne. Mostly, though, during the fifteen years of my California growing up, my mother, who in the 1940's had won scholarships to Vassar and the University of Pennsylvania and had earned a degree in biology, worked as a claims examiner for Blue Cross/Blue Shield Health Insurance, a dull clerk's job in a cold ashen gray glass and steel building near the L.A. airport. Those years she came home, collapsed into bed and didn't get up until after my sister and I had already gone to bed ourselves. Then, while my dad was out on calls, she'd spend the night prowling our apartment, noshing on crackers and cream cheese, reading mysteries, and playing cards by herself, working out Bridge arrangements with invisible partners. My sister and I would wake up to find the Philadelphia Cream Cheese torn open, still on the counter, the white cheese yellowing at its edges, sitting next to open boxes of Ritz and Triscuits. We'd find our mom slumped in bed, half dressed, and we'd have to shake her awake so she could get to work on time.

My mother has since passed away, after a three-month incarceration at Cedars of Lebanon hospital — what started out as minor surgery ended up as weeks in a dark ICU with tubes shoved down her throat. A woman who loved language, she lay silenced, only able to weakly squeeze our hands and gesture "stop, please stop," until the very end when my sister and I gave the doctors the nod to let nature take its course. In the years that I lived with her, as I try to remember when my mother seemed most happy and at peace, the peace of a three-year old drizzling warm sand through his fingers, the peace of a dreamlike drowning boy six years later, I think to that autumn and winter of 1958 in Park Forest, Illinois, at the Victory Bowling Lanes.

All machine the place felt like, with its brand new AMF Pinspotter, as silver and shiny as new braces that automatically collected and reset the pins after each frame; its Radaray Foul Detector, with a beady red electric-eye that blinked like a time bomb when someone crossed illegally into the bowling lane; its AMF Pindicator, a large screen at the end of each lane that showed which pins were still standing and then showed giant hands keeping score with fat, smudgy pencils; and the electric air-blown hand dryers beside the ball returns, where you could feel the hot air on your face if you were quick enough to get out of the way of the ball burping up from the chutes that ran under the lanes. There we were, my mother and I, staring out at the glassy sea sheen of the lanes spreading out before us, in what seemed the beating heart of that mechanical beast, every Thursday and Tuesday morning in that autumn and winter of 1958.

My mom would sit me down in one of the rows of plastic chairs behind her lane and tell me to be a good boy. She herself sat down at a
sort of desk that looked like a space-age ostrich placed next to the ball return. Its head an orange rectangular plastic housing for the overhead projector to the Pindicator screen above; its neck a silvery tube of metal with two nubs that turned on the projector lights when pressed hard; its body the desktop, inset with silver drink holders, a squiggly ashtray, and a hinged metal casing that kept the score sheet from sliding off of its bed of opaque plastic. After slipping on her red and blue bowling shoes, my mom would walk over the ball return and place her right hand over the hand dryer, as if it were a Bible and she was giving it her oath.

Slightly bending her knees, my mom would stand in her long woolen plaid skirt, staring down the lane, cocking the ball towards her face; she’d stride three or four steps forward, ratcheting her skinny ball arm behind her; she’d release; and the black ball would slide away down the varnished lane. We’d watch it, like in those submarine war movies where sailors stare mesmerized at a torpedo speeding towards its target, until the explosion, as the candle-shaped figures flew backwards and upwards. For a few seconds afterward it was quiet. The pins left standing were hoisted up gently, almost tenderly about their waists by metal holsters that slid down from some invisible point behind the wall above them. Then something like the part of a football helmet that protects the quarterback’s mouth and jaw hinged down from wherever those standing pins had been hoisted. It slid the fallen pins backward, where they chinked against a chain-linked skirt, and disappeared. Before long a hydraulic whoosh and whisk announced the ball’s emergence into the greasy ball
holder beside my mom, and then the rhythm began again, overlapping into a layered tangle of rhythms within rhythms within rhythms of the other solitary mothers in their lanes.

Mostly we’d go in the mornings, but sometimes my mom took my sister and me to the league play on afternoons and weekends. I didn’t like the place as much then. It was crowded and filled with men, my father sometimes uncomfortably among them, holding sweaty bottles of beer, their arms around their wives, their children set loose to run in packs about the place. The grown-ups who seemed to swagger most wore red and white, or green and red, or turquoise and white, or black and yellow bowling shirts. A haggard man in a red waiter’s jacket bearing trays of drinks on felt pads or bearing away empties rushed among them from the shadowy, smoky cocktail lounge, forbidding as a dragon’s cave. Through the cigarette haze rising lazily above the scoring tables towards the great banners announcing new bowling teams and leagues, the oceanic thunder bursts of bowling balls whacking down pins in all the forty lanes rolled over us. Soon enough I’d begin to make out the other familiar rhythms of the alley amidst new ones, the masculine slap of hands and the laughter and language of so many adults. If someone made a strike, they’d squeal and shout delightedly. If not, I’d hear “Oomph” or “Oh,” as if someone had just been struck. Sometimes, after a few beers, the men spoke a different sort of language, an alien, trochaic-based poetry filled with words like “Goddam,” “Hail, mother of Mary,” “Crying in the bucket,” and “Jesus Christ!” Though my mother was friendly enough in these times, playing through these tournament games with her teammates, laughing with them, encouraging them when one made a strike, a spare, or narrowly missed a 7-10 split, she never quite seemed as comfortable with them as when she was bowling by herself. She always sat the end of the row of her teammates, and there were always moments during the match, when nobody else was looking, and she stopped smiling, dreamily humming to herself like she did in the Jewel. She’d look away from us towards something beyond the pins that no one else could see.

The behind-the-pin world always seemed a place of great mystery, and I envied the pug faced, fire-plug solid man with a tattoo on his forearm who was allowed to go there. Occasionally balls got stuck in the lane and they had to be retrieved. I loved to watch him delicately, gently as a dancer, single step down one of the little dividers between the lanes to salvage it. Sometimes he’d return, but more often continued his delicate solo, his ungainly pas-de-deux down the length of the lane until he disappeared like the great and powerful Oz into the curtained world behind the pins. Candlepins they were originally called, as if each pin was something that could burn, incandescent and vital.
Over the year and a half since my mom’s death, I sometimes like to think, as she lay tubed and shuttered in her ICU, unable to escape even in her drugged fog from the CNN Headline News my sister insisted on blaring from the little TV above her hospital bed, that if she could have sculpted the way of her passing, that she would have liked to follow that pug-faced man in his single file dance down the narrow wooden lane divider of the Victory Lanes, that she would have gently held his hand as he led her along beyond the blinking red eyes of the Radarays, until she reached those thundering candles, where she might turn around and look at me sitting there quietly in my seat, still being a good boy like she said, and she might wanly smile at me one more time, her slim figure lit in the grating glare of the lights above us, before finally disappearing behind the metal curtain.
Killer Toxins

Lee Ann Pfleider

If first impressions are everything then there is no earthly explanation as to why I consider myself a NASCAR fan. Every race I’ve attended I encounter crazy race fans, and I question am I that bad? The answer is NO. I don’t chase after drivers whose only escape is a thirty-mile-an-hour golf cart. I don’t drool over stockcars, I’m not okay with being dirty, and I don’t claim that I know someone just because they’ve said “Hello, how are you?”

At this very moment I’m questioning why I’m a race fan. I honestly have no answer that satisfies me enough to associate myself with people who seem to crawl out of the hills of North Carolina and other such hillbilly states. I’ll put myself in my place. I’m from Ohio, I speak Ohio twang, and I have a trucker, uncle Bob, yet I hold myself above the out of control NASCAR fan.

I’ll admit, I like the thunder under my feet as the cars speed past me. I like the squint-your-eyes-at-first-smell-of-burnt-rubber-and-high-octane-exhaust-fumes. The distinction needs to be clear that stockcar exhaust is not the same as the exhaust of a Honda Civic or Ford Mustang. It hangs baby blue in the air, like fog with a could-kill-you-odor. Like any other toxin it will kill you if you sniff it too long, but I’m not that addicted.

My first experience with real race fans came in 2001 at the Michigan track. I got out of a 1987 Cadillac patiently waiting for the
trunk to open when a truck two spaces to my left started to roll backwards. My brother bellowed, “Hey buddy you forgot your brake,” as if everyday trucks roll uncontrolled into each other.

A big, bald, white mustached, man, who has followed NASCAR from its bootlegging days dropped, his red Coleman ice chest and started heaving himself belly first towards the Ford Ranger. I heard a bleached-blond Pamela Anderson wannabe scream, “Bill, Bill, the car, the car!” from a few feet behind me.

The man she was screaming at jumped behind the little old cancerous Ford and tried to stop it by planting his feet in the dirt and pushing with all his might on the tailgate. While the woman, offering no assistance, continued to scream, “the car, the car!”

Just as Bill’s feet were about to be pushed under a gray Cutlass, the old timer got the driver’s door open and his right foot on the brake. He slid the rest of the way in the truck, started it, and parked it right back in the same spot as if nothing had happened. His feet were planted firmly on the ground when he leaned back and pressed the parking brake with his right hand, shrugging his shoulders.

*Bill, who was visibly shaken removed his shirt to reveal a Kid Rock gut. Making him and Blondie look like a cheaper, older version of the rocker couple. They walked away connected at the hip not because they were a close couple but because he needed to be held up.*

I stood in the garage area adjusting my fifty-five dollar ticket in its clear plastic rectangular protector hanging from my neck, when I overheard a twenty’ish woman speaking into a walkie talkie.

“I don’t see him! I don’t see him! Where! Where!” A man came across saying, “North, he’s ten steps North of you on the other side of the white building.”

“Are you sure? I was just there I didn’t see him.” “Walk, or your going to come up here and I’m getting the autographs.”

She ignored his command, turned in the direction of the bleachers behind us, and waved as he stood on the top railing holding his binoculars against his face.

“He’s moving, he’s on the move—“

“Where? Where...?”

“—The other side of the building.”

She spit back, “I can’t get there, find someone else.”

Just as she started to pout, a large crowd of fans came tripping over each other around the corner of the white building. Papers, shirts, hats, and Sharpie markers flapped in every direction toward the driver, in
hopes he would scribble his signature on the items. I’ve seen something similar on the Discovery Channel in which buzzards flap their wings and peck at a carcass until they’ve gotten all they want from it. They then fly away searching for their next victim. These race fans had the same motive, get what they want and then move on.

At Richmond International Raceway my father and I sat in the third row of the section just outside of turn two. In the very front row, two men arrived about thirty-five laps into the race. Jimbo, or so I’ll call him, was tall and lanky with sandy blond hair full of natural curl, he had no facial hair other than his uni-brow. He wore a light brown tee-shirt that was most likely white at one point. His cigarette pack was tightly rolled into the left sleeve of his shirt, showing his blue-green tattoo of a rose just below the box. His jeans were politely held up by a brown belt. On his head he wore a cheap black rimed net baseball cap with a foam white front that informed us in neon pink and green that he liked “hot women and cold beer.” His long time friend, Bubba, was just the opposite. He was short and fat. He had more hair on his face than his head and he was not interested in politely keeping his ass from hanging over the rim of his dirty Wal-Mart jeans.

Bubba explained that they were late because they had started to drink early in the afternoon and had passed out in their van waiting for the rain-delayed race to start. “If the ol’ copper didn’t make us move the van we’d still be sleepen it off in the lot.”

The rain didn’t stay away, and sixty five laps into the race it was delayed until one o’clock the next day. Two men seated near us started discussing our entertainment in the stands.

“I’ll bet you ten dollars they won’t make it back tomorrow?” said the well built man dressed in the orange and white of his favorite driver.

A man about two feet shorter said, “I’ll take that bet. You know they’ll be back. They don’t have anything better to do.”

“Nah, they won’t be able to find the place by tomorrow morning.”

Back the next day were Jimbo and Bubba wearing the same clothes as the night before, this time maybe a little cleaner since they had been caught in the drenching rain. Bubba wanted everyone to know that he and Jimbo drove their van over to the K-Mart parking lot and slept there. The daylight revealed that Bubba was missing a few front teeth which caused him to spit when he talked. He loudly told the crowd that they ran out of beer money and only had fifteen dollars for gas. The money reminded the two fans of their bet. The smaller man didn’t have much of a problem taking the ten dollars from the orange and white dressed
fan in front of us, although he did comment, “I wish I was wrong.”

When I thought I could no longer take the plumber’s show Bubba was giving the crowd, a woman in her sixties poked Bubba with a silver cane.

“Please! Either sit down or pull up your pants.”

Bubba didn’t take kindly to this but when her son stood up about 6’3” and close to three hundred pounds, he remained seated and quite for the rest of the race, except for the occasional showering cheer.

Here’s a case of an average person turned fan. As a lucky new fan, I had tickets to a pre-race hospitality show sponsored by Chevrolet at the Pocono Raceway in Pennsylvania. The main speaker of the show was the driver everyone loves to hate: Jeff Gordon. Gordon is a six time Winston Cup champion who is booed just as much as he is cheered. In fact, he makes reference to this in a NASCAR commercial, saying: drama is 60,000 fans cheering for you, sitting next to 60,000 fans who are booing you.

Sitting a few tables ahead of me was an average man in his thirties, suit wearer during the week, race fan on the weekend. He was not the most attractive guy but he’s far from being nicknamed Bubba or Jimbo. Gordon came to the stage and opened the floor for questions.

The average Joe stood up and said “Hey Gordon, how can I get my phone number to Brooke? I’ll give her everything I’ve got.”

His statement is referring to Gordon’s controversial divorce from his former model wife. Gordon ignored the guy saying, “Race questions only please.”

The guy was very proud of himself sticking out his chest covered in a 1-800-Brooke-Call-Me tee-shirt. Crazy fans will do anything to get attention. Later in the race the same guy was featured on the jumbo-tron just on the inside of pit row.

As we were leaving the Michigan track, a crowd gathered around a fence dividing the track area from the parking lot. Curiosity got the best of me and I decided I had to know what was going on. At the fence I could see a helipad. A helicopter would land for a short period, take off, and a different chopper would take its place. I stood and watched for about five minutes. I had no idea what everyone was making a big deal about, so I asked an older lady who was busily snapping and winding her disposable camera, “What’s going on?”

“The drivers are leaving the track, here. They ride helicopters to the Detroit airport.” She said this and rolled her eyes at me as if I were stupid for not knowing the drivers schedules.
“How do you know who is who?” I had to ask.
“I don’t.”
And she thought I was stupid.

I must have twenty Dale Earnhardt Jr. (my favorite driver) tee-shirts and other racing memorabilia that means nothing to me Monday through Saturday, yet Sunday it’s a different story. The point is, there are different degrees of being a race fan, I fall somewhere in the middle. I want to take part in the thrill NASCAR provides, but I don’t want to be characterized as one of the people who create the world that NASCAR thrives on.
And the harpist was silent.
Popular. Sanctuary, a

Shawn M. Young

“There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”
To live in reverence to swine is not my idea of secular ineptitude. I find no privilege in brazen troglodytes, I hasten my withdraw and step backwards to the front, and forwards to the back, and fall in a magnificent, swirling shit storm of “thous’,” “again’st,” soliloquies, and favoritism. I am neither poorly conditioned nor angst-ridden, I am merely forming my didactic, self-conformed, outrageously trite opinion—in the name of William Shakespeare.

Appearing to be wise, and flagrantly failing, with utter penitence seems to cater to the beast of burden. “We know what we are, but know not what we may become,” profundity will get you no where my dearest and yet vaguely enemetic Bill. For you may not be aware of thee. I am lost with-in thine own eyes and yelping for my master helps me not with your posticular, repugnance. Slipping further into your grave mistake forsakes my glassies and burns my “soul” ’till I hunger for nary a heart or a home to collapse into and forbade visiters.

I am the dominant enforcer of post- modernistic literature. I hold, with grave shang gri la, the power to dethrone the cut-throat fuck-o known as William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare, a surname I spew with acid-forkings: utterances like fountains of down-trodden vagrants begging me for a nickel. I look down to the incredulously hard and grey pavement and sneer like a snotty punk at a beaten down shell of a person for whom I care not. I stare “it” in the eye and ask, “Et tu brute’?” The retort is
dim-witted and more daft than a fourth grader in LD, and with a smile of
toothless enwonderment, “it” says to me: Shakespeare?

“I hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created
equal, (except William fucking Shakespeare.)”

I gaze upon a small fragrant piece of papyrus paper, and check
my listings forthwith. My eyes shoot from one side to the next, and burn
from the sheer languid presence of a grouping of classes devoted to the
messiah of the Britain's. “Why does this state recognize that man, as being
required to have been read, in order for me to be a better English major?
Why must I, on matters of purpose and principle, force thine own self to
scrutinize works of shitterature? Is it of any importance to any institution
in the land that wishes me to place my employment, that I must have read
The Merchant of Venice, King Lear, Othello, Hamlet?“

“For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come.” I feel it
necessary to expel my thoughts O reader. I detest William Shakespeare. I
loathe him; I hate to even say his name unless the words, “shitty, over-
rated writer” follow. I feel the utmost sympathy for anyone who is forced
to take a class encircling the epithets of a mindless idiot, whom I am glad,
is dead. What I am not elated to share, however, is that his writings, his
teachings are still in working order. His pentameter is still ticking; his
blue-in-the-face-would-be-good-bullshit is achieving a canonized status
of probable worship—comparable to that of the teachings of Jesus Christ
and his disciples.

A fair well imaged death allows me to heed a proper warning
from the forbearers of a front of clasped soldiers. I slate my mind into a
rigorous empathetic calling for my fellow man. I cry out to he, “Forage,
forage!” But, he answers no. Methinks his last breath was taken from
below the clay, and his mother doth weep like a parable of atrocity. Envy
me. Lose it in me. I am the way the truth and the light. I am your answer
to happiness. I am what you desire when you have lost all hope. BUT!
Remember this! I am righteous and vengeful! And I will strike you down
and make you the scum, the ever crawling waste of fucking life. Do not
play with what you do not understand. Do not question what you perceive
to be right. Follow the leader, take their hand, and hold on tight...
William “Jesus Christ” Fucking Shakespeare the pariah of the “free”-
world.

Excommunication, demoralization, chronosfabrications,
destabilizations.

Thank you.
The night waned with tumultuous decadence. I burned away, seated snugly in what seemed to be a chair, no less a stool, gripping me inside its plains—following the path to exultation, wishing that what hath intrinsically wrought the aim of life through anguish; perusing blindly, the daily print; I followed the night, and timed my heart with a seconds pass. The bleeding night sky dripped its darkness onto the fair roof of the Shelter, the Shelter I inhabited and where I would receive my penitence for basking away, nightly: Zombie to the stars and moon.

Upon first glance, one would say that the prisonic atmosphere in which I inhabited was something that is of malignant shock. The insects of night, smoke-filled glass, haze of normality (shrouded by the dark of fire), sure, for it tracked my move, at the Shelter. Orwellian pupils perched from above, as if [g]od’s hellhounds hath picked a spot, high—but not out of reach—and watchfully emblazoned their eyes upon my person. Mine own thoughts were to this as they were too many topics of the day.

Machina. That was the word for the day. The word that received such a variety, many would speak it with reference to machine. Whilst living in purgatory a.k.a. the Shelter, this torturous idea of device ruled the day. Without such, none would exist. My place at the Shelter would cease, and the humans would no longer seek out the machines.

Passerbys flippantly nodded at my soul, as I work unto waste and witness my bones crash from within my person, and upon the floor. Although the fragments of torture brought forth from the Shelter discharge into my skull, I maintain my position, like a post—unit commander I. I stand behind a medium density fiberboard shrouded with a veneer/plasticy covering—rattled with striations. I liken this mere man-made device to what thine own ticking device must have viewed askew—I translate my rageorous, indecent feelings into what seems to be a harangue of a mantra; my diatribe of bombast, my true feelings of disgust.

I must have waned as the moon, but I did not wot, for my frailty needed one of certain angst. A dear face collapsed before eyes of hell; a face that once upon a time triggered a response into my Trauma (Trauma being a superior word in this context, if context is one to contest, one that might be over burdened by most, but translated into horror by some. Sadly, I was not what I wanted to be. I became what was once me, and Trauma? Trauma stayed as cold and normal as I always knew she had been). Fearing the demons, the brimstone of the holy, I would often stare...gaze even, upon the evil (un)-ring-ing telephone that taunted me (think of your person trapped inside of a lift, and imagine thousands of hungry insects buzzing your ears. The temperature slowly rising, until the sweat is enough to make the dirty fucking insects think that you are water, and you need drained...such was my relationship with the telephone). Some gray and
feather-coated nights, Trauma would ring me. Telling me of “news.” I, attentive as always, held back tears as I chuckled into the receiver of that device. One that was used for pitiful communication between Trauma and i.

For now, I had bellowed out the wrong color. I was not of the old, I was not of the new, I was of the once was. I was of the unaided, the forgotten, the lost. Mine heart, that once existed hand in hand with that of Trauma, now landed angrily upon the planks of walking, and as I attempted to re-collect what was once positioned firmly with-in the created chest of [g]od’s forgotten child, I lost sight and began to give up.

At dusk my prayers: ones of disdain, and shattered finality; ended with a precursor to decision. A Passerby, standing Eastly and filling the contents of a “mug,” smugly swaggered toward the exit, hand on one polystyrenated beverage, the other reaching for what appeared to be the gripping bar of the glass swinging device, the Passerby paused, stood in staleity, and smiled from once to the side toward the other—I peered through the Passerby, eyes grey and small, whiskers complacent and wanton. The ragged suit of grime, the stench of work and the face to prove it. I side-stepped, this would give my skull with eyes that cried and a nose that smelled nothing, nothing but the horror of man-made provisions and Machina...more of a Southerly direction for the purpose of communicating (as I was given my daily bread to do.) It was whence I used the pulleys from behind my mother and father’s created vision, and strained forebodingly at the Passerby. The Passerby’s tubes for the aroma bleached the air with a caste system. The stars burned like fire through the Shelter’s glass encasement. More of a stare passed, this time the aptly included nod, a nod that seemed once too often included in the relationships that I had with the needy Passerbys. The warmth of breath began to find its way out of my mouth. It was here that I knew that all Passerbys must have been beaten and neglected as children, their fragile minds living in a different existence than even I.

<<.79.>> I said to he.
<<Oh. Well, everyone here always give it me for free—. >>
<<.79,>> I said again.
<<Hey, you don’t have to be a dick,>> he said.
<<Yes I do. I am alone, I want nothing more than to die, to be free,” I said.
<<Wow, here—,>> His hand trembled as he passed the currency to me. <<It’s a buck, keep the change.>>

Every morn thereafter I would wait, as if I had nothing. Friends of past, lovers of old, strained, lost, I waited patiently as my time would come. For that of the prognostic, a soothsayer, that in which the “medium”
of trust and beguiling would surpass, and test what I had answered, thus creating a “new” person, a new beginning—for the welded hammer of the gods swung fully towards my life, and I watched as a cat doth—waiting for my certain demise. What former occupants of the Shelter should I receive for the remainder of my malcontent, positioned within the hallowed walls?

The bell struck the extinguishing note of the deep morn. I nodded at Relief, her eyes met mine only for a few brief moments, for she refuted the commonality in which we shared at the Shelter. I passed with my most massive of sympathies for her continuing that in which she knew not, that I would, before the preceding, not return into the box of the Shelter. Fumbling, my ears drew towards the rear. I pictured a wretched witch, flowing upon hell, smote from her own evil—trampling the humans in her path, disgusted by those that would, in need of coffee, plot a course over hell’s half acre. Drawing closer to the sound—a cacophonous delight—I chuckled inwardly picturing in my brain a vision. A vision of inanity, one of insanity, two, leading to my foreseen incarceration. Relief appeared from the rear. Mine eyes dropped to the planks of walking, those beautiful planks that I envisioned hell upon, and what hath my eyes wrought? Nothing. No Machina of destruction, no nightmares of evil, no rolling darkness of spent humans in search of coffee. What I spied was feet...I looked up.

<<I started running the reports, sorry it was so loud, but you can go whenever...>>

<<Great.>> My smile dropped. My sickening dreams of annihilation moot by Relief. I stared at her. I followed her wandering, light eyes as she refused to figure my own eye color. What was she about, I wagered. Frankness took hold of me, I, with fore thoughts of a plan, lay my heart into her, attempting to pierce her “soul” with my eyes. Mine breath jumped, mine cracked heart palpitated, I felt the syllables begin to form upon the edge of mine angry, justified tongue. I spake:

<<Fine, bye.>> Quitting the counter, and quitting the Shelter, I left to enter my carriage.

Following the path towards “home” I awakened my thoughts to a new horizon. Lying, deathfully, as if that in which all living beings fear answered my cry, upon my bed of horror—swirling with the demons of earthly delight—I stared blankly about the old darn concocting a plan, one to which I would abhor and begrudgingly detest, at odds with thine self. The concoction I mixed, like that of the pale alchemist feeding his thirst for greed under the night’s sky, was the intangible sort, the beleaguered, annotated, cremated remains of my once life. I foresaw what I would become upon my path of pathological breakdown, I detested that
future, I rejected it wholly and wished upon my Demons, my true, my loving, my familial; creatures that shamed the good, floss of the pious, distrust of the feign-love I solely felt, often. I would destroy what this pipe organ had played for me. The blasting sound of shattered hope.

I faithfully resigned my position of which I despised nightly, for sore the eyes of the angels of Trauma from whence I struggled to adopt. Closing the lids of stagnant shit, I watched life fall down below the reaches of hell and *magnus sortum*, I crept forthwith, attaining bleak duskful anguish among what I held dear in my heart of hearts.

Thieves of alter lives, plunderers of ethereal holding—I fought, struggled, battled with the fiercest of beasts, and awoke every eve only to find my position true and hard—Whence the night’s arms of fire reached for the “holding” of my heart, I angered it. I scraped down the cancerous bones, charred with the insignia of faces and dreams, and pictured the one-time-eye shut to the atrocities of what the human brain is capable of finding throughout life, especially when the lost and angered souls of the wretched past tunnel into your throat and live like maggots in your decaying, smelling flesh. “I was not the farthest from my dream, I am what I hold in utter contempt, and transpire into filthy worlds transgressed by fucks and degenerate whores of strangled lives.” This I scrawled upon my notes. Figuring that soon my death would live, my life would die, my Freedom would arrive. And I? I would ride along, smiling to this and that, attaining the feelings I deserve.

One, two, three, four, following my rotted corpses of insectual fiends, I dined nightly on a hearty meal of Hatred and Desire (thinking all along of more than I could ever grasp); I scribed my intelligible, lost and devoid of meaning “feelings” upon a tablet of natural report. This, by chance of language and shattered rings, I bore down that in which I wince, following the winds of season and screaming through the air with tails of fire and eyes like soot, standing dreamily on the steeple of a dimly lit twilight frowning, frowning at civilization and cackling thunderously at the birds. I, I, I, what was it? Was it that that can not be seen? That that screams? That that feels, loses, cries, dreams? That that flies, away like the bird? That that wishes for more, but is never heard? Not i, (I).

Graveling, pouring of sound falling down from the steeple. My feet of bone and skeletal mass cut from the trash of man. My knees, knees I did not create (knees that no one did create) battered from the gravel of the steeple. And open, lighted hole in the wall awaited my return. From the wind that knew me too well and the birds that dreamed to watch me suffer, I did return. Return into my parlor of disgust, full of my randominities, and love-ing watchful eyes of strangers from the cinema. The bell of night turned into the morn of darkness, I crawled under the
coverings and saw faces of those I wished to touch...Those that I wished to want to touch me; feelings of camaraderie, of sharing, of love, O love that eludes me so.

Days’ to sleep. Nights’ to fade. Tick tock of the clock. I fell in love with that in which I had always had. That in which had always had me. One as two? Denied, as one is one. Her smiling face, always there—holding my tool of scription. Never leaving, never wanting, never shying, never falling away, never tired, never wary of my thoughts, always “composed”, a real, REAL, lady. She would be ready for me to put down, to exercise such. I could have found her anywhere, anytime, but waited for this moment in life to find her where she had always been.

She would crawl on her knees to me, repeating that in which I had dictated. Never feeling overused and never feeling unused, always feeling ready to serve, me, I, thine own heart, owned by the likes of a simple invention. She never grew cold. SHE, never lost touch, never cared that I, for the lack of better words, lost myself in her. This, my salvation, this, my justice, my heart, and my love. When I was burdened not, and my wrist burnt from the scribbling of transcription, I would carefully place her back under the chair to await my re-arrival, and open herself up to me. I needed no human forms for a good tickity. She and I, I and her, together as one—Human and his written word.

One hanged, (not i (I)), feeling the night’s sick air burning my face with its bile and vomit, I thrust my arms forth, narrowly missing everything in my path, and jettisoned my school boy feelings out of the silicatic pain/pane of distaste and mired in what was a day of reformation. A day of the “second coming,” a re-birthing.

Contacting previous do-gooders and the like, and giving trade greetings, faintly and eagerly, I saw the sun for the first time in months. The golden glory of life everlasting shone through the gray filament of shade, and with a movement of tenacious happenstance, I winked at it and forced myself to try and mend what broken life I had led. Giving second notice to those who had wished me ill, I grasped the rail of movement and traveled upon its straight line of sight towards the road less traveled, thus creating a phoenix of such magnitude that I myself had longed to forgive all and every such an occurrence that twisted my mere human thoughts into magical rides of azure.

The glories of day, the angels of light, all sit smugly upon my shoulder and direct my position into a new path. The stammering of those toothless wonders from the bygone era of night sit on each others shoulders waiting for my return. My path is true and wondrous, my lengths are strange and rewarding, I am of the once more, and shall never rethrone myself to the once was. I welcomed Freedom, and smiled.
Contributors
to the 2003 issue

Justin Bell is majoring in English at OSUM. He is currently at work on translating the complete works of Shawn M. Young into English.

Rosalie Benet is a junior at OSUM majoring in English.

Rachel Bond, a sophomore at OSUM, focuses on Photography, but enjoys a dash of English.

Aaron Cook has dreams of grandeur. Spending every spring break in a different drunken city, sometimes Panama City, sometimes Daytona Beach, he lives life to the fullest. He once broke his arm in a haze so heavy that he refuses to admit it ever happened. At the end of Winter Quarter of 2003, Aaron will be graduating from the beautiful campus of The Ohio State University at Marion. He claims that he will miss all of his fellow students as well as the faculty. He once said, "Love is eternal, never forget that."

Kristin Crump is a senior at OSUM, majoring in English. After 13 years, and 4 universities, she will finally be graduating with her bachelor's degree in June.
Mandy Lewis is a sophomore at OSUM, double majoring in Photojournalism and English.

Stuart Lishan teaches English at OSUM. He had the pleasure of teaching all these good writers in English 568 (Creative Nonfiction II).

Lee Ann Pfleider is a senior at OSUM, majoring in English.

Shawn M. Young is a rank four at the Ohio State University at Marion, majoring in English. Shawn once entered a writing contest and lost...but he has not given up on humanity. Shawn loves kittens and fluffy clouds.
Photo credits

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to the 2003 issue

The photographs of Rachel Bond are featured on pages 6, 28, 32, 33, and 76.

Rosalie Benet contributed the photograph on page 26.

Kristin Crump contributed the photograph on page 48.

Mandy Lewis contributed the photographs on pages 50 and 53.

The photographs of Justin Bell are featured on pages 10, 59, 62, and 68.
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