Exile

Fall 2000
Exile

Denison University’s Literary and Art Magazine

45th Year
Fall 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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Traveling Home

The scent of jasmine on the street still gives me pause. It is twilight, and in a quiet hollow of the city I follow a road still paved in cobbles. Were I driving, this road would jar my back, rattle my foot on the brake. Walking, it is merely a pause in stride, a slight adjustment.

I loved you first in the long-windowed studio that I call home, where we sat over tea and dark chocolate until the trees moved from black back to gray-green. Those fading nights were the only time bird-song was louder than the city’s traffic, and the grate of wheels over steel track did not send me in and out of restless dreams.

Together, we wrote poetry rooted in familiar things, wove stories for one another from the details of our days—the click of high heels on wet pavement, the pressure of a stranger’s handshake, the tough, filigreed web a spider dared to weave in the mouth of a construction worker’s upturned hat.

It was the tea that smelled of jasmine. That’s why my mouth is watering before I recognize the scent. I imagine that tonight, my skin will bare the flowers’ taste though there is no one to tell me so, and I pass the blossom-laden branches slowly head tilted back, seeing in emerging stars the dregs of a near-empty cup.

—Katie Kroner ’01
Lychee and Black Beans

My toes cling
to the green moss carpet
covering the gray skinned lychee tree.
Lychee in my hands, hair, and mouth,
little red golf balls balancing on brown chopsticks,
dense juicy planets wedged
between my fingers
and the universe of my palm.

I take a fruit and bite
breaking the blood spiked leather petal skin
to reveal a naked purity of its flesh water,
the meat, clear white like my new wedding
diamond floating on my left hand.

Sucking the cool flesh,
a tsunami, no a hurricane of its juices twirl my tongue,
sweet like the sent of a plumeria blossom
and warm like my lover’s smile,
that shines like a moon on my face.

He watches me
as he lies on the new born mountain soil.
His mouth dances in a grin and says that those fruits are as red as my lips.

Are lychee lips sweet to kiss? My lover asks.

His black Bronx eyes echo my face, my vine hair, my red planets,
he leans in and blesses my face with sort finger tips
kiss my sticky lips.
His lips are soft like the petals of red orchids

but warm,
like the black beans that his mother made for our wedding feast.

I wonder if he remembers those bland black beans,
that tasted like dirt and water,
that smelled like baby diapers,
that looked like the primordial much that borne earth’s first bacteria.

Does he remember?

He leans into the air of my body,
brushes my hair with his fingers,
and lets his lips dance over the lychee juice membrane
on my lips with tongue singing a silent melody with mine,
his eyes are closed, not dreaming about my lychee and me, but
dreaming of himself writing a book about a little lost boy who
eats black beans and rice every night for dinner who
wants to tell his daddy

that when he grows up he wants to be a scientist.

he got them empty black bean cans right here witha bunch of string
he wants to make a telephone and get him an A+.
He tells his daddy:

Help me
    Daddy says okay
Help me
    not now
Help me
    I’m tired
Help me
    shut up! eat your beans
Help me...please someone
    (but no one would).
Daddy, I got an F.
    F! Daddy yelled, unlatching the brown leather snake around his waist,
    F is for failure
    F is for fault

10
F is for failure you little fuck, his mom would say, after he failed the language test for the sixth time. The white kids at school called him stupid pussy sniffer and he couldn’t spell or understand English. is a stupid language, he can’t understand the word stupid 

slow sorry 

that you’re a stupid bastard who got beaten with your trombone that Dad broke. Practice doesn’t make perfect, it makes noise a lot of noise like hitting and banging and screaming. Eat your stupid beans 

Stupid 

Asshole how could draw but Mom and Dad thougt it was a waste of money, only stupid kids did that. Stupid, stupid, stupid Stupid like the empty can of beans that couldn’t make that A+ Stupid like the high heel shoe that mom would throw Stupid screaming back that wouldn’t stop the crying when the belt’s big voice snapped. Stupid fuck, damn failure who chose to marry some girl away from home. Black dark home, polluted air home, stink like bums and shit home, all stuffed into those little black beans, smothering that Latino long rice when he wishes he could have cotton candy.

Open your eyes my love, do you like my lychee candy Kiss Here taste the fruit I peel off the red scales and place the purified body in your mouth. Sweet waters must be bathing your tongue, cleaning your soul.

But you

cough choke spit

Are you all right? If you choke, I’ll save you and breath life into your dying body. is swollen with sour sweetness, like a dying flower flooded with too much of a rainstorm, or a staring child force-fed until he needs to vomit. You say, darling lychee’s too sweet to eat, please make some rice and beans.

I love you so I will

cook black beans on the stove, in the early summer evening. Through the open door, I see the sun’s fingers play with the planets in the lychee tree’s green dome umbrella and I play, the sweet juice with my lips and tongue as I salt my raw fish with the salt I harvested today, the same salt I used to flavor the black beans and rice you eat as you watch me create worlds in my kitchen through the cracked glass window of the little closet you like to call a living room.

—Jenny Silva '02
When she came home from the party the sky was a starless black blue, and the tears on her cheeks no longer glistened like flecks of warm glitter. A bow in her hair hung limp and undone, dangling beside her small boyish ears. Beth wore a heavy black coat concealing her strapless gray dress. It hung wet past her knees. A tear in her nylons had formed as she ran home through the ice and the rain. Beth wore only one shoe. The apartment was empty.

Some light streaked in from the hall lamps outside her door. She removed her coat and let it drop to the carpet, watching as it disappeared through the evening's thick darkness. Silhouettes and shadows formed shapes on the grays of the wall. Beth half-expected childhood playmates, decked out in pajamas of every known color, to be lurking round corners, submerged in the shadow. They would be hiding from parents. They'd be avoiding the sleep which drew them away from the world.

The night's dialogue was still fresh in her mind:

"You know my studio's right up the street. If you'll just give me a second I can call us a cab. Besides, this party reeks of children, and you're too gorgeous to mingle with these married folk. Hell, you're liable to be that chubby bastard's next big affair. Wouldn't that be funny? Ha ha ha."

In the darkness, Beth found her way to the kitchen. The light from the hall lamps mapped out a trail past the couches of leather and mahogany chairs. Her apartment's halls glowed with a harsh form of florescence. Metallic and buzzing, they'd smell like sulfur if given the chance. She walked to the pantry, breaking the silence with the door's creak. Crackers and grape juice. The saltines felt good on her tongue; the juice tasted better than wine. She felt very tired. Her eyelids sank just a little, blurring her vision enough to feel lost. The shapes on the wall morphed into hand puppets, people, and fruit.

"Now, isn't this better? I know it's warm in here, but the damn thermostat's been broken for days. I rarely notice it anymore. Why not take off your coat? Do you like my paintings?"

Guiding herself by the red, digital displays on her message machine and alarm clock, she stepped to her patio doorway and drew back the blinds. The door to the outside was nothing but glass. An insulated sliding panel which kept out the cold. Beth was still half-awake, mumbling rhymes in the silence.

...A pocket full of posy, ashes, ashes, we all fall down...

"Yes, the one in the corner's a still life in oils. I adore the subject of flowers. Don't you? Good, good. Another glass of wine?"
In the wet moonlight that streamed through the glass, Beth's body was colored a silver blue tint. The run in her nylon learned shadow and texture. The bags of her eyes grew darker and firm. Dropping slowly to the floor, she slid off her coat, and her clothes, and her shoe. Her body bathed in the shine of the luminous moon. She dug her toes into the silver gray rug and pinched at the bruise on the side of her face. "When would the snow come?" she thought to herself. "When will the flakes lie on the warm pinkish tongues?" Beth foresaw a horizon of orange sunlight at dawn, a frosting of bronze upon the virgin white snow. It would almost be beautiful.

"You know it's been a long time since a woman like you walked into my life. A long time. I've waited and thought about things... and, well, regardless... you're here. Ha ha. We're here. Together."

Pulling some pillows and a blanket down from the couch, she curled up by the glass and was no longer cold. She waited patiently for sleep. At the base of the door a fluttering moth appeared and stretched out its wings. Others came too and there the moths gathered, glowing together. Peaceful, bright, they caught random rays of the moon in the span of their wings. Beth curled up in a ball and breathed softly as sleep slowly came. Her last thought was that these ivory winged creatures were the fairies of night, and she would surely bottle one up, save it for later, hold its cold purity, just as soon as she awoke.

"Sit with me Beth? Please? A little closer. Why are you shivering? Would you like more Chardonnay? Of course I'm not trying to..."

A few moments passed. The apartment was silent, colorless, and cold. Then something happened. A quick burst of sweet laughter encircled the room. It was a giggle of sorts, reserved in its volume but joyous nonetheless. Out of the shadows leapt children in brightly colored pajamas. They sang and they danced, twirling each other by their doughy soft arms. A warm orange glow filled up the room as if a thousand small nightlights had melted together. The silhouettes disappeared and the red, green, violet, yellow, and blue toddlers danced and joined hands in a circle round Beth, her blanket rising so softly as she continued to sleep. Then they began a medley of songs, softly at first, louder, raising their voices as they hooked their very last rhyme.

*Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posy, ashes, ashes...*

"That's not what I meant! No, of course I... Where are you going? Don't walk away from me! This isn't what I want! Come back here you bitch! Don't walk away from me! Open that door and I'll—"

They all fell down, bundles of burnt flower still crisp in their hands. The dancing ceased. The million nightlights singed the gray carpet a deep charcoal brown. The song ended. Beth kept sleeping, balled up in a blanket, content on the floor, the bruise on her face beginning to swell.

—Derek Mong '04
The City Of Ends

I tell you stories in Puerto Nuevo,
as guacamole
twines with tequila down our
throats, the heavy scent
of wisteria, the harvest of avocados,
so erotic the Aztecs
locked away their virgins.
I would slow this day's end,
smother this flame between us,
but the splitting of nut
to release core, the suction
of damp inner flesh, it's all
a tantric suffering, without
cessation except in the salt
waves at night. To enter
this world is simple: the pure
sleep on. No one watches. The path
to the beach cords a hill,
crests just before the water,
before the curve of sand
that erodes our clothing,
grains our skin,
and here is the ritual
act, here the story.

—Mary Ann T. Davis '00
The Children by the Road

I.
After waking alone, as I'd worried,
I try to ignore the clock sounds,
the click and roll of hammer and gear,
as I look over the paper. A woman
bashed from behind with a concrete block.

Fighting in Chechnya. I guess the woman
I love has gone to the store for eggs,
muscled legs swishing beneath her skirt
(she wore one on Sundays out of habit),
the tick-tick of heels on sidewalk.

II.
The slant of sun illuminates the news,
so the Red Sox triumph alongside
tired Russian troops, superimposed
backward on the translucent
page. This is how I imagine her,
ine hazy theoretical gray, walking
to the mart, or feeding pigeons
in the park, or beginning back to me,
simultaneously. Authorities found
the woman bleeding, a man cradling
her head, saying, Don't move, honey.
Don't go anywhere, as her mind
worked out to the polished shoes
of passersby, the sign saying Stop.

III.
The soldiers are watching peasants
whisper or women hauling rags or water,
from behind the mines and wire.
They wait in the village school cluttered
with casings and waste for the next convoy.
Boys in the weeds count the cars of troops
to tell the rebels. I remember Sasha's anger
when I asked when he'd be in the Ukraine.

IV.
Sasha told me not to write; nothing
gets there in time. His family
has been here fifty years, and he
bears a suitcase full of cheese
and heating oil, gifts for his Cossack land.
He speaks only a little, and these
are hard times — suppose he is sprawled
face down in Kiev, victim of some
xenophobic ambush, friendless
foreigner. They haven't been free
for long. Cossack blood boils hot for
our freezing home. Sasha told me once,
grinning drunk. A noise like newsprint
rustle, but the paper's still in my cold hands.
The patch of sun is past me — was that
a grocery sack? My love leaves
the bedroom (how did I miss her
there?), pulling her hair to the back
of her head, squinting. Does she
even know where I am? She's
conscious, said an authority,
It appears she's going to be fine.

—Chris Million '02
Shoes

They often fell asleep, both of them, while watching TV — Chuck Norris or an old Bonanza — stretched back in opposite chairs, recliners that matched only in age, his glasses half hanging to one side of his face, her bare feet raised with white shoes laid beneath.

The week my grandfather died I called my grandmother to hear what I could not see from 600 miles — a church, a coffin and then a grave — the feel of an empty house in January but as I waited she began, instead to ask me about Ohio about the north if there was much snow here if there was much cold and if I had good winter shoes for walking. She said that as a girl once not knowing any better she was lost in a strange city and walked blocks until her feet froze and bled that at the boarding house she cried as the girls who knew what to do sank them slowly into white basins of lukewarm water.

— Jessica Kramer '03

"Untitled" by Geoff Peart '02
Twelfth Street, Canton

One

Along part of Twelfth Street in Canton, Ohio, a stone retaining wall supports the earth of a graveyard. Stands of trees obscure the view of rain-smoothed tombstones and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley’s; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. It makes into dominoes the markers that lie downhill, and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley’s; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. It makes into dominoes the markers that lie downhill, and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley’s; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. It makes into dominoes the markers that lie downhill, and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley’s; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. It makes into dominoes the markers that lie downhill, and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley’s; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. 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seem too distraught about his loss. He waited for Mom and Dad to catch up to him and walked with them. They each took a hand, lifting William up the steps and making zoom noises.

Once they joined Jonathan at the top, the family looked around the monument for twenty minutes. There wasn’t much more to the place than the stone rotunda and the tomb inside. When the kids started to get impatient, Martin began to talk about President McKinley. “Hey, guys. Did you know that William McKinley was from Ohio?”

The kids had their normal reactions to the start of Dad’s historical questions: Jon stared at him blankly, and Will fidgeted with his hands. Eventually, Will shook his head at Dad.

“He was from Stark County, just like you. Before he was Ohio’s governor or the President of the United States, he was a lawyer in Canton. He loved this place so much that he wanted to be buried here.”

They started to walk out of the rotunda. “How did he die?” Jon asked. Martin paused, looking at Jessica. She gave him a little nod, giving her consent to the explanation. “A bad man killed him, Jon.”

“Is that like with Abraham Lincoln?” Jon asked.

“Yes, a lot like that. A pretty smart observation, Jon.” The boy smiled at his dad, who reached down to rub his stringy hair.

“If you speak up in class like that, you’ll be sure to improve your history grade,” Jessica said. Jon gave her a sour look, as if he were trying to touch his eyebrows to his chin.

They grew closer and closer to Monument Park. “I hope you’re ready for some fun,” Martin said. “This is one of the best parks around here.”

“Just like I thought,” Jessica said. “A few minutes of history and the rest of the day to play.”

Martin beamed. “Can you blame me?”

The boys’ eagerness to reach the park was apparent; they kept picking up the pace, hurrying the family to the swings and climbing equipment. Before they reached the park, Jonathan caught glimpse of a few tombstones peeking out from the trees.

“Hey Dad! Can we go over there?” he asked, pointing to the graveyard.

Jessica interjected before Martin could say yes. “No, Jon. Places like that will give you nightmares.”

“Aww, please?” Looking at the twisted trees and stone-studded hillocks, Jon was filled with fascination.

“Listen to your mother, Jon.” Jessica took him by the hand, leading him away from the cemetery. Though they pressed onward, Jon’s gaze remained fixed on the creeping trees and looming tombs.

Two

William walked the path through that quiet, deserted place. He thought about the day that they’d come to the monument and the park. He’d been glad for the day off of school; the monument and the park had been beautiful; afterwards they’d gone to Heggy’s for chocolates and Taggart’s for lunch and ice cream. To six-year-old William, that was

The place didn’t appear to be changed since the family’s trip to the Monument, or since William’s visit to the graveyard a week ago. Buds came late to the plants that year; he preferred the cemetery when leaves decorated the trees. They took away from the bleak grayness of the scene.

At least the carnation he’d brought was more colorful than the flowers that grew in sparse patches around the trees. He rolled its stem between his thumb and middle finger, admiring its healthy whiteness. Mom had always loved white carnations.

Approaching a wide tombstone, William knelt on one knee. He placed the flower before the dark blue marble marker. Here, Mom, he said to her in his head. I picked out the prettiest carnation in Bailey’s just for you. You need something to look at other than the dying grass and ugly trees.

“I’ve got something for you, too, Dad.” Out of his jacket pocket he pulled a pack of Beeman’s gum. The drugstore didn’t have any of the black licorice kind, so I just got the plain. Hope that’s all right.

After closing his eyes for a few seconds, he reached out to the wide, deeply chiseled letters on the stone:

Martin Shell 1998-1999
Jessica Shell 1950-1998
Loving parents of Jonathan and William

Something about looking at those letters always helped him remember their faces. He tried to think about them and talk to them back at the apartment, but his roommates were always breaking his concentration. He could see them clearly at their grave. Graduation’s coming up, he thought, imagining them as they had looked in the park that day. I’m going to have to settle for salutatorian, but that’s all right. I’ve already been accepted at the University of Pennsylvania for graduate school. And that’s what I wanted, and I know you’d be proud of me anyway I graduated.

He ran his fingers along his parents’ names and closed his eyes. God, I wish Jon could be there. It would be nice to have someone there. Do you think he’ll make it?

William opened his eyes. No one was visiting on that Saturday, leaving the wind as the only noise. Maybe if that wind would quiet down, he could hear his parents speak.

He looked back down at the stone. Try to help him get in his car and drive here. He doesn’t even have to visit the graveyard. I just want him to see the college and my friends and all. And I want him to visit your grave.

He sat for a moment and breathed the cool air, then stood up. As he walked back toward his car, he thought he might grab a burger before driving back to Wooster, and maybe stop off at Heggy’s.

Three

Jane West finished her hamburger. She crumpled the foil wrapper and threw it into one of the trash cans on Oakwood Street. All day she’d been craving a burger; she’d
missed breakfast because she’d hit the snooze bar too many times, and she only had enough time at lunch to go to the pizza shop next door. Once she’d gotten out of the bookstore she headed straight to the nearest burger joint.

She found that eating on the way home made the walk more pleasurable. She’d tried reading for a few days, but was too interested in watching the pedestrians to focus on a book. She liked eating a little something and guessing at what the pedestrians’ lives were like.

Today she’d watched a businessman who had walked in front of her for about five blocks. He was her age, maybe a little older. His briefcase and clothes were fairly expensive, but he didn’t carry himself like a CEO. And he was walking, after all. She thought that perhaps he was just a few years out of college trying to make it in the business world. So many of her friends from Kent State had tried their hands at business. Not many of them succeeded. They’d had dreams of striking it rich quickly, but all of them were still making little more than she did at the bookstore.

The men and women from local firms frequented Moira’s Books; being downtown, it was a popular lunchtime hangout for the professionals of Anderson. They were just like her business friends from school; very lucid in discussing money, but quite unintelligible in anything else. She and Moira liked to make fun of the conversations that the men would have over their coffee. They were always discussing stocks, bonds, and this or that article in the Wall Street Journal – as seriously as ministers discussing the Bible.

“You should ask one of these fine gentlemen to dinner this Friday,” Moira suggested earlier that day, shelving some new books. “You’ve been too long without a boyfriend.”

“If I want to hear about soy bean futures or the NASDAQ, I’ll watch CNN,” Jane replied.

“All businessmen don’t just talk about money. Bill and I have a friend, Jonathan, who’s a businessman. We went out to dinner with him last Friday. He talked about everything but business.”

“Really. How come I haven’t met this charming prince? What, are you keeping him all to yourself?”

“He’s not around most of the time. He lives in Bill’s building, and they just hang out there. They go out drinking, mostly. You don’t want a boyfriend who goes out drinking with his buddies. Trust me. I know.”

“So what did you and this wonderful businessman talk about?”

“Amongst other things, philosophy and literature. He loves Camus. Isn’t that wonderful? Goodness knows that I’ve been dying for someone to discuss Camus with.”

Moira gave Jane a look from under her eyebrows.

“He must be an idiot if he likes that kind of thing.”

“Well, he likes movies, too. We had a nice discussion of how they used Whitman in Dead Poets Society.”

Jane stopped putting books on the shelves and knitted her eyebrows. “Really. Hmm.”

“What?”

“Oh – I just had a boyfriend in college named Jonathan. He was into philoso-

phy, and wrote a term paper on the poetry in Dead Poets Society.”

“His named wasn’t Jonathan Shell, was it?”

“You’re kidding me.”

“You know him, huh? Small world.”

“I guess so.” She started to shelve books again.

“He works for CircaSoft now. Maybe you should get reacquainted with him. Shake loose some of those big bucks he’s got in the bank.”

“Maybe I should.” She knelt down to get some books out of a box on the floor.

“Lives in Bill’s building, huh? Which apartment is his?”

“That’s what I like to see – a young thing like you taking the initiative. I think it’s 302. The first one on the left on the third floor.”

At the end of work she grabbed her food and headed toward the Apartments at Oakwood Drive. I can’t believe he’s living in Anderson, she repeated to herself as she stood in front of his building. That bastard. She walked up the stairs to the front door and found a trashcan for her hamburger wrapper. An old woman walked out of the place, and Jane caught the door before it closed again.

Four

Standing at the door of 302, Jane took a deep breath. How many times have I thought about this? Must have been every couple of weeks. And he’s living in my city. All this time. She knocked on the door.

After a while she heard footfalls approaching. The knob made a clicking noise, but the door’s hinges were silent as it opened. A man’s face peeked out. She could see his head and half of his body. Several days’ growth of beard darkened his face; black hair, looking in need of a trim, stuck to his head, probably after a shower. Had he not appeared so sleepy, Jon might have betrayed his surprise at seeing her. Each looked at the other without saying anything.

After just a few seconds too long, Jane broke the silence. “Hi, Jon. How you doing?”

His mouth opened, but he didn’t say anything. He looked at her, standing outside the doorway with her weight thrown onto one leg. From head to toe and back again his eyes swept over her. He managed to say, “Fine. Fine.” Then, rather more bluntly than he’d hoped, he muttered, “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you were living in Anderson now, so I thought I’d look you up.” Her voice held pleasantness, overcompensating for a note of anxiety.

His face softened. “I thought I’d never see you again, babe. You look great. Come on in.”

“Seems like you’re getting ready for bed, though. I don’t want to intrude.” She put up her arms and stepped back a bit.

“Don’t be silly. I was just planning to relax for the evening. Come in. Have a seat.” He opened the door all the way.

“All right. But I’m on my way home from work, so I won’t bother you for too long.”

The open door allowed a view of the kitchen to the right and the sitting area to
the left. They were separate sections of one room. She stepped into the apartment, trying to gather details through the dimness. The place's only light came from the setting sun over Oakwood Street and a little nightlight next to the couch.

She wondered why the apartment looked so strange to her, then she realized that it seemed empty. There wasn’t much in the way of furniture or appliances, and the walls were all but bare. As she sat on the couch to which Jon motioned, she noticed his single poster: Shania Twain wearing tight clothing, holding her hair above her head.

“Shania Twain, eh?”

“Yes,” Jon replied, taking a seat in his worn recliner. “I’m saving myself for her.” He looked at Jane and raised one eyebrow.

“So you’ve decided that you’re a virgin again?” She sat on the couch. “Oh, right.” Though he tried to joke, Jonathan betrayed discomfort in his voice.

“That was you, wasn’t it.” He bit his lip, thinking of a way to shift the subject. “Still, I can see a guy like me and a woman like her getting married.”

“Well, not if you believe the tabloids. Last week one said she joined a no-sex cult.”

“Damn. Just my luck. She couldn’t become a Mormon, or something like that.”

Jane let out a weak laugh. “You two would make a cute couple. You could sit around the apartment in your robes, just like this. God, I can’t believe you still have that ugly robe.”

“Yeah. It was Dad’s. You don’t throw away a good piece of clothing like this. Y’know, I should write to her, or call her agent or something. She’d have to marry me once she found out about my wonderful robe.” He looked at the poster. “I’ll bet she’s the kind of woman who appreciates fine clothing.” He rubbed at a dark stain on the collar.

“The trouble is getting her to see you in it. She’s probably busy being famous now.”

“I’ll bet she’s the kind of woman who appreciates fine clothing.” He rubbed at a dark stain on the collar.

“Yeah. It was Dad’s. You don’t throw away a good piece of clothing like this. Y’know, I should write to her, or call her agent or something. She’d have to marry me once she found out about my wonderful robe.” He looked at the poster. “I’ll bet she’s the kind of woman who appreciates fine clothing.” He rubbed at a dark stain on the collar.

“The trouble is getting her to see you in it. She’s probably busy being famous now.”

“I like to think it’s fate. We’re bound to end up together. Out of nowhere this mysterious woman will show up at my door.” He smiled.

“Aren’t I enough for one day?”

The smile widened. “I suppose so. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I told you. I heard you were in town and I wanted to drop by. My boss dates Brian in 316. She was telling me about dinner last Friday, so your name came up.”

“Oh, you work at her bookstore?”

“Yeah, since we graduated, so two years now. I hear you’ve been working for CircaSoft. Nice.”

“Yeah. Upper management.”

“So my communist friend has finally embraced capitalism, eh? If I hadn’t seen your apartment I would have said you were doing well. The stock is still rising at record rates. Must be a great place to work.”

“Well, not really. I quit that job.” He looked down at the recliner’s arm, drumming his fingers on the leather.

“What, did you make enough to retire on already, or did they fire you for your chronic tardiness?”

“No, I quit. I got sick of the computer business. It was almost like I was making too much money for doing nothing at all. So I’m taking some time off from working.”

As they talked, Jane’s eyes wandered around the room. “How much are you sitting on? I see you don’t put a whole lot of it into this place.”

“I’ve got a lot of stock and enough cash for the rest of my life, I guess. I’m just not much of a decorator.”

“You’d think a man in ‘upper management’ would have, I don’t know, marble nudes and oil paintings all over. And a place on Park.” She got up to look around the sitting area. As she walked over by Jon in his recliner she peered out onto Oakwood Street. Men were already congregating outside the Express Liquor store with bottles in their hands.

“It’s not too big a place, but it’s comfortable. And it’s not too noisy like some of the places in the heart of downtown. Plus I’ve got the open air market right up the block.”

“Yeah, because you’re such a gourmet.” He took her words as humorous, smiling at her. She was glad for that. Jane was proud that she’d not yet let her anger show through too much in her words. She guessed it was because Jon seemed different than he was just two years ago. Maybe he’d changed. When the dull cityscape out the window grew boring, she turned to her left, where she saw Jon’s entertainment center: a plain table supporting a VCR, a small television, and three videocassettes.

“I see you’ve got the same movies, still.” She ran her fingers along the tapes’ worn cases.

Jon was quiet as she perused his copies of Casablanca, An Officer and a Gentleman, and Dead Poets Society.

“You can get by with classics like these, I guess. Of course I’ve only seen the first part of An Officer and A Gentleman.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said, shifting in his recliner. He looked over at her, but her back was turned. “Of course.”

Picking up the cassette in its battered case, she turned it over in her hands. What a bastard, she thought. What a total jerk. And I’m talking to him like we’re old friends.

“I wish you’d told me in person, Jon. That would’ve been nice.” Looking over her shoulder, she could see that Jon didn’t intend to meet her eyes. He waited for the silence to pass, rubbing his palms up and down the arms of the recliner. He hoped she might drop the subject. She pressed him further, though. “What, did you think you’d never see me again?”

Yes, he thought. Realizing that she wouldn’t gloss over the matter, he gritted his teeth. “I’m sorry, Jane.”

She kept her back turned to him and looked away. Her eyes found the tape case again. Not really looking at it she let her mind wander back to Kent State, a messy apartment, the arms of a good friend – and the glow of that movie on a small TV.

“I’m really sorry,” he restated. “Things just got weird for me then.”

“That’s still no reason to leave a breakup note taped to my door after commencement,” she said, turning her heavy stare at him. “I’m glad most of the apartment had moved out by then – that way, only seven people knew about it before I did. God, I
can't believe you left the note open on the door. Two, three years of dating, and I was
only worth a scribbled note and some tape."

He got out of the recliner and stepped toward her. "Jane, I'm sorry for what I
did. I know you probably think I'm an ass, but... I'm still working it all out - still
trying."

She turned to him slowly. When she spoke her voice struggled for control.
"Seems to me there's nothing to be worked out. You dumped me. I just want to know
why. You told me you loved me three times in as many years," Jane half whispered, "And
I believed you."

Her words did not prompt the response she'd expected; Jon just looked at her.
For a moment, he parted his lips as if to say something, but closed them as quickly.

Jane looked back down at the movie, then up at Jon. "Now that I think about it,
I should've watched the last hour of this. The end of the movie is probably a lot better
than the sex was."

She tossed the tape on the TV and found the door. Near the bottom of the three
flights of stairs she found that her right hand was covering her right eye and forehead.
Unconsciously, she'd started rubbing between her eyebrows with her middle and ring
fingers. On top of the dirt of a day's work sat a fine coating of sweat. In that moment she
felt exactly as she had after pulling the breakup note off of her door.

***

Jon sat back down in his recliner. The last minutes seemed unreal to him. He
hadn't thought about Jane in - what, months? a year? He'd tried to bury her next to Kent
State, Ohio, his parents. All of those things rested in another age. Jonathan Shell had
been a different person then. He hadn't had the security of a lifetime's earnings in the
bank, but he'd been surrounded by people. He'd had classes to look forward to, although
he didn't go every day. Living with roommates had been nice. And having a girlfriend
had been great. Now all of those things were gone. He didn't like to think about those
things he missed.

He was sitting in the recliner again. His neck and underarms felt sweaty. So
even here I can't leave you behind. Where do I have to go? Ecuador? Antarctica? New
Zealand, for God's sake? You couldn't just let me be, could you? I'd gotten away. I'd
gotten away. You had to come to Anderson.

He stared unwaveringly at the apartment door. From the recliner, his view was
dominated by the entertainment stand: the VCR, the television, and on top of it all, that
old copy of An Officer and a Gentleman.

I was going to shave. A knock on the door. Brian, I thought. Brian wants me to
be his designated driver again. Or Moira with her Camus. But I open the door, and
there's this ghost.

God. I should have told her that I haven't rewound the movie since that night.

Nah - she wouldn't have cared. I couldn't have said it, anyway. I was never
good at telling her things.
on his temples tensed and relaxed.

That’s all right – maybe the throbbing will take my mind away from Jane. Sure, I did right. I know I did – it was the only way. I knew it even as my thumb slid over the Scotch tape onto the lacquer of her door. Even as my throat tightened.

That tightness returned to him in the darkened bedroom on Oakwood Street. He wondered, Why did she come here after what I did? Why is it always the one you don’t want?

Just like losing my virginity. Couldn’t have been Jill, could it?
The longer he sat in the dark, the less he needed to hope for sleep; it came slowly and steadily. He turned his thoughts from Jane to Jill.

As his breathing grew lax and his eyes closed, he whispered, “Love you, babe.”

Six

When he awoke, sunlight was trying to find Jonathan Shell where he lay. Thirteen hours of sleep left him feeling sleepy nonetheless. He was filled with the sense that he’d had nightmares. He couldn’t remember any of them.

Looking at the clock, he saw that the time was already 12:30 in the afternoon; he’d slept later than he had since college.

After dragging himself out of bed, he walked to the bathroom. This was where he’d been yesterday when he’d heard the knock on his door, he remembered, finding his bottle of Barbasol. He felt the four days’ worth of beard on his chin, then rubbed a generous amount of the foam onto his face. His razor was rusty and a bit dull, but it made quick work of the facial hair.

In taking off his clothes for the shower, he realized that four days could make a man stink. Never again, he told himself. Never again will I go for four days without showering. Retired though I may be, I shall keep up with my personal hygiene. He rubbed himself with antibacterial soap and worked dandruff shampoo into his scalp. His mind wandered.

Maybe I should ask for my job back. This is no way to live life. All I needed was a vacation, really. They wouldn’t take me back, though, after the scene I made. But I’m already sick of the apartment, and it hasn’t been two weeks yet since I quit.

I don’t need to work for the rest of my life. I’ve got plenty of assets. I could just travel, or something. I could finally go to Greece, or anywhere else I want. I’d be like that guy who just walks around the world. I’ll buy twenty pairs of boots, and no one will ever see me again.

Nah. I hate walking, and I couldn’t handle eating some of the weird things they serve in other countries. Hell, I’d die without macaroni and cheese.

The stink of his body gave way to the smells of soap. I should do something, I suppose. Before I know it, I’ll be one of those guys that can’t leave his apartment because he won’t fit through the door. The drinking doesn’t help, either. No more of this going out to the bar with Brian. At least more than once a week.

He started to wash the shampoo out of his hair. It took longer than it should have. The building’s water seemed to be getting softer every day.

Jon turned off the water and pulled back the mildewed curtain. The towel on the rack wasn’t yet too ripe. He dried himself and put on his Dad’s robe, then stepped in front of the mirror. With a few quick flicks of his comb, he arranged his scruffy hair in a semblance of order.

Now more or less awake, his stomach begged for the food it had missed the previous night. Some macaroni and cheese sounded good.

He made his way to the kitchen. Opening one of the cupboards to the left of the sink, he pulled out one of the dozen blue macaroni boxes. He set it on the counter and pulled his saucepan out of a drawer.

What is it, milk and butter? he thought, reaching for the box again. It called for a fourth of a cup of milk and eight tablespoons of margarine. I think I have that.

He walked past the sink to the fridge and opened it. Next to a jug of fruit punch and a carton that held three eggs sat milk and margarine. He pulled them out, leaving the punch and eggs to inhabit the otherwise empty fridge.

He traded the milk and margarine for the saucepan. Without measuring, he filled it with tap water and put it on the stove.

Measuring cup. I need a measuring cup.

There was a knock at the door.

For a moment he thought about putting some pants on. He decided to just open the door in his robe. It couldn’t be anyone who would care that he was underdressed.

Jane stood in the hall.

“Hi,” he said flatly.

“Hi Jon.” She was wearing the same work clothes from the day before. “May I come in?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind my attire.” He ran his hand along the collar of his robe.

“No. Not at all.” Jon walked back to the kitchen area, allowing Jane to enter the apartment. She closed the door quietly and walked over beside him as he continued to prepare lunch. “I see that you shaved. You look nice.”

“Thanks. I was starting to feel pretty dirty. Hope I didn’t smell to bad yesterday.”

“No, not too bad.”

He fumbled in the cupboard for a measuring cup. “I’m kind of glad you came by, Jane. I’d hate to go for another two years after yesterday.”

“Yeah; I’m sorry, Jon. I didn’t want to blow up at you like that.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m surprised you were as calm as you were.” He sliced off eight tablespoons from the stick of butter, put the rest back in the fridge, and turned to Jane.

She looked tired. “I thought about you all last night and today at work. The more I thought about what happened, the more upset I got about yesterday. I want us to be able to talk like we used to.”

Jon poured milk from the half-gallon container into the measuring cup. “Do you think I’m all right to use milk that expired four days ago?”

“Probably.”

He nodded. “Let’s talk. We’d both feel better if we got some things off of our chests.” He motioned toward the sitting area.
They resumed the positions they'd occupied the day before: Jon in the recliner and Jane beneath the poster of Shania Twain.

"Why did you leave me like that, Jon? Were we going too fast at the end?"

"No. Nothing like that. I was just trying to move forward with my life. You know. I had the job in Buffalo, and I was eager to build a career. I just didn't think I could keep you happy anymore. So I wrote you that note."

"And taped it to my door, open."

"Yeah. I thought you might want to come after me unless I acted like a bastard."

"Well, you succeeded at being a bastard. But I did come after you. It's just taken me two years to find you."

"I'm glad you did, too. It gives me a chance to apologize."

"I thought you didn't want to make amends," she said.

"Hmm?"

Jane pulled a piece of paper from her breast pocket and read:

Jane,

For two years we've dated. You've been wonderful to me. Last night was one of the best nights of my life.

I just don't love you. I don't see how our relationship can survive when I only feel lust for you. Your body is wonderful, but I don't have a single shred of affection for you as a person.

So I must leave you. I hope to find someone better in New York. I wish you the best.

Please understand. I am sorry for lying to you for these three years, but I haven't the time to make amends now.

Jonathan

She folded it back up and put it into her pocket. "Pretty heartless words, Jon."

He looked at his knees. His robe was hanging open a little too wide, so he closed it up tighter. "Yeah."

"You know what's funny, though?"

"What's that?"

"Even when I first read that note -- and I was hurt -- I didn't believe that you meant it. Those didn't sound like your words."

"Well, they were. Honest and true."

"There's something you're not telling me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He stood up and paced in front of the couch, hands behind his back. He twisted his face into a thoughtful expression, then stopped pacing. "Actually, there is something else, Jane."

"What's that?"

He was silent.

She stood up, bringing her face close to his. "What was it? He looked to the poster, then back at Jane. "It was Jill."

Her eyebrows fell. "Jill?"

"I don't think you knew her; she was two classes behind us."

"Did you two..."

"No, nothing like that. It's stupid, really. Not even that important." He waved his hand dismissively.

"You've started telling me now. Finish."

"Nothing happened, babe. That's the strange thing. I had this thing for her. I'd see her around campus, but I'd never talk to her. She probably didn't even know my name. But she was gorgeous -- she looked like Debra Winger, from An Officer and a Gentleman. And she was nice. Witty. I was attracted to her. How was I supposed to stay with you when I wanted her?"

"That's all? You left me, didn't say goodbye, because you had fantasies about another woman?"

"Yeah."

She looked into his eyes, her face a tangle of disbelief. "That's really stupid, Jon."

"I know."

"I wish you would have told me then. We could have worked it out. Taken some time away from each other, or at least ended the thing as friends."

"I was confused. I would have done things differently, looking back."

Two years, she thought. Two years I've wondered. And that was all that came between us -- a fantasy, just like the ones everybody has...

"I thought about you all the time, Jane."

"I thought about you, too. Your water is boiling."

He turned from her and went into the kitchen. She watched him pour the pasta into the pan, the water bubbling and steaming.

Jane cleared her throat. "Hey. I've got to grab some food and get back to the bookstore. Could I call you tonight?"

"I don't have a phone. Sorry. But you can drop by anytime. Why don't you stick around and have lunch with me? It's like I have anything else to do."

"No. I wouldn't eat anything with that milk in it." She walked over and hugged him, then stepped away again. "I'll come by after work tomorrow."

"Great."

The door closed quietly behind Jane as she left.

Jon took the cap off of the milk and smelled it.

Seven

"Remember that girl Jane I dated in college?" John asked.

William thought for a second. "Sure. The brunette with great legs. I'll never understand why you dumped her. An intelligent girl with a body like that..."

"It was just about the time I graduated."

"Oh. So Mom and Dad, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you bring her up?"
“Well, she came by the apartment yesterday and today. I hadn’t seen her since I left a breakup note at her apartment.”

“Ouch. You always had a way with women, didn’t you, Big Brother?”

“Yep. She was pretty mad; when she came by today we made up, I guess.”

“So you got a little action, huh?”

“Now, Will.”

“That’s okay. Your time will come.”

“You’d better take advantage while you’re still in college. Girls put out a lot right before graduation. Then you get into the real world where people don’t have sex.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. So, what did you decide about my graduation?”

“I can’t hear you, Will. Those damn cell phones are so unreliable.”

“I just went under an overpass, but we should be fine now. Maybe it’s your phone. You calling from the Hawk and Dove again?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s it. It ain’t my phone. Hey – don’t get yourself inebriated down there.”

“I won’t. I’ve just had a few and it’s last call. What were we talking about?”

“Graduation. Are you coming?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m looking for a job, so I don’t think I should leave Anderson.”

“Why don’t you just come home? You can see my graduation and stay at my apartment, and then you can look for a job by the University of Pennsylvania.”

“You got it, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Mom and Dad would be real proud of you. You’re doing really well.”

“I know. I was just visiting them.”

“I bet they would give anything to see you this Sunday.”

“They’ll be watching, Jon. But I’d still like to have my wonderful brother there – you know, a living relative.”

Jon paused. “No. I wouldn’t even make it out of the state. You know that. I get behind the wheel and it’s like a panic attack. After the near-breakdown I had driving here after graduation I swore off long car trips.”

“Why don’t you fly?”

“I’d still have to drive to the airport. I’m not about to walk.”

“You’ve got to get past it, Jon. I know how tough it is. It took me a while to be able to drive again, too, but you’ll just have to force yourself.”

“I’ll think about it, Will. Really. But I don’t know that I’ll make it.”

“Fine. Call me after the ceremony.”

“Okay. You need anything, Will?”

“No.”

“I’ll be sending you some graduation money. Okay?”

“Yeah. Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

Eight

The macaroni and cheese tasted fine, even leftover; the milk could have gone another day or two before it started to smell really rancid. Jon enjoyed the macaroni with a can of generic soda he’d picked up on the way back from the bar the night before.

He sat on the couch beneath the poster, his legs wrapped in a crocheted afghan. The last minutes of Dead Poets Society glowed on the little TV set across from him.

I wish that I could be poetic, Jon thought to himself. I should have kept studying English and art, not business. Maybe that was Jill’s problem with me: I wasn’t interesting enough. The truly beautiful women can only be won through poetry. That’s why I’ll never have the dream girl. Women like that want guys to be... romantic. Interesting. Deep. And I’m none of those things. I live in a one-bedroom apartment and eat leftovers most every meal.

I guess if all else fails I’m a rich bastard. I could ditch the Pontiac for a Ferrari and pick up blondes. Or mail-order a bride from Russia.

He scraped up the last of the macaroni with his fork. The fake cheese sauce left a spider-web coating in the bowl.

There were three knocks at the base of door. “Hey Jon. It’s me,” Jane shouted from the hall.

He got up and opened the door. She had changed out of her work clothes, and held a brown paper bag in her arms.

“Sorry about kicking the door. This bag’s heavy.”

“That’s okay. Come on in. I was just finishing Dead Poets Society.”

“Ooh. Nice choice.”

“Indeed.”

She stepped into the apartment and handed him her grocery bag. “Here. I brought you a present.”

“What is it?”

“I thought you could use a few things,” she smiled, handing him the bag. Jon set it down on the counter and opened it, the brown paper making crinkling noises as he reached in. He pulled out a container of milk.

“For your macaroni.”

“Thanks,” he chuckled. “I guess I can throw out the old stuff now.”

“That’s disgusting. It’s five days past the expiration date, Jon.”

“Well, I’m really sentimental about my groceries.”

Jane walked over beside him and reached into the bag. “I got a few other things, too. I thought that I could make us dinner.” She produced a head of lettuce, a tomato, carrots, and a cucumber.

“You haven’t gone vegetarian on me, have you?” Jon asked.

“You could use a few servings of vegetables.” Emptying the bag, she withdrew a bottle of ranch dressing and two pieces of fish wrapped in paper. “And I hope you like cod. Nothing fancy, but it tastes good.”

“Sounds great. Do you need a hand with this stuff?”

“No. I hate sharing a kitchen. And after seeing you with your macaroni I can’t trust you.”
Jon went to turn off the TV and VCR, then sat down at the little kitchen table behind Jane.
She was looking around. “Where’s your salad bowl?”
“Um... There’s a popcorn bowl in the cupboard above your head. The cutting board should be up there, too.”
“You have the strangest apartment, Jon. I swear. Why don’t you spend some of your money on yourself?”
“I tried for a while. I could wear the clothes and eat at the fancy restaurants, but it didn’t matter; I was still the son of a history teacher and a housewife from Canton. So I gave the fancy clothes to Goodwill and started eating in.”
Jane rinsed the vegetables, then searched the drawers for a knife. “That makes sense, I suppose. As long as you’re happy.”
“I don’t know that I am.”
She found a knife and began to slice the tomato. “No, you really don’t seem to be.”
“I’ll be honest with you, Jane. I haven’t been happy since the night I lost my virginity to you.”
The lettuce made crunching noises as she separated it. “Then why did you just leave me?”
“I don’t know.”
“You didn’t leave because of some lame desire for an underclassman. I know you — you wouldn’t have done anything unless you were sure about her.” She started tossing the salad with her hands in the popcorn bowl, then placed it on the table in front of Jon. Looking through the cupboards, she found plates and cups, which she put on the table. “Go ahead and start on the salad,” she said, handing him the bottle of dressing.
“Do we have to keep talking about the breakup?” he asked, opening the bottle.
“Let’s talk about something happier.”
“As long as I’m cooking for you, we’ll talk about whatever I want. And you brought it up, not me.”
“So maybe it wasn’t Jill.” He served himself a generous portion of the salad. “Maybe I was just scared about where our relationship was going. I couldn’t let things continue as they were when I knew I didn’t love you.”
“You know what? I think you’re lying.”
“Hmm?”
“I think you did love me — probably still do.” She turned to him as she reached for the drawer below the oven. Rummaging through the pots and pans, she withdrew a skillet.
“What makes you say that?”
“I was thinking about graduation.” She unwrapped the pieces of fish. “And I remembered something. A couple things, actually.”
“What’s that?” Jane put the salmon into the skillet.
“After commencement, we were supposed to meet your parents and your brother for dinner. Instead of doing that, you drove fifteen minutes to my apartment to leave the breakup note. Why would you dump me right after graduation, especially if your parents were taking us out afterwards? That would be a bit of a mess to explain to them. It would have been easier to dump me the day after.”
Jon concentrated on eating the salad.
“No. You need to go back to see your parents. You need to be there at Will’s graduation, too.”
Jon started to pick up the dishes and put them in the sink. Jane helped him.
"Yeah. That’s what I keep telling myself. But there are so many things in my life that need fixing – I don’t feel like I can even begin.” They walked over to the sink and piled the dishes beside it.

Jane leaned her hip against the counter. “Get out of Anderson. Go home.” He rinsed the dishes, then reached for the soap. When he squeezed the bottle, none came out.

“You should.”

He picked up a washcloth and dried his hands with it, then looked at Jane.

“Would you stick around tonight?”

“Sure.”

Nine

Jane awoke in a set of Jon’s flannel pajamas. His bed had been very comfortable for sleeping. The light that peeked through the Venetian blind was bright on her sleepy eyes. From the bathroom, she heard Jon humming in the shower, a faint scent of soap wafting under the door.

Jane reached for her clothes and started changing out of the flannels. *I think we needed last night to happen. It’s been a long time coming.* She slipped back into her black skirt and light blouse.

She sat up, throwing the covers back. *That was a great ending for a movie. I wish that Richard Gere would carry me away, just like that. I can’t believe that Jon hadn’t rewound the tape.*

The sound of water from the bathroom stopped. Jane stretched, listening to Jon rustle around in there. He emerged after not too long, wearing his Dad’s robe and a pair of flannel pants.

“Hey. How did you sleep last night?” he asked.

“Probably better than you did. That couch didn’t look too comfortable.”

“I get left out there in my own apartment. Geez.”

“That’s what you get for falling asleep during the movie.”

“I still think that we should have kept with tradition and had sex.”

She stood up. “You were always the witty one, weren’t you?” She patted his cheeks.

“Yeah. Tell me one thing, though. You were just kidding about the sex being bad, right?”

“You’ll never know, will you?”

“Come on. You’ll help some poor girl out by educating me.”

“You did all right, Jon, for the first time. I can’t complain. Too much. You find that woman and give her the best sex you can.” They both smiled.

“Well, I guess we’re saying goodbye, huh?”

“Guess so. Let me leave you my number.” She scribbled on a pad beside Jon’s bed. “Let me know how things turn out. You’ll start feeling better once you get back on the road. And see your parents.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you need any help packing before I go off to work?”

Ten

Jon knocked on the door to William’s apartment. For a moment, there seemed to be no one there. *That’s what I get for not calling ahead,* he thought. *I’ll have to break down and get a phone in my new place.*

There were some noises inside the apartment, and the doorknob turned. He saw his brother’s face for the first time in months.

“Jon!” William shouted, a grin spreading his cheeks.

“Hey, Will.” Jon threw his arms around his brother. “Long time no see.”

“Oh, it’s good to see you, Jon. I thought you weren’t going to come.”

“Well, I just thought that we should meet up and fix some things.”

Will stepped back to look at him. “Come in. Come in. You can finally meet Ed and Terry when they get back. They just went out to get some necessities: popcorn, potato chips... Do you need a hand bringing anything in?”

“No. I’ve just got my clothes, my books, and my TV stuff. That can all sit in the car until later.”

“Your TV? What, did you move out of your place?”

“Yeah. We’re moving to Philadelphia, aren’t we?”

Will’s smiled broadened. “Sure. I didn’t think you really would, but I’m glad to have a good roommate lined up already.” He winked at Jon. “Well, don’t linger in the hall. Come in. Try one of these recliners.”

“Leather. Nice. You will be bringing these to our new place, won’t you? Mine came with the apartment, so I had to leave it.”

“You bet. And this big screen, too.” The brothers sat in the two chairs facing the TV.

“I’ll have to furnish us with some other fun entertainment stuff. Surround sound and DVD. We’ll have the best apartment in town.”

“You’ll have to be nicer to me than you were the last time we lived together. None of this keeping the lights on reading comics all the time.”

“Come on, Will. That was when we had pajamas with feet.”

“Still.”

“All right. I promise not to short-sheet your bed, either.”

“I don’t understand how Mom and Dad never caught you doing that.”

“Yeah.” Jonathan looked thoughtful. “After graduation will you take me to
them?"

He nodded. "Of course."
"That's really all I want to do between graduation and getting to Philly."
"Yeah, I can't wait myself. Our apartment will be great."
"Especially where I decorate it," Jon said.
"Sure, sure. Just one thing, though. You can't bring that God-awful Shania Twain poster. I can't stand the sight of her."
"Don't worry," Jonathan smiled. "I left it back in Anderson."

—Dan Rohrer '03

"Untitled" by Alan Palmer '02
to conceive

in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives:

If my left hand can touch his right while it palpates, can touch it touching,

a reciprocal insertion of one in the other makes of hands one sole organ, as it makes

of my two eyes the channels of one sole Cyclopean vision. That lacuna where our eyes

lie is filled—I recognize in my green his green. If am close enough to hear his breath and feel

his effervescence and fatigue, I almost witness, in him as in myself, the birth of vociferation.

My voice is bound to the mass of my own life as is the voice of no one else,

but if I am close enough, forming tirelessly the strange statue, this flesh that one sees

and touches is not all there is to flesh.

— Tom Hankinson '02

All of the word in this poem are found in the chapter "Intertwining -The Chiasm" of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's The Visible and the Invisible, edited by Claude Lefort, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Originally published under the title Le Visible et L'invisible, copyright 1964.

Seraphina

Her bathrobe is loosely tied around her waist, while the sun is stuck in the dry ocean of her throat. Why can't she scream? Jesus no love screamers, if you love Jesus you no scream Ninang Nitta would hiss as she prayed her rosary every morning, afternoon, evening, and in her dreams. Screw Jesus. Mary too. Maybe a shower would help. Ninang Nitta would make her a bath and say that happy spirits like to swim. Seraphina Marlon can't afford a bathtub so this little three by three shower will have to do. She slips off her robe, a robe filled with the scent of Ninang's climbing orchids, her homemade cigars, and her coconut oil hair. In the canyons of its surface lie miniscule mountains of her home soil where bright girls like her marry successful young men, grow babies in their backyard, and don't become accountants who move to the cement diseased city. Seattle. Cold. It's cold in here. But anger keeps her warm. Feet brown, step on to the tiled floor, and they wheeze like an old man's emphysema lung because they've been running. From her? From Ninang? If you going leave, no stay by the white guys, Japanee men eat with their eyes that's why they skinny and Filipino men kiss with words that's why they get plenty money, but white men feed their hands, kiss their food, and polish their skin in the morning.

Yes, they must be running from him. She turns the pipe handle; the faucet vomits. It's cold like those false rays from his staring hazel eyes. The water soaks her straight black hair and combs in a blonde rainbow. It chills her bare thigh under that business skirt.

"Good morning Seraphina," the voice of the boss-man would say.


"Good work Seraphina."

Sara.

"You look beautiful today Seraphina."

Sara.

Warm water licks Sara's bare skin. Why can't it eat her skin away? Brown skin, it's all brown. Brown like the dust in her baby hair, brown chocolate bark of the mango tree, brown dirt on Ninang's hands, brown dirt faced Seraphina. She scrubs and scrubs her brown body clean.

"I love you Seraphina," the boss lover-man tells her. She scrubs and scrubs, scrubbing and scrubbing like a rock scrubbing itself until it would become a feather of sand. She presses the sponge to her skin, as if cleanliness is her life's one true calling. She remembers scrubbing Ninang's face after eating pancit with her under the calamungay tree, where she and Ninang would stick the noodles between their teeth gaps and spit them on each other's black tanned faces. Ninang. Ninang with the black brown shining orchid face who on her deathbed calls Seraphina, a little girl in a woman's body who left one life in exchange for another one an ocean, a continent, and a world away. The child woman is making clouds now. Clouds of suds build; white on the body.

"You would look so much lovelier if you got rid of that gap in your teeth," the
boss-lover said one day after coffee.
Sara scrubs and scrubs.
"How pretty you look, such a lovely smile."
She scrubs until she can scrub no longer, when the suds cover the brown perfection and stick to the sweet air of her body. Sara turns off the water and stands in the robe of suds in her shower; the place that is hers and hers alone, where her spirit tries to swim, but drowns in soap. It is her shower. She hears the voice of her boss, her lover, her American man calling, "Sara. Hon? Are you out of the shower yet? It's getting late."
Sera wonders what Ninang would say. White men, so stupid. If I had three wishes I would wish to be a tall woman with balls and a large dick, larger than any other dick in the world, so I could rape all of their asses. Sera wants to laugh at her boss at herself and at the words that Ninang would never say, but her little body smothered under the icing of her own cleanliness cannot pray for a single word or sound. Jesus help. She turns on the water and rinses off the white shell. Seraphina brown, wet, running fills her lungs with a scream that bursts the seams of her body as she gracefully swims into the colorless, tasteless, and blind ditch of her lover's white hand, where she believes expensive wine tastes better, money is the reason for living, white is her favorite color, and her legs are her greatest asset.

—I Watch When He Stops Her, Tuesday, in Passing

Toward the end, he splintered a frame on the floor, scattering glass across their bare feet. In it, picture the portrait of what was to come, her direction of lens at a mirror already sectioned, his ghost-arms holding from behind. Picture the divide of reflection. He was salvation. Today, she answers him in a voice that hangs between lack and want. It is her arm he reached first, the hinge of inner skin, of inner intimacy, the previous grasp: the hinge she used to close him out. He stopped her mid-breath. In this pause, a lightness falls outside from the sky. Snow comes. With it, the cold air slices through me. I know desire is a hot vein of inhalation. It burns like running in snow must tear the lungs and legs too far. I could leave her; I mean death. I mean the end of desire.

I mean: then will the slender fire have run its course. I know the subterfuge of leaving and ending. I leave marks with my teeth instead. Pain is the word yes.

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Calling Famine to End

From the wrong angle
the edge of a doumbek bites,
welting palm flesh
to foul weather green.

My fingers
stifle pulse lightening
to staccato cracks
and mimic thunder
despite split skin.

In storm I call famine to end,
rain stinging a rhythm with my hands.
For these sounds, a deer
ran with sweat at arrow point—
offered its throat.

Now, hands on drum.

—Katie Kroner '01
Here is the sound the bottle of ice tea made when it hit the floor of the convenience store where the 18-year-old boy was working:

PWACK!

"Ah, geez, man, I'm sorry, I'll get a mop and clean that up."

"No, don't worry, I got it," said the boy.

"You sure? There's a pretty long line here, and..."

"Just leave it. Pay for your stuff, it's OK."

"OK, as long as it's cool."

"Yeah, it's cool. Whatcha need?"

"Packo'Marlboros,nipofSmirnoff,andtwo$2scratchcards."

"Which kinda scratch cards?"

"Winningones." (hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha)

"That's $7.35. Thanks, have a good one."

Next: "What can I do for ya?"

"Packo'Camels,nipofAbsolut,andthree$5scratchcards."

"Which kinda scratch cards?"

"Winningones." (hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha)

"That's $19.56. Thanks, have a good one."

"Youtoo. Youshouldreallycleanupthatmessonthefloor."

"I know, I will."

Next: "How ya doin'?"

"Give me three dollar cards."

"..."

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes. Which kind do you want?"

"Winningones." (hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha)

The line was growing longer by the minute. It was around three o'clock, the time when the construction workers down the street had their mid-afternoon break. The boy ran over to the buzzer that was used to signal to the manager that he needed to come up to the register and help out. Ten people were waiting, all of whom were bigger than the boy behind the counter, all of whom had been working in 90-degree heat, and all of whom were irritated by the boy's slowness at meeting their shopping needs.

The boy stood and looked out at the vast line before him. Fuckin' Jason. Where the fuck is he? Hate all these guys that come in here. Every last one of them ought to be burned to death and then eaten. Then they should be shot out and that shit should be set on fire too. No mercy. Blahblahblah, gimmee scratch cards, winning ones, hahahahaha, I'm so fuckin' witty, that's why I'm a goddamn construction worker. Where the fuck is Jason?
That fucker. He always has to wait on the hot women, sticking me with the truck divers and old ladies. GodDAMN him. Well, that fixes it. He’s going down. Absolutely going down.

The line of customers eventually died down, and the store became relatively quiet.

“OK, I should tell you some things here,” said Jason to the boy. “First, you gotta buzz me earlier when there’s a line that big. Customers always come first, that’s the store policy.”

“Ok, gotcha.”

“Second of all, there’s a big puddle on the floor of ice tea that someone spilled. Now, I’m obviously hoping this won’t happen, but if someone comes in here and, god forbid, slips, they could sue us and make a lot of money.”

“Uh-huh, got it.”

“Now, if there’s a big line, you can’t exactly clean it up because customers will get impatient, and remember, the number one rule in this store is that customers come first.”

“Right. Understood.”

“So in that case, the best thing to do would be to head out to the back of the store real quick and get a ‘Caution, Wet Floor’ sign so that at least they have a fair warning of what’s ahead.”

“Ok.”

“Now in the case of...”

“Can I ask a question?” interrupted the boy.

“Uhm, sure. Shoot.”

“What if they trip over the ‘Wet Floor’ sign? Is there another sign warning them of the wet floor sign? Perhaps a ‘Caution: ‘Wet Floor’ Sign’ sign?”

“Unfortunately, no. Which is why it’s best to warn customers as they come in the store that...”

Settlement Reached in Convenience Store Civil Suit

Stoughton, MA (AP) - In the conclusion to a harrowing civil suit, convenience store worker Richard Balin was awarded a total of thirty million dollars in his lawsuit against his former employers, the GRS Convenience Store company, whom he filed suit against when he tripped over a “Caution: Wet Floor” sign in his place of work. Mr. Balin appeared for a public press conference with his attorney, F. Lee Bailey, to discuss the significance of the case.

“This wasn’t only a victory for me, but for other workers. Now that convenience stores across the country will be made to put out ‘Caution: Wet Floor’ signs to prevent this sort of accident from ever occurring again,” said Balin.

The suit has prompted Congress to pass a Customer/Employee Bill of Rights, which is awaiting the approval of the President. The bill would mandate “Caution: Wet Floor’ Sign” signs for every convenience store locale in the country.

The bill would also give employees of convenience stores the right to make citizen arrests of customers who are guilty of “high crimes of assholism,” which is defined in the bill as “any customer who takes too long to decide which scratch ticket they want, any customer who spills coffee on the floor and doesn’t clean it up, any customer who brings their spoiled child with them into the store who whines about not being able to buy a Furbie, or any customer who generally makes working suck a big fat donkey dick for the employee at the time.”

Better Business Bureau founder John Jacobs replied enthusiastically to Mr. Balin’s victory: “The courage that this young man has demonstrated in taking on a major corporation is phenomenal. He has a great future ahead of him, as a lawyer or a consumer rights activist.”

Former GRS store manager Jason Mays, who was fired over the “Wet Sign” incident, remarked: “The first rule of company procedure is that the customer always comes first and that all other needs are to be taken care of after the customer is served. This is the most important creed of the company, something that is to be followed strictly and without fail. It is our job at GRS to ensure that the customer...”

“...is always served with care and precision. Am I being clear?”

“Yes, very much so,” replied the boy.

“Good. Now, there’s a line building up. You should go wait on the customers.”

“No prob,” said the boy as he rushed over to the counter. Damn this job. Really didn’t need to hear that lecture. Wonder if he really believes that stuff. Poor guy, been working here, what, six years now? Gotta get you down after a while. Don’t know how he can stand it, every day the same shit. Would drive me nuts. Glad to be going to school this Fall, can’t take much more of this.

“Can I help whoever’s next?” the boy spoke out loudly throughout the store. A woman approached with her child. “Can I help you, ma’am.”

“You certainly can,” she said, pointing behind the counter. “I would like to know why your store has copies of that trash in plain sight of where innocent children can view it.”

The boy looked behind him to see what the woman was referring to. Ah yes, the new copy of “Just Turned 18.” That reminds me, I oughtta take a little “bathroom break” with that later, hee, hee, hee.

“What are you smiling about?!” shouted the woman. “The corruption of youth is not a laughing matter. I try to bring my children to church every week to educate them on how to be a decent person, and then I come in here to buy cigarettes and I see this trash sprawled out on the counter. You should keep those sort of magazines out of the view of children.”

“Ma’am, I don’t think that I’m the person you need to be talking to. I’ll ring Jason, the manager,” the boy informed her as he pressed the buzzer calling the man once again to the front of the store. He had moved into stocking the canned grocery section when the boy called him. Green beans, 3 cans. 2 cans of tomato paste. 4 vegetable soup. 3 chicken noodle. 6 cans clam chowder. Canned corn: 3... finished, left off with canned corn. He strolled up to meet the complainer.

“May I help you, ma’am?” he asked.

“You certainly can,” she declared, the whole moral weight of the world carried in the thunder of her voice. “I would like to know how such smut could be sold at a GRS store, a store which professes to be a family store!”
“GRS is certainly a family store, ma’am, and...”
“Then why would they sell such an unwholesome and deplorable product?”
“It is the policy of GRS to keep all such...”
“Don’t tell me that, this type of pornography should not even be sold at all and should certainly not be in the view of small children...”
“We do have it behind the cou...”
“I go to church every week, and this sort of material offends me as a Christian. I come in here with my children to buy cigarettes, and this awful, sinful material is presented here...”

The boy watched in her attack the man disgust. Jesus, why are your followers such assholes? Can’t believe Jason has to put up with this garbage. Can’t imagine doing it every day, all your life. How does he do it? Poor bastard. Wonder if that woman has a job. Probably bored housewife. Bored Christian housewife. Bored Christian housewife with four kids. Never want kids.

He glanced in between customers at the heated argument the man and bored Christian housewife with four kids were having. It ended with her threatening legal action against the company before angrily storming out of the store. The man, seemingly unfazed by her assault, walked casually into the back room. The boy went on waiting on customers.

“May I help you sir?”

“Yeah, uh, I got a coffee, uh, a Snacky Cake, a whatyacallit, pack o’ Camels, and, let’s see, where are your two-dollar scratch tickets?”

The boy pointed unenthusiastically to the row of two-dollar tickets right in back of him The man’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, there they are, OK, OK, uhm, let’s see, I’ll have... no, uhm, what I want is...”

“A winning one?” the boy interjected helpfully. The customer bust out laughing.

“Ha, ha, oh you’re a character, definitely, that’s really funny... OK, now let me see here... you got ‘Fast Money,’ ‘Easy Bank Roll,’ ‘Check in the Mail’... uhm, I will have... yes, I think I will have... what’s that one there called, Casino Backlash?”

“Oh, no, that’s ‘Casino Blackjack’...”

“What?”

“Casino Blackjack.”

I been dealing blackjack at the Gateway to the Stars Casino for six years now, and never seen a gambler so slick and polished as the guy who came in tonight. I’m used to watching people moving like lemmings in and out of the casino, entering with money, leaving without it. I know all the tricks of dealing, stacking the deck and what not. Know how to tell when a person’s counting cards instantly. But this one particular guy, whom I’d never seen before, baffled me. He kept on winning money, and I hadn’t detected no flaw in his game yet. He’d scored like three-hundred bucks off me, so I decided to watch him very carefully this time. I dealt the cards out in my usual quick fashion and watched him intently.

“OK, sir, you got 15 standing. Hit or stand?”

“Uhm, let me see here, now, I got a 7 and an 8, so that makes...”

“Fifteen.”

“Seven and eight, put them together, carry the one...”

“Fifteen.”

“I think that’s fifteen...”

“Right. Hit or stand?”

“Uhm, let me see here, uhm, if I stand then I’m stuck at fifteen, but if I hit I could get something higher, perhaps a six or seven to make 20 or 21, but there aren’t any face cards out right now, so that means the chance of me getting one of them is pretty high, so I guess, the best thing to do...”

“Hit or stand?”

“Now if I hit it goes over 21, then...”

“AAAAAAAAAAAA...”

“...AAAAAAH!!!!！”

“Are you OK?” asked the customer, who had been scanning the one-dollar tickets.

“Oh,” said the boy, recovering a little bit, realizing that he had just shouted. Mosquito. You know, it bit me.”

“Oh, OK, I think I’ll have a... uhm... one of those... no, I tried those yesterday... maybe a... OK, I can’t decide, you pick ‘em.”

The boy grabbed two lottery tickets that he knew had been winning all day, so as to decrease the chances of the customer winning significantly. By this time, the line had already built up again to about six people, all looking very impatient. The boy pressed his finger against the buzzer again to call the man out to help him.

PWACK!!!

came the noise from the back room, followed by a muted “DAMN IT!”

The boy continued to wait on customers, who were somewhat startled by the noise. Hope he’s OK back there, sounded like he mighta hurt himself. If he’s not back out here by the time the next customer is done, I’ll go back and check, see if he’s OK. Oh, here he is, glad to see he’s all right.

The man hurriedly rushed up to the front of the store and once again removed the “Please Use Other Register” sign and said dispassionately, “May I help someone over here?”

The two of them once again heroically served the customers in the line until the line had been diminished and the store was empty. After all the customers had departed, Jason yanked a tissue from the Kleenex box and placed it on his hand, which had a couple of small bleeding cuts on the knuckles.

“You OK?” asked the boy.

“Just fine,” responded the man, with a somewhat bewildered expression on his face. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

The two of them stared silently out to the store for a brief time, perhaps twenty seconds.

“Well, I’m gonna get back to stocking the shelves,” said the man. “If you need
me or have any questions, just buzz.”

“I got one question for you now,” said the boy, looking the man in the eye.

“How many hours do you work here a week.”

“Oh, I don’t know, around 60.”

“How do you get through that without bursting your top? Doesn’t it drive you nuts? How can you put up with other people’s crap for so long?”

“I guess I’ve just stopped fantasizing,” he said and went back to fill the canned corn.

—Brad Reed ‘02

Migraine

My head ached when my little brother pushed me down the rock porch stairs. I was the goddess Pele and he, Maui, the Hawaiian Super-man, in a furious rage flung me off my volcano home into ma‘ke world where zombies bit off your tingling toes. Head ringing, mouth salty, eyes stung with blood, but it didn’t hurt ‘cus me and my brother laughed lying on the poky Japanese grass as we watched Mickey Mouse Clouds play checkers with blue bumble bees mumbling as they tumble, and fly out of the rotten wood stump. Their buzzing hurricane made me dizzy, ‘cus I “have a headache” Grandma said as she rubbed kukui nut oil on my temples and toes and feet ‘cus I was sick and she didn’t want the Portuguese futseda fairies to curse me like they did her five years later when she died, I cried and clung to the warm fold of fat under her armpit, the only warm place I could find on her purple body of petals on grandpa’s new rose he held in his fisherman’s hand and gave it to me, picked me up and swung me with a rush of green, brown, mango tree, rainbows in the air. I clung to his boxer’s arms that harpooned whales in the ‘20’s, held babies in the ‘40’s, killed men in the ‘60’s, and hung limp on the hospital bed
yesterday, My head hurt as echoes
of dirt rain on the green coffin made me
sleep. I dreamed I had a headache as I sat
on the snow covered beach with my
lover. Naked, wrapped in my legs,
our bodies flowed like waterfalls on
rocks and we make snow angels when our
flesh steamed red like
devils in my head saying
“yes” to everything I would never say
“yes” to, wishing and wanting to
kill myself and the man who
spits at me because he thinks I’m a dirty
Cuban, like cigars that stink the
woman’s hair who has more money than me
and says “I’m Sorry” since she thinks I’m Cherokee
and live on a reservation where there’s
no electricity and we eat fried
rats for dinner at McDonald’s
where I kissed my lover for the first
time to wake up. I always have a
headache in the morning when my
vagina tells me “I’m sorry” for
wanting and for making you a woman
who knows that as time rolls
on the pink cushioned road on the
nipple of the Kwanzaa elder’s shirt,
Black Polaroid’s won’t bring light to the
eyes of the blind white girl in the
J. Crew Sweater who will
shrive with age and buy a poodle and
smirk at us as she strolls by while we
sit at the corner of K-Mart with
a wooden bowl begging for loose
change, is what my lover wants.
He’s always talking of politics,
racism, communism, and classism,
too many “isms” for my taste. His eyes
are black as the Hawaii night sky
whose stars cry with light but
no one sees or hears
me scream at him
he makes my head ache,

"Take me to the park” I say
and he does because he loves me. Bundled in his arms
as we lay on the grass in the park
by a tree and laugh as Mickey Mouse
Clouds hold penises and we hear the
souls of flowers and trees
masturbating to the breeze
that dances with my long hair
and kisses my cheeks. The
heavy air makes me weak,
I’m Dizzy
I fall asleep in my lover’s arms
and dream of my
head pounding
blood throbbing gray
cream into a crumbled paper
cup of the white man’s
strongest black coffee.

—Jenny Silva ‘02
Contributor's Notes

Mary Ann T. Davis is a last semester senior (finally) English Writing major from Louisville, Kentucky. As all of her pithy statements have been exhausted for the moment, here’s something from Adrienne Rich: “Politics is the moment when a feeling enters the body. By which I mean, politics is the effort to find ways of humanely dealing with each other.”

Tom Hankinson is a junior double major in philosophy and English. His work is sponsored by various multinational corporate interests whose product lines can be found at www.kerplunk.com.

Jessica Kramer is an English (Writing) major from Louisville, KY.

Katie Kroner is a Senior English Writing and Communication double major from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Chris Million is a Junior English (Writing) major from Worthington, Ohio. He is particularly indebted to the J.R. Reynolds Young Writers Workshop he attended before his first year at Denison. His Young Scholar’s Project this summer, entitled “The Children by the Road,” consisted of poems and essays on twentieth century poetry.

Derek Mong, a freshman English major hailing from an undisclosed Cleveland suburb, remains readily convinced by the “unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wings.” When Derek is not quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald ad nauseum, he can be found on the library’s fifth floor, rummaging through art books, grape juice nearby. Please don’t disturb him. He’ll easily know on your ear or a little gray kitten. To all the folks who’ve made Denison his home: you people are beautiful. Love and wet kisses.

Alan Palmer is an Indianapolis, Indiana resident. As a junior English Major, Art Minor, his most influential artistic and literary influences are Salvador Sali and Hunter S. Thompson.

Geoff Peart is a junior psychology major, art/economics minor. On a rainy Sunday, he loves to cuddle up under a blanket and read a good book. If elected president, Geoff would create world peace and end world hunger. His biggest influences have been Hopper, Magritte, Rembrandt, and his high school art teacher.

Brad Reed spent the greater part of his first 21 years thinking he was cool. Upon learning that he was, in fact, uncool, he decided to submit a story to Exile. This is the second work of Mr. Reed’s published in Exile. He hopes that everyone out there reading his biography is doing well and gets what they want for Christmas, Chanukah, etc. Mr. Reed believes that good writing constitutes “anything I write.” He still does not regret voting for Ralph Nader.

Daniel Rohrer majors in English (Writing) and Religion. He was born near Canton, Ohio, and now lives in Harpster, Ohio. He writes narrative, poetry, and music. “Twelfth Street, Canton” emerged from Dr. David Baker’s English 237 class in the spring of 2000, and appears as a result of his encouragement.
Tanya Sheremeta is a senior studio art major. Her favorite things to do on a Sunday are sleep and eat tator tots. If she were president, she would legalize it. Her biggest artistic and musical influences have been Kiki Smith, Lucian Frued, and Tom Waits.

Jenny Silva is a junior English Writing and Education double major from Kalaheo, Kauai, Hawaii. She once wanted to conquer the world, but now she wants to impose her ideas into the minds of children. She also likes to swim, walk on the reef, ponder the questions of the universe, and write.

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