Exile

Denison University’s
Literary and Art Magazine

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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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Chores, Then and Now

"The Windex and the rag, Paul."
What, is he that wonderful with windows that you ask him to clean them every time and stick me with the garbage?
I just know that he stands for minutes by the sliding door to the deck and pushes the rag into the corners with his little fingers, too young for callus or dislike.

I don’t have that indifference to the trash; I lug the big, black bag from the kitchen to the curb bitterly—a bag that smells like chicken bones, empty ice cream cartons—the things that fill your veins with sediment that collects for twelve more years before the call at college, Dad’s tense voice trying to keep me calm,

and I think of all the chores I never did for you, or did grudgingly, and I swear I’d take out the trash a hundred times and wash all the dishes without a word and scrub those windows myself if that would help clean your heart; if these hands could heal, if my will could make it pulse anew, I would clean your heart to the corners.

--Dan Rohrer '03
I.
Inner beauty is, of course, selfless. Its greatest curse. My friend found a bat in the house last week, flitting from one end of the hall to the other, its chirps panicked, cries like a vagrant waking in a dumpster being lifted to the truck. It came in a window. My friend’s girls chased it, unable to resist the pull of horror, screaming. Panting, hair in a wild flash, one called out, “Get out! Fly away! Die!”

II.
What brought you to this desolate place, O wise one? Night’s faithful sweeper, long blind, you look almost feeble under electric light. We have no pests to offer you, just a long treeless tunnel and the flailing arms of your worshippers.

III.
The woman who makes heaven out of her body fills my dreams. Poor thing! Long sought, men chasing her endlessly, missing all they pass. And she is left to judge the souls who come to her window, lonely with her dazzling offerings.

IV.
Girls, scoop up that winged baby and hear its last hushed breaths. I’m outside the window, under the beeches.
When Ellen remembers her childhood, she tends to see it in slow motion. Every action slows down to individual frames of movement viewed one at a time: a slide show of two children slipping on hardwood floors in their woolen socks and flannel pajamas, of her mother polishing the wooden panels of the house one small stroke at a time, and of the particles of dust streaming in the attic, highlighted by the sun coming through the two circular windows at either end. Each particle was a planet, part of a larger swirling galaxy of dust that would eventually settle onto one of many spider webs, sticking there invisibly, like a piece of a failed universe.

There are sounds in the scenes: small words like love, orange, slide, and don't. There is also the thankful laughter, the inevitable shouting, the suction of bare feet sticking to wet earth, and the sound of parents having sex on the living room floor.

The key grinds heavily in the lock. Ellen wraps her fingers around the brass door handle and feels the stick of the cobwebs that have gathered there. She pushes the door open and looks at the threads that float between her fingers in wispy trails that could be tricks of the light. Ellen is a student of light and shadow, two important elements in the composition of a superior photograph. Even now, she has her camera on a strap around her neck.

She steps inside as the door swings open; it hits the edge of the stairs. A minor architectural flaw, her mother always said. At the threshold, she snaps a picture of the foyer, undisturbed for over twenty years. You could get a great price for that house, says Henry, her real estate friend, isn't it about time you let it go? No one would pay to live here, Ellen always replies. If it weren't for the flash in the foyer, the clouded daylight streaming through the doorway would have been the only illumination.

She knows the living room lies in the darkness beyond the doorway light but she ducks into the kitchen first. Ellen raises the shades on the windows of the breakfast alcove, coughing on the dirt and dust stirred up by the sudden motion. The dust floats in the light, as it did in the attic, but this time it makes pictures. Ellen picks out individual frames from her memories, the way she and her brother made shapes out of the white clouds above their house when they were kids. There is an immaculate 1963 Buick Skylark in the kitchen like there was in the sky twenty-eight years ago. She takes a picture, even though she is the only one who will know exactly what it means. More windows are opened and more pictures taken before she moves through the kitchen to the dining room. Her fingers trail over the dull wood that used to be polished to a gossamer shine. She raises the shades and wishes that someone had covered the furniture.

But which careful relative would have done such a thing? Ellen's mother killed her father with the revolver he kept in his nightstand before shooting herself through the heart. With the swiftness of breaking glass, Ellen and her brother, James, moved south from Hopewell, Connecticut when she was thirteen and he was eleven, to Macon, Georgia to live with their Aunt Leda. The idea was to sweat out the memory of the bloody bedroom, adding their liquid misery to the humid air that seemed to wrap around every Southern pine tree, every water-beaded glass of iced tea. Ellen always wonders, though, why the heart?
It was in Georgia that she began to take pictures. She tried to draw the pine-tree canopy first and discovered that she couldn’t make it real enough to suit her. Without telling anyone, she took her aunt’s camera out of its leather case and lay on her back snapping pictures of the trees above her. The resulting overexposed images were worse than no television for a week and Ellen learned from them.

There is an archway leading from the dining room to the living room. After opening the curtains, she sees that the upholstery on the sofas and chairs has yellowed beneath the film of dust. Ellen and James were hardly ever allowed in here for more than a few minutes at a time. The television was upstairs in the room they shared and they played there, outside, or in the attic. Ellen looks at a familiar spot on the oriental carpet by the sofa before going through the foyer and out the front door. She pulls a telephone out of the pocket of her jacket, along with a piece of paper with the phone numbers for the utility companies. A phone call turns the electricity back on.

“It sounds like an interesting old place,” said Henry, the real estate friend.

“I haven’t been there in almost thirty years. I don’t really want to go back.”

“Well, I’ve said a hundred times that you’d make a hell of a lot of money on it if you would just let me put it on the market for you.”

“I really don’t want to.”

“Maybe you should take another look at it. Snap a few pictures, I’ll put together a couple of pages on it, put the word out for you. Just for about a month or so. And we’ll see what happens?”

“Okay. Fine,” said Ellen and she left his office, unsure of why she gave in.

“I think he’s right. You should try and get rid of the house. What do you need it for, anyway,” said Rachel, her married friend.

They work at a private school in Westchester, just outside of New York City, where Rachel teaches first graders how to share and Ellen teaches nine- through eleven-year-olds how numbers work. They commute together every weekday.

Sitting on the front steps, Ellen still wonders why she gave in as she reads her composition book. Everything on the ruled pages is in the form of random sentences found in between sketches of figures and objects arranged in the rectangular space of the frame. Ellen’s notebook is always close at hand, for whatever comes up.

On the front porch, she sits down on the steps and opens her book to a blank page. She normally plans out her pictures weeks beforehand but she has no ideas this time, though it isn’t as if she ever forgot the rooms. Her phone rings and she flips it open.

“Who was on the phone,” Sofia her mother asked David her father.

“It was no one,” he said.

James and Ellen are on the stairs. From where they are—almost at the top—they can see their father at the phone by the breakfast table, a dark figure backlit by the bay window. Their mother is on the floor with a kerchief over her hair, a bucket of soapy water by her side. He towers, their father, and they always wonder why their mother won’t stand up.

“How is it?”

Rachel’s question is careful, like she’s asking about death.

“It’s the house. I don’t know. It just is. It’s dirty, I guess. But the pictures should be interesting. Maybe it’ll sell.”
open window. He smiles and leaps out of it. The window slams after him. Ellen looks through to see him floating facedown in the brown water, his body knocking into the bodies of her parents. She beats on the window and wakes up wanting something to drink.

As an adult, she’d hoped that she might have taken enough pictures but there were still the nights when nothing would help her sleep. Not the New York skyline, a cup of tea, an arm around her waist; the arms became fewer and fewer until Ellen gave up. It was a decision she came to when number seven said that she couldn’t handle the suffocation of the lifetime that she had locked inside of herself. Of course, he wasn’t that specific about it. He was vague, as all men are to Ellen. Except, perhaps, for James.

She was right about waking up but it wasn’t until forty-three in the morning. The tidy sterility of the hotel room lends an unexpected calm as she settles for hot water and a sugar packet from her bag. The slight sweetness of the water vaguely reminds her of the orange juice Sofia would squeeze fresh some mornings, natural and uncorrupted.

The next morning, Ellen enters and turns on the lights in the foyer first thing. The shades are still open so the morning sun casts shadows on everything. She spends four rolls of film on pictures of each room. When she is finished, each window shade is carefully closed again.

A film of dust coats the stairs, muffling her steps as she ascends. The first door is to the guest room. Aunt Leda has stayed there, and others. The second door goes to a bathroom with a clawed-foot porcelain tub. The third room is the one she and James shared until they left, two months after he turned eleven and she turned thirteen. Their birthdays were so close that their father took them out together.

“You wouldn’t mind if a friend came along with us,” David asked.

“I thought it would be just us, Dad,” said James. Ellen said nothing and played with the door handle.

“My friend Irene wouldn’t mind joining us. Let’s give her a ring.”

By ‘ring,’ he means the doorbell. They have pulled up in front of an apartment complex, gaudily new. David leaves them in the backseat and walks up to the door. He returns with a youthful sixties relic, all go-go boots, psychedelic stripes, and free love. Ellen and James are disgusted by the falseness of her, like a comic-book parody of a human woman: stringy, impossible muscles and hair, tiny dots of color making up a solid. Sweet Sofia for ridiculous Irene, the evil-triumphant-over-good kind of thing that doesn’t happen in the comic books.

She photographs each of the first three rooms before opening the door at the end of the hallway. Ellen knows that Sofia and David’s bedroom was stripped immediately after they died but she feels like the stains are there anyway. It’s just the naked four-poster bed, though, and dressers, wardrobes, a make-up table, and chairs with footrests by the window. She remembers hearing her parents argue through the wall their two rooms shared. David thought Sofia asked too many questions and Sofia thought David was being unfair. David always said that he would teach Sofia about what was really unfair and he taught her by doing what he wanted. Ellen always imagined Sofia sitting on the edge of the bed wondering to herself why she didn’t stand up.

It seems to take a long time to find the right angles. Nothing in the room speaks as Ellen is used to hearing: in images, the language of photography. Shadows, light, contrast, depth of field, focus, angle, composition. What is this new thing the room is trying to say? Two rolls and she doesn’t figure it out.

The attic is next and Ellen recalls that this used to be her favorite place in the house. Now it is also the most difficult to get through. The spider webs are the densest here, where Ellen and James used to play when it was raining or when it was too cold to go outside. From antique wooden hope chests, Ellen lifted old lace panels from Victorian gowns out of their tissue paper wrapping and draped them over her arms like wings. James stole magazines from the bottom drawer of their father’s bedside table and they flipped the leaves back and forth.

“I hope that never happens to me,” said Ellen, pointing to the cheap-looking features of the women stretched across the pages.

“If it does, I’m never speaking to you again,” said James. He curls his lip and snatches the magazine away and stacks it on his lap with the others. She hears him walk down the steps to put them away and then back up the attic stairs. This was the day that James threatened to jump out of one side of the attic, out of the circular window to see how much the ground would hurt.

“Do you think that they’ll ever break up,” asked James.

“Like a divorce? Maybe... Marianne Blythe’s parents did and she says she has to spend weekends with her Dad and his girlfriend.”

“I don’t think our Dad would care.”

“Maybe not.”

“Do you think Mom knows about Irene?”

“Probably or she wouldn’t always ask who’s on the phone.”

“Yeah...”

Then James says What if I jumped? Do you think the ground would hurt? Ellen says she doesn’t know but that it probably would. Probably? says James. What kind of answer is that?

Ellen spends the least time in the attic because it is darkening outside and the spiders drop out of nowhere, appearing suddenly in the middle of their gauzy webs. She takes a roll of film, moving around careful as a spy to step over boxes and broken boards. A green-tinted mirror spotted with corroded circles reflects the room. She captures the broken reflection and this is the last picture she takes inside.

“This is the last time, David. I’m finished with you.”

“I’m sorry, Sofia. I’m so sorry. I’ll try my hardest to make everything up to you.”

“You always say that, but I’m leaving this time. I have to.”

“No you don’t.”

Sofia leans into him as David’s hands crawl up her waist and he kisses her. I hate you, says Sofia. She is stiff at first but loosens. They are in the living room while Ellen and James are on the stairs on their way up to the attic. The sounds fly up to them like terrible, sharply angled crows and they hear the slight rip of high-heeled shoes on the Oriental rug.

In the attic, Ellen says nothing and waves an old iron poker through spider webs and kicks up dust on purpose. James the Precocious coughs and says, What are you so upset about? It’s just sex. No big deal. Dust and web filaments stick to her sweaty young skin. She wipes off the filth with a piece of lace peeking out of a wooden chest. All they can do is wait for them to finish then ignore the obvious gouges made by their mother’s
high heels on the carpet by the sofa.

Nine days afterward, a Tuesday, is two months after their birthdays and two gunshots wake them up in the middle of the night. James calls the police from downstairs while Ellen opens the bedroom door like a stupid girl. Her father is on the floor, spread eagle toward the window with a red ink blot on his back. Her mother is on the bed, her entire body curled around the gun in her hands. Blood is on the sheets and on the walls. The room smells acrid and metallic, the way Ellen now thinks of love. This is the first time she asks herself Why the heart?

She rushes down the stairs from the attic to the second floor, to the first. On the porch, she makes sure she has all of her equipment before she locks the front door. After a moment, she begins to circle the house and take pictures in the dusky afternoon. Ellen finishes and walks away, her boots sticking a little in the damp earth. In her car, she counts her rolls of film, twelve in all. She calls Henry from the driveway to say she is finished. Rachel says to meet her for dinner but Ellen says no, she needs to rest. The house is looming in the dusk. She gets out of the car like a stupid woman and walks up to the porch, sits down on the front steps.

She realizes sitting there what the bedroom was trying to say. You cannot have anyone. James died twelve years ago, his piece of the universe stuck immovable somewhere up in the attic. Rachel had her own family, a husband and children. She had “couple” friends and “parent” friends and shopping trips with her twin daughters and two-hour sit-down meals on Sundays. Rachel was a sentimental friend. Henry understood little beyond how to play the markets: stocks, bonds, real estate, whose shoes to lick and whose toes to step on. He would put together a brochure and sell the house. Henry was a practical friend.

But Ellen exists in a lonely part of the universe, where her grief is gently packed away in tissue paper, like lace in an antique chest. She stands, walks to the door, and leans against it, feeling the cold glass panels and the filmy stick of the cobweb grime. She is caught.

--Dianna Craig '04
Loving her in Balinese

There are six of them-six pairs of fluttering, done-up eye lashes enacting practiced, Balinese moves. A woman closely watches the dancer in front of her. Shimming and shaking the tassels on her costume, the dancer captures the woman's eye. Without flinching from the man's coughing beside her, the woman continues admiring. She is in awe of the dancer who turned vegetarian during her college years, the one who wants the simple wedding outdoors. The woman smiles in motherly acceptance. That is her daughter out there, on that stage. That is her bare-footed dancer in gold trimming, the one flexing her hands, and moving them through the air.

--Ginna Fuselier '04

"Epistemological Torment" by Matthew Sove '04
The Golem

What? Yes, yes I’m fine. Of course I’m okay, thank you very much. Don’t look at me that way! I don’t want your sympathy. Who the hell do you think I am? Ah yes! I can see from the look in your eyes. Yes, sir, you are indeed a better man than I! I’ll try to stop picking on you; it’s more fun when you don’t realize anyway. We can come back to your care! But you do? Yes, of course you do – how silly of me! After a while you all look the same, you sound the same, you feel the same. And you all insist you care to the point of looking absurd. Tell me – what does it feel like to be a clown? I always used to be afraid of clowns… now I just feel sorry that they have to wear a mask to face the world. Paint on my smile! I’ve got my handshake!

Okay, I’ll stop “abusing” you, for now anyway. We can come back to your commercial sometime later. You’re here for yourself, after all. We may as well talk about you. Or maybe I have been talking about you this whole time! Too much to take in at once? Anyway, two years ago I began to have trouble breathing. I ignored it for a month or so, figuring it would just somehow go away. Eventually I told my mother, who had me wait another week or so before finally getting me a doctor’s appointment. “Well, Neil, I’m not quite sure what’s wrong; how ‘bout you give it a week and come back again if it’s still bothering you.” Three days later my lung collapsed when I was walking back from our mailbox. I crumpled on the sprinkler-wet grass and read, “Today is your lucky day! You could be the winner of millions!” Laughing probably only hurt my lungs more.

I woke up in the hospital. It was like one of those television movies. I came to with about five people standing above me looking down with faces kind of like the one you just had, except... genuine. I could see their mouths move, looking back and forth as though they were all engaged in some coherent conversation. They looked at me and I was going to reply, but as I went to take a breath I half choked (I couldn’t really choke) and felt like my eyes were about to burst out of my head. I was on a respirator. For another minute I laid there watching everyone hovering over me, muted and in slow motion, and passed out.

In my right lung I had developed large-cell undifferentiated carcinoma. Which basically means I was – sorry: am – fucked. The tumor was spreading rapidly and the doctors recommended that they take out the lobe on the right lung where the cancer was growing. I awoke again and felt like I’d just been run over by a tank. In the process of the lobectomy, the surgeon had to cut through several of my ribs to reach the lung; it was as if my entire body was in shock and screamed out in anger as soon as I opened my eyes.

Around this time people stopped telling me things. Everywhere I looked my life was like, how I feel every morning when I wake up... the pang of anger when people look at you stop by. I could tell you all this, but you will take my words and make them mean whatever the hell you want them to mean. Why the hell should I waste my time on you? I know, I know: you’re only trying to help. Let me try to make this perfectly clear – I don’t care how much you want to help or how much you think you are helping – I don’t want it. It’s people like you that make this so hard for me; every fucking day you show up and make me relive this horror you like to call life.

Hahah! You’re all so predictable! Becoming angry with my so abusive and unfair words, you feel insulted and leave in a fit of rage. That’s what you were going to do, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it?! Yes, nod your head slowly. I thought so. I wanted you to leave? No – I want you to leave – in the present tense. But you and I both know that you won’t be leaving anytime soon. You feel that you have to prove yourself and your good intentions and you won’t leave until I ask you to stay. It always goes like that.

So... let me guess, you want to hear my life story? That would be nice, wouldn’t it? I told you before: no matter how many words I say, it is impossible for you to have any clue what my life is like, how I feel every morning when I wake up... the pang of anger when people look at you stop by. I could tell you all this, but you will take my words and make them mean whatever the hell you want them to mean. Why the hell should I waste my time on you? I know, I know: you’re only trying to help. Let me try to make this perfectly clear – I don’t care how much you want to help or how much you think you are helping – I don’t want it. It’s people like you that make this so hard for me; every fucking day you show up and make me relive this horror you like to call life.

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Are you going to start up with those questions again already? Alright, then. My name is Neil. No, my last name doesn’t matter; I’m Neil. I’m nineteen years old, I have two parents, one sister, and a dog I haven’t seen for over a year. I’ve been in the hospital for about a year – the walls are an extremely light gray (it is hard to tell due to the terrible lighting), the couch is apparently uncomfortable, the pot of flowers by the window never change (the flowers cycle in and out, but always the same type, color, and number), the volume up button on the television doesn’t work, and the nurse on the day shift has only one eye (which is why, I’m convinced, she’s so mean). No, I don’t like it here. Would you? I have lung cancer and a five percent chance of surviving the next two months. Two years ago they told me I wouldn’t live through the year; a year ago they told me I had a week to live. They could tell me I had five minutes to live and I’d spit in their faces for teasing me like that. Two years ago....

You’re too much, man. Heh. The look on your face – it’s classic! The slightly bitten lip, the downturned eyebrow and the wide eyes. You almost look like you actually
None of the options had anything higher than a 50% survival rate – and even after the surgery I was told I probably wouldn’t live more than five years. After careful consideration and five days of thinking about it, I asked that all treatment be terminated. Of course, this greatly surprised and outraged my doctor. “How am I supposed to help you if you won’t even let me do my job? I think we’d better sit down again so I can better help you understand the situation! I don’t think you know what you’re saying…” I did, naturally, which was why he had to go to my parents after he talked to me again. My parents (my father, mostly) were surprised by my decision, and they disagreed with me. Deeming me unable to come to a rational decision due to my pain, they authorized my treatment for me (I was only seventeen). Do you know what it’s like to feel like you lost your father? I kept looking for him, but the father I loved disappeared. Until then I always thought part of freedom was the right to make any choice, even if it was “wrong.” Now I know better. You probably can’t even conceive what a “wrong” choice is, can you?

For a while I was angry when they decided to remove the rest of my lung. There was a period where I thought about killing people or myself or doing something violent – for an uncreative person violence is often the only recourse to growing madness. I sat in my bed for the days leading to my surgery thinking of ways I could impale my doctor or the nurse or the random guy like you who showed up. Why not, right? What are they going to do, kill me? Ha! Let them try! It was what I wanted anyway! I looked into the dark, inexpressive eyes of my doctor as he stood by my bed and felt only anger until the moment I realized the only difference between he and I was that he was ignorant about himself and I was not. After that I only felt sorry for him.

For the second time in six months I woke up feeling like I had done twelve rounds with Mohammed Ali. My parents beamed with pride that I was “courageous enough to fight through all of this” and not give in to the attractiveness of rejecting the wonderful life they had preserved for me. Everything was naturally going to be wonderful. How liberating it was to be free becoming – and not being able to laugh. How could it be otherwise? They talked about going on vacation and going to parks and museums, and me going back to school.

I would have laughed, but laughing hurt too much. There is nothing worse than not being able to laugh.

Was the surgery successful? Do you have any of that grey matter between your ears? No, the surgery was not successful! Why the hell would I still be lying here if the surgery had been successful? Besides, they still had to rip my throat apart with radiation before the cancer was gone. The pneumonectomy only got rid of the cancer that spread down. It took two months for my chest and body to heal enough that the doctors felt safe in starting the radiation therapy. Jesus – and I thought them taking out my lung hurt!

What did it feel like? Have you ever smoked? Yeah? Okay – imagine this: your entire throat lining has been cut up and down with razors. Someone just covered all the open wounds with rock salt and you are inhaling a strange mixture of paint fumes and tiny shards of glass. Whenever you wish to breathe heavily (which is doubly hard because your entire right lung has disappeared) the throat gland is angered and makes you wheeze, only making you hurt more. And then you have people all around you telling you how brave you are and how good you look. How much good this radiation is doing for you. One day you decide that you want to move your leg around a little. As you try to move the withered limb you realize that you can’t move it. The leg muscles had atrophied.

Soon you start believing people who say that life isn’t worth it. That life has no meaning. God is impossible, and, naturally, that your life is ultimately a waste of your time and precious energy. Why do you believe this? Because you live it and are allowed to see nothing but this never ending cycle of pain, disappointment, unfairness, and paternalism. How was I in a paternalistic situation? Because I simply wanted to die in peace and I was forced to become what they thought was best for me.

Shortly after the radiation therapy was completed I turned eighteen. I couldn’t talk. They came to me and told me that the cancer had spread again. While I was recovering from the pneumonectomy the tumor in my esophagus had spread down into my left lung. Despite my deteriorating condition, they said, the best course of action would be to start me on chemotherapy right away. I took a piece of paper and in my now atrocious handwriting scribbled: I AM GOING HOME NOW!

My doctor tried to fight me again. He had a psychologist come in to test my mental sanity – I was perfectly sane, of course. After waiting a few weeks for my throat to recover, I signed myself out of the hospital. My parents, who were now much more understanding of my decision, and I headed to Lake George in upstate New York for a month. It was September and just starting to cool down. I had almost forgotten what trees looked like… I barely even remembered the sky. The sky is always becoming – that is what is so beautiful about it. A rock, a building – they are; the sky – you never see the same sky twice! I watched as the leaves on the trees just started turning color; I watched the people running around and felt no envy any longer. Mostly, I finally lived again.

But you – you can’t have any idea what I’m talking about, can you? I’m just wasting my (hard-fought) breath on you, aren’t I? You’ve sat there and listened to me for the last few minutes, and your expression hasn’t changed once. It’s still that stupid, penive, sad look that doesn’t mean anything. For Christ’s sake man, don’t be sad for me! (I know you’re not, and you’re just pretending to be to further your own concept of your beneficence – but I’ll play along!) Oh how fun this all isn’t…

Being out by the lake was the most real experience I’ve ever had. I sat in my wheelchair, unable to do what everyone around me was doing (a constant reminder of my illness) and yet I have never been happier in my entire life. I was once again, like the sky, constantly becoming myself, grateful for my freedom. How liberating it was to be free of the unmoving and eternal creature I was forced to be in the hospital! Even if I died in a minute, that genuine freedom (which I knew was genuine because I finally knew what freedom was) was enough to fill my soul for eternity. I don’t need inhalants that will coat my lungs (well – what’s left of them) with a layer of tar, I don’t need a rusty piece of metal thrust into my skin to load me up on chemicals, I don’t need constant pleasure. All I have to do is think back and remember the sky – the pink-orange sky at dusk that lazily fades into the blackness of night, becoming. And that is enough.

Keep nodding your head, man. Keep thinking you understand, that you have even an inkling of what I feel. It will make you feel better, and, whether you realize it or not, that’s all I’m worried about right now anyway. So tell me: do you always look people in the eyes like you look in mine? That inspires confidence, you know? Well, not in me, anyway, but you are perfectly aware of what it is supposed to do. I bet when you walk your head is always held proudly up above your shoulders as you march along, rank and file? Yes, of course it is. Of course it is…. And he tries to explain himself once again! I
thought you brighter than that. You disappoint, me Mr.? Adam Nemo? Nemo, Adam Nemo. Yes. That's not your real name is it? Haha! Beware of the sirens! They will get you yet! Hah! And the sirens are here constantly, coming in and out. You are a brave man... or very dumb.

It's really inconsequential anyway. Shall we get this over with? I think you want to leave as badly as I want you to leave. But first! – first you must have your moment of truth, your epiphany! So, kind sir – Mr. Nemo! – shall we move along? Indeed, I shall guide you through the rocks!

The last week up at the lake I again became very ill. I had a very difficult time getting enough oxygen into my body. My family rushed me home to Pittsburgh and immediately took me to the hospital. The doctors were able to get my body stabilized and let me go to an assisted living home instead of staying in this wretched place. I stayed there for the remainder of the winter and got along adequately, I guess. But how well could I really expect to do?

That spring I began having heart pains. The cancer had spread – by now this was no shock – down into my left lung and the tumor was pressing against my heart. This time, no operation or radiation or chemotherapy was going to save me. The doctors didn’t even try to convince me to undergo treatment. And so here I am, months later waiting to pass away. If it weren’t for the pain and the need for pain medication I wouldn’t be here now – I’d be up at the lake or out in the woods or somewhere that recognizes that change is the fundamental reality of life...not this eternal, stale room where the volume up button never works and my lungs will never get better. But it’s okay; I still have my happiness; I still have my sky.

No, you don’t know what it’s like, and if you think you do, you have no idea, man... no idea. Oh... really?.... I didn’t know....

--Owen McGrann '03
The Shower Room

One time in the gym showers, while clothing myself in soap foam, that hairy boy turned the nozzle beside me, soaped up, and told me his sex story. It began with skinny-dipping and a girl whose breasts bulge to here. His palms cupped the steam clouds that swelled from his chest. I'd never been naked with a girl, so only sweetness, a thing I thought love, appeared in his words: two shadows, no sound, slink down into thicket. One hesitates at the silt shore, then plunges through the pond. He'll watch her top half emerge, a little moon ripples over her areolas. I envision her body untouched, his an imperfect match: nipples all bushy, hair that trails suds to the crotch.

--Derek Mong '04
Johnny couldn’t help climbing that oak tree after I dared him. The lowest branch was more than a tiptoe above his arm, so he ran inside his house to find something to stand on. When he came out with an Encyclopedia Britannica, I made him go back inside. “Aren’t you gonna climb up too?” he yelled down from what must have been twenty feet up.

I was doing just fine on the ground, and I told him that much. Johnny called me a fraidy cat and for a moment I thought about jumping up, but I decided to watch him instead. He took forever climbing up, and even longer on his way back down, stepping on each branch as if it were about to break.

“You eating with us?” he asked.

“Nah.” I brushed some dirt off the shoulder of his tee shirt. “Maybe tomorrow.”

Mama was waiting on the porch when I got home. She grabbed me by the arm and said, “Where’ve you been?”

“I ain’t getting into trouble,” I said, pulling my arm out of her grip.

“Yes, Mama,” I said, “I don’t need nobody else.”

The three of us joined hands around the dinner table, while Mama said grace. We sat in different seats on the bus ‘til school let out for the summer.

Johnny decided it was dirt and flicked it away from the box. “Aren’t you ever gonna come over again?”

I set my hand in the sand and let an ant crawl onto it. I leaned over and angled my hand against the ground until the ant walked off. “Not ‘til Missy comes home.”

She closed the gate with him running away on the other side, then got in the sandbox with me. “You don’t need boys,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. “We’re doing alright, ain’t we?” She pushed me away when I didn’t answer. “Ain’t we?”

“Fine,” I whimpered.

She stared at that TV like it hurt to turn away, like she was watching a space shuttle launch for the first time, or something. It was a talk show. Mama liked the talk shows almost as much as the Wheel. “Nah, you ain’t us,” she said to the people in the box.
tossed food. Turned out Missy spent the night behind S&S Deli, where all the stray cats went for black, came down almost to her knees, and had a picture of the Rock on it. When she damn pretty for her own good. Good thing you ain't like that.”

Missy was wearing one of the boys’ tee shirts the first time she ran away. It was black, came down almost to her knees, and had a picture of the Rock on it. When she came home the next evening, she was still wearing that shirt. It smelled like old sausage. Turned out Missy spent the night behind S&S Deli, where all the stray cats went for tossed food.

She just sauntered into the living room where Mama was watching Wheel of Fortune, and pretended like nothing had happened, like she hadn’t even left the night before and scared Mama half to death. But Mama didn’t say anything either, not about that. “Hey Missy, can you solve the puzzle?”

Missy ignored her and disappeared for the rest of the night.

“You’d never ignore me like that, would you, Chubs?” Mama smiled then turned back to her show. “Don’t buy a vowel, it’s The Grand Canyon!”

Mama kept watching her show and Missy kept running away. “I don’t need this place,” Missy would say. “I don’t need you or Mama or those stupid-ass boys.”

She probably didn’t leave only because she couldn’t afford to. She was always digging through Mama’s purse looking for some treasure, but all she found was loose change. “You ain’t got no money, do you, Chubs? Nah, didn’t think so.”

But when Blake and his cheap beer and army jacket started hanging around Missy, the money didn’t matter anymore. “He’s going to put me on his motorcycle and take me to California and I ain’t never coming back,” she said.

And then she was gone.

“You’ll never leave me, will you, Chubs? You ain’t nothing like your sister. You ain’t need to get away from me.”

“She’s seventeen today,” Mama said. She turned away from me. “Where are you, Miss? Maybe we oughta go on one of those shows, put your picture up.”

Daddy didn’t have anything to say about that. He handed me an unwrapped box of crayons, the kind with sixty-four colors and a built-in sharpener. “Happy birthday, girl.”

Me, Missy, and America were all born the same day. We had always driven to St. Bernard to see the fireworks display, and Mama and Daddy sang “Happy Birthday” to me and Missy just as the red, white, and blue sparklers went off.

This year we ate dinner at Frisch’s down the street. When I went to bed that night I could hear the boom boom boom of the fireworks, and Daddy’s footsteps downstairs. Mama was coughing in the other room.

“I’m twelve now,” I said the next day. “I think I oughta be able to walk a couple blocks over to Johnny’s house.”

Mama said I was old enough for lots of things, and that’s why I wasn’t going anywhere by myself. Later on she took me to the pool up at Winton Commons, but there were too many people and I was afraid to take off my swimsuit-cover.

“It’s okay,” she said when we left.

I helped her fix hamburgers and baked potatoes for supper that night. We even put cloth napkins and a candle out on the kitchen table. Daddy called to say he wasn’t going to make it home in time, but me and Mama went ahead anyway. She let me say grace.

“Please God,” I said, trying to sound real official, “watch over our house. Bless Mama and Daddy, and bring home Missy safe and sound.”

“And God bless the cook,” Mama added, smiling big.

We started staying in bed longer in the morning. Mama with her coffee, me with my orange juice, and the TV with its talk shows. In the afternoons it got to be so hot that Mama came out to the backyard with me and sat in a lawn chair while I played jacks or made perfect sand.

One afternoon I decided I needed to learn to crochet. “Every girl should know how,” she said. Mama came downstairs with a basket of yarn, scissors, and a couple crochet hooks. We sat on the couch, me on one end, Mama on the middle square.

“Do what I do,” she said, then made a small loop with the yarn, a bright yellow, folded a strand back over, then pulled it through the loop.

“See that?”

“Uh huh,” I said, and then repeated with my own green yarn. “Like this?”

She smiled and took out the crochet hook. She stuck it in the center of her loop then tightened the loop around it. She grabbed some yarn with the hook and pulled it through the tiny loop. She repeated that a few more times until she had a chain. Mama helped me do one loop with the hook, and then watched me crochet my own chain.

The next day I got started on a scarf. It was going to be black, white, and gray, with fringe hanging off the ends. I figured I could get it done in time for Daddy’s birthday in August.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have taught you,” Mama said, laughing, after I’d finished two more scarves. “You’re gonna use up all the string in Cincinnati.”

We crocheted in mornings, still in bed. Mama was working on a sweater, me on scarves. She didn’t have to tell me to stay home, because I didn’t ask to leave. I was doing just fine at home with Mama that summer, and one day I told her that.

I said, “I hope Missy never comes home.”

Mama hadn’t slapped me since the first grade when I took her good ring to school and lost it for three days. This one hurt more. My half-finished scarf fell off the bed, unraveling. “Don’t you ever say that again.”

The next day I left a cup of coffee on Mama’s bedside while she was still asleep. I went out back and filtered sand.

In August I gave Daddy his scarf. He said he loved it, but I suspected it would end up in the closet with the homemade wallet and the pen jar I’d given him in years past.

“Why can’t I come with you to work?” I asked.

He said it wasn’t a place for twelve-year-olds. Besides, someone needed to keep Mama company.

“She don’t want my company,” I said, but only to myself. School was starting up soon, so I’d be able to see my friends and Mama’d get rid of me for a few hours a day.

Missy called on a Thursday afternoon and Daddy picked her up from the bus station the next day. She didn’t have anything with her but a backpack.

“Where she been?” I asked.

Mama just cried that her baby was home.
Missy didn’t do anything but sleep for the next three days. Mama brought her food and left it by the bed. I wanted to see her, but Mama said to go play outside so Missy could rest easier.

Mama was asleep when Missy finally came downstairs.

“How can you stand it here, Chubs?” Missy was wearing one of my tee shirts. The sleeves hung over her shoulders and reached her elbows.

“I ain’t Chubs,” I said. “Call me by my name.”

“I don’t know, you still look like a ‘Chubs’ to me,” she said, punching my arm.

“Wait, I’m sorry. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Just come on... Charity.”

I’d never been on a Metro before. The city buses always drove right in front of our house, and I’d wondered what they were like inside. Missy told me to drop the change in the slot and then just sit down wherever I wanted. I picked out two seats all the way in the back. “Why’d you come home?” I asked. She said she wasn’t sure. I wanted to ask why she left in the first place, but I thought of a few reasons on my own.

“Ever been to a bar?” she asked as we stepped off the bus. Across the street was a pink neon “Mike’s Tavern” sign, flashing on and off.

It looked like nighttime inside. The lights were dim and there were grown men sitting at tables or on barstools holding mugs of beer. The jukebox was playing a country song that a man at a table by himself was humming along to.

Missy took my hand and we sat down at a round table. There was a clear, round ashtray, full of gray stuff. I stuck my finger in it and moved it around, picking out half a cigarette. Missy made a face like she swallowed a bug or something, so I put my hands on my lap.

She waved her hand. I turned around and saw a man, younger than Daddy, walking toward our table.

“I’m Tim,” he said.

Missy told him to sit down. “My name’s Melissa, and this is my niece, Charity.”

I gave Missy a mean look, but she didn’t notice. Neither did the man. And since when was she Melissa?

He probably thought she was twenty-five or something, all that make-up she wore. Or maybe he didn’t care. The way Missy was laughing at his jokes, they looked like they’d known each other for years.

Tim asked if we wanted anything to drink, then jumped up toward the bar. That’s when I asked Missy what she was thinking, talking to a stranger like that, and taking drinks. “Is this what you did when you were gone?”

Missy just sat there, with her legs crossed and her shirt too low. She was just trying to be friendly, she said.

Tim came back with three mugs of beer, holding two handles with one hand. Foam was spilling over the sides. He set one in front of me. I watched the bubbles rise from the bottom of the mug into the foam.

“I’m not twenty-one,” I said, still watching the tiny bubbles.

He said not to let the bartender hear me say that, as if the bartender couldn’t tell just by looking.

I tipped the glass, letting the foam tickle my nose. Then I licked it, just to get a taste. When I looked up, I saw Missy and Tim’s glasses half-empty, and Tim pulling Missy out of her chair.

He started moving in time with the music, a twangy guitar song with a man’s voice moaning about how life don’t treat him right. Missy had followed Tim’s lead and moved right along. He grabbed her left hand, lifted it up, and started to spin her around underneath. Missy looked like she’d been doing that her entire life.

After the song ended, and another too-fast one began, the two came back. Missy pointed to a dartboard on the wall and said, “You want to show us how to play?”

That made him smile. “You bet.”

Tim showed us how to hold the darts, how to aim them for the bull’s eye, and how to throw them. It looked easy enough, but my first dart landed somewhere near the bathroom door. Missy’s practice shot was even farther away than mine.

“I think I got it,” Missy said. “I’m ready for a real game.”

She was ready if the goal was to be as far away from the bull’s eye as possible. But I didn’t say anything.

“Me against you? That don’t seem right,” Tim said.

“How about me and Charity a team? We both get a turn to throw, and whichever is better is the one that counts.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

That’s when they agreed to make it a little more interesting. If Tim won, Missy had to give him a kiss.

“And if we win?” Missy asked.

“Well what do you want?”

“Fifty dollars.”

Tim shook Missy’s hand and then mine. His hand was warm and sweaty, and there was a maroon scar traveling across his palm. He handed us five blue darts, keeping five red ones for himself.

He hit the circle outside the bull’s eye then I hit the outer-most ring. He hit the bull’s eye then Missy hit a stuffed moose on the wall. After we’d thrown all the darts, there were five red ones around the middle, two blue ones elsewhere on the board and three more ones scattered around the floor.

When it came time for Missy to pay up she said, “It ain’t fair to Charity. She didn’t do half-bad.”

“Well she don’t have to kiss me,” he said. “You do.”

“Okay. Let’s say, double-or-nothing, me against you. If you win, you get a ten-second kiss. I win, I get a hundred bucks.”

They shook hands on it. Tim knew by Missy’s first throw that she was hustling him. I clapped my hands together as it hit dead center. All of her shots were in the bull’s eye, and it looked like she was going to knock Tim’s right off the board.

“Bitch,” he said, counting out the money. “I ought to call the cops on the both of you.”

“Thanks!” Missy grabbed the money with one hand and my arm with the other.

“Come on!”
Missy didn’t do anything but sleep for the next three days. Mama brought her food and left it by the bed. I wanted to see her, but Mama said to go play outside so Missy could rest easier.

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“Thanks!” Missy grabbed the money with one hand and my arm with the other.

“Come on!”
She was laughing when we ran back into the daylight. "Look at this!" she said, counting the money. "Hey, the weasel only gave us sixty-five." She started to turn back toward the tavern.

I told her to stop, that guy could get us in trouble. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?" She said that like it was the craziest question a person could ask. "You took that guy's money."

"He wanted to commit statutory rape anyways. I was saving him a prison term."

The bus arrived and Missy slid a dollar into the shot. "Besides, didn't you have fun?"

"Noope," I said, sitting down with my arms folded to prove it.

But she kept at me. "Just a little? Not even when you saw his face after I hit that bull's eye? Tell me that wasn't fun."

"Just a little," I said, starting to smile. And that made her smile. "The beer was gross."

She laughed, said it was an acquired taste, and handed me thirty dollars.

"What's this for?"

She said I was a part of her team, and that entitled me to half the money.

"Half of 65 is 32.50."

"Don't press your luck."

We expected Mama to be sitting on the porch, waiting to give us hell. But she just said, "Hey, girls. Supper'll be done in a bit." Me and Missy walked right on inside.

Missy was painting her eyelids. "When you left, I mean."

She had set down the little brush and was using her finger to blend the color over her eyelids. "What happens when I have to rub my eyes?"

"Well just don't," she said. She set one black tube on the dresser and picked up another. "Pucker your lips."

After she put some lipstick on me, she took my shoulders and spun me around to face the mirror.

For a second, I thought we looked alike. Me and Missy were almost the same height, and with the same hair and same purple above our eyes, we could have been twins. The mirror didn't show anything below our necks. I turned away from the reflections and looked straight at Missy and her skinny little body.

"You're a real pretty girl," Missy said to me. "No one should ever tell you different."

I still had the stuff on my face when we went down for supper. Mama said I looked like a little tramp, but Daddy was smiling and thought I looked real grown up:

"Just like your big sister."

Missy looked like she swallowed a chicken bone or something when he said that and just about started to choke. She took a sip of water and set down her fork. Her face turned toward Daddy, dead serious. "Don't you go near her."

That night she came into my room. I woke up when she got under my covers. I asked her what was wrong, and she said it was nothing; she just wanted to stay with me. I fell back asleep right away.

Something woke me up: I sat up in my bed and saw Missy, halfway out the window.

"Missy?"

"Shh," she said.

In a loud whisper, I told her to wait. I got out of bed and started throwing clothes in my school bag. Jeans, tee shirt, underwear, and whatever socks I could find. I needed to get my toothbrush.

Missy climbed back inside. She had a pillowcase full of stuff. "What are you doing?"

"Coming with you." I would need a jacket. But that was in the downstairs closet.

I took two sweatshirts instead. "Give me two minutes, I'll be ready."

"You don't even know where I'm going."

I decided that I could buy a toothbrush later. "I don't care."

She took my bag from me. "You can't come with me."

"You can't leave alone," I said, trying not to cry. "You can't leave. You can't leave me alone with Mama and Daddy and this house. It's so much better with you here."

Missy set down the backpack and pulled me into a hug. Mama gave hugs that I couldn't escape from; Missy gave them to say good-bye. "It'll be alright," she said.

Before she'd completely climbed out the window, I ran and gave her something.

"A hat?" she said.

"I made it for you. When it gets cold out."

She said she loved it then made her way out the window and away from the house. I closed the window, got back into bed, and waited for morning to come.

"Chubs, Mama said from her square on the couch. Missy'd been gone for a couple months now and Mama figured it was okay to watch her shows again. "What's the puzzle?"

I told her I didn't know and walked out to the backyard. Daddy had torn down
the sandbox because it was getting too dirty. A seventh-grader was too old to play in a sandbox anyway, he said.

To reach the lowest branch of the tree, I had to climb up the chain-link fence that surrounded our yard. I slowly made my way up it, for once not being scared of falling. I decided to stop when I reached about thirty feet off the ground. I straddled the branch and leaned my back against the trunk.

The days were starting to get shorter. In two days it was Halloween, though it was still warm enough to go outside without a jacket. At school during recess, sometimes me and Johnny ran around so much that we had to peel off our top layer and go with just short-sleeves.

I didn't say anything when Mama came out looking for me at supper time. I just watched her move around the yard like a little turtle. The spot where the sandbox had been was just a square of soil, darker than the rest of the yard. From up here, it looked like a landing pad. Mama screamed my name until the neighbors came out of their houses, asking her to be quiet. She said her little girl was missing.

"You mean that one, there?" one of them said.

I pretended I didn't hear her when she yelled for me to come down. My name wasn't Chubs. "I'm Charity."

I got out of the tree and snuck into bed without saying anything to Mama. And Mama didn't say anything about it the next morning when she handed me a dollar for lunch. Just to come straight home so she could show me the double-stitch.

"Sure Mama," I said.

--Rachel Colina '02

"The Sheraton" by Harper Leich '04
The Wailua

I. The Wailua

River Soul kayaks down the Wailua in lilikoi cups.
Eating the small fruit and letting the seeds grow into a vine
that entangles the body in a web of prayers and early morning.

Swim in the river hands.
Jump into the river voice.
Taste the river mind.
Drown without dying.

How can you sit on the white driftwood at the bank
while I chew on Soul.

Soul is not on the bank with you,
on the old driftwood,
on the weeds freshly sprayed by the haole man.

It is with me, playing with my toes
on the river.

You say there’s dog piss in the water,
cat feces up my nostrils,
disease impregnating my pores.

I tell you “no more leptospirosis here.”

Your eyes whisper worry
but they must see my child-self playing
with the spirits on the lava rocks.

I lay on the Wailua,
soak in air, and let
my fingernails become leaves.

II. The Hudson

It does not smell like rain here when it’s raining.
Clouds over the Hudson menstruate,
bleeding darkness into the water.
And when it’s sunny,
evaporation binds the dark particles
onto the air that you breathe.

Jump into the water and try to be a fish,
you become a dog instead.
Try to swim as a dog,

and you become an orange donkey,
call for help as a donkey,
you become a duck with no wings
who must swim in the bloody waters
until the stench marinates its flesh thoroughly,
burning the flesh away.

Then I must make lavender flowers out of your bones,
bury them and pray
that the Hudson soul will not devour yours.

I won’t jump in and
you won’t either.

Let’s stand here and watch the city
eat the river
and vomit it out from a distance.

III. Water

Your tears and mine look
like the dew on the taro leaf at dawn
that drips onto the ground to bathe
morning soil.

You cry
as you wash my hair,
pouring pitchers of warm water
onto its strands,
as you massage shampoo
onto my scalp.

It must be because you are sad to see
the water slide off of my head
and into the basin.

—Jenny Silva ’02
Good to the Last Drop

The first night you decided my companionship was expendable was the first night I noticed that my spoon left dark, circular marks in the bottom of my coffee mug.

It was only a matter of time, I suppose, before you came home past curfew, reeking of the cigarettes your friends smoked waiting for the last train back.

--Chrissy Swinko '03
exile

his stride to hops as he crossed the puddles.
"My War" by Matthew Sove '04

--Matthew Mantz '02
**True War Story**

I am eleven years old, and one morning two years ago my Mom woke me up before the sun was even out to say *We are taking your father to the airfield.* I had been sort of prepared for this early morning but I still didn’t know what an airfield was, only that it must have something to do with air, of course. I pictured thick fog. A field of heavy air. It made sense to me in the dark, pulling on my clothes and putting my shoes on the wrong feet.

An airfield is where airplanes take off. Those machines, which I’d only seen in pictures until now, were big and massive and they swallowed my Dad up after he hugged me and said *Good-bye, I love you,* and *Everything is going to be alright.* I believed him because he had never lied to me. He even told me the truth about Christmas and Easter. When I was six. There is no Santa Claus and there is no Easter bunny, but Jesus was born and he definitely died but then he came back. After two years of waiting, so did my Dad. But I should talk about what happened in between. Miss Armstrong teaches reading to our sixth grade class and says that a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

We ate breakfast, just my Mom and me, at a diner open all night. My Mom—Annelise—drank coffee with two sugars and one cream. I had the pancake breakfast with butter, syrup, and blueberry topping just as the sun was coming out. As we sat, she told me that my Dad would go to training camp for a few weeks. That meant he’d be prepared to fight. We drove home in the full light of morning but I don’t remember the whole drive because I fell asleep just as my Mom said I didn’t have to go to school that day.

That was a Monday. On Tuesday, I didn’t have to go to school again and we put a blue star in our window, which meant that my Dad was in the war. On Wednesday, my Mom dropped me off with a note for my teacher. I was nine and in the fourth grade so I had Miss Emmanuelle. She was nice and smiled at me without saying anything stupid and embarrassing about how everyone should be nice to me because my Dad was overseas. “Overseas” was the word that everyone used and still uses to talk about our soldiers because no one knew exactly where they were. They also called our soldiers “the boys” because no one knew exactly who they were. I only knew of my Dad and my best friend Laura Crowley’s brother, Rick, who was a sailor and not a soldier. After six months overseas, he came home as one of a hundred and sixty-eight survivors of a submarine attack on a battleship. We call their submarines “U-boats.” Now Rick goes to college for free in Wyoming, where the only water he sees is the water he drinks and the water he showers with. He was a nice boy, though, and he said he’d had gifts from Italy and Greece but they sank with the ships.

I chose to believe him about the gifts, but I never asked what they were exactly. I went to the library and looked at books about Italy and Greece, so I know what they could’ve been. I liked to imagine them on the bottom of the ocean and me and Laura with them sometimes, dancing on the sea floor, able to breathe underwater. If I want to laugh, I imagine fish with silk scarves or clumps of seaweed growing out of garnet- and sapphire-colored vases. Things like that.

But before Rick Crowley ever came home and his family took his blue paper star out of their window, before he was even assigned to the ship that would sink, me and Laura would go home to her house where her mother and her aunt would look after us. My Mom worked at the Red Cross during the day. She got paid to tear sheets and roll them into bandages. She put care packages together and wrote letters dictated by young children with parents busy elsewhere and by elderly grandmas and grandpas whose hands were too curled in on themselves to write a whole letter. On Saturdays, she would get me and sometimes Laura to come to the Red Cross with her and make sandwiches out of stuff that wouldn’t go bad, like peanut butter and jelly. Come to think of it, I guess it was all peanut butter and jelly that we made. I tried once to put bananas on one and the other women said that wouldn’t work.

At Laura’s house after school, when her mother and aunt were in the kitchen, we would go in the basement and sit under a card table with a blanket over it. It was our bomb shelter. We were allowed to have water in it, but no crackers because of crumbs. Sometimes Laura’s other brother, Alan, would come down and play the drums on the tabletop. We pretended to be mad at him, but it made it more real, like we were in England during the German bombings and the city was falling down around the two of us safe in our bomb shelter.

I told my Mom one day about playing in the bomb shelter and she got angry. *Do you know how frightening that is for the people who really do have bombs falling on their heads? For the people whose cities are falling down around them? You’re a smart young lady who ought to know better.* I was ashamed after that and explained to Laura why we had to take the shelter down. She was mad at first but agreed. We solemnly folded up the blanket and pushed the card table to the far wall of the basement slowly, like a funeral procession I had seen when my Grandpa—my Dad’s father—died when I was seven.

My Mom didn’t think it was worth it to stay mad at anyone for more than an hour or so, and that long only if it was a really big thing to be angry about. She was done being mad at me about the bomb shelter by the time she finished her dinner and we listened to radio together on the couch like we always do. The news didn’t mean much to me, only that my Dad was somehow a part of it, a maker of it. As far as I was concerned, he single-handedly captured a German supply convoy somewhere overseas. I never said as much to my Mom.

One year after my Dad’s departure, she changed jobs. She said she was tired of the Red Cross and, frankly, I was quite tired of making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Saturdays. She worked as a record-keeper at the recycling plant. It paid the same as the Red Cross and she said it was easy work with no weekend obligations. She still volunteered, though. I know she needed to fill up her time because my company was not yet enough to fill the emptiness my Dad left.

During that first year, we had a rationed Thanksgiving, but we still had dried out turkey at my Mom’s parents’ house, where the blue star for my Dad was on a cloth banner on the wall by their crucifix. Grandpa can’t cook turkey to save his life but he always insists on being the one to do it. My Grandma also tries to tell us that her cranberry sauce is homemade but everyone knows it’s not. I had some that tasted exactly the same at a restaurant once. This year, I looked in their house for cans to recycle and found one for cranberry sauce. I figured that it was a good thing because the can could make a bullet or a knife or something. I didn’t know exactly what.
We also had Christmas there and I got a lot of handmade gifts, which was okay. We also had hardly any sweets because of how little sugar and butter the coupons allowed for each household. My birthday came and went. My Mom and Laura Crowley and her Mom and Aunt all remembered and took me out to eat. There was no cake, but it was fun. Rick Crowley even came for a visit because he was home by then. He seemed to enjoy himself, but his Mom kept looking at him with the eyes my Dad would give my Mother whenever she got really quiet.

What I didn’t know about that year was that my Dad would wear thin at times. His letters were always clear to me because he only said that he loved me and missed me and that he wished he could come home and that, yes, we would go to the movies every Friday for a month when he finally did. This was all he was allowed to say because sometimes, German spies would get a hold of our mail and read about secret locations. At least that is what I saw in a newsreel at the movie theatre when my Mom took Laura and me one weekend shortly after my birthday.

I should explain “wearing thin.” It is supposed to mean that a person gets really frustrated with and tired of his or her surroundings and recycles that frustration and tiredness again and again, like aluminum cans recycled into bullets or knives. I should also say that after about a year-and-a-half of my Dad being gone, I found a pile of letters in my Mom’s dresser when I was looking where I shouldn’t have. They were scary to me because my Dad sounded like a different person in those letters. I felt really stupid because there was stuff I couldn’t be told just because I was a kid. That’s one of the first times I really got mad about the war.

The very first time was when a substitute teacher in fourth grade announced to the class that Laura’s brother Rick was going overseas and that everyone should be nice to her. She started crying quietly in class and no one, not even me, knew what to say. So the teacher sent me to the bathroom with her and started the grammar lesson as we were walking out.

By the time Laura Crowley’s eleventh birthday came, it had been almost two years without my Dad at home. Laura’s Mom and her Aunt had learned from her tenth birthday to start saving sugar, butter, and chocolate rations for weeks in advance so that there could be a cake. My Mom saved ours, too, but because there were only two of us in the house, our rations were a little less. We still saved enough, though, and Laura Crowley and I each had vanilla-flavored cakes with chocolate icing. It was at Laura’s birthday party that my Mom came in late with a yellow envelope tucked into her purse and her quiet expression. She smiled when Laura opened her presents and didn’t say anything to me until we got to our house.

Inside, she sat at the kitchen table and told me to sit, too. I thought that it would be bad news, but she said that even though my Dad had been honorably discharged—she didn’t say why—he would be okay and would be home in two weeks. For me, it was so simple and quick that I didn’t really think of it as anything but what must have been bound to happen. Everything was okay, though, because my Dad was coming home and I could ask him exactly where “overseas” he had been and what parts of the news he had been responsible for. I forgot about the letters to my Mom. At least, I pushed them as far down into my mind as I could.

Laura’s Mom came over later with extra cake and she and my Mom sat in the kitchen for a couple of hours talking after they told me to go listen to the radio. I did turn it on, at least, and “The Green Hornet” played loudly as I listened as well as I could outside of the door to parts of their conversation. What I heard made me remember the letters. Mrs. Crowley said something about how Ricky was getting a lot better and that my Dad would be okay, too.

When my Dad walked toward us at the airfield, the first thing that I noticed was that his walk was different from what I had remembered. He used to walk with a bob that made his whole upper half move from side to side a little as he walked and his face would have a big grin on it that was as warm and loving as the scarf my Mom made for me the first Christmas after he left. Now he was a little bent over and held a duffel bag over one shoulder. His other hand was in his pocket. He didn’t even take it out or put down the bag when he and my mother stopped and looked at each other. It was almost like they were strangers because it took my Mom a minute to lurch forward and put her arms around him. It wasn’t the crushing kind of hug she would always give me and gave him before he left. It was like she didn’t even know who he was but was supposed to touch him for some reason. He didn’t try to hug me either, only took his pocket hand out and patted my hair. Nice to be home, nice to be home, he said, a sharp tick to his voice.

My Mom drove home and my Dad stared out the window. I sat in the back seat, upset because I was being ignored. When we got home, my Mom had to guide my Dad back to the bedroom. I stood at the door and watched her help him lay down. She pulled off his shoes like she took mine off whenever I fell asleep reading on my bed or on the couch in the living room. She also covered him with a blanket and closed the door, then motioned for me to follow her down the hallway and into the kitchen. My Mom was quiet again and gave me dinner. She had a cup of weak tea and a slice of bread before she put dinner on a tray and took it to their room. This routine and the one where she sits in the middle of their bed and strokes his hair as he keeps his whole body turned away from her replaced the evening radio. I listened by myself or not at all. Soon, my Mom asked me to keep it off because the noise bothered my Dad.

This is the scariest thing: I woke up one night to hear my Dad yelling. Maybe it was a dumb thing to do, but I ran to their room and he had his hands around my Mom’s throat, yelling that she should get her goddamn white ass back to Germany and stay there. I started yelling, too, because I didn’t know what else to do. I came closer and tried to get my fingers under his hands so my Mom could breathe. It was fast when he let her go. He scrambled away like a dog does when he thinks you’re angry. My Mom sat up and rubbed her throat, coughing and breathing and crying. My Dad sat in the corner all huddled up in a ball with his hands over his face. Go back to bed, said my Mom.

I didn’t know how long I was supposed to go to school and over to Laura’s house without saying anything. I started going home instead of to Laura’s. One day, I just told her that I had to go to my house and I went there, found the extra key under the potted plant by the front door, and let myself in. I walked straight back to my Dad’s room and started doing my homework. He was in the bed, like always, and he didn’t look at me except for small glances he must have thought I didn’t see. I kept working and I wouldn’t look at him either, except for the same small looks. My Mom came home and saw me in there, but she only asked what I wanted for dinner. I said that I’d have whatever my Dad was having. I made sure to say MY DAD nice and loud. He shrank a little under the
After dinner that one day, I stacked our dishes on our trays and put them by the door. That became the new routine, me eating with my Dad. I also quit going to Laura’s most days and went home to do my work in their room. He would start to look at me longer but he never said anything. I asked my Mother if he spoke to her at all and she said, *Not much, not much* and went back to sorting through bills.

This is the way it still is: My Mom comes home from the recycling plant and does housework and cooks dinner. I see Laura at school and on weekends, but during the school week, I go home and stay in the bedroom. I found out that someone started coming during the day to look after him because my Mom couldn’t keep coming home from the plant. Too much gas. And there is still a war going on.

This person, who had a uniform and a bag with the U.S. Army emblem on them, was supposed to be a psychiatric nurse. That’s what my Mom told me. I think she was a babysitter. I never needed one, but apparently, this person is doing some good because my Dad will sit up in bed more often instead of just to eat. He will watch me steadily as I do my schoolwork and he and my Mother can at least touch like friends. Maybe next time I ask my Mom if he talks to her, she can say something like *Yes, sometimes.* or *He’s getting better.* That’s what I would like to hear.

--Dianna Craig ’03
Derek Mong descends from Cleveland, Ohio to pursue a degree in English writing. Doane lists him as a sophomore. Anything he's learned, he's learned from his brother, a man who finds solace in IBC root beer, Neil Diamond on vinyl, and the endless warmth of a black hooded sweatshirt.

Dan Rohrer, class of 2003, studies religion and creative writing. He loves his mother very much.

Roman Sehling loves moody pictures, hates dust and scratches on film, and is still looking for models.

Jenny Silva is a senior English writing and education double major from Kalaheo, Hawaii. She has enjoyed her experience at Denison as a “minority student” and has come to terms with her hybridization into the snobby white elite and hip hop cultures. She hopes to move back to Kauai with her fiancé, live in a shack in the woods, go swimming everyday, and be content within the confinements of poverty. Her favorite animal is the snake.

Matthew Sove represents a writing community at Denison that finds its true talent outside of the creative writing major. “I never plan on having any writing published, so I had better stick to the ‘art thing’ if I want to be famous,” he said. “After all, that’s what we’re here at Denison for: fame and fortune.”

Chrissy Swinko is a junior English writing and communication double major from Litchfield, Ohio. Her current favorite CD for hanging out in nice weather is Little T and One Track Mike’s, “Fome is Dape.” Her goals in life include: being a regular player on Saturday Night Live, bringing humor and fun to poetry (gasp!), and saving the world with lip-gloss.

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