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## Exile Vol. XLIV No. 2

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### Authors

Ezra Pound, Paul Durica, Alison Stine, Colin Bossen, Angel Lemke, Erin Malone, Bekah Taylor, Danielle Burhop, Lyn Tramonte, and Ben Sutherly

# Exile



Spring 1998



# **Exile**

**Denison University's  
Literary and Art Magazine**

**42nd Year  
Spring Issue**



You of the finer sense,  
Broken against false knowledge,  
You who can know at first hand,  
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought:  
I have weathered the storm,  
I have beaten out my exile.

—Ezra Pound

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*"Roles We Play" by John Novak '99*

## Artichoke

It is almost midnight  
and I am eating an artichoke  
scraping the thick leaves with my teeth  
pricking myself  
trying to get to the heart.

—Colin Bossen '98

## Salt

A woman scatters  
salt on the sidewalks this cold morning  
the way my mother used to  
throw feed to the chickens,  
holding the eggs secret to her stomach.  
The hens were getting better  
at hiding them. But her fingers hunted  
till they hit something hard,  
scrapped the dried white shit  
and straw,  
shell chinking against shell, small music.  
When it was winter,  
she slipped an egg or two into her shirt,  
and they nestled there, warm  
and red-brown between her breasts,  
bantam, beating.

I will drive through this snow to reach my sister's  
for dinner. My ovaries inside me like the food on cool plates,  
like bell peppers split up the sides,  
tear-cut seeds, white and thin as sesame,  
strung from yellow skin strings,  
salted fish hung to dry,  
spilling bloodless  
athwart the knife, across the table, into our hands.

My sister's eggs  
would be pumpkin seeds,  
fat and fleshy behind curtains of string—  
the kind we used to burst  
through with our fists,  
digging the seeds  
out with our hands,  
orange skins to the elbow.

*Do you want to see,*  
my doctor asks,  
has a hand mirror right there ready  
beside her silver tools.  
A man would never ask me  
this, but we are supposed to take pride  
in our mysteries.  
I shake my head on the paper pillow.

There is more than a sheet  
separating us.  
There is a curtain of skin,  
hiding nothing but breath.  
There are seeds that have been scattered  
into cold air,  
like salt  
melting.

—Alison Stine '00



## Left

Fix yourself on this: the way her hair parts is a straight arrow. Kneeling, she smiles and pulls stubs of grass from the ground, scattering it under the shade of a willow tree. She feels his attention, the cut of her hair falling over her face; she stays face down at her work.

And they talk and change subjects and sit against the thick tree in the afternoon. At one time Alison jumps up, to run to the house for cans of Orange Slice. They wipe wet hands on shorts legs; the bottoms of their shorts are cool and damp from the ground. Outside of the tree's protection the heat floats and shakes the air; they stay out of the killing sun, the August before their last high school year.

"This grass is so dry," Alison says because it's hurt her hands to keep pulling at something so harsh. "I haven't mowed in three weeks. It's just not growing." She scans the expanse of front yard that welcomes to her house, now the "Breeze Inn," some oasis in West Virginia for white water rafters and rich Virginians on long weekends.

She tells Jon it's about time for him to head out, quiet without apologizing; he's stretching and surprised and says, "It's four o'clock already?"

It feels like four o'clock because she's watched the long hours pass on her watch and so she nods. "Ten 'til." They stand up and pound off their shorts and look towards the garage where he's parked his bike. They start for the garage but are caught at the perimeter of the tree's shade, reluctant to shove out into the hot hot world again.

\*\*\*\*\*

She lets the screen door fall flat against the frame and quickly rounds the rail for the stairs, but a voice from the basement scratches up for her to stop. "Ally? That you?"—as if it could be anyone else.

"Yeah," the annoyed tone of voice asking, "Did you expect something from me?" She continues up the steps, just trying to make it up, then to the right, past the bathroom and right again to duck her head under the sloped ceiling of her room, shut the door and turn the lock.

Anyways a locked door can't even be a defiance when its release is a skeleton key your father keeps in his pocket. A locked door. It's a fucking symbol, she thinks at the door.

"Ally?" Again, what? "Come down here a sec. I wanna talk to you before the guests get here." So unlock the door and go down, to the basement. She pulls at the knob, tests the lock, looks back to the unmade bed with its Kermit the Frog sheets she's had since second grade. Not because they can't afford new ones, and they've got plenty others—wedding gifts, flannel sheets bought for some frozen winter that blew right by, linen sets that'd been embroidered when everyone wanted embroidered sheets. Sheets ironed and then left to sit and make permanent creases while Kermit the Frog turned soft and pale from so many washes. But the door has to be unlocked and things have to be done. People'll be here any minute.

The house is dark but light from the open basement door pulls up to Alison, she

slows her steps. The headache-smell says he's painting, always painting, an easel made from the old music stand she'd used when she would practice the trombone in fifth grade. He hums something slow and operatic, it stretches through like the light to reach her because she's standing outside of the door and won't go in.

"Come on in—I'm just finishing up on something."

"That's OK, I'll wait outside." And because she should offer a reason, "I can't stand the smell of that paint." Her arms are folded against the damp must of their basement. She doesn't need to see them to know that his large and many paintings lean against every concrete wall, more and more every day. She turns to stare somewhere dark, away from his light and sound and smell and eyes.

But he wants to be in her eyes, so he leaves his seat and crosses to the doorway. Wipes his hands on dirty jeans, old ones marked with paint, working pants. He's happy, sweating, the prickly white beginnings of a beard showing his age, tiredness. "Won't you please just come and see this one? She's looking so beautiful and I've put her in that blue dress with the beads, you know..."

But Alison doesn't need to see this painting, there's been so many others just like it, stacks and stacks cluttering the basement walls. The same thin blonde hair, smiling face, head thrown back in a laugh. Healthy sun lighting up her mom's young features: her father's perfect, painted replicas of old photos, captured before the tired eyes and lines of the mother Alison knew.

"Dad," she speaks sharply, interrupts him for the business at hand. "Come on, it's after four. What do you need me to do right now?"

\*\*\*\*\*

That night they serve grilled herb chicken and rosemary potatoes; a pretty good wine, large salads, coffee after dinner. One table orders dessert, chocolate-apple cheesecake, the rest Alison saves to give Jon the next day. To show she really was thinking of him. She contents from table to table, four groups totaling eleven guests. Three tables are couples and the fourth is a rowdy crowd of boys, college age, spilling wine down their throats and laughing louder with every bottle. They'll never leave so she can clean up, they'll stay late and drink and flirt with her and her dad will look out every so often from the kitchen window, lights off to hint. And waiting and watching and they'll never leave, just never, so things can get on and finally she can go to bed.

When she calls Jon later that night he's all apologies. "I'm so sorry, Al, I didn't notice it was so late this afternoon." That's okay. "I should've been paying attention, left sooner. Next time I'll be more careful." But she hadn't reminded him of the time, was just embarrassed to say anything earlier, and he should've been more careful anyways. He knew, should've known.

Her quick laugh, response to his words. Oh, that's OK. Nothing happened; "this time" was a silent addition.

"So, can I come over later?" He's been trying this almost every night lately, but it's always the same answer. No, of course not. I'm too tired. It's too late. He might hear you. Always the real reason last, thrown out like it doesn't matter, just one of many possi-



bilities. A small uncomfortable silence and then they talk for a few minutes more. Alison whispers with cold fingers wrapped around the phone, springing the cord, until her father gets on the other line and says alright Honey it's time to get off.

"No problem, Mr. Cain," Jon says, quite respectful in tone of voice. They make plans for tomorrow, whisper good nights.

Two minutes later she's under the sheets, still wearing the pair of jeans and t-shirt she'd put on after the boys had finally gone up to their room. There's a knock and then her father enters, having changed out of the white chef's uniform he wears for the guests' benefit. "You ready?" he smiles, and the lamp on her nightstand spooks his face, the dark hollows of his cheeks, the thin nose. His eyes deep caves of sag and then the darkest place, the mouth that opens to what will it do? to scream or cry or speak or just open and close and open again with no sound, gummy and toothless—this old man, her father, broken and breaking into dust like plaster struck by a hammer.

Alison's up with the flashlight in hand, clock says 12:14; they're starting late. She follows him smoothly downstairs, so practiced, the every-night of it all, their routine. Should be back in bed by one, unless he takes his time. But he's quicker than his daughter, carried by excitement, and waits on the porch. He's so happy, eyes wet in the night. He carries a big metal flashlight and is already wearing rain boots. Alison's wait by the back porch door, she pulls them on, he starts with clean, long steps toward the pond. She plugs her ears as she goes to block the screams of crickets.

\*\*\*\*\*

The earth is so many holes, some filled with water, others with sand or dirt, something new that wasn't always there but's still perfectly part of nature. The night in West Virginia smells like a camp fire. Like wet dirt, black air, moons, fat toads. There's a heaviness to the air that leaves your shoulders sore for carrying its weight. There's a summer that drags you down like moss to crawl and clutch and spread sideways. There's a willow tree to pull you vertical, leaning, unable to stand up on your own.

So she goes to the pond with him, cracks sticks and limbs and leaves to get there. She stands and watches, or looks away, while he throws out the petals and prays the prayers and kneels at the bank to break dirt in his hand. He caresses a large stone slab that pokes perpendicular to the ground, runs his fingers in the grooves of a name and a date carved in rough strokes, inexpert, beginning to smooth now with the erosion of his hands. He cries, turning from the stone to the pond to the moon and finally, Alison. But she's not really there.

It's been five months, one full tourist season, since her mother left and the nights began. So many nights exactly alike, the smallness of two figures in the bug world of a night in the country, what eleven guests who now lie snoring in The Breeze Inn had driven and paid to find.

But they don't want, won't take, can't and don't have to, this night, this crouching and crying around an earth's hole filled to here with water, still high despite the dry summer. He sits on his knees and rocks. She stands arms crossed over her chest and heart

pumping. The loudness threatens to escape from the heart cage, to give her away for what she really is. Not his, not a child that would pray for this kind of mother, dead to their world. But rather, to throw dry grass and pond dirt in her face, pick up toads and hurl their bodies at this woman that has not died but merely walked away from the man she married and the girl she made.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Breeze Inn's guest brochure describes a "sumptuously-restored eighteenth century farmhouse, providing the best mix of rustic charm and hotel amenities." It boasts of home cooking, comfortable rooms to "let," and proximity to the best white water rafting around. It's located near Fayetteville, West Virginia, where people are born and live and die without ever getting up out of their porch chairs.

The Inn is surrounded by an old "new-growth" forest; the trees impose their brocoli stalks from all directions as you raft down the New River. Its complicated rapids attract college students and other adventure-seekers. Guests always leave The Inn completely satisfied, already planning for next year's trip.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finally in bed, almost one-thirty, Alison pulls the sheet up to her shoulders but she's hot and kicks it back down to the bottom of the bed. She's left the light on, not yet ready for sleep; she can hear her father in the bathroom they now share. The run of water down pipes, the sudden catch of a faucet shut off, slippers steps muffling on the wood floor. The two of them cramped up in this tiny bathroom—we're being pushed out of our own house, she thinks. And then, whose fault is that? But really, whose is it?

She remembers the first night he'd come into her room, early in the season, when only one or two of the guest rooms were in use. She remembers it this way because the house felt emptier than it has in more recent months. Hollow, lonely sounds jumped off the walls and hit each other when she creaked open doors at night for a drink of water or something to eat.

There had not been much work to do that night, but Alison was more tired than she had thought—too tired to sleep. Finally she'd just resigned herself to the inevitable, the indulgence of asking herself questions she pretended away during the day. Her mom was gone, and there were no answers anywhere, no possibility. She lay completely still in bed, willing herself to stop thinking, please just stop and forget and sleep without dreams.

Then came the knock, knuckles strong against wood. Something in the suddenness of the knock that begged importance. "Go away," she asked of her father, bold behind new tears and the right to privacy she thought they gave her.

Instead he turned the knob to come in, but it was locked. Then it gave—his skeleton key—and he just let himself in. But not to hold her or share in her special type of grief. Not to ask questions that, like hers, could not be answered. "Come on, get dressed. I want to show you something." And when he saw she wasn't coming, he pulled her by one arm from

the bed, the first time he'd ever been physical with her, and the only time he would ever need to be because after that night she always made sure she was ready to go. It wasn't the roughness of his touch but the insistence of his eyes, the way they blocked out the possibility of anything but absolute compliance. Her father. And then, not.

The pond was familiar to Alison as a spot for picnics and a place to play when little friends had come to visit so many years ago—not for the moonlit grave site of her undead mother. Flowers, candles, some of the things she'd left behind, but the worst was the gray stone slab he'd put up for a "proper" burial. She didn't need to read the "Madeline L. Cain" carved with so much precision. Or the date, March 11, 1997, the day that would forever stand in Alison's mind as the day her world fell.

In his hand he carried the note her mother had left, the words that didn't say anything, though they tried, outside of the simple fact that she was gone. With a cigarette lighter he burned the note in his hand into ash, barely flinching when the singe touched his flesh. Then he scattered the pieces in the water of the pond and gave his benediction. "From now on she is dead to us."

So then the pond was nothing of her childhood and everything of the nights they tramped out there, the numbness spreading and starting earlier and earlier until it carried Alison through the day, the anticipation of their new ritual. It stuck its tree branches in her like fingers, poking through, pointing things out, until she couldn't ignore questions and she couldn't recreate the love for her mother she knew she once felt. There was nothing left for this memory, this mom, or for her father who finally she's decided is the one to blame.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jon opens the screen door and despite herself Alison is relieved to see him. The diversion of his interest, insistence that this time they spend the day at his house, although she hardly ever wants to and he knows this.

Jon's mom has flooded the kitchen with the smell of a pot roast. His little twin sisters come running through the entryway, pulling on Jon's legs and then hiding behind them, quickly shy in front of Alison. He shakes them off and leads Alison to the living room, where they can talk.

He sits her down like he's about to propose marriage, takes her hands in his lap. But it's not that. "Listen, Alison, I'm thinking about going up to WVU in a few weeks, maybe sit in on some classes, see the campus. My cousin's boyfriend goes there, said I could stay a couple days with him if I want." And then, the hard part, the most-practiced, staring away so as not to anticipate her reaction from her face: "You could come along too. I mean, we'd take a day off from school and just drive down there and see what we see." He speaks in a rush to get it all out.

Alison pulls her hands from Jon's grasp and leans back on the couch. She can't look at him and tries to focus instead on his sisters, fighting over a doll in the corner.

Jon sits on the edge of his seat, still leaning in to Alison; she can feel him looking for her gaze. "Get out of here," he yells at his sisters, with maybe a little too much force. They scatter, running to the kitchen to cry at their mom.

"Look, Alison, I know this is going to sound terrible but there's no other way to



say it." He pauses, trying to concentrate on thinking before he speaks. "It's just, it's been five months."

He almost can't look her in the eyes, but forces himself. He's pleading with her. But "it's been five months" and they still can't mention what "it" is. He really doesn't know everything like he thinks he does. He really can't sit here and tell her what she should or shouldn't be doing. He has no idea. And then, "We have to do things to continue with our lives."

She feels like a little kid, the steady throb of "It's not fair" drumming in her head. And how are "we" included in this? It's not his mother that left without explaining why—if there is an explanation. It's not his father that drags him out to some fake grave every night so he can stand there and watch him change the nature of his pain to something more normal. Ordinary. What a word—something that really has nothing to do with Alison's life.

"Jon, I think I'd like to be alone for a while." She's firm but quiet, not trembling or about to cry.

He folds his arms tight against his chest, looking for something in the carpet below him. "Alison." He pauses. "You know I love you." He drops his arms loose, palms open and facing the ceiling. "Why can't you ever just let someone help you? You think you have to do everything on your own?" He looks away, knows he's accusing. "Just go ahead and go. I'm sorry." He's breathing very quickly like he could just start crying or screaming if she doesn't leave right now.

So they walk to the door; he puts his hands on her shoulders and kisses her goodbye. His mom calls from the kitchen: "But you're not leaving already, Ally, honey? We haven't even eaten," and it's all Alison can do to keep her voice level. "Some other time, Mrs. Joseph. I have to get home now."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Back when Alison's mom was alive, we began turning our humble home into what you now know as 'The Breeze Inn.' It'd always been a dream of Mad and I to show outsiders how beautiful our quiet little state really is, and this seemed like the perfect way.

"And then, right before we opened for our first season of tourists, Madeline left our world." He pauses, looks away. Re-focuses. "It came as a complete surprise to everyone, and after much pain and doubt, Alison and I decided to keep her mother's dream alive.

"I have such a good little helper here. She's my angel. In these trying times I turn to the Lord, yes, and He has blessed me with the best daughter you could ever imagine."

Playing his audience, Mr. Cain wipes his eyes with the corner of a handkerchief and puts a stiff, farmer's arm around Alison. New guests have just arrived from Maryland and this is the little speech he always gives before showing them to their rooms. The hand-holding couple shifts uneasily in their wrinkled traveling clothes and pulls a little tighter, looking around for their room.

\*\*\*\*\*

The flashlight and the moon are enough to see by, tonight, and memory leaves her with the rest. Alison runs through the woods, the same path, free from following her father and pretending in his purpose. Maybe it's the way air rushes when you run, but it feels light and quick instead of the usual thick load. She can run faster.

Suddenly then Alison hits the clearing, almost falling out through tree trunks into the pocket of air around the pond. She stops herself, not hiding anything in her voice, whatever animal-cries and pants that seem most natural just now. And this time she does drop to her knees, but not to pray. She takes the small trowel from her pocket and digs, turning earth and disrupting things and scraping around the stone until she can pull it. Stretching, grunting, free and up and out where she tosses it, surprisingly light, to splash and sink in the water.

\*\*\*\*\*

He's waiting in the kitchen, she knew he would be, but it doesn't matter anymore. He sits at the table in the dark, his usual place facing the porch and the back door, and there's no reason for her to close the door softly. "You went without me?" he asks, hurt at being left behind.

She's waiting for him to beg, to cry, to plead that she should stay always with him and never leave and continue this lie, or truth. But he doesn't move or make a sound. He doesn't drop his head into his hands and moan about loss. She wants to wound him some more, because she can. "I guess I've decided to leave," she says, realizing as she says the words that this really is the conclusion she's come to. "I am sorry..." to be leaving him in the inn alone, but not really about anything else.

He sits in the stony silence, perfect posture, until his back bends and he does put his head in his hands.

Some time later there's new work to do, new paintings. While she's brushing her teeth Alison hears him drag the box of old pictures from the hall closet, childhood photos of Alison, happy at Grandma's house or in a plastic kiddie pool. He'll be up, working, until morning.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's late but Alison has to call Jon, even to wake up his parents, because she has to say good-bye. It's the least he deserves, after today and really every day this summer. On the third ring his mom answers, the tired and worried voice we use to answer late-night calls. Alison breathes in and just hangs up, not exhaling until the phone's back in its cradle. There's just nothing she can do about this right now. She'll call him from Virginia; and then she knows where she's going. The only other family she has; they have to take her. Just until she can think of the next step.

Alison goes up to her room and packs things, not really looking at them, and gets into bed but doesn't sleep all night.

\*\*\*\*\*

When you stay awake all night your eyes start to dream without you. There were the leaves and they turned early that Fall. It was huge, the melting of Summer into Fall, green into yellow, orange, red and then finally the dead leaves that fell and blew over the October grass. Got crunched down by early snows in November and December, and then the snow whipped up with the wind in January to burn your cheeks red.

She's not dreaming about her mother, or her father, or even how her life will be starting tomorrow. She's trying not to even think of it. Her eyelids twitch and drop and all she can do is pull them wide to keep them open. There's a man who has knelt at a small pond near Fayetteville, West Virginia every night since the beginning of summer. He continues; the cold of winter doesn't matter. He tends two small graves and never looks up from his busy work, eyes closed in the dark. It's always so dark. When he gets up he feels his way through the woods guided by his feet, his memory, the light like a painting.

—Lyn Tramonte '98





*"Passages to the Self" by Kira C. Becker '00*

## Exile Talks to Reginald McKnight

*Reginald McKnight is the author of the short story collections Moustapha's Eclipse, The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas, White Boys and the novel I Get on the Bus. He is best known for his short fiction and has been awarded an O. Henry Award, the Pushcart Prize, the Drue Heinz Literary Prize, the PEN Hemingway Special Citation, a Whiting Writer's Award and an NEA fellowship. He currently teaches at the University of Maryland. McKnight recently delivered a reading at Denison and two Exile staffers were granted a rather long and rather wonderful conversation.*

*Exile:* You mentioned before that writers are not merely individuals; they are more like compilations of different writers, and you focused on the legacy of writing. Could you talk a little more about that?

McKnight: Nothing is done in a vacuum, particularly with this art form. I think it is possible for there to be painters who are native painters, sculptors, singers: people who sort of rise out of the sea on a halfshell with very little formal study and almost no formal tutoring or teaching. With writing it depends upon mimesis; you have to read in order to write. Writing is perhaps the most tenuous art form in a certain sense because it is wholly dependent upon what surrounds you, what you have read; you could read your work aloud, particularly if you are a poet or a playwright, and your words can be interpreted, but, for the writer of prose, reading always has to be part of the practice. I shudder at those writers who say—and a lot of my students will say this—“I really don't like to read that much. I like to write.” It drives me crazy, and I don't know how to ameliorate that. Usually, it turns out that most people aren't serious in the long run and give up. Why do they give up? Because they are not fueling themselves. Fuel is what proceeds us. It's literature. As I said in class earlier today, I don't recommend anyone being too selective, especially when you're beginning. You should read everything available, everything—that includes poetry, prose, as well as drama, that includes newspaper editorials—everything because each different genre, each different category or type of prose writing is talking about the dynamics of rhythm, which is very important. It helps develop the ear to be exposed to different forms of verbal expression.

*Exile:* You just mentioned rhythm, and this may seem a little silly, but how important is music to you?

McKnight: It's real important. I remember when I was working on my novel *Get on the Bus* I listened to this one tape over and over again because it had the kind of mood and rhythm I was trying to establish in the book. When I was about three-quarters of the way through the final draft the tape burned—it got caught up in the tape player. I was so pissed off. I tore the thing out of the cassette case and threw it on the floor. But I ran to the nearest record store and bought another one. I had to order it, so I had to wait two weeks before I could write again. So, yes, rhythm is extremely important. I always teach my students that lan-



guage is music; therefore, you have to learn the delicacies and intricacies of grammar and mechanics. You have to learn how to use semicolons as opposed to colons because they are the rest stops, the pauses, which are akin to musical notes. Consequently, in every short story or chapter I evaluate I mark those things. Some of my students complain because I mark everything I can, but the reason is that every piece should have a particular rhythm. Everybody's speech does. The human voice is a musical instrument. Very much so. I remember once teaching a class and saying similar things, and this one young woman said, "All this stuff you're saying about voice, about music, doesn't really matter for my generation because everybody I know speaks the same way." I said, "Listen to people. You're not listening to people." How is it that you can recognize a friend's voice in a crowd? Because it's the expression, not just the tone, but the rhythm and the rhyme of the speech. She looked really skeptical. She crossed her arms and said, "I don't think so. I think all my friends speak the same way." So I said, "I tell you what. Tape record them, and then transcribe the sentences, and then tell me if they all speak the same way." She tried it. She came up to me two days later and said, "You were right about it. Everybody does speak differently." Frankly, it's not an issue for every writer, though. There are certain writers who write terrific novels but who have absolutely no ear. Stephen Crane wasn't a great prose stylist but his novels are terrific. Balzac—same sort of problems. But rhythm is most important to the short story writer because our genre is somewhat closer to poetry than it is to the straight, prose novelistic manner.

*Exile:* Along with American language and culture, how much to you draw upon African cultures and your experiences in Africa in your work?

McKnight: Enormously. It's hard to articulate the exact extent because I think real influence is almost unreal, like the subconscious. You don't go out and say, "I'm going to go to Italy for six months and get some experience," because it's hard to know what experiences will be conducive to good writing, great writing. There are those students who go out and work in canneries in Alaska because they wanted that experience, when really it's right in your own back yard. The important thing is the attention to detail. The nuance of human life which has to be captured with the writer's eye. You don't have to go out and do exciting things.

So I would say it was an enormous experience, but it wasn't anything like I thought it would be. The first two weeks I contracted malaria—cerebral malaria which is deadly and very painful. I wasn't looking for that. I was just hoping for some nice walks on the beaches and that sort of thing. One thing I learned was the nuance of gesture, blocking. When I refer to blocking I mean the special kinds of descriptions connected to dialogue. "'I love you,' she said" is fine depending on the context. "'I love you,' she said, jingling the keys in her pocket, looking out the window" speaks volumes. I didn't speak the language well when I first got there...so everything was reduced to gestures for me. I was at the level of a two-year-old child who can't speak any language fluently. So I communicated and received information by reading people's faces and hands. One of my first encounters with an individual, only hours after arriving, was with a pickpocket who wasn't very good. The reason he wasn't very effective with me is because I watched everything he did. I watched his body movements instead of listening to his words which he used to distract. Prestegotation—that

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is, magic tricks—always include a story which distracts. While magicians are doing things with their hands and telling this story, they are also doing things with their eyes and mouths. They're distracting people from their hands, so they can conceal the object they've been manipulating. There's a certain age of kid with which it won't work at all—those kids who don't understand narrative well—and three- or five-year-olds are very good at just saying, "It's behind his coat. It's in his sleeve," because they can pick up that thing very well because language means very little to them. I've had 15 years now to process all that stuff in Africa, and I'm still discovering every moment what I learned there.

*Exile:* I know that only some of your work is autobiographical, but how much of it has to do with memory, little bits that you remember? How much do you use in your work?

McKnight: It's hard to say in terms of percentages. Hard to say. Memory is very slippery. I have a usually reliable long-term memory and—thanks to some indiscretions in the 70's—not such a great a short-term memory, but I do remember things that friends who have experienced the same things have forgotten completely. The important thing is not to remember things specifically but to remember them in kind, in category, to have the right instinct and intuition about human nature. Those things come from the gut more than from the mind. There are things I experienced in Africa that seem incredible to me now. A lot of people will talk about my novel not knowing that the most of protean stuff, the customary stuff, the normative stuff I entirely made up. some of the more fantastical and surreal and bizarre things actually happened. Reviewers, however, have read it the opposite way. "Why didn't you just write about this peace corps volunteer who just had a specific experience without all this spiritual, metaphysical crap," they frequently asked. Charles Johnson, I remember, came down real hard on me for that sort of thing. If I ever meet with the guy I will either punch him in the nose or sit down and talk with him and tell him about some of these experiences which he thought were wholly made up.

If you're a realist you want readers to have the sense that there is an actual life that is taking place there on the page. I am a little annoyed by people who insist there are certain passages that correspond directly to life. Reviewers have an annoying tendency to do that—all the time people will speculate and return to your history. People were certain that I was a peace corps volunteer, and I was not. I knew peace corps volunteers. You're like the movie version of Dr. Frankenstein. You get the spleen from this body, and the heart from that one, and you stitch it all together. And it walks and talks and crushes people's skulls. The idea is to do a kind a surgery, a kind of grafting, and you want to do it as seamlessly as possible—yet I don't understand why things that are true people don't believe. There's this story I tell people all the time, with respect to this.

When I was a kid in Louisiana, I got into a shoving match with a couple of boys, and then two or three more come dashing across the playground to help them—as if they needed help, as if I'm this powerful warrior—I was just one kid. So I'm being chased by five or six boys, and the teacher, of course, blows her whistle at me, telling me to stop running. I stopped, and a kid tripped and ran smack into me—his face hit my back, and his whole face kind of slid down my butt. It occurred in early adolescence, and you're often in the process of losing your teeth in that stage. He lost two of them in my back pocket—they were ripped out of his mouth. And I didn't know this for sometime. He's rolling around the

ground, bleeding from the mouth and nose. Everyone was terribly alarmed. They thought I had turned around and punched him, so I was taken to the office and was dressed-down by the vice-principal—who in those days was the enforcer and still is probably. I'm trying to explain to him what had happened to him. "You see he hit me like this, and then I felt this little lump in my back pocket." My fingers touched his teeth in my backpocket, and I was like, "Jesus, his teeth are in my back pocket." I didn't say this to the vice-principal of course because he would have thought I had taken them as trophies. It was kind of gross having these two funky, yellow-green teeth in my back pocket. They stayed there all day long, and I felt them all day long, like they were burning a hole in my ass. As soon as I got home, I took them out and put them on the windowsill and just stared at them thinking, "No one is going to believe this. No one will." The poor kid never found out what had happened to his teeth. I never told him. I threw them out eventually. They were gross. You really can't put that sort of thing in a short story, can you? No one would believe it, yet if you make stuff up, lie your ass off, people believe it.

*Exile:* Several of your stories, "Homunculus" and "Soul Food," for example, can be fitted into certain genres—fantasy, science fiction, horror. What are your thoughts on genre?

McKnight: I was really delighted that "Homunculus" was in 1993's *Best Fantasy and Sci-fi and Horror*, published by St. March. "Soul Food" was anthologized in something called *Rocky Mountain Horror* or something about horror stories set in Colorado—go figure, who's going to buy this book? But it was an anthology of horror stories.

I think we get far too snooty in the academy about genre, and it annoys me greatly. It's the same sort of consciousness that spurns segregation and apartheid, those sorts of things. There can be good and bad literature in every genre, and there is. I'm not going to name names, at least as bad writers are concerned, but you can't tell me that Ursula K. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* is not a very powerful and great novel and piece of writing. You can call it fantasy, you can call it science fiction, whatever you want. Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* you can call sci-fi, speculative fiction—what it is, is a great piece of work, a great piece of literature. You can call Cormac McCarthy's *Blood on the Radiator* a cowboy book if you want to, but it's really not—it's just a magical piece of literature. There are books that are written for the express purpose of making a living, and not much of the person's heart is in it. That bothers me, yet I feel that what we consider bad and what we consider good is not necessarily so. I'm not going to say that James Joyce is a hack and that in the next 40 years he will be revealed as a hack. I think people who say that are dead wrong. If you read *Ulysses* you'll see what effect it has had on everything that has come after—the writing of Faulkner, Nathaniel West, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton—and they in turn have affected the following generations. I think sometimes you have to assess great work by what effect it has had on works that have followed. That's a little harder to do because there are so many different strings of influence. You can spend an entire lifetime trying to familiarize yourself with the literature in a single nation in Africa, for example. You couldn't really read and know every work by Nigerian writers or South African writers or really try to. So I believe, for a writer of fiction, a real writer of fiction, or a playwright, it's good to read a bit of everything, to be as catholic in your approach to reading as possible. Sometimes you'll want to narrow down on one writer. For example,



there was a period when I was reading a lot of Nadine Gordimer's work because I love her short stories—stories no one else is seemingly able to write with such subtlety and grace. I didn't try to crib from her in any specific way, just immersing myself in her work changed my work on a subconscious level. Granted, there are times where you'll read a passage over and over just to figure out how someone does something, and that has value. That passage has that perfect distillation of expression you're looking for. (*Pause.*) Have either of you read Neil Gaiman? I mentioned him in class earlier today.

*Exile:* The *Sandman* series? He writes comic books.

McKnight: He's brilliant. He really is, but here in the U.S., you know, we look aslant at people who read comics, so-called graphic novels because they have pictures; pictures are for idiots, you know. They're for people who can't order their own food in restaurants. That's far from true. Gaiman's quite a poet. He's quite a good writer. There are other comic series I read, one called *Preacher*, and some of them are pretty violent and use far too many curse words—imagine me saying they use far too many curse words—but on the whole it's a fascinating genre. I'd love to write a script for one of those things someday.

*Exile:* I'm glad you mentioned that. I still read comic books and feel like I have to keep them in my desk drawers. There's a kind of intellectual shame attached to them, but they seem, to me at least, to be a kind of American mythology.

McKnight: Yes, certainly. You'll see people in Japan on subways reading comics all the time. They're businessmen; guys who pull down three million yen a year will read comics. That's the difference in one culture to the next. We tend to make them very anti-intellectual. Parents will always decry their children's interest in these books, but they don't know what they're missing, as far as I'm concerned. Granted, some of that stuff is pretty lurid and in poor taste. I grew up in the Silver Age era—*Batman*, *Superman*, *Green Lantern*—which was really watered down. There were standards. They were fun but they weren't what I'd considered fine art like these later things are because they take risks. All the risk was gleaned out of the Silver Age stuff. There was a time when you couldn't show the word "pee" in a comic or a certain kind of violence—you couldn't show a police man being shot. It was a time when truth, justice and the American way continually had to be espoused, and comic books became a kind of pamphlet rather than a work of art. When anything is reduced to a tract for political reasons, then artistic potential is sapped. I also think if anything is written purely for lucre, purely as an economic gesture, then it's hard to call it art. But I don't want to get into aesthetics. That would take forever.

*Exile:* Since we are on this comic tangent, I would just like to ask quickly what your views are on other mass media forms, like TV and film, which involve writing?

McKnight: The good, the bad, and the ugly. There's some really great stuff out there. As I said in class earlier today, you should not try to predict what will be considered a great work

40 or 50 years from now. I know that if I'm around 40 or 50 years from now I know what I'll be reading, personally; however, as a society, we can't predict great works. I know that if I stayed at Carnegie Mellon one more year I would have taught a course on serious comics, but I went to a place that was a good deal more conservative and abandoned the idea. I love movies. I watch a lot of them. Tell me if this is true, but I have the suspicion that people of your generation find it much harder to watch black-and-white films than people in my generation. Am I wrong in that?

*Exile:* I don't think so. I love them

*Exile:* He's a film major. He doesn't count. He's not real.

McKnight: They are wonderful, but I guess I'm a victim of my generation. I don't care for many silent movies. I find them a little hard to watch. There are some which I think are really great—*Metropolis*, *Greed*—the odd few—but they're not something I typically watch. Even Chaplin. I've watched a couple of his movies and that's about it.

Someone asked me my favorite movie once, and I was surprised I said, *Jacob's Ladder*. It just came out, and I think it is a wonderful movie, partly because it is both heartening and disturbing at the same time and because it deals with a generation with which I'm familiar—the Vietnam era. There's a truthfulness to it and a risk to it that I don't see in a lot of movies. There are a lot of phony risks, like showing two people humping in a car, but that's not a risk—there's a whole genre of porn movies where you'll see that. As far as TV goes, I like *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld*. There's not much more I watch. I'll watch the occasional baseball game. I try to keep current on everything so I know what my students are talking about. But there's a lot I can't take. I don't have the usual contempt that writers have for the mass media because I'm really surprised that people are still reading books despite all kinds of distractions, all kinds of ways to not read books in this world. Books can have nothing to do with your life. I'm perfectly delighted when I walk into a *Barnes and Noble*—as scurrilous as that institution may be—and just see people buying books and reading books. It's wonderful.

*Exile:* I just saw *Full Metal Jacket* for the first time the night after reading your story "Boot." I was wondering if you saw the film and if you see any similarities between the two?

McKnight: I thought the first half was the most accurate depiction of boot camp I have seen on film. The rest of it was real filmy; it was art. It made war into art, which I don't know why people are so tempted to do. I'm not sure whether art and war should not share the same space. War is absolutely confusing and terribly ugly—there's not a pretty thing about it. I think sometimes people have to write about these things—that's why I like Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," that sort of thing. I could see why someone would want to express that verbally, but why people who never experienced combat would want to express it, I don't know. Kubrick is a great director; there's no question about it, and he really understands boot camp. He gets it down to a certain degree. There's a scene which is chillingly like something that happened in my company in basic training, where a kid blows his brains out.

Rifle training is the most dangerous part of boot camp for everybody, for the recruits, for the drill instructors. They make sure as strongly as they can to inculcate you, to make you to be as disciplined as possible, before they put live weapons into your hands. Yet every so often, a kid will stick a barrel in his mouth and blow the back of his head open, and I remember the DI marching us by the area where a kid had done it outside the barracks. He marched us to the side of the barrack, made us do a right face, and look at the mess on the wall—all the bits of brain and hair and all that stuff. He said, "Take a look, a good long look, privates. Take a real good, long look and keep saying to yourself, 'It ain't that fucking bad.'" He made us go left face and marched us to the firing lines.

It's really hard to capture that stuff on film since so much of it happens in the mind. As I write in "Boot," they keep you off-balance on purpose. The idea in the first three or four weeks is to strip you of your personality as much as they can, as effectively as they can. They know how to do it. They're better at it than the movies. They're better at it than anyone I know. They've done it for over 200 years. What the screenplay beautifully captures is that they don't want you to be automatons—they're not asking you to be robots—but highly-disciplined individuals. Maybe the Army wants you to be one way or the other, but the Marine Corps, at least as I understood it even as a young recruit, wanted you to be a trained killer—very disciplined but still with a little feistiness and fight, cockiness, so you can go to some foreign land and get your ass shot to pieces. Kubrick does a good job of that. He really does. The other half of the film I really didn't care for. It's still an effective movie. It's still good art. His job is to recreate reality; it's just that I wonder what has always fascinated directors about war so much. There are so many other things you could film. I guess it's really glamorous when you get down to it. For some bizarre reason. Great stories, however, happen in the most common places.

—Paul Durica '00 and Alison Stine '00

## Shift Change

Though weary from your factory job—  
this summer's only opening was night shift—  
you rise, pull your bones to the door and admit me  
for our breakfast ritual. We young fools meet,  
convincing each other again that we're really wise women.

The morning edition lands with a soft thud—  
I secretly covet your delivery boy  
each time I pluck my news from the cat's dish—  
but we ignore the sound of murders,  
mourners and newborns arriving at your doorstep.

I decline a cup of instant coffee, jelly donut,  
and feast on your tale of factory gossip.  
A cigarette would suit my dietary needs,  
but you recoil at the thought.  
Turned mouthy mother, you frown at my latest vice.  
Conversation tightens, but we continue.

My insomnia keeps calling me here,  
though I ache, bone-tired as you,  
that and the quiet of my days of purchase orders,  
your nights of plastic. Counting fasteners (gray #244),  
you try to remember everything  
you want to tell over apple juice; we both hate orange.

We sip slowly. A ray through the window signals  
bedtime. I go home to pack my lunch before work.  
My day begins, and I know you are resting well.

—Angel Lemke '00





*"Untitled" by Kris Lewis '99*



## I could be Sylvia Plath.

1. curled up in the capsule  
of a pill  
potent  
imploring.

queen of the medicine cabinet:  
band-aids,  
salves,  
blades.

2. the babies are crying in the kitchen.  
stop their mouths with the cotton of words  
of lullabies  
stop your ears with the click of the typewriter  
with poetry

3. your dress is sewn from pages  
of Ulysses  
of magazines  
and rose petals.

you wear Daddy's shoes  
and Lucifer's hair.  
your womb is hollow,  
your heart is full,  
your eyes are closed.

4. you are Sylvia.  
preserved in a jar  
labeled *Poetry*,  
it is full of ashes,  
faerie dust.

5. I will not marry a poet,  
descend the staircase to meet  
Daddy in the kitchen.  
I will not curl up in pages,  
into oblivion.  
I will marry poetry instead.

6. every ten years, you  
pulled petals from the bloom,  
leaving trails of red behind you,  
causing the flower to wilt.

I am afraid to wear red.

7. the babies are crying in the kitchen.

—erin malone '00

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## Black Water, Strong Currents, and *Jaws* A Place of Fear Considered

Three feet of space. Three feet of empty depth between a steel walkway and a concrete bridge which Mark Partin, officer for Covington County, husband for a year, didn't see, didn't feel after leaping over the embankment, after coming to the aid of an officer pursuing a suspect on the walkway. He slipped through the three feet of space and fell ninety feet into the black waters of the Ohio River. The water was cold; it was night and early January. Hours after the fall, searchers found his flashlight.

On another day in another year, on an afternoon in August when the sky was blue and the sun hot and high in the sky as one would expect, I stood on the edge of what I thought was doom. I was standing on a wooden pier, warm and sprinkled with sand, which extended ten feet into a lake and formed a *U* with arms a hundred yards apart. I was looking over one side of the pier, down into the big, black lake. The water was black, completely opaque. Sunlight bounced off its surface; it didn't penetrate. I looked across what appeared to be miles of nearly still black; I could see a stone wall in the distance, the wall which divided the boy's lake from the girl's lake. I had been told that campers regularly raced to that wall, always accompanied by a friend in a row boat. I didn't have a friend with a row boat that afternoon. I didn't care about racing to the wall. I was having problems dipping my big toe into the black water.

I was ten when I stood on the pier and confronted the big, black lake. I was at summer camp for a week in late August. I was at Seven Ranges in Northern Ohio, a boy scout summer camp which meant earning merit badges in basketry and mammal study, tying a sheepshank for my meal, taking communal showers for the first time, naming the stars at night, and being always and woefully very far away from the girl's camp on the other end of the lake. There were no girls at boy scout camp. There was a swimming test which all scouts had to pass in order to earn an award particular to the camp, a piece of Native American pipestone with some intricate carvings on it. It was quite the honor, I assure you, and in order to earn it one had to pass a swimming test, four hundred yards. Not a great challenge for the aqua-enthusiast, but I was no swimmer. And there was that lake—that big, black beast—with which to contend. At the age of ten, my toes curled around the edge of the pier and locked themselves in place.

At the age of nineteen, when I learned Partin fell ninety feet into the Ohio, I was still no swimmer. But I was far away from water, far away from the lake, at the diagonally opposite end of the state. I was in Cincinnati, enjoying the winter break during the middle of my sophomore year of college. I was visiting Lyn, staying in her nice, dry suburban home. She had a pool in the back; that was fine. Lyn and I were in her den, watching *Jaws* when we first heard of Partin. We didn't learn of his fall through the conventional sources—newspapers, television—though the story filled them the next day. We learned of the fall through Lyn's younger sister, Jill. Jill had just returned home from her job as a waitress at a local sports bar. Partin's wife worked at the bar as well; she had called off that evening. The owner of the bar told the rest of the workers why.

At first I was stunned, as one would expect. I thought about Partin's wife. I thought

about the suddenness, the senselessness of his death. Later that evening, when my girlfriend and I watched the news, watched vid-feed of police boats dragging the river and learned that the current was three to four miles per hour, I thought of how he died. I thought of subfreezing water. I thought of the force of hitting the water from a ninety foot height. I thought of the black of the water, how it had swallowed him leaving nothing but a flash-light. The poor visibility is what the rescuers complained of. Not the cold. Not the current. They complained to the reporters about the black of the river, how they could not see beneath the surface. I remembered the lake.

I'm not a hydrophobe. At least the I don't think so. I take a shower each morning. As I'm working on this essay, I'm drinking a glass of water. I always drink water when I write. I read somewhere that Sondheim does that. When nature calls, the writer gets a nice break and a chance to regroup scattered thoughts, a chance for new ideas to form. My idea about the lake is that I was not simply afraid of the water; there was something more, something about the place.

I should not have been scared of the black water. I had been taking swimming lessons at Estrabrook, the local rec center. I had been preparing for the test. The water in the Olympic-size pool was different from the water over which I now stood. I had learned to live with red eyes and the feeling of being burned which followed an accidental gulp of pool water; I knew the worst of Estrabrook. Fear of depth was not present at Estrabrook; I could see the increasing depth in feet painted on the side of the pool. More importantly, I could see bottom in all parts of the pool; the water was clear, the water was crystal.

The lake water wasn't clear. As I said, it was black, opaque, a solid sheet of carbon paper which occasionally rippled. As I stood on the pier waiting, dreading the signal to dive in, one of the lifeguards, a tan man of nineteen—they were all tan men of nineteen with bleached hair and Olympian muscles readily revealed in tank tops and short swim trunks—dipped a long wooden pole into the lake. I watched the pole descend into the depths. I continued to watch the pole descend into the depths. The guard just smiled; he lowered the pole at least six feet without striking bottom, shrugged, and raised the pole. I wasn't happy; the pole was to be my tool for rescue if anything went wrong. I thought about dipping a toe into the black but kept my feet on the pier.

The morning after Partin's fall the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that searchers had not located the body. Boats continued to patrol and drag the bottom of the river. Divers soon joined the effort. The search was slowed by rusted girders and slabs of concrete which filled the River. Another bridge had once crossed the River; the civil engineers of Cincinnati had thought it best to detonate the bridge to make room for the one from which Partin fell, to allow the debris to collect in the Ohio. Now the debris was just an obstacle, a challenge, along with the cold, the current, and the black of the water. Another officer fell off a patrol boat and into the river; he broke his arm on a chunk of concrete and was nearly swept away with the current. He was fished out; his fracture was set, and he was sent home. Something else fell into the River that day: a wreath placed on the bridge by Partin's wife.

I read somewhere that Shelley, shortly before his fatal accident on the *Don Juan*, was walk-



ing along the beach when he came across a strange funeral. A young man's body had been placed on a pyre at the edge of the beach and was being consumed by the flames. Shelley thought he saw himself in the corpse, thought he had seen his doppelganger, a sign of impending doom. Shelley drowned when the small yacht on which he was sailing overturned; his funeral was held on the beach, and his body was burned. Shelley was no swimmer.

Standing on that pier, standing before the dark water, I looked around for my own doppelganger. I saw a kid standing next to me with a freckled back and too tight trunks. I felt impending doom. Swimming lessons or no swimming lessons, I did not want to leap into that lake. It was not like the pool. It was not clear. My trunks were still dry, and I preferred them that way. But before I could run my hands over their stiff, finely stitched surface one more time, the tanned and smiling lifeguard blew his whistle, and I leapt head first into the lake.

I regretted that decision, leaping in head first. A true coward would have gone in feet first. It must have been an instinctive decision. The water was cold, a bitter ice. The water was colder than the showers. I half expected the mammalian diving reflex to kick in as I sank. And I did sink, down and down, farther than the pole. I struggled to right myself, to have my head pointing to the surface and not the invisible bottom. I opened my eyes. I saw nothing. The water was as black in its heart as it was on its surface. I kept sinking. I strained to see the light of the sun poking through the surface. I was nearly out of breath. I saw a spark of yellow and began kicking my feet, forcing myself to move towards the spark. I reached the surface and took a deep breath; water filled my throat and nostrils. I tried to spit it out, all the while attempting to dog paddle—yes, dog paddle—to keep my head above the water. The paddle—really more of a desperate flail of shivering limbs—got me back to the pier. I grasped a steel support. I looked up to the top of the pier, a good three feet above the water's surface, and cried, "Get me out of here! I'm drowning! Jesus Christ! I'm drowning!" The lifeguard walked over to where I was holding onto the pier. He smiled and dipped his pole into the lake. I reached for it, but he used it to push me back. "Swim," he said softly and walked away.

I've often wondered what would have happened if I just sank, if I just stopped flailing the limbs. The lifeguard would have helped, I guess, I hope. I wonder if Partin tried to swim, tried to struggle against the current and the cold. The news reports said his equipment would have weighed him down. He may not have been conscious when he hit the water. He may have died on impact, smashed against a rusty girder. All because of a three foot gap and a misplaced step. But if he did try to swim, to reach the surface—he was young and strong; maybe it was possible—did he just give up? Did he allow the River to swallow him? After tiring of flailing his arms and legs, did he just let them go limp and sink into the cool waters? Could sinking, could yielding to the lack of solidity, have been, in a strange way, a relief, a release? A pleasant loss of control? Of course not, he was fighting for his life. I was fighting for my life in that summer camp lake; I certainly was not going to allow myself to sink, even for a moment.

Despite the cold filling my limbs, I managed to start something like a breast stroke. I moved slowly. There was nothing beneath me, nothing solid at all. There was no nice tiled floor, no reassuring vent. Down there somewhere, I was certain, was a lot of sand

and silt. I wasn't sure where; I just knew it had to be down there. As I swam, I felt something solid scrape my heel. A fish maybe. I just kept swimming and gulping down the lake's black water. I finished three laps with the breast stroke, turned rather clumsily onto my back, and really strained to keep my face above water for the final lap.

I eventually reached the pier from which I had leapt. The lifeguard lowered his pole and this time did not push me away. I climbed up the pole, fell onto the pier, and coughed violently. I staggered to the sand and the grass. I sat down on my knees and allowed the sun to warm my body. I had passed the test. I felt terrible.

Three days after the fall Partin's body was still missing. The search continued, slowly. Sophisticated diving gear from Australia was used to investigate the murky depths. Partin's fall was no longer the top news story. Murder, robbery, and rape filled the air time. A daily update brought only news of an increasingly frustrated search. One evening a reporter visited the Partin home and spoke with his wife; it was the first time she had been interviewed. She said a lot; at least I thought she must have since they continually cut shots. She cried a lot. I looked over at Jill who was curled up in her father's recliner. I saw tears on her face.

Near the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, while still upon the river, Kurtz breathes his last but not before exclaiming, "The horror. The horror." He may mean the sheer brutality of his jungle surroundings. Or he may mean allowing that brutality to enter his soul. Kurtz may have been destroyed, not from his surroundings acting upon him, but rather, from within him. Huddled on the beach, not feeling really proud after passing the test, I may have been a lot like Kurtz. I, who had been so afraid of being swallowed by the lake, had instead swallowed it. Shortly after reaching the shore, I began to feel the lake's effects, began to feel it hurt me from within. My arms and legs began to twitch uncontrollably. I doubled over on the sand and clutched my sides. I felt ill. I crawled over to the grass and released the water and that morning's breakfast. The lifeguard had been watching me. He came over to where I sat, clutching my knees and groaning. "Drink any of the water?" he asked. I nodded a "yes." "Dumb thing to do," he said. "Lots of algae. Makes you sick."

Not long ago I told Lyn I planned to write about Partin's fall and the lake which troubled my youth. I told her that I wanted to examine places that cause fear. I wanted to write about the only place that caused fear in me. I asked her a few questions: "Do you think some places are just inherently scary, spooky, eerie? Are there places that are just naturally frightening? Like haunted houses? Or do we bring our fears to those places?"

She didn't think there were any places which were inherently spooky. She said as a child she and a friend used to play in a graveyard near their homes. They played hide-and-go-seek, tag, and spud. She was never afraid to be in the graveyard. To her it was like a park, a playground with a lot of marble and limestone. "It's all in how you see the place," she told me. I agreed. I may have always thought as much.

Consider the lake again. Every other kid in my troop took the test that day; all of them passed. One of my good friends went for his swimming merit badge that summer; he had to retrieve a rock from the lake's bottom in order to complete a requirement. He didn't appear to be afraid of his surroundings, and the land which surrounded the big black lake

was pleasant enough. The surrounding beach was warm and sandy. Tall reeds, grasses, and cat tails filled the banks and hid frogs and geese at night. Campers played volleyball on the beach. There was a beach house and a life guard tower, freshly painted white, and a buddy board, on which a paper tag, one for each camper, hung from a steel hook. It wasn't a very frightening place. It was a peaceful place. Campers went there whenever possible; in the heat of late August, it was the only cool place. So if the lake was not inherently frightening, then what made it frightening to me? Why did I fear that place? Why did Partin's fall cause me to remember it?

We were watching *Jaws* when Jill told us about Partin's fall, and I believe it sheds some light on my fears—or at least it gives me a framework for rationalizing them in the pop culture-fixated manner I love. We paused the film at the part where Chief Brody tosses an oxygen tank into the mouth of the very great white shark. The shark has devoured at least five individuals, including the captain of the sinking ship upon which Brody finds himself. Brody, rifle in hand, ascends the mast—slowly slipping under the waves—as the shark attacks again. Brody takes aim at the oxygen tank—still protruding from the creature's flabby lips—says, "Smile, you son of a bitch," fires his rifle, and does what Ahab never could by blowing the marine monster into a million Japanese delicacies. With the shark dead and the ship sinking, Brody lowers himself into the water and finds a friend he took for dead. They swim several miles back to shore. Brody is no swimmer. The film stresses his fear of water in several scenes. But as the film ends, he seems to have lost his fear. Dog-paddling along, he says he could swim forever. Brody has gained something Partin and I never could: control over the dangers in his environment.

I could not control the water I feared. I could not shape it as a filmmaker could: remove the giant shark and with it all the danger in the water. I could not make my lake into a place with a bottom I could see or with water that was warm to the touch. Partin was similarly powerless when he took his dip into the black water of the Ohio. I could not even remove the algae—a far more vicious predator than a rubber shark—which made me ill. I had to deal with the big, black lake as it was, with all its potential to harm me unexpectedly. I had to accept its inky depths and its apparent lack of a bottom. I didn't even have the skills to cope with the lake. I was no swimmer. I knew I was no swimmer. I could not control being pulled beneath the surface; I could not control drinking a good portion of the lake nor the little beasties which lay waste to my interior. The lake's violent response to my plunging into it, its ability to hurt me from within were not expected occurrences, were not conditions, like a giant great white shark, which could be removed. The big, black lake would remain the same cold, deep, algae-infested pool summer after summer. I could only know it in that way. That is why my toes clung to the pier. I wanted to stay in a place I felt I could control. When Partin was taken by the cold current of the Ohio, he lost the very control I valued and his life.

Maybe the issue of control is just a cop-out on my part. Maybe my use of *Jaws* is just a cheap gesture, too simple of a tool for understanding such a complex problem. That the horrors one is told the water holds in books and films has influenced my memories of the lake I won't deny, although I don't remember thinking of *Jaws* when I dove into the cold, black water. Whether I simply use these cultural constructs—the books, the anecdotes, the film, the newspaper reports, even this essay itself—to shield me from granting



the lake any sort of primordial power is a thought worthy of consideration. But I won't consider it. I'm not going to admit I was afraid of drowning. I'm not going to say I was scared of the unknown lurking beneath the lake's surface, that my life flashed before my eyes when the water first filled my lungs. I panicked. But I was worried because I could not control my surroundings; they did not bend to my influence. I was not afraid of the lake overpowering me. It's just a place; it can't dominate a person, right? So I will stick with the *Jaws* analysis even if it cheapens the tragedy of Partin's death and prevents me from really grappling with my fears. I've learned to avoid the lake.

The next summer I did not take the swim test. I never walked by the lake. I didn't earn my pipestone that year; when all the other campers went off to receive it, I stayed by the bonfire for another round of "Rise and Shine." The summer after that I did not even go to Seven Ranges, and the next year I quit scouts. I never took another plunge into the big, black lake. I've never even gone swimming since that summer. I'm not a Brody. This past summer, at the dawn of an August day, a friend and I, under the persuasive power of Jack Daniels, took a stroll down to a pond called Ebaugh, which in most respects is a smaller version of my lake. My friend began to remove her clothes and then saw the thick layer of algae floating on the surface of the pond. "On second thought. Maybe. No," she said. I didn't protest.

About five days after I returned home from Cincinnati I decided to call Lyndsay. I wanted to make sure that her parents had received a thank you note and that I had not worn out their hospitality. During the course of our conversation, I couldn't help asking her, "Have they found him? The officer?" She said she didn't know. She had not heard anything on the news nor had seen anything in the paper. "But they brought in all that hi-tech scuba gear," I said. "They dragged the river. They even said they knew where he fell." She reminded me of the depth and the dark and, most importantly, the current. "He could be half way down the Mississippi," she told me. He was just swept away. He couldn't resist.

—Paul Durica '00



## Aloe Vera

I first saw her with wet shoes surrounded  
by watches, the green one calling out  
“accessorize accessorize” and she laid  
a shining card on the counter  
and their smiles didn’t matter  
as she reached for the bag. Floating out

onto the street, I glided after that spoken green  
form woven through masses of gray suits.  
I saw her notice the rain, looking up  
and around and then staring down at the price  
of her shoes, reflected in her dripping face.  
I imagined she was thinking about suede,

squinting as she tried to remember  
why she hadn’t read the weather this morning.  
I thought of her painting her nails, tendrils  
of cigarette wrapping around her hair  
from the thick crystal tray. Her heel caught  
in a crack and she stuttered, pulling me from

her kitchen back to feet in the rain.  
The purse and shoes and scarf  
were all matching, and her walk  
knew it. Reaching the corner,  
she stepped down easily and ignored  
the flashing hand; and my feet were pounding

and I had to follow her, run into her,  
over her, something before she was a green  
speck on the cityscape. So I dodged  
the whole of New York and would have married her,  
would have plucked the young shoot  
from the sidewalk cracks but the light

turned red and I clutched the last of her,  
a handbag, a green scarf waving good-bye.

—Bekah Taylor '00



*"Untitled" by Camille Gammon-Hittelman '99*

## The Wig

1.  
Melanie who lost her hair  
because of a stone  
in her uterus,  
Melanie wears a wig today.

I see her fumble with it,  
fuss with the back wisps,  
push down the nested skull,  
the soft scalp of skin.

I wonder, will she lose it all?  
Black scraps of eyebrows,  
sharp fur of her legs,  
a dark stream like a fall of pine needles.

Will it be a gradual loosening, soft tufts clinging  
to the imprint of her sleep on the pillow,  
eyelashes like tea leaves  
in her morning cup?

Or will she awaken shorn  
bare, red flesh soft,  
re-born infant  
over woman bones.

2.  
On television tonight, a circus.  
I watch a woman  
in a chocolate brown bodysuit  
hang by her hair

above the mezzanine,  
propelled by the muscle's man's  
tug on a fat rope.  
More than the girl

who holds on with her teeth,  
more than the balancing  
of toe and wire,  
this act terrifies us.

How will the strands of our brittleness,  
which we tear at and burn and flatten and curl,  
which we flick like a waterfall  
into our lovers' eyes,

how will our hair hold us?

3.

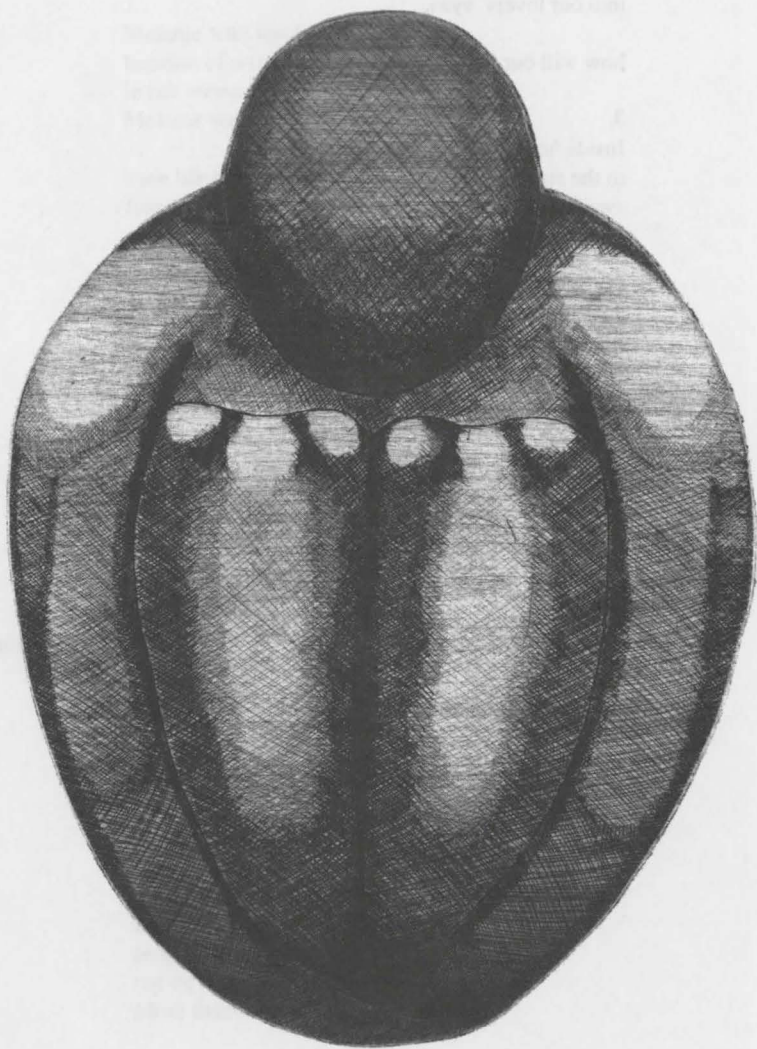
Inside her velvet cave the cyst grew  
to the size of a grapefruit,  
swelling the skin behind her navel,  
swallowing her eggs as if black caviar.

I wonder if she got to see it when they took it out,  
and if it was pretty to look at,  
like a geode's crystalline interior,  
sticky cells glistening and holy.

Can she see herself  
in it, like a crystal ball?  
Like I see in her the future  
thinning,  
waning bare, coming  
close.

—Alison Stine '00





*"Untitled" by Erin King '98*

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## Red Elephants?

We have all seen variations of the photograph that has come to symbolize rural America: the dilapidated barn, majestic even as it collapses after years of neglect, set against a picturesque landscape. To the uninitiated eye, it may seem a dignified death. Wooden rafters rot beneath spent shingles. The roofline sags and, left in disrepair, gives in to gravity. Perhaps it is this inevitable collapse that charms us, but the timeless quality suggested in pictures of deteriorating barns denies reality. The photographers are long gone when a volunteer fire department unceremoniously arrives on the scene, and rural neighbors are the ones left behind to notice flames feasting on weatherboarding at a neighboring farm. And neighbors do take notice, often shaking their heads as the noonday sun dims. Some may simply be paying tribute to a loss of craftsmanship. Others recognize that more has been lost than an outbuilding—barn without memories is as rare as smoke without fire.

When I was very young, barns meant rough-and-tumble dodgeball and hidden forts. I envied my cousins' ability to build tunnels in the loft of my grandparents' barn; by the time I became an artisan of straw, those cousins were too old to bother climbing into the mow to admire my multi-leveled creations. Dad found my pet raccoon—my "object" for fourth-grade show-and-tell—in an uncle's barn, nestled between bales of straw and other furry bodies, ringed tails, and masked faces. A bat dropped from the peak of our barn during my tenth birthday party and became momentarily entangled in my friend's hair as the rest of us shrieked in horror and delight. Those who were there still talk about swinging on the medicine ball Dad suspended from a sturdy rafter. We dreamed of swinging on the hay fork hanging from the peak of our barn, its rusty fingers filled with pigeon nests.

Barns meant chores, too: pocketknives and handfuls of twine. I remember steam in winter, rising from beneath Holstein cows disturbed from their sleep by bales of bedding landing beside them. I associated sweat in summer with cousins who terrorized me with threats of tossing me out of the loft once we finished mowing a load of alfalfa. During that year or two when my younger brother and sister could climb a ladder but still had to be escorted in the loft, I associated barns primarily with jiggers, splinters, dust-induced wheezing, and hooded sweatshirts for a sister with long hair. I took refuge from adolescence in the simplicity of our barn's evening shadows; I cursed the straw forts my sister and her friends had crafted when they collapsed beneath me without warning. And there were the subtle gifts a barn offered at the threshold of adulthood, like the smell of curing alfalfa or the tap of Grandpa's hammer against walnuts balanced between his fingers and the cool barn floor.

Old barns exacted youth for our memories, and skinned knees for our fun. Their solid posts rolled their share of knots on unthinking heads during "no blood, no foul" basketball games. Their lofts demanded innocence for a momentary loss of inhibition, and our labors for a security that put our minds at ease through another long winter. And so it was with each passing season; the exchange was different for each of us, but with every exchange came a price. For a long time it was a price we were willing to pay, though perhaps we paid it unconsciously. Barns showed us what we

valued; by doing so, they became extensions of ourselves.

Experiences like these gave me reason to object to our county commissioners' decision to raze a barn at the David L. Brown Youth Center, a center for juvenile delinquents located on a county-owned farm about four miles west of my house. The south end of the barn had separated from the floor joists, and rumor had it that the structure would be torched by a local volunteer fire department before the end of the year.

It would not have been the first old barn to disappear from the local landscape of my childhood, but neglect had always been the culprit before. Here was a new, more immediate threat, one that compelled me to write to my elected officials to criticize them for viewing the barn as a liability instead of a resource. There were other letters. Our township trustees, sensing the original decision's unpopularity, requested that the commissioners preserve the structure. Ultimately they did, addressing the barn's structural weaknesses and even its fading coat of white paint—by the end of the summer. It felt as though we had come to the aid of an old friend.

But it was not until we had a barn fire of our own that I came to fully appreciate the value and vulnerability of older barns. It started early one July morning. "Barn fire!" Dad yelled. Smoke already seeped from the barn's vents, threatening our first cutting of alfalfa and orchard grass. We fought futilely to contain the round bales' smoldering cores with garden hoses until the first of five volunteer fire departments arrived. Acrid white smoke and exhaust fumes soon cast a ghastly halo over firefighters and tractor and skidloader engines struggling to evacuate soaked and smoking round bales. Hot, wet hay stifled the air.

The chaos within the barn transfixed me even as neighbors, squad cars, and television crews closed in from behind. Floorboards snapped beneath the tremendous weight of the tractor and skidloader and their waterlogged cargo. The intense jets of water dousing the tops of round bales still inside obliterated one of the barn's vents. After realizing the barn would be saved, I wondered if our efforts were doing more harm than good. For the first time, I had detected a hint of frailty in the barn's walls. It seemed out of place, left by an era of small-scale agriculture to endure the frenzied efficiency of modern machinery.

I recalled when our family had switched from square bales to less labor-intensive (but heavier) round bales. A few years after we began storing round bales in the bank barn, the floor's support beams began to give out beneath the weight of the round bales and had to be reinforced with additional beams. Even then, we had to lay presswood on the barn floor to help distribute the weight of the heavy equipment driven across it. Nor are old barns cost-efficient; the money needed to repair roofs and replace wood siding often can be more economically invested in newer barns and pole sheds, which accommodate larger farm equipment more easily than bank barns and are less expensive to erect. I knew my family could afford the upkeep of our old bank barn only by capitalizing on the benefits of these newer barns. Old barns have become white—or red—elephants of sorts. Ignored except at tax time, old barns that stand empty stick out as considerable financial liabilities when steep property taxes are levied against them.

Why preserve old barns, then? Why resist my local landscape's seemingly inevitable transformation into giant grain bins and fabricated metal Morton and Cleary buildings? Memories can do little in the face of the almighty dollar, powerful as some may be.



And yet the old barn refuses to bow out of collective memory. A neighbor whose barn burned down on Christmas Eve fifteen years ago recently confided that his new barn, though more efficient, just didn't have its predecessor's charisma.

I remember statements like that when I drive down township roads and see the old bank barns: their presence, their singularity. I recognize the Sweitzer barns with their cantilevered forebays, but I knew they were beautiful long before I came to understand their architectural significance. I fell in love with our own barn's practicality, how it maintained its dignity despite my dirty boots. I recognized the strong backs in the barn's beams, and reveled in its mysteries, though I never did find that mythical heart-shaped knothole the barn owl is said to have curiously peeked out of as the farmer painted his barn white.

I think America sees in its barns a simple covenant belonging to another era. Barns promised to immortalize our childhood, though youth invariably slipped away in the gaps between the straw bales one golden afternoon, never to be found again. The day came when those humble structures taught us responsibility, and yet we never resented them for the lessons as we did our parents. Many of us discovered what expectations were in the empty haylofts of old barns, and realized satisfaction for the first time when they were filled.

What was the barn like before it was photographed? That's the ironic question Don DeLillo poses to a consumer society accustomed to pre-packaging and instant gratification in his novel *White Noise*. I find myself instead wondering why we photograph old barns; if it is for the reasons I think we do, then future generations will waste little film on the rustbucket remains of the barns we are building today. Today's barns do not engage us the way the old barns did. They have no lofts and thus no hay or straw, no knotholes, and those that house livestock have room for little else. New barns cannot ward off a February chill like the old barns with their straw-filled mows could. The materials used to make them come from factories, not from the woods of a neighboring farm. Yes, the new barns house the huge John Deere tractors and New Holland combines that fascinate children, but today's youth may one day cherish fond recollections of tractors and combines, not of the buildings that housed them.

Old barns offered us lessons for life. They taught us resourcefulness, imagination, and cooperation; how else could brothers, sisters, and cousins entertain themselves for an entire afternoon in a mow filled with nothing but hay and straw? They taught us to discipline ourselves, yet tempered the workaholic in us by providing outlets for pent-up orneriness. The countless hours we spent in barns reflected the ideal life we all imagined: a simple, balanced life with clear-cut rewards and consequences, and hard work that left us enervated but fulfilled at the end of each day. Perhaps it is a symbol of simplicity and fulfillment that an America deracinated from its agricultural heritage and inclined to shortcuts tries to capture on camera from the windows of cars parked along the shoulder of our interstates. Indeed, as Jack Matthews points out in his essay, "In Praise of Euerlastyng Barnes," the barn is an artifact which, like all of our most honest inventions, mirrors us in what we have done and what we are.

And so it is. During those protracted times away from the farm, I have looked no further than pictures of collapsing outbuildings for reflections of myself and of my heritage. But sometimes, on early summer mornings not long after returning from college, I pause in



our barn during morning chores to watch dust fleck the first light of dawn. For a moment, the barn is a rural vault. Silent and empty, its unpretentious expanses broken only by broad rafters, it commands a presence that seems even to stir the air about me. Freed from the sentimentalism invoked by glossy pictures on calendars and playing cards, I breathe deeply of the barn's coolness and sigh.

—Ben Sutherly '98

## velcro

sometimes when I sleep  
I consider the possibilities of  
detachable arms  
sleep's necessity doesn't justify  
nocturnal cramps

if this is the best of  
all possible worlds, Leibniz  
why are we designed to toss,  
infinite?

the restlessness of lovers,  
shuffling crudely, elbows  
meant to lay still, contact  
with the most delicate places  
rueful apologies disregard notions  
of our descendance from a 'perfect mold'  
Plato must have slept on his back.

if we were to be punched out  
like so much dough from a  
cookie cutter  
I should like to be the impish facsimile  
with but one arm  
and a wry smile

—Danielle Burhop '01

## The Law of Falling Bodies

### I.

Examine the falling chimney,  
a classic mechanics problem:  
a column of bricks topples,  
accelerates towards earthly center  
at 9.8 meters per second squared.

Chimney falls,  
top keeps pace with bottom  
until, towards path's middle,  
it moves faster.  
Baked yellow clay snaps  
under strain.

### II.

The week before graduation  
my friend and I wander  
empty holiday streets;

fall into grass;  
watch clouds and sharp blue ceiling  
metamorph into a wrinkled man.

Sick from sunlight  
vomit pours from my nose.

### III.

We fall in love—  
electron drawn toward proton,  
leaf pulled to Earth.

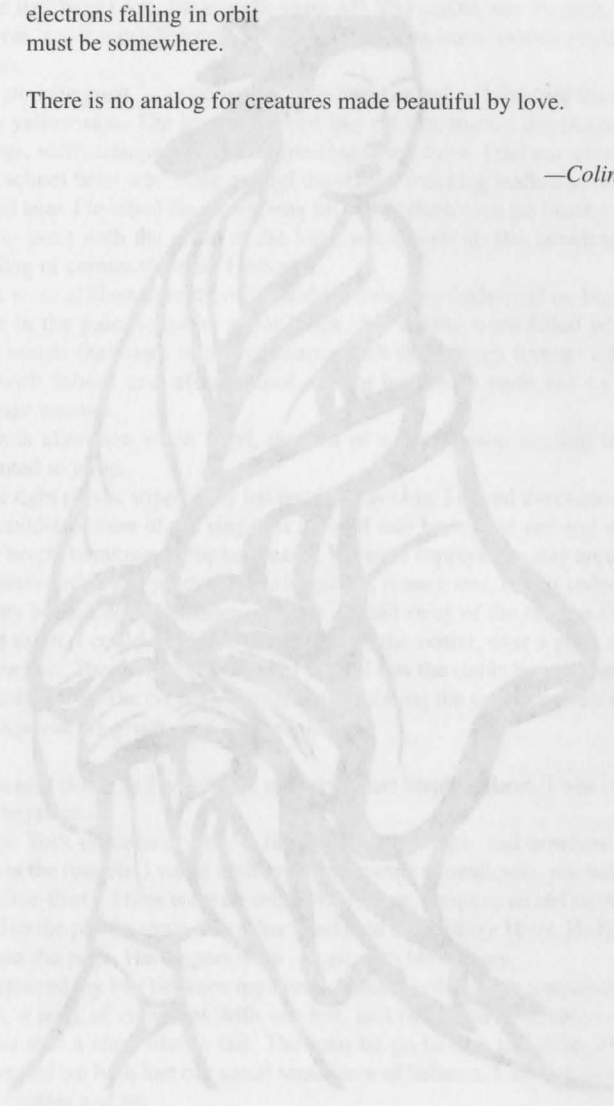
Violent motions, oddly symmetrical  
modeled by complex mathematics.

And yet,  
we can only predict things,  
guess.

Schrodinger's Equation  
a string of symbols and numbers,  
says:  
electrons falling in orbit  
must be somewhere.

There is no analog for creatures made beautiful by love.

—Colin Bossen '98







*"Untitled" by John Novak '99*

## Horses

The first time I fell, I was eight years old. The saddle was English, black leather, slick with sweat, and it was a Palomino that threw me. The horse's name was Puff, and I did not talk to him.

To stop the great, gray hooves from kicking me when I brushed his tail, I blew air circles on his yellow skin. The hooves looked like cut tree trunks, discolored and slightly splintered rings, softly tramping in place, grinding down straw. I did not whisper words for fear the high school boys who hung around the stable, mucking stalls and rubbing oil into saddles, would hear. I brushed the wrong way till one of them took the brush out of my hand and told me to push with the grain of the hide, not against it. His breath came in white circles, smelling of cornmeal mush. I listened.

We were still upstate then, in Middletown, my father off on business, learning Japanese in the pale hours he spent home. My nights were filled with crisp pronunciations, words that sank into my dreams with their sharp foreign edge. My days were filled with school and after school, riding lessons. I rode old style. That was what my father wanted.

It was afternoon when I fell, the end of a long lesson circling the ring. I fell because I wanted to jump.

The tight plastic strap of my hat burning my chin, I traced the outdoor ring in dust circles. The middle section of the ring was divided into bars, long red and white stripped poles of even height breaking up the base earth. We were supposed to stay around the edges, lapping the clapboard fence, practicing *walk, gallop, canter, trot*. In that order. I gave commands with my body. The horse listened. With a small sway of the reins, a dig in his girth with my right thigh, I could send him storming into the center, over a pole, if I was quick enough. I knew this. The second before I met earth, I saw the stable boys leaning against the fence, hats pushed up to the crowns, brown hands rubbing the sweat on their necks. One of them called, *Against the grain, girl*. I tasted dust.

The next time I fell was in the subway. I met Stephen there. I was twenty, and he was my first boyfriend.

New York in summer smells like cooking garbage, and nowhere does it bake stronger than in the tunnels. I stood with my back against a metal pole, not holding onto the straps. It was five-thirty. There were no seats. Next to me, a man in an old tan raincoat clung with one hand to the plastic strap. The other hand held *The Village Voice*. He had to let go of the strap to turn the page. His fingers were ringed with blue stains.

I balanced my bag between my knees. Inside my bag were a notebook, a pencil, a bruised apple, a pack of cigarettes with one left, and two poems—crumpled, mistakes. I pulled my hair into a short elastic tail. The man let go to turn the page. The train went around a curve and we both lost our small semblance of balance. I fell into his coated arms. He smelled of coffee and ink.

*Sorry*, he said, pushing his glasses, round and rimless, back onto his nose.

*Your paper*, I retrieved the theatre section.

*You should hold on.*

*I'm used to it, I said. I don't fall, usually.*

The door to the car slid open. A man with a sign that said UNEMPLOYED HOMELESS CHRISTIAN (in that order, on cardboard, no commas) came into the car, stopped in front of us. I looked down. The man with the glasses reached into his pocket and gave him three dollars.

*That's illegal, I said.*

*Giving money?*

*Asking for it. In the subway, that's illegal.*

The train lurched to a stop and the doors opened.

*My stop. I hitched my bag over my shoulders.*

*Hey, he said. Hold on next time.*

We stepped off the train. The smell washed over my face. On the platform, a woman in a raincoat was screaming about the mayor. I felt him stiffen beside me.

*It's Guillian, I said. Happens all the time.*

He took out a small pen from his inside coat pocket, and wrote in his palm: WOMAN RAINCOAT MAYOR, blue letters, all caps.

*That's gonna stain.*

*I write, he said.*

*Me too, I said. On paper.*

The smell was starting to get to me. I wanted to be above ground. I wanted to be smoking my last cigarette. I adjusted the straps of my bag and turned.

*Wait, he said.*

My number was a blue stain, a tattoo on his palm.

The lessons were like this: *walk, gallop, canter, trot*. I controlled with the inside muscles of my legs, squeezing tight for faster, loosening to slow. But mostly the horse controlled and I followed. *Run* was my favorite, but we never ran, except at the end of the day when we headed back toward the barns and his hot, slippery body remembered warm mash and sweet-smelling hay. *Canter* was the worst. My small bones seesawed. Forward over the saddle and into the dry nest of mane, smelling of sweat and straw. Back into the saddle so far I thought my spine would snap and I saw the yellow earth turning up behind us. Forward and back. Forward and back. I would remember this movement.

He wrote with fountain pens only, Royal Deluxe Uni-Ball, blue ink, thick lines. At night when he touched me, the letters sweated off his palms. The words transferred onto my skin. I awoke with UMBRELLA VENDOR tattooed on my breast, BLIND GUITARIST smeared on the soft jut of my belly. In the dark the letters were black, nonsense syllables, too dark to read. They could have been calligraphy. They could have been columns of vertical characters, moist and sloping. In the morning I showered before they made sense.

I liked Stephen's work. He wrote plays and stories that became plays. His lines were funny, sharp, and sarcastic. I understood most of them.

I preferred to write alone, in silence, in the thin-rule pages of yellow legal pads, bought in bulk, writing in pencil even though I crossed out all the mistakes, anyway. I just liked sharpening them. When I was small, my father taught me how to sharpen a pencil with

a pocket knife. That's the way I do it still, cross-legged on the bathroom radiator or the fire escape on those rare nice days, with a notepad on my lap, a knife, and a green apple beside me, the greener the better.

Stephen wrote in the next room, in a room converted for his writing, though we had little space to make that kind of sacrifice. He had never learned to type and would not let me teach him. Instead, his fingers letter pecked on the lap top my father had given me as a graduation present. He read lines out loud, testing them. I tried not to listen, but his voice called me from all over the small apartment. I heard it in the brush of my hair, in the cold stream of running water as I washed the vegetables. At night his voice cut through my sleep. The sheets swirled around me were small protection. His words went right through them.

*Is this okay?* he said, hand almost fitting, but not quite, the crescent of skin beneath my breast.

I said something without parting my lips. I didn't like to talk. I liked the lights off.

*You don't tell me,* he said. *Sometimes I don't know what you want.*

I said, *I want what you want.*

He bent his head over my stomach until the white of his face disappeared. His dark hair softened into the dark of the room. There were lines on his face, lines I hadn't noticed before, lines that did not seem to lead anywhere. I closed my eyes.

Once his breathing had subsided, I slipped my body out from under his. I liked to write in the morning, before the sun was up all the way and everything was still a little grainy and undefined. I was up before him, making coffee, settling things as he slept soundly, not moving from the position in which his tossed body finally landed. Sometimes I had to lay close to his mouth, so close my ear almost touched his lips, just to hear him breathing. Sometimes I wasn't sure.

I kept a pen for him and some unsharpened pencils and yellow pads for me in the drawer beside the bed. I kept a red pocket knife in my coat. I took the knife out and sharpened a new pencil. The shavings fell on the floor, breadcrumbs leading into the bathroom. I closed the door till only a small crack of light leaked my hiding place. There were postcards stuck in the edges of the mirror, from Japan, from my father, with various postmarks and degrees of yellowness. *My Japanese is getting better. Mata o-me ni kaka ri-masho. I hope to see you again soon. Dewa Mata. I'll be seeing you.*

The other postcards were from my grandparents, on Assateague Island, outside of Maryland, one congratulating me on my graduation from college, one telling me they were sending me things of my father's—a pocketknife, a fountain pen—things he had left behind, things that came to me.

I sat cross-legged on the bathroom floor, next to the tub. The tile was cool beneath my knees. I ran my hand across an empty sheet of paper, smooth as skin. I wrote:

*Dewa Mata.*

*My father's words.*

*Walk Gallop Canter Run*

*My words.*

*My father's*

*Where are you?* His voice, glazed with sleep.



*The bathroom. Did I wake you?*

*No. He filled the doorway, eyes half-melded.*

*I did. I'm sorry.*

*I need to get up for work anyway.*

Work was for a small zine. He made coffee and copies. He rode a bicycle to get there. *To save subway fare*, he said. He still wasn't used to the trains. I was giving it two more months, then answering the help wanted signs we always saw in the windows of cheap restaurants in Chelsea. *You would make a good waitress*, he said. *Your handwriting is excellent.*

There were sirens in the distance, New York waking up.

*What are you doing in here?* He sat down beside me. *Are you writing?* He folded me into him.

I pushed the pad away. *No.*

On my bare arms there were some of his words, blue and smudged. They marked my chest and hips. They glowed in the bathroom light, his bruises all over my body.

On Assateague Island, wild horses roamed in small herds. Twice a year they were rounded up and sold at an auction on the mainland. *To control the population*, my father said. He sent me to Assateague, to my grandparents, when he was out of the country for long periods of time, and sometimes during the summer. In New York, he didn't know what to do with me. On Assateague, I didn't know what to do with myself.

I only saw the horses as spots out of car windows, brown shapes moving on the horizon. But once, I went out alone, before a storm, when the rain came from all directions, not one of which was the sky. I kept the rain behind me.

I first saw him in the field behind my grandparents' home, right across the highway. His coat was dark and heavy, marred with burrs and black burrowing scars. His mane boiled over his shoulders, island gray. Every day he would come to me. I was twelve, but I remember the bridge of his nose, the white tuft like an abstract star on his forehead, his flanks twitching, one ear flicking. He lowered his head and gray clumps slid over his face, across the star. He placed one hoof on the road between us.

Slowly he stepped onto the highway, hooves clicking on the pavement, the bones in his shoulders intent on movement. I counted tendons, the muscles in his back shifting. When he stood beside me, relaxing his muscles, he was so close, I could hear him breathe. I lifted my arm gently, afraid of the sudden movement of fingers. My hand was mirrored in his eyes, deep pockets in his face.

He flinched. His body tensed again. The mane swung over his head, over the star. He bolted across the road, past the field, past my grandparents' house—past my hand, useless now. I watched him rush onto the beach. His hooves kicked up the gray island dust, wet sand streaming out behind him. The other horses lifted their heads, surprised. Grass stuck crazily out of their mouths like an old man's beard, bristling. He ran past them, into the surf, his hooves red, his star white, storming into the sea.

I did not tell my father this. The car ride home was four hours. It rained.

*How was the trip?* my father said. He promised me a carousel ride when we got back.

*Fine*, I said.

*Did you see any horses?* he asked.

*No*, I said.

*You will.*

We listened to the rain twist around the tires. My father put a tape into the cassette deck. A man's accented voice: *The airport. Hiko—jo.*

*Hiko—jo*, my father said.

*The bus stop. Basu no teiryu-jo.*

*Basu no teiryu-jo*, my father said.

I looked out the window at the gray scenes. I strained to see the color.

Sometimes I'd see the horses and carriages going to work in Central Park. They left around seventy-thirty and passed my street, bells jangling. By then I'd want a cigarette, and would slip a sweatshirt over my pajamas and go out in the gray light. I'd lean against the wood doorjamb of our building, smoking, re-arranging stanzas in my head, waiting for him to wake. It was cold in the mornings, even in the fall, a fall so crisp the air crackled, and the smoke from the cigarette blended with my breath. Two white streams mixing. I sucked them both in.

The carriages were usually black, but once I saw a white one with red vinyl seats and silver spoke wheels. The drivers stood in front of their benches, wearing top hats, even the women. They flicked thin reins, whispered into the horses' moving flanks, had small whips they did not use. Sometimes they wore carnations in their buttonholes, white and yellow and blue.

*Take you for a ride?* they said. *Take you to the park. Take you to the zoo.*

I shook my head and ashes flickered onto my shoes, dispelling in the sidewalk cracks, instantaneous red.

Stephen got a better job, copy-editing at one of the smaller tabloids in the back row of the newsstands. *Soon*, he said, *they'll let me do a story*. Folded ties filled his drawer and the bike rested against our door in the hallway till someone stole it at Christmastime. I sent poems off in thick manila envelopes that were returned to me just as thick.

It was too cold now to wait for the horses, but the heater in our apartment had a broken dial. We kept the window cracked open with phone books, and sometimes I heard harness bells. Or imagined I heard them in the pockets of early morning silence between the clang of garbage trucks and the beep-beep-beep of delivery vans backing up.

*We should hire a carriage*, Stephen said, *to take us to work some morning.*

He talked as if I had work, as if I did more than stare at yellow sheets. My two months were almost up.

*Didn't you use to ride?* he said.

*My father's idea of busy work.*

*But you liked it*

*I fell*, I said. *He wasn't there. I hated it.*

This new job required rising before me and keeping his hands clean and blank. I ironed shirts the way my father used to do for himself, liking the warm stiff fabric in my hands, the steam rising like foal's breath in winter, sweet water smell coating my hands. I no longer woke with smeared metaphors across my breasts and ribs. He had no time for writ-

ing, took the lap top to work with him and filled it with interview transcriptions and reliable sources. Still, I found small notes in the inside pocket of his coat.

*An exposé, he mused into my hair. Second page, next to the gossip column.*

*Do you remember the woman, I whispered words and my breath flew across his skin like pencil, erasing itself. The raincoat.*

He kissed the freckles on the back of my neck.

*Take you to the park. Take you to the zoo.*

There was an old carousel in the park. I think they've torn it down by now. My father used to come straight from the airport, pick me up after ballet and we would go. He would buy a handful of gold tokens, pink cotton candy, and Coke in a wax cup. I was angry because I was missing stable time, because I hadn't seen him for three weeks, and now I was glimpsing him in quick blurbs at the end of the ride's rotation. I rode it anyway, the white Pinto with the chipped mane and blue plaster flowers woven in its bridle. My father sat on a bench beside the old people who had no where else to go, and the young mothers waving at their fat children clung to giraffes or pink ostriches. He bought enough tokens for ten or twelve rides. Every time the carousel circled I saw his face in blur. I did not wave. I was too old for that.

A brass ring hung on a wooden pole a few feet from the carousel, swaying slightly as the ride turned. If you reached out and grabbed the ring as you were passing by, you got a free ride. As far I know, no one ever did this. My father sat on his bench and mouthed the words, *Reach for the ring*, too embarrassed to shout in front of strangers. The movement and the pink cotton candy and the Coke and the music with its tin bells and belly drum beats stirred in my stomach. I felt something close to death. I never touched the ring.

When I fell for the first time, the ground was yellow dust that scattered beneath my hands. The earth was still solid enough to bruise me. I landed on my hands and knees. My palms split and the dust burned in my eyes. I could taste the salt of my own blood in my mouth. The horse stopped a few feet away, tail swishing at flies, chewing on nothing.

The long driveway spit up a vaporous cloud of dust. A car was coming, stirring everything up. It stopped in front of the ring and the dust settled down. It was my father's car, the company car. He got out and stood by the open door, fresh from the airport, his brown suit wrinkled. He squinted. He saw me. The boys pushed their hats back on, rolled their flannel sleeves to the elbow, hopped down from the split fence rails. They were all waiting. Even the horse was waiting.

I studied my hands. Scratches puckered my skin, red-black, the color of ink, like the marks of a language I could not understand. I brushed them off. I stood.

The morning he left, I bought an umbrella from a vendor on the street. In the spring, umbrella vendors appear on the corners like toadstools. No sooner has the first drop darkened my sleeve then there is a woman in a purple raincoat and a wide umbrella the color of ripe mangos, pushing a silver shopping cart. The ones she sells are black, plastic-handled, cheap. I don't know what she sells when it's sunny.

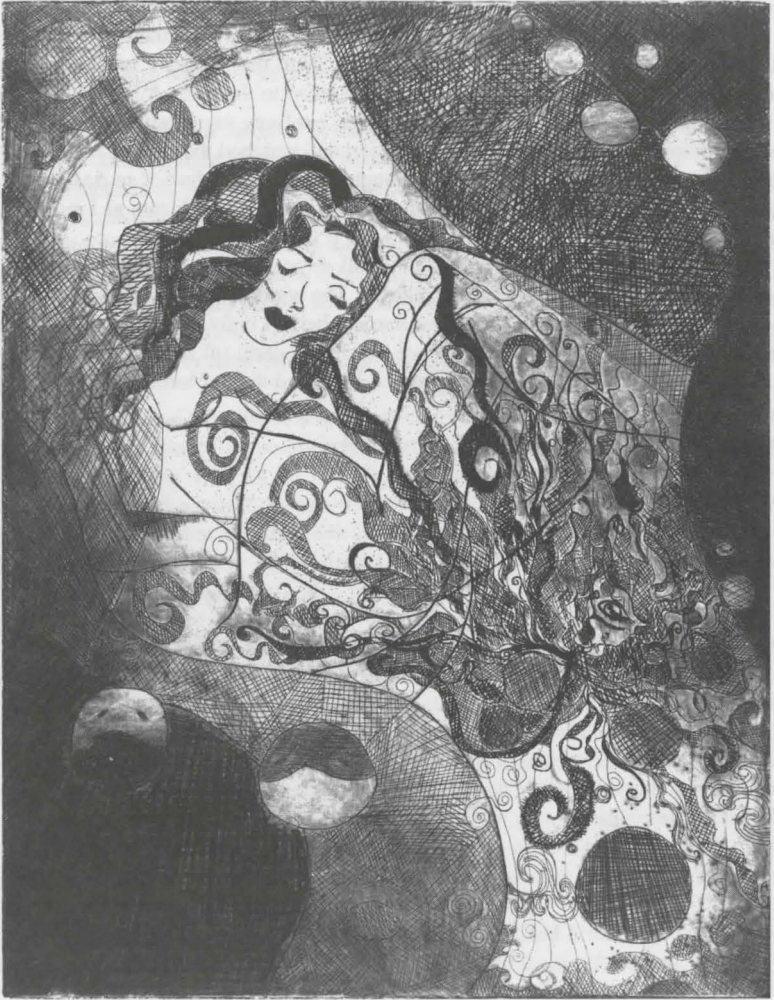
I bought a five dollar one and set off walking under a makeshift shelter of scaffolding and plywood planks. The rain buffeted the wood above my head. This morning I had received mail, a thin white envelope in our box, a note written on a red paper napkin in the sink. *I can't stay here*, Stephen's handwriting, lying on top of last night's dishes, covering the blood stains of lasagna. *We are pleased to inform you that your work has been accepted*, on watermarked cotton stock.

Tonight I would delete his files from my computer, open the envelope, which I would save, and cash the ten dollar check inside. With the money I would buy a good umbrella, perhaps, one that would last. Today, I walked to the park. A long ways, even in good weather. The carousel was closed till summer, but I saw vague animal shapes through the small windows, hazy, nothing familiar. I stood and watched the rain cataract across the garage doors, leaving tracks in the dust. I thought of my father, buried in Assateague, the way the rain would fall. The brass ring hung from its pole, not as distant as I remembered. Within reach, maybe.

I walked home through streets that still dripped. I dumped the umbrella, got a legal pad, and crawled on top of the cool radiator. The window was open, the yellow phone book pages ruffling in the wind. I heard no harness bells. I unfolded the pocket knife from my jeans pocket and scrapped the edges of a yellow pencil till the point was sharp and black. Two soft brown curls fell into my hands. I crushed them. I wrote.

—Alison Stine '00





*"Self-Portrait" by Cori Barto '98*

## summit

he bared his teeth  
and ha-ha-ha-ed  
louder than she,  
    as usual  
he talked about stocks  
and their tendencies,  
    trendy  
and football and Clinton's last speech  
he had rotor-rooted the yard, washed the  
car, did laundry  
    because even that's something  
    he's not afraid to do  
she felt him struggling  
to pull himself up  
scratch at her eyelids,  
pull on her scalp and claw  
    at her nostrils  
he reached the summit,  
head tilted back      drove the flag in her skull  
    still laughing

—Bekah Taylor '00



*"Phantom" by John Novak '99*

## Contributors Notes

Cori Barto is a senior from Chesterland, Ohio.

Kira C. Becker is a sophomore from Columbus, Indiana.

Colin Bossen, a senior from East Lansing, Michigan, is a double major in English (writing) and physics. In his spare time he likes to listen to techno music (especially if it is from Detroit) and write poetry. He also enjoys cooking and hopes to someday learn to make the perfect artichoke. If he has any plans after graduation, they revolve around moving to San Francisco.

Danielle Burhop is a first-year student from Evanston, Illinois, who is otherwise known as Snafu, and will be residing in Chi-town next year, much to the chagrin of Fetus. "John Lennon is the bomb. Defenestrate is a great word (but you can't pick your nose with it)."

Paul Durica, a sophomore English (writing) and cinema double major from Cleveland, Ohio, once remarked, "I believe I am highly quotable," although no one much remembers anything he has said. When not writing fiction, Paul can be found slaving over *MoYO*, trout fishing, or engaging in scandalous exploits with the insatiable Mrs. Parker.

Camille Gammon-Hittelman is a junior from Houston, Texas.

Erin King, a senior from Xenia, Ohio, is a studio art major with a concentration on printmaking, and a minor in art history. She thinks Kris Lewis is really cool.

Angel Lemke is a sophomore English (writing) and philosophy double major. She is publicity editor for *Exile*, assistant A&E editor for *The Denisonian*, and assistant editor for *Episteme*. Of "Shift Change," she says, "I wanted to record the important part of what was otherwise a very uneventful summer for me. I think I managed to do that and capture the monotony I was feeling during that time, too."

Kris Lewis is a junior Art History major from Cleveland, Ohio. She is manager of the Bandersnatch Coffee House, and art editor for *Exile*.

erin malone is a sophomore English (literature) and theatre double major from Poland, Ohio. She is assistant poetry editor of *Exile*.

Melissa Morgan is a junior from Battle Creek, Michigan.

John Novak is a junior from Chillicothe, Ohio.

Alison Stine is a sophomore English (writing) major. Though she calls a 150-year-old farmhouse in Mansfield, Ohio, home, she has also resided in New York, Georgia, Indiana,



the Catskill Mountains, and the Bellville Inn. She writes on her hands and sharpens pencils with pocket knives. She was eight the first time she fell. She thanks Benchley, James, T, and the fairies for catching her.

Ben Sutherly is a senior from Troy, Ohio. He reveals, "My major accomplishment in life so far is that I can say my alphabet backward faster than I can say it forward. I learned it that way when I was little, and it's stuck with me. Kinda explains a lot, doesn't it?"

Bekah Taylor is a sophomore English (writing) and women's studies double major from La Grange, Illinois. She is poetry editor of *Exile*. She is an insatiable herbivore who enjoys sunsets, walks along the beach, and the occasional hiccup.

Lyn Tramonte, a senior, is a native-born Ohioan who has recently spent time in Italy and Spain, studying language and culture. After graduation she will move to Northern Virginia to work as a Research Analyst for Coopers and Lybrand Consulting. She credits her friends and family with her happiness at Denison and in general, and would like to quote someone anonymous who said: "Tengo que morir cantando/Ya que llorando naci/Que las penas de este mundo no son todas para mi."

## Editorial Board

All submissions are reviewed on an anonymous basis, and all editorial decisions are shared equally among the members of the Editorial Board.

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