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C. V. Davis

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The
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 39
Spring 2007

The Literary Review of Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, North Carolina

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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The J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is given annually to a senior English major at Gardner Webb University for a portfolio of poetry. *The Broad River Review* Editors' Prize in Poetry is a single poem chosen from among all poetry submissions by Gardner-Webb University students. *The Broad River Review* Editors' Prize in Fiction is chosen from among all fiction submissions by Gardner-Webb University students.

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"A Little Thing Wrong Makes a Big Mess" by Paul Shepherd first appeared as "Spene" in *St. Anthony Messenger*.

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ON THE COVER

Randy McNeilly

Randy McNeilly's compelling images have earned him countless awards and a national reputation. The Professional Photographers of America organization (PPA) has recognized him more often than any other photographer in North Carolina, including six N.C. Photographer of the Year awards and three PPA Southeastern Best-In-Show awards. He serves as North Carolina's representative on the PPA's National Council. In this position, McNeilly has helped establish and build the state's mentoring program, offering members the opportunity to work with and learn from seasoned veterans.

In 1992, McNeilly was one of the first photographers in the Southeast to introduce electronic imaging. The new digital technology allows photographers to shoot many more photos, while letting them see and enhance their work more quickly. And these advances — in the hands of a master — increase the likelihood of a perfect shot.

For over a dozen years Kodak and Epson have sponsored his lectures and presentations at conferences across the country. Kodak has showcased McNeilly's work 16 times at its Epcot Center pavilion, and Epson now chooses him to photograph its own advertising. The PPA has included McNeilly's works in its Master Photographer collection 11 times. McNeilly earned his Master of Photography in 1994 in only four years of print competition.

Finally, McNeilly doesn't rely on a distant lab to interpret his vision. At his 6,500-square-foot high-technology studio — featured in numerous photography trade magazines — he controls the entire photographic process.

Randy McNeilly can be found on the internet at
mcneillyphotography.com

Reading Poetry in a Dorm Room Is Not an Easy Task

Under a mountain of dirty clothes and half-eaten bags of potato chips
from last semester, I find a book of poetry.

I retrieve it,
And a hundred poets of ages past are finally able to breathe.

My roommate asks if I mind if he turns on the TV.
“No,” I reply.

But I do.

And so does Walt Whitman,
Who finds himself having to scream over obnoxious sportscasters
And the squeak of shoes
On an old gym floor.

ERIC PROCTOR

Prue Sain

My turn signal taps out the rhythm of a CD I borrowed from a friend.
I would like to say that I will return it,
But there's no use lying to the open road.

I am on my way to a new place,
With new friends, and new songs,
And I'm not looking back,

Except to check my blind spot as I drift across the yellow line.

Pocketful of Words

I wish you could take the words from your lips,
Those words you said to me that night,
And slip them in the pocket at my hips.

I'd cut them out and paste them down in strips,
Into the book I read by candlelight.
I wish I could take the words from your lips.

I'd write them down on postcards bought on trips
We'll never get to take – no not quite –
And slip them in the pocket at my hips.

I would touch them with my fingertips,
Braille for a man who's lost his sight.
I wish I could take the words from your lips.

I'd paint pictures with the words from your lips,
Covering the white with colors bright,
And slip them in the pocket at my hips.

But, from my mind, those words have slipped
So there are no pictures to paint or cards to write.
I wish you could take the words from your lips,
And slip them in the pocket at my hips.

Half-Watching Infomercials at 3 A.M.

A man in a plaid business suit rambles on about how a blender could
change your life forever.

But you're too tired to even change the channel,
Although the remote is already in your hand.

So you lend him a piece of your dwindling consciousness.
If you were more alert, you'd be skeptical.
It would all seem too good to be true.

Your grip is released and you drift off to sleep,
As the remote is consumed by the couch cushions,
Swallowed like a weight-loss pill
For three easy payments of \$19.95.

While you camp in the dark woods of slumber,
The man is wide awake,
Plucking dreams from your head.

Your brother-in-law, who is helping you build a time machine
For some unknown reason.

The dog you never had, who has broken free from his leash
And is eating cake at an outdoor wedding.

The plaid man throws them all into his blender,
Laughing his carnival laugh,
And pushes the button marked PARFAIT.

But you don't notice a thing.

When you first wake up, you see a glass
Overflowing onto a self-addressed stamped envelope.

You consume the smoothie, too groggy to realize what you're doing.
As the sun spills through the window,
Consuming you.

Six-Foot Three

In my opinion a five foot...shelf would hold books enough to afford a good substitute for a liberal education to anyone who would read them with devotion, even if he could spare but fifteen minutes a day for reading.

Charles W. Eliot, on his Harvard Classics collection

The layers of my skin could have been the layers of Dante's hell,
My veins could have pumped Odysseus home.
But instead, a brain that could have been *The Origin of Species*
Is left to question whether my large stature
Is a colossal waste of space. I could have contained
All the pages of literary history deemed worth preservation

With a foot and three inches to spare.

Leaving room enough
For the next Tolstoy or Poe
To prove himself worth his height.

JESS SNYDER

The Buzzards Circle Home
to Ezra Pound

I

fringed wings swirl and snag in treetops;
dancing leaves in an autumn gust.

II

every afternoon they rise.

and flow north, spiraling
over lake
and woods
and barn;

to bare and crooked
trees
where they hang,
solid and dark
against the graying cloud.

III

or do they search,
like you and I,
for the lost?

Jamie

Tina Miller of Mrs. Phelps's sixth grade class had found the words during lunch the first Monday of the new school year. Her eyes widened as she carefully read each word written on the bathroom stall door and then she promptly reported her discovery to Mrs. Phelps who wasted no time reporting the "incident" to a higher authority. No one was sure who wrote the three words, who started the ordeal. Regardless, there they were:

I HATE JAMIE

The phrase ran about 21-inches across and stood about 7-inches high. They were clearly written with black marker on the green paint. The graffiti artist had an eye for simplicity; that was all that was said. There were no reasons and there were no clues: no marker, no leather gloves, no fingerprints, and no muddy trail was left behind to point in the direction the villain behind this atrocity.

The "Girls' Restroom Incident," as the Westfield Middle School faculty referred to it, was both shocking and disturbing; never before had the school had to deal with vandalism within the school walls; a fact that Moore was proud of maintaining in a public school. The school had a zero tolerance policy for such behavior. The student body was small and easily manageable and they rarely, if ever, broke the rules. The twenty years of the school existence stood as an example of flawlessness and now, written on the stall:

I HATE JAMIE

Principal Moore decided a quick cover-up of the incident would be best for the school. "It's no big deal. The culprit is just looking for some attention," he said, "Let's just not give it to her." Duct tape was used to close off the stall and the janitor was summoned to repaint the door. In less than four hours after the incident, it was over. "Jamie" had been removed from graffiti annals. Principal Moore went home, had a lasagna dinner with his wife and two high school sons, watched primetime television, worked on his staff meeting presentation and slipped into bed. Had he known what was to plague him for the duration of the year, perhaps he would have appreciated the calmness of his thoughts because it was the last night he would spend without thinking of "Jamie."

I HATE JAMIE

It was 10:35 Tuesday morning. Principal Moore stared at the familiar words on the bathroom stall. Classes had begun an hour ago but he had only been informed of the crime in the last five minutes. He reread the words written in each stall several times.

I HATE JAMIE

JAMIE SUCKS

JAMIE IS A JERK

JAMIE IS A FREAK

Principal Moore was relieved that the words had been reported early in the day. They were discovered by Sarah Redding, Jessica Smith and Linda Uthman on a water break from gym class. One phrase was written on each stall of the girl's bathroom. There was no telling how many students had read the words before the girls had been ushered out of the bathroom. "We're going to have to close off these stalls," Principal Moore said, turning to Harold Brown, the school's janitor.

"But Mr. Moore, these are the only bathrooms for the girls to use during lunch."

"Well, try to do what you can to cover it up before any students see this," Harold Brown stared at the words for a moment then reached into his janitorial cart. He tore off a strip of duct-tape and moved towards the nearest stall:

I HATE JAMIE

"Ms. Wright," Principal Moore said as he stepped into the main office. "Could you find a girl named Jamie in the student database?"

"Sure thing. Do you know her last name, Mr. Moore?"

"Nah. There's some girl writing on the bathroom stalls about a 'Jamie' and I figure the quickest way to find out who the culprit is would be to talk to the victim. You know, find out if 'Jamie' has been arguing with anyone recently."

Janet nodded her head in agreement. "I'll have it for you in a few minutes." Principal Moore returned to his desk with a sense of satisfaction.

Five-hundred thirty-eight students make up the student body at Westfield Middle School. At the top of the database list was "Aarons, Alex Philip- Eighth Grade" followed by "Abby, Regina Grace - Sixth Grade" and so on until the list ended with "Zancowskie, William Gregory - Sixth Grade." It took Janet Wright less than two minutes to pull up the directory on her computer and less than twelve minutes to

finish looking through the list the first time.

Thirty-five minutes later Janet Wright knocked on Principal Moore's office door and entered with a puzzled look on her face. "Mr. Moore I finished looking through the list."

"Did you find out what class the girl is in?" Principal Moore asked eagerly.

"Mr. Moore, there aren't any girls in the database with that name."

"Oh," Principal Moore replied. "Well, did you check to see if there are any guys named Jamie?"

"I checked and double checked. I even looked for variations of the name Jamie. Principal Moore, there is no student or even faculty with that name at Westfield."

What had begun as simple vandalism had grown over the past months into an almost unmanageable situation. Each day another accusation on the bathroom stall doors in the girls bathroom was made against the enigmatic "Jamie": I HATE JAMIE, JAMIE BITES, and JAMIE IS STUPID had made appearances on the bathroom stalls. With each occurrence, Principal Moore became more and more frustrated. Simple bathroom graffiti was one thing, but vulgarity couldn't be stood for. Finally after the phrase JAMIE IS AN ASSHOLE appeared, Principal Moore said at the faculty meeting, "I think the solution to the Girls Restroom Incidents is to place a teacher in the girls' bathroom before and after school as well as during the lunch period. The students are starting to pick up on what's happening and it needs to stop." For two weeks the problem was solved and "Jamie" almost became a sordid memory. What happened next gave "Jamie" a title in Westfield Middle School lore.

I HATE JAMIE

"It looks like different handwriting to me," Harold said as he painted over the words on the boys' bathroom stall door.

"What do you mean?" Principal Moore asked.

"Well...it's not as neatly written, for one. And it's bigger handwriting. I can tell it's different. I suppose I'm not a handwriting specialist but I've sure spent a lot of time staring at the name 'Jamie' and this isn't the same person. I'm not too sure if any of them but those first few were done by the same person."

"Are you saying we've got a copy cat?"

"I'm just saying it's not the same handwriting, Mr. Moore."

The monitoring of the boys' restroom began the next day. But it was already too late.

Suddenly Jamie was everywhere. In two months, JAMIE IS A DORK had been scratched into a cafeteria table. JAMIE IS A BUTT HEAD had appeared in chalk on the west-facing wall of the school. Even SCREW YOU JAMIE ended up spray painted on the playing field right.

By the third month since the first incident, "JAMIE slogans" appeared in lipstick regularly on the windows of the school or the cars in the parking lot. Writing on the walls of the hall in pencil and pen. Painted in Wite-Out under desk. It had become almost a full time job for the janitor to remove the graffiti each day. "Mr. Moore," Harold said kneeling on the ground as he scrubbed out DEATH TO JAMIE from the cement, "I don't know how much longer things can go on like this. I'm doing more Jamie scrubbin' each day and I just don't have the time to stay late every night doing the regular work. Heck, I haven't given the hall a good sweepin' since last Thursday." Mr. Brown stopped and wiped at his brow. He looked up at Principal Moore. "Did you know some kid has printed out 'I HATE JAMIE' stickers? I spent the better part of last week scraping those things up. And you know how stickers are—they leave that nasty residue."

"Mr. Brown, I'm doing everything I can do to catch the perpetrators. I'm sure we'll have this under control before the holidays."

"I sure hope so," Harold Brown said, returning to his task. "I don't know who this 'Jamie' fellow is, but kids around here seem to have something against him...or her."

Principal Moore nodded. Principal Moore had, in fact, been doing everything in his power to stop the vandalism: a hall monitor program had begun, each individual class had been addressed, a newsletter had been sent home to parents talking about the vandalism but all to no avail. The vandalism continued.

That isn't to say that students had not been caught. An upwards of 25 different students had moved through Principal Moore's office. Most of them claiming it was just to be "funny" or because someone had pressured them into it. A few students remained fairly silent during their interrogations and hung their heads in shame, saying they didn't know what had compelled them. "Everyone is doing it," eighth grader Eric Jennings said late December, "I don't know a single person who hasn't Jamie'd somthin'." None of them knew who "Jamie" really was, and none of them confessed to being the original vandal.

"I'm running a goddamn school of 'graffiti copycats,' Principal Moore said to Ms. Wright. It was the last day of school before Christmas break and Principal Moore had just sent a student out of his office with detention.

"Another Jamie crime?" Ms. Wright asked.

"Aren't they all?"

"I'm sure after a long break things will all blow over. It's probably just a passing trend. They'll forget about it while they're away." Ms. Wright said as she left the main office.

"I sure hope so," Principal Moore said to himself as he stood alone in the office.

"You're such a JAMIE!" Benjamin Pierce yelled at Jeffrey Davis during the sixth grade gym period seven months later.

"Stop calling me that!" Jeffrey replied with tears beginning to form in his eyes.

"JAMIE! JAMIE! JAMIE!"

"Mr. Pierce!" shouted Coach Clark. "You know the rules. Now report to the Principal's office."

Benjamin, caught and embarrassed, sulked towards the main office.

It was now March and things had only grown worse. Benjamin Pierce, dressed in his gym uniform, took a seat outside of the Principal's office and joined the ever-present line of children who sat in the chair outside of the office. The "Jamie Ordeal" had become an obsession for Principal Moore and he insisted on speaking to each student who was caught vandalizing or trespassing the "Rules Against Jamie" that had gone into effect in February. On this particular day the seats were filled by sixth-grader Benjamin Pierce for calling Jeffrey Davis a "Jamie" in P.E., eighth-grader Samantha Roberts for passing a note that read "Ashley Street is a Jamie" to another classmate, and eighth-grade repeater Billy Thomas. Thomas was continually suspect for the ever present "Jamie" vandalisms which continually persisted.

Christmas break had not quelled the Jamie rage within the students. When students returned the ordeal had elevated to a new level of slander. Some say it was seventh-grader Regina Adams who started the name calling when she called Geoff Harris a "Jamie" when he accidentally spilt paint on her backpack during art. Others claimed Bradley Truman started it when he said seventh-grade teacher Mr. Summerson was a "Jamie" for giving Brad a "D" on his science report. And still others said their individual groups started calling each

other "Jamies" during the Christmas break. Regardless of where it had begun, it was now everywhere. The vandalism had led to the name-calling and the name calling led to the "Rules Against Jamie." The rules were written by Principal Moore early-February and sent to each individual student's home to be signed by students and their guardians. The rules stated heavy penalties for any "Jamie" offenses which included: "calling another student, faculty, or staff a 'Jamie' either verbally or written form" and "vandalizing school property or another student, faculty or staff's property with the word 'Jamie.'" By the end of February, four students had received suspensions in accordance with the new rule. But there was no slowing down the "Jamie" trend. Now there were students filling the office, waiting to see the principal, and angry and confused parents who didn't understand why their child was receiving detention for calling another student "Jamie" much less who this "Jamie" character was suppose to be.

"It's like the word bitch," said the Spanish, art, music, and miscellaneous teacher Mrs. Hernandez said outloud just before the monthly staff meeting began. It was Friday afternoon and all the staff sat waiting for Principal Moore. He was in his office, finishing his third interrogation of Billy Thomas for that month. "Since "Jamie" started in the girls restroom, Jamie is a girl, a bitch," she contended.

"Just because it started in the girls bathroom doesn't mean it was directed to a girl," Mrs Phelps said. Some girl must have been screwed by some boy and felt angry about it. I mean, she said he was a jerk."

"I thought it was like nigger," eighth-grade teacher Mrs. Williams said quietly to seventh-grade teacher Mr. Smith.

"What is like nigger?" Ms. Wright asked louder, overhearing. She felt uncomfortable with herself for having repeated the word.

"Jamie. It means nigger," Mrs. Williams said.

"Nah, that's not true," Mrs. Phelps said. "I've heard white students called it too."

"Could you please keep it down," sixth-grade teacher Ms. Woods said. "I hate these words."

"You're all wrong. Jamie is some fairy," Coach Clark stated. "The boys in my class are always calling that Davis kid "Jamie." I mean, you know what that kid is like. Jamie is obviously gay."

Mrs. Phelps glared at Coach Clark.

"This conversation could be offensive to several of us here," Mr. Anderson said, shifting nervously in his seat. But the discussion

had begun to expand and grow more heated.

"Kids don't even know these words," sixth-grade teacher Mr. Jun said.

"You'd be surprised," said eighth-grade teacher Mrs. Todd.

"Well, if we're going off of who has been called a Jamie," said Mr. Summerson, "then I suppose I'll throw terrorist into the mix as well. Some students were yellin' at that Muslim girl after school, callin' her a Jamie."

"Just because Asmara is Muslim doesn't make her a terrorist, Mr. Summerson," Mrs. Williams retorted.

"I'm just saying. Jamie is a terrorist," said Mr. Summerson.

Principal Moore listened at the door as the teachers' discussion evolved into a heated debate. Another student had left the building with a suspension for writing *PRINCIPAL MOORE IS JAMIE* on the chalkboard before class. Principal Moore watched as his staff argued over Jamie. It had been nearly eight months now and he still seemed further and further from stopping the Jamie ordeal much less figuring out who had begun the original vandalism. He was tired, he was at the end of his rope and he was angry.

"ENOUGH!" Principal Morris yelled over the voices. The staff froze, a look of shame washed across their faces. "That's IT! This is going to stop! No more Jamie. I'm sick of it. I'm fed up with the vandalism. I'm fed up with the slandering and name-calling. I'm fed up with all the talk about Jamie from the students, and I won't be having it from the staff. Do you think I enjoy sending kids home with detentions and notes? Do you think I took this job to track down some mystery culprit?"

Principal Moore looked at his staff through his tired eyes. "I hate Jamie."

During the weekend, Principal Moore called in a few favors to find someone to speak on the "vandalism and slander" and how it was criminal. "The scarier looking the better," Principal Moore said.

On Monday a large and muscular policeman entered the main office. "I'm Officer Jennings," the man said, shaking Principal Moore's hand.

"Thank you for coming. Are you aware of the problems we've been having here at Westfield Middle School?"

"I haven't been in this district but about two weeks. All I know is that you've had a little problem with students vandalizing?"

"Yes, that's right. And it's just growing out of control. I need

that to come to an end." Officer Jennings nodded his head in agreement before Principal Moore added. "And, if you could also address name-calling, that would be great."

The officer's dark eyebrows bunched up. "Name-calling?"

"Attention students and teachers. This is Principal Moore," echoed the voice over the intercom system in the early afternoon. "We are having an assembly during the last period for the entire student body." Shortly after, 532 students were seated in the small auditorium with faculty and staff standing against the wall. Principal Moore stood behind a wooden podium and spoke into a microphone. "Settle down, settle down." Principal Moore waited a few seconds before he continued. "We have a special speaker this afternoon to address the serious problems we've had at the school since September. I want you to all listen very closely and pay attention to Officer Jennings."

The students applauded while Officer Jennings walked out from the wings of the stage and made his way to the podium. The man's bulking presence overtook the podium. Many of the younger students stared wide-eyed at the large man as he cleared his throat and began, "Vandalism is a serious offense that could land you in prison. It is harmful to other person's property and has serious consequences." Officer Jennings looked down at his note cards and continued, "Vandalism is considered an offense of..." his gruff voice droned on and his audience quickly lost interest.

Forty minutes later, addressing the audience of bored middle schoolers, Jennings finished up his speech, "and that is why vandalism can ruin your life and land you in prison." He glanced over at Principal Moore and quickly added, "And don't call each other names either."

Principal Moore took to the stage at the sound of the scattered applause. "Thank you Officer Jennings," Principal Moore said into the microphone with a sense of disappointment. "Well, we have ten minutes before school lets out. So are there any questions for Officer Jennings?" The sound of students impatiently shifting in their seats and murmuring could be heard. "Anyone have a question?" Principal Moore repeated.

"Ask him!" eighth-grader Rudy Hilliard whispered to Michael Daughtry.

"No, you ask him!" Mike said.

"No, I dared you first!" Rudy whispered with a building sense of anticipation.

"Fine!" Mike stood up. "Umm..."

"Yes, a question from the eighth-grade section," Principal Moore said into the microphone.

"I wanted to ask," Mike timidly said

"You're going to have to speak loudly," Principal Moore said.

"I wanted to ask," Mike said with growing confidence, "if YOU ever did any vandalizing or anything when you were a kid and stuff and if you got in trouble for it." Mike quickly sat down again.

Some of the boys snickered at the question. Officer Jennings leaned into the microphone. "Well, when I was a kid I too tried vandalizing. It was actually in high school and I got in a lot of trouble when I got caught spray painting on a rival school's basketball court. I was suspended and it could have gone on my permanent record and I could have ended up in prison. When my mother found out she whooped me hard, said 'You're never too old for a good whippin' when it's needed' and 'I didn't raise my boy to be a criminal. And if it takes a beating to take that criminal outta ya, Jamie Jennings, then I'm up to the task.'" Principal Moore's eyes widened as hush fell over the students. A small sixth-grade boy, Timothy Cartwright, stood up and broke the silence, "Your name is Jamie?"

"Officer Jamie Jennings." Chuckles could be heard from the students. And they begin to talk softly to each other. "Alright students, I guess we can..." Principal Moore began before he was cut off by a voice in the audience. "I have a question," said seventh-grader Derrek Bucks as a smirk crossed his face.

"Yes?" Officer Jamie said taking his place at the microphone.

"I have a question for you, *Jamie*." A few snickers from the students. A look of confusion crossed Officer Jennings' face as he noticed this change of mood in the room. "Officer Jamie," he said.

"Sorry, Officer *Jamie*," Derrek said, drawing out the name. "You ever shot a guy for vandalism?"

"No, we don't shoot people for vandalism. We do catch them and take 'em in."

"Officer *Jamie*!" seventh-grader Rachel Ross yelled as Officer Jennings finished. "Why are there rules against you?" The student body laughed. Principal Moore's face became flushed.

"Well, even as an officer I have to abide by laws which are like grown-up rules. But they're not made 'against' me. I'm not really sure what you mean."

"Hey *Jamie*!" another voice yelled from the back of the audience. Officer Jennings squinted in the stage lights to make out the

face. But the questions were no longer people, just voices. "Yes?"

"I hear that you're retarded!" the voice yelled. Principal Moore tried to take control of the situation. "All right students..." But his voice was drowned out by the growing sea of voices. And the questions keep coming from the students, each question louder than the last and more abrasive. "HEY JAMIE! ARE YOU REALLY A FREAK?" "JAMIE! WHY ARE YOU AN ASSHOLE?" Each question was followed by a growing laughter from the students. "JAMIE! WHY DON'T YOU SCREW YOURSELF?" The teachers had scrambled to stop the students. But the individual voices had grown into a jeering mob. Officer Jennings was yelling, "Hey! Now I don't think...! This needs to stop!"

Then, inside the collective body of the students, something snapped. SCREW YOU JAMIE! YEAH! DAMN YOU JAMIE! I HATE YOU! Then they were chanting it together: I HATE YOU JAMIE! I HATE YOU JAMIE! The words rose and fell with the tide of young voices yelling at their enemy. I HATE YOU JAMIE! I HATE YOU JAMIE! I HATE YOU JAMIE!

Principal Moore sat alone on the edge of the stage in the now empty auditorium. His face was buried into his palms as he went over the events of the afternoon over and over again in his head. It had taken him an additional 20 minutes to calm and disperse the crowd even after the bell had rung to end classes: the entire faculty and staff to calming the students, taking individual classes out, yelling over the voices. Moore was embarrassed for having to repeatedly apologize to the confused and angry officer. Moore was tired from yelling into the microphone. But mostly, he was scared by what had happened. He was scared of the beast living within the students. He was now considering how this was going to be repaired, maybe the small student body would need to be separated and sent to other schools nearby for the last few months. Parents would be angry and he'd probably lose his job in the end. But maybe even that would be disastrous. What if this Jamie thing was infectious? What if it spread to other schools? What if these kids never grew out of whatever it was they were feeling? What if it grew and grew into a riot? Principal Moore was fairly certain it was the beginnings of a riot he had seen earlier. And he was convinced it was the sheer fact that many of them had yelled themselves almost hoarse that the staff was able to calm get things under control again. What was all of this?

"Principal Moore?" Principal Moore looked up to see sixth-

grader Michelle Ellis standing next to him on the stage. Her presence caught him off guard, as did her soft voice and timid nature that stood in stark contrast to the scene that had passed only ten minutes before.

"Yes? Do you need something?"

"I'm sorry." Tears began to fill her soft blue eyes. "It was me and I'm so so so sorry!" Michelle covered her face with her small hands.

"What was you?" Principal Moore was skeptical that her small voice was one that had sparked the near riot.

"I wrote it. I wrote that I hated Jamie."

"Lots of students have been doing it. It seems to be the trend. Just don't do it anymore."

"No," Michelle said firmly. She looked into Principal Moore's eyes in sincerity, "I did the first ones."

"You wrote..."

"I wrote 'I hate Jamie' in the girl's bathroom stall and then again a little later. But that's all I did! I swear!"

Principal Moore was confused by this confession. "I don't understand. Who is Jamie?"

"There is no Jamie," Michelle said meekly looking down at her feet.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would you write that if there isn't a Jamie?"

"I was angry. I..." Michelle paused a moment and rubbed her eyes across her sleeve. "I was angry because there was no one to listen; because nobody cared about what I felt." Principal Moore waited for Michelle to continue as she collected her thoughts. "Everyday people complain and get angry. Like, my dad is always sayin' how much he hates his boss and how he hates this guy he plays cards with and lawyers and a bunch of other people I don't know. My mom's the same too. She hates the neighbors for parking in front of the mailbox and the lady who cuts her hair for messing up sometimes. And my older brothers hate me, I think." Michelle's lip began to quiver. "I think everyone hates me. The popular girls hate me."

Principal Moore attempted to find reason in the young girl's message. "So why didn't you write you hated your dad? Or your brothers? Or Jennifer and the girls?" Michelle was shocked.

"Cause I don't hate any of them!"

"But you just said you did."

"No. I dunno. I don't hate them. I hated stuff being how they were. I just, I made Jamie up so that I could hate something. I know

it doesn't make any sense." Michelle looked up at Principal Moore, "Haven't you ever been just so angry but there was nothing you could do about it? I just wanted people to know how I was feeling. I chose Jamie 'cause I don't know any Jamies. I didn't want to hurt someone by saying I hated them. I don't want to hate anyone."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier before it got out of control?"

"I didn't want to get into trouble. I was afraid. And so I stopped. But it kept going. I didn't want it to. But other people started doing it and I didn't want to get blamed for it. So I just kept it a secret. I'm sorry. I just got so scared after today." Tears began to slide down Michelle's cheeks. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt. I'll do anything to make things right."

Another assembly was called the following Wednesday. This time parents had been invited to attend as well. Anticipation charged the crowded auditorium. The students were murmuring, wondering who the guest speaker would be this time, wondering if it would happen again. The voices continued as a young girl of 12 walked across the stage and stepped up to the podium. Unlike the speaker from a few days before, the young girl was not imposing or intimidating in any way. She actually seemed to tremble in front of the student body. A step stool had been placed behind the podium and she stepped up on it. She adjusted the microphone and spoke. The audience quieted down, not out of respect, but rather curiosity.

"You probably don't know who I am. My name is Michelle. I'm in sixth grade." Michelle looked nervously into the sea of faces before her. She turned her gaze to the wings of the stage. Principal Moore was nodding approvingly. "I wrote that I hated Jamie. I was the first one who did it at the beginning of the school. And I'm sorry." There was a brief collection of whispers and shared glances. As Michelle continued to talk, they quelled. "I thought that things would make more sense now. I came to a new school and I'm older now and I thought things would make more sense." Michelle looked down at the podium. "But they don't. Why are people so hateful? It only makes other people hateful, ya know? Like, why do we have to call people names when they never did anything to hurt us? But, I guess I don't know. I guess I'm not much better. I didn't want to hurt anyone but I hurt Officer Jennings the other day. And somehow I made everyone so mad at each other. So," she paused a moment and held her arm, "I guess I do hate myself for what was happening. Maybe that's who

makes me angry: me. I guess, I guess I am Jamie.” Michelle’s voice broke as she stumbled over her last words. “And I’m sorry for it.” She stepped down from the podium and walked off stage.

No one spoke. No one made a single noise. There was no applause. There were no chuckles. There were no cruel questions. There was no Jamie calling. The entire student body listened to the silence as Michelle’s confession soaked into their minds.

Principal Moore read the words during the last week of school. No one was sure who had started it in the weeks following Michelle’s confession. Things were different after that last assembly and it wasn’t just that the vandalism stopped or that the words had changed. The students had changed. He smiled to himself as he re-read the words written across the shirts of several students who passed him on their way to lunch. At first it was just one or two shirts in the months following Michelle’s confession, regardless the words could be found on nearly a dozen different students each day: I AM JAMIE. Some words ran 21-inches long and 7-inches. Some were in black marker while others were in a variety of colors, or puffy paint even ink. No one knew who had first written those words. Regardless, there they were, written on the shirt of the student body.

I AM JAMIE

The Well

Water drips from the cracks
c o n s t a n t m o v e m e n t
releasing
 into
 a pool of reunited victims
celebrating the positive cycle of repetition –
as they mold one by one into one
surrounded by each other's existence
each moment forgotten when it passes –
slowly absorbed by greater forces
forgotten and replaced

Of What I Now Know

of what I now know
a cow is most safe
although it cannot be proven
that grass cannot think
or feel pain in a way
that a cow can express
or a human can reveal or fake

of what I now know
a cow is most safe
from the potential harms
of the judgment that comes after –
assuming all is just and fair
for when it comes judgment time
the cow will be accused
of only one crime
but who is worthy of punishing
those guilty of merely swatting flies

Polar Bear Prayers

These words we exchange excuse all cause
to feign forgetfulness or confidence.
They demand sober tones and temperate touches,
anything to shadow the remorse of my departure.
Our usual folly is put aside
for these formal phrases of farewell,
though they feel foolish and unfamiliar.
I'm undecided on your mild manner,
considerably reserved and over-cautious of contact.
Does the distance you desire make this easier?
I do not disapprove of your doubts
that our unkempt oaths might be in vain,
but be patient and pray
that our hearts may know faith and
our souls may be serene when illuminated by hope.
Our bodies divulge these vows;
promises made to endure all our tomorrows.
I will think of you often and fondly,
as your love has been the remedy for this malady
we both have labeled as loneliness.
If an old polar bear, enamored with the cold,
may find pleasure in the warmth of your eyes,
might he not also seek the embers of your soul?
And if you too should be enchanted by our dream,
then do not forget our midnight dances,
for the coming blizzard cannot keep me from you.
Tender kisses warm frosty faces.

After the Flood

Ellis Marsalis fingering through
Just A Closer Walk With Thee,

A whole generation of jazz
Having spilled out of him,

Making Marsalis a brand name
Like Bentley or Rothschild.

Even his yawn, at this late hour,
While pedaling Delilah softly,

Is in tune. The tools of the trade
Are touch and sweet harmonic

Rhyme; how to modulate not
As important as when. Suddenly

The hammer-ons bring the old dog
To the front of the pack, making

The middle ground fall away
From beneath our feet. He spins,

With one hand raised to quiet
The cymbals and drops back into

The groove from his outside perch,
Pats his left hand against the low

Bass note and everybody stops
On the down. Exiting stage left,

To mad applause, he hunches into
The curtains like a hound dog

Houdini, pulls his ears around
Himself and quickly disappears.

The Blues

Last night I dreamed of my wife,
two years gone, the traces of feeling
in men, like marble in meat,
the hypnotic interiors that highlight
the soul's confusion, like a moth trapped
in a glass or under a hat on the floor.
Nothing rises, not History which requires two,
or marriage with its schizophrenic feeling,
half longing, half belonging, like living
in a homeland constantly occupied by
a different neighboring country.

Her curls
wind-whipped in a field, the old comfort
of our lust rolling through the weeds
in a Welsh meadow of bluebells, and the
cratered places where our bodies had been,
the weight of absence, or the inertia of images,
the half-traced alcove of a piazza's blueprint,
the eclipse of the moon, the plaster casts
of bodies faced with death, contorted together
in Pompeii beneath an age of ash, a single
feather on a beam of wind from atop Chichen
Itza fastened alone on a journey to the Mexican
jungle.

I can feel my eye breaking on the coastal
plain, a piece of shoestring tied to a wire,
the silent mouth screaming in an o-ring of
pleasure or fear, all the questions, curdled milk
streaming from a cracked carton into the waves.
I have wondered, if by these details one could
inhabit or comprehend another, by what method
do we understand the spires of an incomplete
building stabbing out at Time whose face
is hidden?

Camped on a cliff, can we become
complete as one gull battles a crater of saltwater
with its crushed wing, while the flowers ferment
under concrete pressure, and the smell of a muse
that cannot be viewed, flays with a strange violence
in my brain? The fossils rise, their pearly skulls
drained of local color. There is no coupling
of natures, no merger of worlds.

The dead name us,
taking the first fork they find and bending it to suit
their own peculiar path. Ever speak of this and their
voices run wild. Just ask anybody, wandering
half-lit by the moon on a country road at night,
where the shadows announce themselves and
disappear, their presence overblown in a land
scape of broken ruses, and the ending is the blues.

The Throat Singers of Tuva

Stupefied	Like the blind
And rolling down	Throat singers
The steep ravines	Their voicebox
I write	Three notes
The Constitution	Locked between
Of no authority	Siberia and
The history	The Gobi Desert
Of ecstasy	Breathing out
Like the waves	Rhomboids
Endlessly battered	And rain dances
Buttressed	Like turtledoves
From behind	In a drought
By formlessness	Making misty
And ahead	The wobbly triangle
The only	Of overwhelming
Jagged choice	Fragrances
Is to carve	Coming from
Themselves	The hidden source
Against the rock	No reference
And in doing so	To the Captain
Shape their	No map
Opposite	To chart
Into the shore	The ascent
And to speak	More native
Of this woe	Than the Indian
In thunderous	More Indian
Tones	Than the sea

After the War

Sanford Vandiver Reeves was taken prisoner by Federal soldiers at Petersburg, Virginia and sent to Elmira, New York. He died there October 31, 1864. The family was long in having the news, not until some time after his wife Deny had given birth to their third child, a son, on December 4, 1864.

Sanford had left Deny and their two children in the care of his mother Wiley and his father Dan when he had enlisted in the 22nd Regiment, Company G, South Carolina Volunteers on January 19, 1862.

A man stood in the dogrun between kitchen and parlor. He held his torn felt hat in his hands and quietly begged the pardon of Dan Reeves and his family who were at supper. Dan reached behind his chair for his rifle while looking the stranger up and down. He took his rifle to his hands, but stood and offered an invitation. "Come in and have some supper."

The man shook his head and stayed where he was. He opened his mouth as if he were a mechanical toy. As he reeled off his message, Deny kissed the downy head of her nursing babe. Her five-year-old Jeff and three-year-old Julia held tightly to her knees. They sat there, the family of Sanford Reeves, while the messenger, a man who had been released after the surrender and had walked home to South Carolina from Elmira, told them of starving men in the cold northern autumn. "I was sent to walk the land, telling families what happened to their men, and I was glad and sad to do it. But when the time for each family comes, in the end the only words to say are, 'For the lack of food your man died.'"

The message had caught Wiley offering cornbread to the messenger. The bread slid to the floor. She wrapped her arms, plate and all, around herself and sank to her knees. Her keening startled Jeff and Julia who ran crying to hug her as she rocked wildly back and forth. Deny held her baby and remembered that Sanford never knew him to be born.

Dan took two pieces of fried squirrel and the spilled bread and walked with the stranger to the porch. "You can sleep in the barn.

There's good water in the well, and here's hearty food for your supper. I thank you for your news, but I expect you've had enough of crying folks."

"Yes, the quiet is a gift. Thank you. I'll be off early tomorrow. There's more news to tell."

When Dan returned to his family, he found his wife holding Jeff and Julia, no longer keening, but dropping tears on the small heads. Deny had not moved. The baby was now screaming. She kissed his head, and said to the air, "I can't feed him."

At that Wiley rose to warm milk and honey to feed the baby. She and Dan took all three children and left Deny alone with the boney ghost of her starved-to-death husband. She spent the hours remembering how Sanford had brought a side of venison to her family when he asked for her hand. She remembered how he loved to pick blackberries and would call to her to share the sweet one that he bit into right off the vine. She remembered that he had always wanted bacon and sweet potato pie when he came home, and how both bacon and sweet potatoes had run out when he was home last, in March a year ago.

Toward dawn, Deny stirred the embers and built the fire. She went to the root cellar to get the last three sweet potatoes and to the smoke house to take the ragged end of the last rasher of bacon from its hook. She set the potatoes to roast. She sliced the bacon and laid the pieces in a frying pan. She scrubbed the table and, taking flour from the bin and lard from the can, mixed dough to roll into crust. She fed to her husband's children and parents the meal she had saved for his homecoming.

After that her milk came down.

Dan grieved while he plowed his fields, tended his orchards, fed his stock, hunted, fished, traded for sugar, tea, coffee, and white flour. He grieved and brought in food for Wiley, for Sanford's family, for all of his grown children and their families. He grieved and he worked and he watched his family eat until his shirts hung off his shoulders like they had been made for a man bigger by half.

Deny gave the baby his father's name. She and Wiley cried at night. They spent their days cooking the food they all gathered. What they did not eat, the women preserved against the possibility of a desolate winter. It was the jelly making that Deny most remembered in later years. Blackberries in the summer, apples and muscadines in the fall, jelly making was a family project. Dan and the children gathered the fruit and brought it to Wiley and Deny, Dan as jubilant as the young ones, proudly spilling the baskets into the washtubs. "More

than last year," he would declare. "And there's more to pick tomorrow," one of the children would say.

Over the years, they seemed to make a ritual of the jelly making. Deny could not recall when it started, but likely with the blackberries that first summer after the news. Deny was spooning cooked berries into the cloth bag, which Wiley held suspended over a pot. "Look at that beautiful purple juice," Deny had exclaimed. She had stuck her finger under the dripping bag and had licked the juice she had caught. "So sweet it won't need much sugar."

"Wouldn't Sanford love to have some," Wiley had said softly. "He loved jelly more than anybody I know."

"Let's take him some," said Deny, and she had carried that dripping bag right out the kitchen door and down the dogrun to the yard where she held it up as the juice dripped and said, "This is for you Sanford, wherever you lie." And every time they had made jelly since, they had dripped some of the juice onto the ground, and had learned to say, "May the juice of this fruit run the courses of the earth and take our love to Sanford far away."

From trying so hard, Dan and Wiley and Deny filled the house with food and love. But the trying brought its consequences. They were too tired to be wary of the responses bodies give to abundance such as this. Slender fibers first drifted then threaded through the house, binding those souls who lived there until they could no longer distinguish relationships.

The vision may first have come to Dan when the women were sitting side by side, Deny nursing the baby and Wiley holding Julia. Their shoulders touched, but each was concerned only with the child she held. Each of their heads bent to the child and each crown of light brown hair looked like the other except that Wiley's had gray in it. To Dan the women became one. Time wavered between them, and was what made them appear as two. But they were Wiley young and Wiley old, and Dan loved them both as his wife.

The women, too, may have sensed themselves as Dan's one wife. "Will you be going with me to town on Saturday?" Dan might ask. "Yes," both would answer. Or they might say together, "If I get the floors washed in time."

Then came the evening after the chores were done and the babies slept. "Will you come to bed now?" Dan asked. This time only Wiley answered. "I will."

Though Deny had been left to sit up alone, somehow a peace came to her, and the joy of lovemaking. It was as if her body and soul

had returned to her, if wrung out, whole again.

She could hear the bed creaking in the far bedroom and remembered the way it felt to be in Sanford's arms, to be caressed and joined—the wild and desperate throbbing and the final release. To rest heavily on his shoulder, to sleep dreamlessly after all of her cares had been sucked away by the whirlwind made by their union.

Deny went to her bed and lay in the enveloping feather pillows keeping herself warm, conscious of the joining in the other room, passion surging through the walls along the floor and ceiling. And then Dan came to her. She welcomed him as Wiley had.

The community laid blame while Deny carried her fourth child. "Who is the father?" the delegation from the church asked.

"My husband," Deny answered.

"Your husband is dead," they said, and walked off, shaking the dust of her presence from the soles of their shoes.

The congregation gathered. They did not take long to decide. "A widow with three children and her a whore before her year of mourning is done. Strike her name from the roll of believers. She must not congregate with us."

After the churching we all stayed at home most of the time, Dan bringing in food, we women preparing it. Meals were large. Mealtimes were jolly. The children were filled with venison, chicken, pork, fish, eggs, wild greens and garden grown, onions, sweet potatoes, fresh corn and cornbread, peas, green beans, milk, butter, apples, pears, berries, stories, and always they knew that our arms were there for them to flee into.

As the years passed, we let the children go more. The older ones, Julia and Jeff and Sandy, went to school and to church. Jeff and Julia courted and married. In the meantime, we birthed three more children. We shared the pain and joy. Dan planted each child in my womb, I carried it, and Wiley caught each as it came forth.

The end came gently.

Six weeks after our last babe was born, Julia was brought to childbed. Wiley mid-wifed her and stayed to help since I was nursing our infant and tending to our six year old, nine year old, and eleven-year old, also keeping house for Dan and fifteen year old Sandy.

Julia's baby was two weeks old when the news came that Wiley was ill. Dan and I found Wiley lying still and speechless in Julia's bed. We had walked up the steps still sticky from the eggs she spilled when

she fell. For eight months Wiley clung to me as a shadow to its form. Fragile as a shade, hardly able to sit or stand without support, she could not travel the five miles home. Nor could Julia look after her alone. I sent for our children and stayed.

Each Sunday when Dan came to visit, he held Wiley and walked with her around the yard. And every Sunday he said to her, "You are the joy of my life. Before we were wed, I longed to touch your light brown hair. It hung to your hips when you were still, and flew around your arms and over your head when you ran. When you were with child, I loved your rounding body, firm with baby and with milk." He watched her, always with the ardor of his youth, though now the gray length of her wavy hair was pinned in a loose figure eight across her head, and her bosom still firm and full, rose over a thickened waist.

He teased her into eating the sweet surprises he brought her. When spring came, he picked the newest blossoms and helped her make wreaths for her head and for mine and Julia's. They looked like two young people in May falling in love.

Dan hardly reached the ford going home after his last visit when we sent Julia's husband Calvin to bring him back. "Dan, turn around," we heard him say as quiet as can be. "Wiley needs you."

Wiley was dead there in the chair with honeysuckle on her brow. Julia and I still wore our wreaths. We had grown to cherish the closeness those wreaths brought every Sunday. We used to walk together to the hen house, each holding a babe, Wiley between us. Gathering eggs after Dan left us seemed a natural thing to do. I don't know why. Eggs spilled from Wiley's apron and broke when she first took ill. Maybe we thought whole eggs would make her well. Anyway, when we went to get her on that last Sunday, she was gone—and part of me flew away with her, holding onto her ghost self as she had held onto my flesh and blood self all the time she was sick.

If I felt part of me go with Wiley, Dan felt all of me to be gone. He never saw me again, not like a person sees with eyes. I sensed it when he and Calvin came riding slowly into the yard. I knew when Dan went straight to Wiley growing cold in the chair. I stood behind her, and Julia with a babe on either hip stood in the door. He looked straight through me and asked Julia if the young ones knew. "They're in the pasture," she told him.

He said, "I'll go tell them their mama is gone." And off he went. Calvin wanted to call him back, to correct him, but Julia stopped him.

Dan brought the children in. He sat them on the steps and said to them that he would be the one to take care of them now. He told them that they would have to help him, and he gave them chores right then and there. Little Bettie, only 6, turned to look at Wiley, then at me, and I could see that she saw both of us dead—one still breathing. She bawled like a hungry calf and Dan smothered her in his arms. The other two stared, saving their questions for their older brothers and sister. They did not ask until after the funeral.

Bettie soon understood that I was a separate person from Wiley, but Dan never did. The children and I stayed with him as we always had, only now I was not a person to him. I did the woman's work and he always let me. He never saw me though. He would eat the dinner I put on the table, drank the water I carried to the field on hot summer mornings. To him I was the vision of Wiley.

Dan took charge of his children, except for the baby who he had to leave to me. He sent the others to school and took them to church. When we went visiting at Julia's or Daniel's or Sandy's on Sundays, he could not help but know I filled a seat in the wagon, and sometimes he made mention of me, but not as a flesh and blood woman. Sometimes he looked at me with longing. He never tried to touch me though. It was like he knew he could not touch a ghost, and would not put himself in the way of disappointment.

The children never acted like anything was odd. They all came to know I was their living mama and that their other mama had died. I think Julia and Calvin tried to explain to them that they had one mother and that Wiley was their grandmother, but they stopped soon after beginning for the same reason I did. I did not know how to tell them about Dan. I guess they all found out in one way or another, and I never asked them how they felt about their family. I didn't think to, and what would have come of asking anyway. We were what we were. We were three people who never quit mourning the one who starved to death far away, whose body we never got to bury. Three people who formed a tight circle embracing each other until the pain of holding on was greater than that of losing him. All of the children, mine and Sanford's, Wiley's and Dan's, and mine and Wiley's and Dan's, seemed to know that the way we lived was the only way we could.

I heard the gossip.

"Surely that old man will make her an honest woman."

"For those children he should, but she knew what she was doing. Don't deserve an honest marriage, she don't."

"What do we do with children like those?"

"I don't think old Dan knows either. That's why he's hoping to move in with Laura Turner across the river."

"Let him go then, and this other lot might just starve to death, and we'll be rid of them before retribution comes to us all."

I stayed with Bettie in the house she and her husband built on her share of the land Dan gave to the children. I helped take care of him in his last years, though all he needed was his food prepared and his house cleaned. He was stout to the end, was plowing for his last cotton crop when he died in the field away down near the creek.

A Pondering

How interesting –

Understanding is found though Nonsense

Strength is seen in the Weak

Wisdom is learned from the Foolish

Beauty is discovered though Pain

Love is stronger than Hate

Patience is learned from Difficulties

Life is given through Death

A Good Life

What does it mean?

A car
A house
A husband and kids?

A career
Good job
Comforts and pleasures?

A home town
Nice community
Activities to be involved?

A budget
Wise spending
And the world at your fingertips?

Testing the waters
Seeing what sells
Making yourself marketable?

A boyfriend
Dances and dresses
A fun and youthful time?

Seeking approval
Becoming normal
Everyone getting along?

Sacrificing life
For a living
Of a well-paying job?

What does it mean?
For me it means
Living your Dreams

Aberystwyth

Lost in a maze of ancient streets,
Stone beach and sea our destination,
Cold summer sun and Sinatra
Waft with the wind through a hotel bar;
Later, the good-night kiss at the door
Agelessly, adolescently giddy
In a hallway's glaring light.

We slip onto narrow tracks, the cliffside
Cable car rises, the HO gauge train
Cuts through tight passages on its way
To Devil's Bridge, steep stony walks,
waterfalls,
slim shafts of rock,
the electric shock.

Making love on a bed as narrow
As the reclined seat of a '50s Nash,
Two Americans in Wales
Behaving like kids who can't get enough.
The gray mantle lifts and you are
My young buck
Lover, lover, lover,
Leggy and lithe,
Outside the dark gathers, the wind
Comes up in the night, swings
Open the window to the rain.

Aberystwyth beneath umbrellas
Navigable now. We know
the streets, the sea, the shops,
The train station,
The salty air between ourselves.
Is it lost or found, the moment,
The time, the space, the
Forsaken seacoast place?
The train chugs through green hills;
Sheep cluster to watch it go by,
Wheels turning, turning,
Unrevealing, the sky.

Dying from Dementia

She went to the garden alone
in the dew, the early shade,
nozzle set on spray
to water the cool blue scabiosa.
A statue of Venus and her shells
fountained tiers of water, wantonly,
on that lusty May morning
when shrubs and flowers unfolded
beneath the copious sun and
a cool blue sky,

Across town
a nurse wrapped him in white,
pillowed his head,
a pharaoh
already embalmed,
lips parched from thirst,
his breath a dry desert wind.
Was it nature's law or man's
that decreed he would shrivel
like an unkempt plant?

The irony grieved her,
his life a fire she could not quench.
She turned off the hose,
listened to the sounds of water
flowing into shells
beneath the new blue sky,
beneath the last blue sky,
the eternity of sky.

Sonnet 0

Who says a sonnet must be written so;
Fourteen lines of that conceited love –
So passionate and violent it takes
All that the poet has to give and then
It twists and turns and wrenches out her heart?
Why must it be in these iambic feet,
The natural rhythm of English speech?
The sound reminds of galloping horse's hooves.
Why can it not be of more gentle pace,
The murmuring of brook or stream, perhaps?
Is there not a softer love to be writ?
Romantic love is not all there is.
I do not write to change the form; instead
I simply write for love of words alone.

Through the Window

The streets were full of water. We stood on the porch watching it come down, but more impressive than the sight was the sound. It sounded like a million things exploding at once. It sounded like silence.

"You all should sleep here tonight," Carolyn said. Dan had his arm around her shoulders and was staring at the ground. A certain electricity was in the air and I breathed deeply, wanting to take in as much as possible.

"I think we'll make a run for it," our friend said, grinning at her roommate. They both lived a block away.

Because I rode over with him, Steve turned to me and raised his eyebrows. "What do you think, Rebecca?"

"Sure," I said. "We'll stay. It'll be like camping."

After many hugs and tortured promises to speak more often, we watched our two friends splash down the dark street until their voices disappeared in the crashing down of the world. I followed the rest back into the small, one bedroom house that Dan had assured me earlier belonged more to Carolyn than to himself.

The couch by the window turned into a bed, and Steve said he'd sleep on the floor. Carolyn, the tall, thin brunette that she was, brought out a thick stack of blankets for us like it was the middle of December or something. I met Steve's eyes, as she smiled back and forth between us, and tried not to laugh.

After Carolyn and Dan retreated to their room, Steve tiptoed to the wall and turned off the light. We sat cross-legged on the pull-out mattress, a certain distance apart, so we could whisper for awhile.

There were two small indentations on his forehead that through college had very slowly faded from pink to white. I knew from rumors he'd been in a car accident just after graduating high school, and that was why he'd started college a semester late. It wasn't the sort of thing you asked about, and apparently he didn't think it was the sort of thing you talked about, but it had always been there. This thing that happened to him.

He wore his hair long to hide the evidence. Sitting in the dark living room, I could still see the spots on his forehead through spaces in his straight, tousled hair. They looked gray. Outside the window, rain pounded violently from the sky.

I said, "It's like all the water in the world's pouring out in front of this house."

He brushed his hair out of his face and narrowed his eyes in deliberation. Long, complex looks such as these were fully in character for him, but it unsettled me more not having seen them for the past year.

"I was surprised when you called for a ride. I didn't think you'd come tonight."

I picked at an old blanket between us, remembering the call from Dan at my parents' house and the invitation to dinner. "Why are you surprised?"

"I don't know. You haven't exactly kept in touch."

"I haven't kept in touch with anyone from college."

He nodded and scratched his head. "I understand."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. I bet you think it's pretty lame we're all still here."

"No." I shook my head. "In a way I wish I'd stayed too. Coming here and seeing you guys again made me realize there are certain things I miss. Having a group of friends. It's nice."

He nodded and watched me closely for a moment. "You feel like a glass of wine?" he asked.

"OK."

He stood from the bed and crept silently into the kitchen. He didn't turn the light on and I watched his dark body move carefully from the counter to the cupboard and back. I closed my eyes for a moment and listened to the rain. The windows in my Chicago apartment were so thick I could never hear anything outside. It felt like the world was on mute. I could watch the rain splotch the window, but couldn't hear it fall. I watched people walk by, but couldn't hear them yell. Sometimes I imagined what they were saying to each other. To me they were raising their arms and screaming things like, "I freaking love you!" and "I love you too, so much I could rip all my hair out!" In a way, the world was much lovelier through the thickest of glass.

Steve came back to the bed with two wine glasses filled neatly

to the rim. The liquid looked black.

"This is going to knock me out," I said, taking a large sip.

"Probably the only way to sleep with all the racket out there." He motioned to the window. We held up our glasses and clinked them together.

"What do you think of Carolyn?" I asked.

"Um," he smiled and paused so long that we both started laughing.

"If I tell you something," I said, "you have to promise never to say anything."

"OK. I swear."

"What do you swear on?"

"On love." He grinned. "If I mention a word, may I never find love anywhere in this ugly, ugly world."

I lowered my head closer to his. "When I went to the bathroom earlier, Dan met me in the living room and took me over there," I pointed to the far corner by the door. "And said he was in love with me. That he'd always been in love with me. And won't I take him from this hell he's created for himself."

Steve looked at me without moving, and then chuckled. "He did not say that."

I nodded and sipped my wine.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'God, Dan, you have a girlfriend here, and a house.' He said, 'I don't care about any of that, it's all been to bide my time until you came back.' I said, 'You think you deserve me after all you did in college?' You know, how he pulled me around and made me believe something would happen."

Steve nodded, his eyes wide. He'd known all this, I was sure, but only from observation.

"So Dan looked at me and said, 'Why do you have to be so damn intimidating all the time?' And then he turned away, with his head low to the ground, and went back to the kitchen."

"Sounds very exciting." Steve grinned and leaned back to look at me. He lifted his eyebrows and sipped his wine.

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect anything less dramatic from Dan. I heard this loud crack outside when he left me standing by the door, and that's when it started pouring like all hell."

"Well," Steve said. "I'm sure Dan's thrilled to have us staying over after that."

"Oh. Yeah." I looked at my glass and saw the wine was nearly gone.

"Have another glass?" Steve asked.

"Sure," I said. "Why not. I'm not going back until Monday, anyway."

Steve went into the kitchen and I watched him stand at the counter. He raised one foot to scratch his ankle. He was tall and thin and as he moved back and forth I wondered why nothing ever happened between us in college. By the time he got there, a semester late, I guess I had already fallen for Dan.

Steve returned with the glasses. "Are you still in love with Dan?" he asked.

"How do you know I was ever in love with him?"

He sat carefully on the bed with his glass and looked at me from the corner of his eye. "I just know."

I sipped my wine. It wasn't that I still thought about Dan that much, but I had this feeling maybe I moved all the way to Chicago so I wouldn't be able to think about him. And maybe that meant more than if I'd stayed at home, and was still sitting around thinking about him.

Finally I told Steve, "I hate anyone with sideburns lately."

He smiled. "Yeah?"

I looked at him. "I don't know. I can't figure it out."

He turned and stared at me for a long time, which seemed more significant in the dark, with the rain snapping behind us, and me feeling something strange in my stomach.

"Tell me about the accident," I said.

He turned away and stretched his legs out in front of him, staying silent so long I began to think he was angry. That deep, lost look spread across his face.

"I was driving," he said. "My brother was in the car. We were going to this cabin my parents had in Virginia, and my brother kept telling me to go faster. The road was narrow and winding and hilly, and I could only see this small space through the windshield. The next thing I knew, I was flipped upside down and couldn't move my head. Then I passed out."

"God."

"Yeah. For the next six months I sat locked in a head-brace, moping around my basement."

I finished the rest of my wine. "Was your brother OK?"

"He broke both his legs." Steve shook his head. "He tells me he's fine, but I know they hurt when it rains. He never goes outside when it's like this." He nodded at the window.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It made me slow down and question a lot of things. Since then, I think I've made myself figure out what's really good for me in a situation, instead of what sounds good in the moment, or what sounds good to someone else."

I nodded and looked into my glass. A small, dark puddle rocked in the bottom. The energy I'd felt earlier on the porch was still there, and everything seemed so immediate, dangerous even, like I'd get a huge shock if I reached out and touched something.

"Are you happy in Chicago?" Steve asked.

I shrugged. "I haven't made any friends there."

"Why don't you move back here?"

"I don't know. I think it would feel like giving up." I looked closely at Steve's profile, at his long nose and dark eyebrows, his hair situated behind his ears. And I started to smile.

He glanced at me and smiled too. "What?"

"Nothing. I just realized something." I paused. "There's this man I see every day on the El. And he looks like you. I just never realized before."

Steve raised his eyebrows.

"You don't understand, I'm obsessed with this man. Every morning it's the same. I get on the El, front car, and there he is with the newspaper in his lap, sitting in the third row by the window. He glances up, holds my eyes, smiles, and looks back down. I think about this man all the time. But it's you. He's you."

Steve grinned. "That's strange." His gaze shifted sideways, and he watched me once more from the corner of his eye.

We looked at each other in this way, sitting a certain distance apart on the hard pull-out bed, and I listened to the rain. I thought again about those mute people screaming outside my window in Chicago, the ones who were passionate in love, or passionate in hate, but at least they were passionate. I wondered if I was getting tired of just

watching the world go by all the time.

"Well," Steve said. "We should probably go to bed."

"Yeah."

He went to his spot on the floor and I stretched on my back for awhile with my eyes open. Through the window I heard the sky shudder and knew the rain was slowing down. I was sure Steve was asleep, but then his voice cracked through the dark like that thunder earlier in the night.

"Rebecca?" he said. "I just wanted to tell you...I have a girl who looks like you too."

I smiled. Looking at the dark ceiling, I didn't say anything. I didn't move, but I kept on smiling.

The Gift

Intrigued by all the fascinating bits of history one can find in a dark and dusty abode, I have always enjoyed rummaging. One particularly muggy August afternoon, when I was sixteen, I stumbled across a priceless treasure in my grandparents' attic. As I was scouring the bookshelf in the very back of the room, I discovered a long forgotten scrapbook the size of a college annual. The soft, burnt orange leather cover and yellowed pages were stained from time and the oiled hands that carefully put it together so long ago. Its binding, once neatly sewn along the edges, was now being held loosely together with aged and discolored Scotch tape. I used a nearby cardboard box as a stool and cautiously retrieved the book from the topmost shelf. Though falling apart, it was beautiful.

Once it was in my grasp, I closed my eyes and inhaled the wonderful smell of its musty pages. It was the smell of time, history, knowledge, and imagination. After ensconcing myself in a small nook in the left corner, I carefully opened the tattered book with excitement, as if unwrapping a fragile present. Each tenuous page was decorated with old black and white photographs of my grandfather, barely clinging to the thin pieces of paper. They were captivating images. Faded around the rough edges and smudged from touch, these snapshots had withstood time and remained unseen for decades.

Pictures of my grandfather as an ambitious high school senior scattered the first few pages. In these he wore a faint smile that reminded me greatly of my father. A certain twinkle in his eye suggested he had a positive outlook for the future. He looked pleased. Displayed on the next page was an old photo of my grandfather in a suit and a young woman in a tea-length pink dress with a corsage carefully pinned to her shoulder. I could tell from her height, as they stood together under a huge oak tree, that this lady was not my grandmother, and I wondered for a moment about her identity. Flipping the page once again, the aroma of the book filled my lungs as I looked at his high school graduation program delicately creased at the corner, a result probably of his mother's nervous habit as she watched her son receive his diploma.

The mood of the scrapbook suddenly changed, as the next

photographs were taken on a dusty baseball field. My grandfather was a virtuoso in baseball and was pictured proudly sporting his team uniform. Holding a long wooden bat steady and upright in his strong hands, he exhibited a look of determination and of seriousness. He loved America's favorite pastime. The stern expression displayed on his face suggested that he did not take his position lightly. As I tenderly turned the next page, I discovered that several pictures were stubbornly stuck together. Using a gentle force, I pried the photos apart and with a sound like tape being pulled off wrapping paper, they were free.

Unlike the previous snapshots, these were solemn and grave reflections of war. My grandfather had been drafted for World War II, and while in Germany fighting for the United States Army, my granddaddy captured many vivid images of life as a soldier. Each photograph was a different setting – some in fighter planes, on the battle field, atop bombed buildings, and others depicted him posing with fellow soldiers, his friends. Their somber looks and burdened eyes caused a strange feeling to bubble in my stomach as I fingered through the grim images. It was a sense of deep respect for my grandfather that I had not felt before. Through the lens of his camera, I was transported out of the dim, cramped attic onto the front lines of the battle field and experienced some degree of the emotions that pulsed through his veins.

A picture of my grandfather playing baseball was mixed in amongst those of war. Naturally, I assumed it to be out of place. Holding it gently in my palm, afraid to hurt such a rare treasure, I examined it closely. This particular picture was much different than the preceding baseball ones. Perhaps it represented a well-deserved Sunday rest; maybe it was an emotional break. Whatever its purpose, it was a snapshot of soldiers taking precious time out of the war to relax and play a game of baseball. In it my grandfather's grey and navy blue team uniform had been traded for a tan tank top and hunter green pants, slightly rolled up at the foot to reveal black combat boots. Taken the moment his scared hands swung a makeshift bat, this snapshot emphasized my grandfather's bulging arm muscles and perfect form as his right leg rose slightly off the ground behind him. There were no bleachers, benches, or chairs for fans and players alike. Instead, on-lookers made themselves comfortable with whatever they could find. A light breeze made the nurses' hair dance in the air as the women stood applauding Granddaddy's hit. Five other soldiers sat waiting patiently on the sideline for their turn at bat. Four of these men were sit-

ting in the dry, dead grass, arms around their knees, casually smoking cigarettes. Standing alone toward third base, the fifth man had his left leg propped upon a large crate, head being supported by his right arm resting on the raised knee. He appeared to be in a reverie. A young German boy sat as a spectator on an overturned barrel half way down the line. The dirty white baseball cap that rested sideways on his head obscured his eyes from view as he traced the ball's path through the light blue sky. Had there been a fence, the ball would have easily soared over it. It was only one snapshot, a single moment frozen in time. Staring at that intriguing photograph never got old or tiring; it fascinated me. I wanted to know the thoughts of their minds, the emotions of their souls, and the desires of their hearts.

While sitting in my cozy nook in the attic and browsing through my grandfather's many memories, an unexpected lump arose in my throat. I yearned to run downstairs, scrapbook in hand, and sit at my grandfather's feet while he retold the stories preserved forever in photographs. But that dream would never come true for Granddaddy passed away when I was thirteen. All I have now is a precious gift, dozens of timely photographs, and my imagination.

Open to Translation

In last night's dream:

Blackjack eyes raced the jungle,
talons and teeth chorused hunger's aria,
sporting taste for native sweetmeat.

Moonlight scurried on village trails,
stone pits smoldered cold misgivings
and siamese bungalows suckled sleep.

In my hut, a bamboo mat husked maiden dreams;
ignorant of the warm-blooded art
drying into blackest ink,
on my drinking gourd.

And you, the only profile seen...
squatted on the packed-dirt floor;
licking hunt's vestigial flavor
from moon-white, manicured fingers.

Negotiating Maneuvers

I can't feel your warmth from here,
Argument's chill restrains me;
secludes me as its hostage.

In Stockholm,
scientists have classified my need
to identify with my captor,
as a survival syndrome.

It is regrettable
I cannot speak Swedish.
Yet I understand reversed runes
and how the cold forces hibernation.

Two stories below the sky,
I pour today's tea;
its brew steeped in sentiment,
Socrates and Sappho.

And when the laudanum has been added,
I'll swallow its warm commiseration;
quenching my thirst to remember.

cliffs hung over wild seas,
the hemlock potency of love
and why it is the hour
for me to succumb to sleep?

At the Mercy of Prayer

Sitar, flute and zills converse,
the ashtray fills with unspoken thought
and cumin's pungency spikes the air.

Candle's fire spangles your eyes;
large cinnamon and paprika marbles,
inveigling and hypnotic.
I lean closer to connect.

But the bangled feet and shaking belly
of your words gyrate;
a furious, curried dance
cultured with colonies of botulism and diphtheria.

Chills flog my spine.
Fever blisters the hour.
And my water glass sits empty.

In Goa, a monk sets a pyre of cow dung
a-sail on the Indian Ocean.
This, he whispers, is for the love
denied its karma.

When the Great Grey Twisted Road God

when the great
 grey
 twisted
road god
 devoured
 your second brother
you saw
 hands
 haunches
on the crouching casket
a living thing with
 sad
 heartless eyes
eyeing you

you sat
 coiled
 between your parents
and eyed it back

 wary
 weary
the silence embraced you
in sordid constriction
and you quit school

it made sense to me

JANEY PEASE

And Now Daughter

and now
 daughter
it is too late
 to shield you
and you are too young
 to understand

when the storm hit
 i tried
to cover you
but the violence
tore you away
and gave us
 separate squalls

 spinning
 spinning

our whirlpools touched
and divided

and did you know
i was there
in the desecration
of your protection
reaching
 with arms too weak
to hold you

the storm is past

Beyond Time

"time heals all wounds"
they said
they didn't know my pain
or that it would take
more years than i will have
for time to heal my wound
this lingering ache
creating its own loneliness
and deepening my lack

i remember
the avalanche of coldness
crushing me
beginning
too long ago to repair
but growing now

and Jesus
bending over the same fire
He built for Peter
on the coldest morning of his life

and Jesus
arms and shoulder crushing me
to warmth
that melted all my memories

The Birds

While Jake peels a grape with claw and beak,
wearing with perfect nonchalance his yellow and red,
the good gray potter tells me he is not old Jake,
who died in a house fire, but a new Jake.

We make talk about the long life young Jake will have,
barring another fire.

I hear about a parrot's remarkable cognitive grasp,
how a glib prodigy uses just the right word
at just the right time. Like any precocious four-year-old,

Jake says
exactly nothing, with perfect timing.

A friend tells me

why her uncle hanged a crow in his trees.
They were overrun with them, she said, and when he shot one
and strung its body up, the others flew away.
I remember being scolded from a treetop or a pole
by a lone crow who laughed like Barabbas.
We had been talking about Auschwitz,
she and I.

When the two fledglings
leave the nest under my patio roof, one flies true.
The other slams into the lattice,
slumps, staggers like a honky-tonk brawler.
Poor little schmuck sets out again.

This time he walks
under the lattice before he flutters to the top of the garbage cart,
puffs, sails off
to the lowest limb of the blossoming-white dogwood.
I will not see what happens next.
I am talking about my life.

Waterloo Bridge

Still watching the late show when I come back,
she catches me up in snatches, our eyes
never leaving the screen. I remember
that Vivian Leigh lost her job as a dancer
when she saw Robert Taylor off to war
on the night they first met (and the quaintly
rakish way he eyed those calves).
While I've been gone, the report has come back
from the front that he was lost. Job lost, love lost,
nowhere to turn, woman of the night.

Just that easy.

Now here we are on the docks of wartime London.
Are we really surprised when he comes down
the gangplank, world-weary glint in his eye
but very much alive, no clue that she's there
looking for any man on leave with a few quid?
We sit and watch them at the restaurant table
as he pours tea and tells her all their plans.
He talks of taking her home to mother
while she smiles and weeps in terror because
she must tell him she is a fallen woman.

You lucky dog, I think.

*She will worship the ground you walk on.
She will be yours, your sweet, soiled little pet.
Whenever you fall, you can say back to her
"But none of them meant anything to me."*

Heartbreaking, I say. We smile, pause, sigh.
I leave her to watch the end.

Sarah

your eyes are brown, but i can think back to
when they were blue and helpless
yet filled with wonder
hair brunette and silky, but it once was black, and thick
none of that lasts, just like that time, babyhood blessings.

now through walking and talking and
fingerprinting on the ceiling
i see you for what you are
three years old, so long yet so short since that first time,
eight pounds of beauty to thirty of mischief.

how you have changed! and
what a difference three years can make,
as if you came home as a worm and
have morphed into a butterfly,
so strong are the changes that we have seen.

i remember it all – you intrigued by my face (i looked like mommy);
you screaming except when i was there;
the special way i would rock you – you slept every time;
the first time you rolled, the first time you laughed
onto crawling and talking and chasing through the house

and then i left, and you were the only reason i didn't want to
were the only reason i wanted to stay
but no matter – you love me still and from a distance
I can hear your voice in the stories your mom tells me,
three thousand miles yet so very close

*sarah, meme's on the phone, but you correct her because you know
for sure:
no, mommy – Meme lives in Narnia – because I do live a long ways
away which, in your three-year-old innocence, could only mean Narnia
we laugh and you think we're sad – but it's okay, mommy
she'll be back in a minute.*

nearly four years now, no longer a baby but a little girl
huge brown eyes filled with wonder and i know
that you don't understand the distance i am from you
but you do know that you love me
that i always come back

and that's all that matters
to either of us.

Antiseen, Antiheard, Antiwon

Antiseen is underground Southern punk
and now a cult.
This band's real —
as real as wrestling.
The lead singer slashes his forehead
with a broken bottle halfway through sets
and bleeds until the wild finales,
one of which is
diving into a flaming card table
topped with tacks.

The lead guitarist for Antiseen,
"Mighty" Joe Young
(Shades of King Kong!),
won a seat on the Lenoir City Council
in the biggest electoral victory
the Libertarian Party has ever had
in North Carolina (and maybe anywhere).

"Mighty" Joe Young himself
has never played guitar
but learned enough to strum a few chords,
faking the rest when the band wants
a primitive sound.
In between gigs, including European tours,
Joe delivers flowers for his mother's shop.

As for politics, I'm sorry to report
"Fallen" Joe Young's win was overturned.
"Fallen" Joe Young is an Antiwon.
Allegedly, precinct officials
made an error in tabulation.

But "Mighty" Joe Young's again using his fingers,
still playing two-finger chords of the like of
"Destructo Blitzkrieg," "Eat More Possum."

Jenga

I built
everything
 so very
carefully.
I pride
 myself
on the
 symmetry
of my life.
But it all
 depends
now on one
 block.
And I can't
bear that
 weight.

STEVEN CALABRESE

Self-Portrait, Frontal Figure



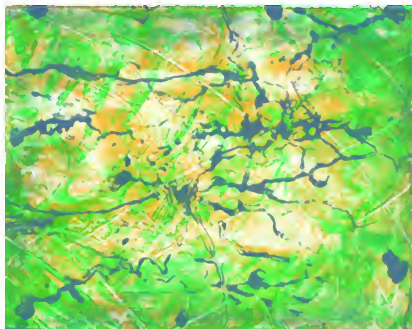
KATE GAZAWAY

Angel's Playground



LIZ HARTNEY

Splatter



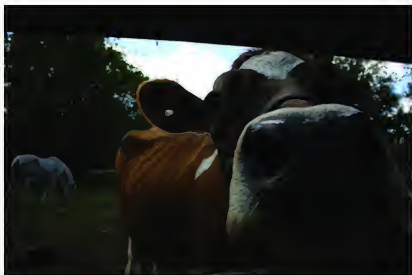
RACHEL LLOYD

Sandy



AMY MAYO

Cow



JESS SNYDER

Still Life After Cezanne



JILLIAN STEPHENSON

Rocking Horse



RACHEL TUCKER

Where They Once Walked



Hero

Among those dark and ruined pillars
I kept his temple, praying over the
crush of ocean spray on the rocks.
I covered my head with yellow-dyed linen,
straining to listen, but could only hear
(the water echoed his voice, liquid and warm)
the scramble of seawater maddened by storm,
bearing the vengeful laughter of the gods
on the winds that raped the cliffside.

They took him –
punishment for loving his priestess.
He was banished
to surge restless and resentful
against the shores of land.

I stood in the surf, legs spread, welcoming
storm's gale that tore my yellow linen
(he loved me here, waves licking, rocking)
the wind raged through my ruined temple,
lashing at me, pressing me out to sea.
(I hear his voice, his sighs, his breath)
The ocean swallowed me, and the wind calmed.

The yellow linen billows, swells –
languid in the blazing blue water.

Dreamscape

Your body
curled
around mine,
thumb
brushing my lips.

Glimpses of your
face
between rising arms
as you lifted
my shirt.

The curve of my stomach
where your lips
touched,
heating.

My hand a
pale shadow,
tracing the contours
of your chest.

You shuddered and
stretched
under my
wandering
fingers.

Your face
pressed into the
hollow of my throat,
tasting for that
pulse.

I don't dream.

Or, if I do,
I can't remember.

But this morning, I woke up
missing you.

White Clouds Overhead

The night before I found out my parents were divorcing, I made my dad pork chops. It wasn't his favorite meal or anything. It was the only meat I could find in their freezer that wasn't completely covered in frost. Their freezer was a lot different from mine because it had food inside. I could count the number of things inside mine (a box of waffles, a bag of chicken breasts, cupcakes from an office party two months ago). I could count them and name them.

I had graduated from University of Massachusetts (with a degree in art history) six months prior, and because I didn't have a job lined up right away, I moved back to my hometown of Belview, Massachusetts. I had found an apartment across town, about 15 miles from my parents, and I tried to make it a weekly habit to spend at least one evening with them. Usually, I made dinner and then we talked or watched TV or played Scrabble. It still felt like my home. Nothing had changed.

I stood over the stove flipping the chops, stirring strips of onion into the pan, getting stung by stray bits of grease. One drop landed in the dead center of a freckle on my arm. "Shit!" I swore under my breath and rubbed the grease away with a red and white potholder.

I'm convinced that every household in America has at least one handmade potholder. They all look basically the same. Unsightly. Revolting. Reminiscent grandmas and industrious young girls crank them out with plastic weaving squares and cloth rubber bands. Somehow, between these two groups, they are dispersed across the country.

I have this game I play when I go over to friends' houses. I snoop through their kitchens looking for ugly potholders. When they are busy chopping carrots or quieting their yappy dogs, I open drawers and peek into pantries. "You said the celery seeds were in the top cabinet?" Open, rummage, close. "Do you have any extra grocery bags in the pantry?" Open, rummage, close. Usually I find at least one. The houses where I come up empty I'm certain I've simply missed that particular drawer.

My mom thinks that I pay too much attention to things like ugly potholders. I don't really know what that is supposed to mean.

I notice unattractive things? I have a fetish with worthless items? I hope that's not what she intended, but I can't think of another meaning behind her statement. I don't look at the world through rose-colored glasses, but I'm not pessimistic (or entirely pessimistic). My boyfriend Barry jokes that I'm dating him only because I don't have a good enough reason to break up with him. The truth is that I love this boy, and I probably don't tell him enough.

I watched the pork chops sizzling in the pan, sending up waves of steam, and I thought about Barry and the first time I saw him, the day we met.

Barry and I met at a Barnes and Noble bookstore two years ago. It was my junior year in college, and I was home for Easter break. My mom had sent me out to get some plastic eggs and filler candy for a community egg hunt that she had volunteered to help with. "Go by the dollar store and see what they have. These kids don't need the expensive candy." The dollar store was only a few miles away from the Barnes and Noble so after I picked up several bags of multi-colored eggs and an assortment of hard candy, I stopped by to have some time to myself. I had ordered an espresso and was looking at the clearance section, complaining out loud about the disorganized shelves.

"The employees should do their job and straighten up every once and a while," I said indignantly.

"I think so too. This section is always out of order."

I looked over my shoulder to see who had made the comment, happy that someone had taken notice of my huffy attitude. A guy, early 20s, dressed in khakis and a polo shirt was standing several feet behind me. I was taken slightly off-guard. Someone this cute wasn't supposed to be the one to overhear my complaint and talk to me. I didn't know how to respond so I took a sip of my coffee, which took a total of five seconds, and then we were standing face-to-face, and I still didn't know how to respond.

"Can I help you find something? It's hard to see what we have in stock when everything is in such disarray." His tone was sarcastic, but I couldn't tell from his facial expression if he was serious or not.

Shit! He works here? I thought and mentally kicked myself for opening my mouth. "Uh, no thanks. I'm just browsing. Sorry, I didn't know anyone was listening. I really don't think it's messy in here."

He nodded and smiled as if to say "Yeah, sure."

"Is your coffee any good?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's great. Thanks."

"Ok, well if you need anything come find me. My name is Barry." He extended his hand and when I took it, it enveloped my own. I came back two days later, introduced myself and asked him out to dinner. We started dating several weeks later.

Another drop of grease hit me on my face and snapped me out of my thoughts. I looked down at the pan, smoking a little, and saw that one side of the pork chop was burned. I flipped it out of the pan and placed the dark side face down on the plate, spooning the sautéed onions on top. At least I think they were sautéed. I'm sure that word pretty much means "to cook" something. The plate looked bare. It needed something else, and I assumed my parents' pantry was just as full as their freezer. The door made a thumping sound as I slid it open and surveyed the shelves. There was more junk food than usual. I figured my mom must have been getting soft to my dad's insistent pleadings for more treats. A can of corn and a packet of saltine crackers jumped out at me. It was a random assortment, but it definitely filled the plate. I called my dad and told him dinner was ready, and then I went into the dining room to set out napkins and utensils.

For a man of 56 my dad was still striking. His hair was mostly black with streaks of gray along his temples. He worked in an accounting firm so he was always dressed like he was going to the office—argyle sweaters and button down shirts, khakis, brown loafers with tassels. I'd visited him at work a few times and was always amused when older, female customers would come in and brighten when they saw him. Not knowing that I was his daughter, they would whisper about his cute butt and if they thought he preferred older women with gray hair. They always had gray hair. They always decided that he liked it.

"What do you want to drink, Dad? Water?" I called from the dining room.

"Oh, I'll get it. I think I'm going to have some Coke."

"You guys have Coke? Since when has Mom allowed soda in the house?"

"Since I told her that I was getting it whether she liked it or not." I laughed at his comment and wondered if it was true or not.

I grabbed some placemats from the cabinet against the wall in the dining room and set them out. A basket of silk flowers sat in the middle of the table where it had gained a place of prominence since I was in high school. My mom had set it out for my aunt's 40th birthday dinner and hadn't taken it off. The table looked nice even if there were only two of us eating. My mom had called while I was cooking to say that she was stuck in traffic about 30 minutes from the house. She said

she had run some errands after work and had driven a different way home and the traffic was worse than her usual route. "Go ahead and have dinner. I think I'll grab something to eat on the way home."

My mom didn't ever "grab something to eat." She pretty much believed that fast food was a one-way ticket to death, no questions asked. I always tried to tell her that a burger every once in a while wouldn't kill her, but she would just shake her head and pop soy nuts or dried green beans or some other organic food into her mouth. She was also into exercising and, needless to say, in good shape. All of my girlfriends thought she was the prettiest mom. They always eyed her when she walked into the room, checking out her toned legs and flat abs. They asked her what she did to keep in such good shape, and she'd make some sarcastic comment about how worrying about me was exercise enough. "I had it easy when Shay was a baby. She used to cry when she needed me and now she just asks for money." My guy friends also appreciated her good looks, but they never made it too obvious around me. I sometimes overheard their comments about how they thought she was hot and how they would bang her if she weren't married. This kind of grossed me out, but I took it as a good sign because a lot of people told me that I looked like her. I wondered if that meant these same guys wanted to bang me too. I never told Barry this.

I walked back into the kitchen to fix a plate for myself and stopped in the doorway. My dad was standing at the sink eating. His plate was nearly empty, a few pieces of pork chop and about two forkfuls of corn were left. I opened my mouth to say something, and then shut it immediately. He hadn't understood that we were going to eat together. I tried to think of something I had said that would have given him the idea that we were going to eat separately. We always ate together when I came over. Was it because my mom wasn't here? Because I handed him his plate first and then walked away? I backed up silently and picked up the placemats, napkins and silverware from the table. I didn't want him to hear me and get embarrassed. I stayed in the dining room until I heard him wash his plate off, put it in the dishwasher and head towards the living room, and then I walked back into the kitchen and fixed myself a plate of food. Out of curiosity, I took my plate over to the sink and began to eat. It was uncomfortable, and I felt off balance. How had he cut his pork chop standing at the sink?

After I finished my food, I walked out to the living room and joined my dad in watching Jeopardy until I got bored.

"Dad, tell Mom I'm sorry I missed her. I'm going home."

"What? Mom? Yes, I'll tell her. Thanks for coming over. I love when you come over." He got up from his seat and walked me to the door.

"Night Sweetie." He kissed my forehead.

"Night Dad." I gave him a hug and walked to my car, hoping my mom would get home soon. I didn't want him to be alone.

The next day during my lunch break from work I drove home to eat. I had gotten a job at Huey's Carpet Factory right after I moved back to town after graduation. A friend of the family owned it, and when he heard I was looking for a job he gave me an "offer I couldn't refuse." Unfortunately, I didn't refuse, and I had been stuck as the company secretary for the past six months. I absolutely hated my job. I did mindless tasks that anyone without a high school diploma could do. I answered phone calls, took memos, faxed papers to other businesses, counted paperclips, organized highlighters by colors and, my personal favorite, filled the sugar jar by the coffee maker when it got empty. My major in art history was a total waste here. No one who worked with me knew who Matisse was.

Every morning when I pulled into the parking lot, I mentally berated myself for ending up here. I was young and smart. I wasn't supposed to be working at a carpet factory. I was supposed to be getting my masters to teach art history at a prestigious university or working at a fancy art museum.

As much as I wanted to blame my boss and coworkers for my unhappiness, it was ultimately my fault. During my senior year, my medieval art teacher told me about an opportunity to travel to Greece and work for an exchange art program sponsored through the university. He knew a lot of faculty members on the board and told me he would recommend me if I was interested in applying. "You're one of my top students, Shay. I could see you thriving in this setting. You've definitely worked hard." He had this raspy voice formed from years of smoking from too many cigarettes, but it was endearing. I was honored that he thought I deserved this chance, and I told him I was definitely interested. I applied to the program, and he assured me that I had a very good chance of getting the job. I began imagining myself sitting in open, sun-filled rooms, drinking sweet Greek coffee, dressing in colorful eyelet skirts and wearing my hair loose. It was about two months before graduation when he told me that someone else had been selected for the position. "Shay, I have some bad news. You...weren't selected for the art program position. I can't tell you how sorry I am." The news hit me hard. My sights had been set high,

and I had been banking on that one job so much that I hadn't looked into anything else. Now karma was getting back at me by making me work at Huey's Carpet Factory.

The few perks of my job were that it was a short drive from my apartment, I got factory-discontinued carpets for half off and I could wear jeans to work. I also ate as many of the peppermints from the customer candy jar as I wanted without any complaint from my boss. They were the good kind too, the green spearmint swirl. Sometimes I felt bad about eating so many, but then I figured I deserved some kind of bonus for answering endless phone calls from cranky customers.

I unlocked my apartment door and unloaded my purse and coat on the couch before heading to the kitchen. I decided to make a quick sandwich and eat some of the fruit from the produce drawer in my fridge before it went moldy. I rarely splurged on fresh fruit, so when I did buy it, I always forgot I had it until it turned bad. I was standing at my kitchen sink washing off grapes when my phone rang.

"Honey, it's Mom. What are you doing?"

"I'm about to eat lunch. Do you want to come over? I'll make us some sandwiches."

I heard scuffling on the other end, and I imagined my mom wearing her slippers. It was her thing to put on slippers as soon as she got back to the house after being out. I'd seen her pair them with jeans, a cocktail dress, even a bathing suit. "It makes me comfortable," she would say. "And I believe in comfort."

"Oh, no. I've already eaten. I made myself some hummus, and I bought this new energy tea at The Trading Post today. It was really good, but I'm still waiting for the energy part to kick in." She was smiling as she said this, I could tell.

"Ah, The Trading Post. You just need to work there. You're in there all the time anyway. Do they put your picture on the wall if you come in seven days a week for two years in a row?"

"I don't need another job, but I could tell them you're available since you hate yours."

"Actually, I seriously might consider that," I laughed.

There was a pause on the phone before my mom responded.

"Hey, we need to get together later. We need to talk."

"Ok, yeah we can do that. Why? What's up?" I listened carefully, noticing a change in her tone.

"It's just something I need to tell you." My throat closed a little. I turned off the sink and put the wet grapes on a napkin.

"Mom. Do you have cancer? Did somebody die? Is somebody going to die?" I figured I'd ask the worst-case scenario questions right away, knowing she couldn't say no if any of them were true.

"Oh, Honey. No." She breathed a laugh as if she wished one of those things were happening, as if it would be easier to deal with than what she had to tell me.

"Oh my gosh. Don't scare me like that. I hate when you say that we have to talk. It makes me think the worst."

"Shay, we still have to talk. And there's no other way I could say 'we have to talk.' Do you have time after work to get together? I could meet you at The Diner."

The Diner is a restaurant in our town that everyone has been to at least a hundred times. It's decorated in 1950s motif (poodle skirts, Happy Days, rolled jeans, root beer floats). It's very cliché, but if you grow up with it you love it. I wondered why my mom suggested eating at a restaurant that could technically be considered fast food. The only thing I could figure was that she knew I would be comfortable there, and this made me nervous.

"Ok, I could meet you at 5:15. Should I be worried?" I leaned against the sink and then stood back up.

"It is something important, but I... I just don't want to tell you over the phone. I'll see you tonight?"

Our conversation ended shortly after. There wasn't much else to say. She sounded tired and distracted, her voice barely carrying its weight across the wires.

I drove back to work thinking about our conversation. I tried to remember how she sounded when we started talking and how her voice had changed when we said goodbye. There was definitely a change in her attitude. It was as if she had called just to chat, and then decided during our conversation that she might as well tell me the awful news that she had been hoarding for who knows how long. I thought about our family members and relatives across the country. My uncle in Detroit had thrown his back out a few months back. Maybe it was something about that. I discounted that possibility quickly. Nobody really cared about that uncle.

The afternoon at work dragged on. My boss asked me to call every self-storage company in the area to compare prices. One room in the building was filled with nothing but leftover carpet scraps. Squares and squares of flat, shag, oriental and checked carpet were piled from the floor to the ceiling. It was a serious fire hazard, and I had brought it to his attention several times. He finally took notice.

"I think it's about time to clear this room out," he said. We were standing in the doorway of the carpet-packed office. We had been standing there for a good five minutes not saying much. Well, I wasn't saying much. He kept guessing how many pounds of carpet were in the room. He finally decided on 800.

"Why don't we just throw it away?" I asked, hoping that this solution simply hadn't occurred to him.

"Shay, this is good carpet. I can't stand to think about throwing it away. Call all of the self-storage units in town, and ask them what their rates are. Thanks." He turned and walked away, rolling his sleeves up high on his arms.

"Oh my God," I thought. "Is this seriously happening? This is such a waste of my time." I spent the rest of the day flipping through the yellow pages, looking for numbers and addresses and getting rates. As soon as five o'clock rolled around I shut off my computer and practically ran to my car. As much as I was dreading meeting my mom, I couldn't stand another minute at my desk with my monotonous routine.

I pulled into The Diner parking lot and spotted my mom's car right away. She drove a '99 Honda with a yellow bumper sticker on the back fender that said, *My child can beat your child at chess!* She got the car a few years ago from our neighbors who were moving overseas, and it hadn't let her down once. The bumper sticker embarrassed me – it had come like that from the neighbors and she had never tried to take it off. It also embarrassed me because I had belonged to a chess club in middle school, and I still didn't know half of the rules.

The closest parking spot to my mom's was next to a pickup truck occupied by a woman with a cigarette. She stared me down and blew smoke toward my window as I pulled in. Usually, I would have stared back and challenged, but I was too anxious about meeting my mom to pay much attention. I put my car in park, quickly checked the status of my hair in the rearview, gathered my purse and keys and climbed out of my car toward the restaurant.

Neon lights illuminated the entrance and the outside speakers were blaring an oldies song – something about a girl named Peggy Sue. Through the oversized windows I could see that there were very few empty tables; at a little after 5:00 the place was already packed with families and high school couples. I caught sight of my mom in one of the red, pleather booths. Her light blonde hair hung around her face, and where it usually brightened her skin, tonight she looked pale and solemn. She was looking down at the table, playing with a salt

shaker, but as if she felt me watching her she looked up in my direction and immediately forced herself to smile. "Mom, don't do that," I thought.

She reached out and grabbed me as soon as I got to the table. It was one of those tight hugs, a hug that I liked to get from my mom but didn't always know how to take, especially in a public place. She held me for a good 20 seconds, and when she let go and looked at me, she had tears in her eyes.

"Mom, just tell me already," I spit out my words and my throat got tight and prickly.

"Your father and I are getting a divorce."

In the back of my head I somehow knew those words were coming, but at the same time I never expected this to be the news she had to tell me. I swallowed hard.

"Let's sit down," I told my mom, pushing past her to slide into the booth.

She sat down across from me and reached out to touch my arm. "Honey, I'm sorry." I pulled away and hugged my stomach. I felt like everyone in the restaurant was staring at us, but I didn't look around to see if they really were. I kept my head down and stared at the brown plastic tabletop. The Diner was not the place to hear this kind of news. It was a place to celebrate a game victory, to have a first date or to have a family dinner, not hear bad news from your mom.

My dad took me to The Diner for my 6th birthday and let me pick anything off the menu. When you're little it doesn't take much to make you happy (a cheeseburger, fries with blueberry syrup, cherry pie with whipped cream and chocolate syrup, endless cups of soda). My dad ordered, and we played thumb wars until our food came. When the waitress arrived, she was carrying a huge tray filled with dishes. She even had a candle in the shape of a six stuck in my burger and claimed she just had a feeling that it was my birthday. But I knew my dad must have had it in his pocket until we got there. I can only describe my feelings as pure joy. Here I was, on my birthday, wearing brand-new jelly sandals, eating cherry pie with the best dad in the world. I felt like a queen.

"So, how long have you guys been talking about this?" I looked her straight in the eye.

"For a long time, Shay."

"How could I not have noticed?" I felt tears welling up, and I grabbed a napkin to catch them before they fell.

"Your dad and I have been unhappy for, for years."

"Years? You've been pretending to be a happy married couple for years?"

"Shay, it was for you. We didn't know when would be the best time to tell you. We decided not to upset your high school career. At that age you had enough going on in your life. You didn't need to add the divorce of your parents to it. And then when you started college it was easier for your dad and I to do our separate things without you knowing. We didn't get a divorce then because you were out of the house so much. It was easier to postpone the whole legal process because we could be apart for long periods of time since you were away."

My mom was revealing way too much. I wasn't ready to hear this information. I was still trying to absorb the fact that my parents were getting a divorce, and now she was telling me how she and my dad had hardly lived together for the four years I was at college. How could I have been so unobservant, so out of touch with my parents? When I called the house to talk to my mom and my dad said she wasn't there, I didn't question this. How often had this happened? I tried to think back, and I wasn't coming up with any concrete answers. And during the summers when I was home on break, they were both at home. Everything seemed fine. We went out to the movies, we played Scrabble on the dining room table, we invited friends over for dinner. They had their moments of tension, and I heard them fight occasionally, but it didn't strike me as anything more than a fight between husband and wife.

I remember the first time I heard my parents fight was when I was eight. I was outside playing Veterinarian Barbie with the neighborhood girls. We each pretended to be a different character and Donna Thorn was always Barbie. She was nine and had boobs. It didn't matter that her hair was nowhere as close to Barbie blonde as mine. Donna chose all the roles, and I was usually cast as the puppy that had just been hit by a car. She was one of those bossy types that you didn't know what to do with except hate her on the inside. I could have easily dumped her as a playmate, but at eight I didn't know how to go about doing that. Besides, she sometimes let me try on her bra, cotton with red flowers.

She had sent me inside to find a roll of toilet paper to wrap my broken puppy leg with. I stepped through our front door and walked through the living room to the hall closet where we kept towels, extra soap bars, cleaning supplies and toilet paper. I picked up a roll and reached to pull the door shut, but my hand froze on the knob. I heard

shouting coming from my parents' room several feet down the hallway.

"I can't believe you just said that! I have never let the family down."

"Maybe if you spent more time at home with us than in your cubicle adding numbers, we would be a real family."

"Lydia, I am not abandoning the family, but maybe if I wasn't the only one working, I'd be home more."

"You are an ass."

I got scared that one of my parents would barge out of the room and find me standing there listening to them so I closed the door and tiptoed as fast as I could down the hall and back outside.

Donna was standing on the lawn with her hands on her hips shaking her head at Becca and May, the two girls who lived across the street. Becca wasn't paying any attention, but May was looking up at her with quivering lips and big eyes. She was holding a stuffed animal that she had dressed in a baby doll dress.

"Donna stop being such an ass."

I had never said that word out loud before, and I emphasized it unintentionally. If Donna were any older she would have made fun of me for saying it louder than the other words, a clear indication that I was new at cussing. Fortunately, Donna was just as stunned as I was. I stood my ground and told her to go home, that nobody wanted to play Barbie anymore. I sent Becca and May home too and watched them all trudge across the street.

When I went back inside I didn't hear my parents yelling. I walked into the kitchen, and my mom was standing at the sink peeling carrots; her back was towards me. I leaned still against the doorway and watched her carefully. Her shoulders were quivering, but she didn't make a sound. I wondered how many times I had walked into the kitchen and seen the same scene and never known my mom was red-faced with tears on her cheeks, never knowing she and my dad had just fought it out.

I cried harder thinking about this memory. I couldn't believe this was happening to me, to my parents. I always thought they had it together and that divorce was something that only happened to the families down the street. I remember watching dramatic movies about families who went through divorces and feeling relieved that my mom and dad were going to stay together forever. But now we were just like the rest of the neighborhood.

"Mom, I have to get out of here. I can't be here anymore." I

grabbed my purse and rose to my feet. My skirt had a few teardrops on it, and I smoothed my hand over the damp spots.

"Honey, I am so sorry," My mom got up from her seat and held my arm. "I didn't know how to tell you."

I numbly nodded through my tears, indicating that I heard her, but I couldn't stay there any longer. I turned and made my way to the door.

My heels sounded like nails hitting the pavement as I walked to my car. The lady with the cigarette was still parked beside me, but this time when I looked at her with my red, puffy eyes she took notice and put the cigarette down. She sat up in her seat and gave me a sympathetic nod. I guess no matter who you are or how you view the world, you always react to seeing someone in grief. I acknowledged her small attempt at being kind and raised my hand and then sank inside my car.

I reversed out of my parking space and shifted to first gear while my car was rolling backwards. My eyes started welling up with tears again, but this time I didn't have anything to wipe them away with. When I blinked, they spilled over and streaked down my face and neck. Through my blurred vision, I managed to pull onto the main road and find my way towards the highway. I had to go see Barry. He was the one person I could talk to. I reached for my phone, called him and, over my blubbing and stuttering, told him what had happened. I was still talking to him when I pulled into the apartment complex. He told me everything was going to be ok, that things were going to work out. I found a parking spot near his building, and as soon as I looked up through the windshield he was there, walking towards my car. I dropped the phone in my seat and ran to meet him. He wrapped his arms around me, and we stood there, outside in the dark, crying.

It had been a week since my mom had dropped the divorce bomb on me, and I was driving to see my dad for the first time. I had talked to him over the phone twice; he called me the day after I found out, and we talked for a few minutes, and then I called him a couple days later to see if we could get together and talk in person. I had been thinking about the situation over and over in my head, and I wasn't coming up with any answers. But, really, how could I? I was the one who had been blindsided, the one who hadn't noticed anything was wrong. I had seen my dad standing at the sink, eating his dinner, and it hadn't occurred to me that this was a new habit he had started sometime after I moved out and started college. It didn't occur to me that he ate like this six days out of the week and that my mom was somewhere

else in the house doing the same thing.

We had decided to meet for coffee at a new café downtown. I had planned on being rude to my dad, giving him the cold shoulder and interrogating him with questions, but as soon as I saw him standing outside the café, I realized how much I had missed him. I greeted him with a hug, burying my face in his shoulder, and I almost started crying. It was good to feel him again, to know that he was still there.

"Hey, honey. How are you?" he asked when I pulled away.

"How do you think I am Dad? Mad as hell at you and mom."

He nodded as if he knew I was going to say that. "How about we sit down and get some coffee before we talk about this?"

"Fine."

We walked to the counter and ordered our drinks. He got coffee, straight black. Since he was paying, I got a grande raspberry mocha and a biscotti. "Extra whipped cream," I told the barista.

We got our orders and found a table by the window. As soon as we sat down I took my cup in hand and sat back in my seat, eyeing my dad. I wanted him to start this conversation. I took a sip of my mocha and waited for him to take the hint. He saw my steady gaze and cleared his throat.

"Well, I'm guessing you want to know about your mother and I."

"Yep," I said and nodded. I wasn't giving him an inch.

"Hearing all this about the divorce is new to you, but it's been building between your mother and I for a long time. It's not new for us."

I listened to each word he said. I was determined to understand his reasoning.

"When we first realized that we were having trouble, we got help. We went to counselors, we read books, we tried to communicate more. But eventually we realized we'd been growing apart for years, and it hit us that our marriage wasn't going to work."

"Wasn't going to work," I thought. I couldn't think of a more sad way to put it. It was as if they had tried assembling a bike with the wrong tools and gave up before they tried using the right ones.

"Marriage isn't something you just give up on, Dad. Of course it's going to be hard." I fiddled with my coffee cup, pulling at the cardboard sleeve.

"Shay, we did try to work it out. We knew it was important to try to make our marriage last. We especially didn't want to hurt you in the process, but we couldn't force it anymore." He sounded sincere, like he truly was sorry for hurting me even if he wasn't sorry about not

loving my mom anymore. I wanted to tell him to suck it up and stay married to my mom for me. I was his daughter. I deserved to have a whole family.

"Shay, your mother and I just...fell out of love."

His words hit me hard. I would have rather heard that they were cheating on each other than hear this. How could two people who were so in love wake up one day and realize they no longer had feelings for each other? Or maybe it was more of a gradual thing. Maybe my dad, one day, had seen that my mom was calling him and ignored the rings. Maybe my mom had had a nightmare and didn't wake my dad up to comfort her. She had lied there, on her back, with eyes wide open not wanting to reach over to him.

I looked at my biscotti sitting neatly on my napkin. I imagined myself breaking the cookie and then trying to put it back together again. It wasn't possible. Maybe that's what my dad was saying about his and my mom's marriage. It just wasn't possible.

Over the next few weeks, I continued to struggle with the news from my parents. I was even more distracted at work and sometimes found myself locked in a ladies' room stall, crying. I called Barry for support throughout the day.

"I cried in the bathroom again today. What's wrong with me? Why am I having such a hard time with this?" I was getting frustrated with myself for being so weak. I liked to fix problems myself, and now I felt as if this were impossible.

"Shay, don't get down on yourself. You're doing a good job, ok? You're doing a good job." He repeated himself in a low voice, and it sent a wave of goose bumps over my body.

"Do you think I'm crazy for being this emotional? You know me, I hardly ever cry, and now my eyes are never dry."

"Well, Shay, everyone knows you're crazy." His voice was sarcastic, and I could picture him with the ear pressed to the phone, head bent down, grinning.

I laughed at the remark. "Well thanks for sticking around even though you think I'm crazy. That means a lot."

"I like sticking around." His comment was so small, so innocent. At any other time I would have laughed it off and not taken him seriously, but at that moment it was just what I needed to hear.

"Barry, I love you." He didn't miss a beat.

"I love you too."

Later that day, I was sitting in front of my computer at work,

mindlessly moving my mouse from one side of the screen to the other. I considered opening a document and pretending that I was typing an office memo, but I didn't get past just thinking about it. I didn't care if my boss saw me, I didn't care what my co-workers were thinking. I was fed up with this place.

"Shay, I have some invoices that need to be filed." My boss' voice broke through my thoughts. He was walking towards me carrying a stack of papers about three inches thick.

"Oh, goodie," I said flatly.

"Are you feeling alright? I've been noticing that you aren't your usual self lately. Is everything ok?" He looked at me with concern, and I felt awkward that my boss was talking to me about my personal life. I broke my gaze and noticed that his tie had little white rabbits all over it.

"I'm doing fine, Mr. Rahal." I almost had to stifle a laugh. Did he seriously think I was going to open up to him with one surface question in the middle of the office? I wasn't about to tell him anything. He stood hovering over my desk, still holding the papers, wondering what he should say next. I just wanted him to leave.

"I just want to make sure you are finding help for your situation, whatever that may be, and remember you can--"

"You can go now." I cut him off. "I'm not going to talk to you about my personal life." I hadn't meant to say anything like that, but it suddenly just came out, and I was glad it did. He seemed offended like I had just called his mom a name.

"I beg your pardon. I don't think it is of your best interest to talk to me like that."

"Stop trying to get me to open up to you. I don't know how legal that is." I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. He looked around nervously to make sure nobody had seen me make him look like a fool. Several people looked away when he glanced at them.

"Will you please see me in my office to further this discussion?"

"Actually, Mr. Rahal, no thanks. I think I'll pass on the office discussion. You just helped me realize something. I don't want to be here. I don't want to work here. I'm better than a stack of invoices that needs filing and a sugar jar that needs filling. I've spent way too much time here and I'm moving on to bigger and better things. I'm quitting." I grabbed my purse from under the desk and slung my coat over my shoulder. "I'll be back later for my things."

There's a park in our town called Hyde Glen. People go there

with their kids and dogs and play Frisbee and tag because there's so much space to move. When I see this place, this large piece of land with no buildings, cars or traffic lights, it always amazes me. I decided it was exactly where I wanted to be at that moment. I got in my car and drove out of the parking lot, heading towards downtown. The park was on the other side of the city.

I pulled into the gravel lot and got out of my car. It was bright, beautiful outside. The grass was scattered with people. A couple was sitting on a blanket with a picnic basket, several families were playing a huge game of horseshoes and ladies with strollers were power walking along the sidewalks. I found a spot under a willow tree and sat down, arranging my feet beneath me. I looked up into the sky and watched the clouds float past. Some days they moved fast and you had to constantly shift your gaze from one cloud to another just to keep up with the movement, but other days they didn't seem to move at all. Some days they waited for someone to look at them like they were showing off. It was days like this that made me think that maybe the world really is compassionate, perfect. Maybe all the chaos is what makes it perfect. The hate, grudges and bitterness is what makes apologies more sincere, reunions sweeter and forgiveness more genuine.

I lay down on the grass and rested my hands behind my head. I thought about my parents and how my life would be different now that they were not together. Family photos would no longer include all three of us. Holidays would be spent split between the two. There would be no more family dinners, movies, Scrabble nights. Everything was going to change. The only constant I had was that I knew my parents still loved me. I was their daughter, and I knew that would always remain the same.

The sky was changing fast. I watched it until I got tired, and then I closed my eyes and fell asleep in the grass with white clouds overhead.

White Mustang

"Just like Monte Carlo!" Hill shouted.

He held the car tight through the corner and hit the straight-away flat out.

Angie was serene and unimpressed.

She folded the map in her lap so that County Road 117 showed on top and tucked the corner of it under her leg where she could glance at it.

"Do you think Alex and Seth will be all right?" she asked.

"This vacation is the best idea I've had in years," Hill said.

"Do you think it was wise? I mean, we've always had your mother drive down for the week."

"Angie. Let's not discuss it again. They are old enough. And they are responsible boys."

"I want to call them when we get to the ranch."

"Fine. Call. Call them every day. But don't spend the rest of our time wringing your hands."

"I'm not worried, Hillary," Angie said. "But they are my children." She gazed passively at the brown hills. "They are yours, too, I believe."

"Yes," Hill said, smiling broadly, "I suppose they are."

He intended to enjoy everything about this vacation, no question about it. With the election over and his man Reagan going to Washington, all was right with the world. He had removed the campaign buttons and posters from the trunk and even had the Reagan '80 sticker peeled from the bumper. He was a free man. The rush of the wind being sucked across the open top of the white Mercedes blew Hill's hair forward over his forehead so that it touched the top of his mirror sunglasses and left the balding spot on the back of his scalp uncovered.

Hill sang through the entire first verse of "Home on the Range" in his wavering baritone, twanging his voice whenever he could for authenticity. Angie smiled through his singing, pleased to see him so carefree, so relaxed.

"I'm not worried about your manic driving either," she said.

He sang the first verse through again, howling like a coyote at the end.

"Doesn't that song have a second verse?"

"Indeed it does," Hill replied, "I just don't know it."

About ten miles after they'd joined it, County Road 117 entered a ravine, called Lost River Canyon, formed by a river that had long since dried up. The sides of the canyon were steeper and rockier and closer to the road than the hills just beyond.

Hill approached the first curve in the canyon much too fast and slid through it sideways, raising a terrific howl. He pulled the wheel in the direction of the slide and brought the car under control.

"Slow down, Joey Chitwood," Angie said without raising her voice. She looked straight ahead, her face dead serious. "We're in no hurry, as I recall."

Hill smiled and shifted down, buoyed by adrenalin and his regained control. "For what it's worth," he said, "I think there was a layer of sand across the road at that curve. Maybe wind carried it there. Or a thunderstorm." He shifted up and looked over at his wife's stern profile. "Still, I haven't done that since college."

As they entered the lowest part of the canyon, Angie spotted a car on the edge of the road a half-mile ahead.

"Slow down!" she said sharply. "There's someone off the road. Maybe they need help."

As they approached the car it was clear there had been an accident. The front end of the car, an old white Mustang convertible, badly mashed, rested on top of a boulder. The boulder, nearly three feet high and five feet wide, lay in the right lane of the road.

There was no movement from the man and woman in the car. One front tire turned slowly as Hill brought his Mercedes to a stop in the left lane, beside the Mustang.

The horn was blowing, loud, steady, strident. The man, one bloody arm hanging out the window, was pinned against the steering wheel. The top of the steering wheel had been broken and the man's head rested on the dashboard. There seemed to be blood everywhere, some of it coagulating and turning dark brown on the sun-heated surfaces, some of it fresh, dripping, bright red.

The woman had shot halfway through the windshield. Her upper body lay askew on the hood, her face turned away, covered by blood-matted blond hair; her legs were pinned under the dash by the front seat.

"Dear God have mercy on us," Angie whispered.

They sat in the car stunned, staring.

"They look dead," Angie said. "Hill! Get out and see if they are dead!"

"I'd better get out and see if anything can be done," Hill said. He shut off the Mercedes and got out.

He walked carefully to the old car. With abnormal clarity, he noted each dent, each scratch, each rust spot and patch. It was as if he were examining the car with elaborate care and thoroughness through a magnifying glass. He picked up the man's arm, immediately dropped it with a clunk against the door. He twisted away and started to retch.

With a hand on the fender of his own car, Hill doubled over, his stomach convulsing violently. His brain felt as if it had been flipped upside down; he couldn't keep his bearings. He leaned heavily on the fender until his stomach had been wrung dry and the heaves abated. He dropped to the ground and sat with his back against the car, his head back, eyes closed.

"Is he dead?"

The voice sounded small and distant to him like a voice over the telephone. But it was a familiar, solid voice.

"Is he dead?"

Hill opened his eyes. His head hurt, his stomach felt queer. His fingers and legs tingled as if they had lost circulation and were being revived.

"Is he dead?"

Hill turned his head toward Angie, whose face loomed out of the car window no more than a foot from his own.

"How long have I been out of it?" Hill asked.

"About ten seconds!" Angie replied. "Is the man dead?"

Hill moved his head, but Angie couldn't tell whether it was nodding or shaking or just wobbling from a wave of nausea.

"All right," she said. "All right. Can you at least get him off the horn?"

Moving slowly to his knees and grasping the top of the door of the Mercedes, Hill pulled himself to his feet.

"That horn is just giving me a royal headache," she said, pressing the center of her forehead with her fingertips. "I can't think what to do, what we should be doing."

Hill turned back to the man and tried to push him gently away from the steering wheel. The man did not budge. The front seat had jammed forward in such a way that the man was pinned forward. Hill stepped behind the man, grasped him firmly by the shoulders and tried to pull him back. There was still no movement. Hill pulled on the seat to see if it were moveable. Nothing.

"No luck, Ang. He's wedged in and the seat's stuck."

"I can't hear you over that noise. Speak up!"

Hill again gripped the corner of the seat from behind. He leaned his weight against it. Being both tall and heavy, Hill was able to throw consider leverage on the seat. It gave ever so slightly. Hill jerked at it, leaning his weight against the seat in a rapid series of tugs. Snap! The seat popped back six inches.

Hill pulled at the man's shoulders again and they moved. The man's head, like a log hung from a rope, shifted, lifted slightly, careened to the side and flopped backward grotesquely. The man's face was bloody, his mouth gaping, bleeding; the eyes were half-opened, a sliver of brown iris showing beneath each upper lid.

The horn kept blowing.

Hill desperately grabbed at the horn hub in the center of the steering wheel and pulled. The hub popped off in his hands. The noise continued.

Hill, his hands shaking spastically, his head reeling, sagged against his own white car.

"Hill, we've got to do something," Angie said. There were tears on her cheeks. "We must do something!"

"What."

"Open the hood and disconnect the battery. That will stop the noise at least."

"No," said Hill. "That woman is lying across the hood and I will not move her too."

"Then leave her on when you lift the hood. You don't need much room to disconnect the battery."

"No, Angie! No! I will not touch her! I will not!"

"Are they dead?" she asked. "Can you tell?"

"They must be. They must be. They have to be, I'm sure of it. Look at him for yourself."

"I can't . . ."

"They're dead!"

"Then we can't do anything more here - for them."

Hill seemed to pull himself together. "Let's go call the police," he said. He found his way around the car into the driver's seat. The car started with a roar.

"Wait!" she said, shoving door open and stepping out. "I have another idea."

As if from a great distance, Hill watched Angie slowly open the jammed door of the Mustang. Then with her face averted from

the face of the driver she looked through the front of the car. A floppy leather bag lay on the narrow dash. Standing on tiptoe, with great care, Angie stretched for the bag. Touching it with two fingers, she worked the bag close enough to grab it by the edge. As she withdrew her arm, she lost her balance and touched the driver. The bag dropped to the ground and a wallet slid out. She picked up the wallet and tossed the bag back on the dash. It slipped to the seat.

"This will give the police more information," she said, holding the wallet up as she climbed into the car. Hill stared at the road. He dropped the shift into first as she pulled her door shut and sped off.

2

The noise from the horn faded and then, abruptly, ended. They were up out of the canyon within minutes and the road continued to climb through the brown foothills. Angie cradled the wallet in her lap. There was blood on her sleeve and collar from the man's arm, but she had not yet noticed. Hill drove fast, mechanically, staring at the road without blinking. His body and eyes were functioning; but his mind seemed far away, beyond the brown hills and the narrow, deteriorating road and the hum of the Mercedes.

At the crest of the hill that led from the canyon, Hill sighed heavily. Angie seemed to snap out of her reverie and began to look through the wallet for information. The wallet was blue imitation leather. It folded once like a man's wallet and closed with a snap. The wallet was about three inches thick and contained innumerable compartments for pictures, credit cards, change, paper money, notepaper, a mirror, and other specialized items.

Angie took out a series of plastic cards from a series of inserts in the wallet. "Look at these," she said. "MasterCard, Visa, Gulf, Mobil, Macy's of California, Sausalito Public Library - they live in Sausalito - check cashing ID from Safeway, let's see, a California Driver's License." She shuffled through the stack of cards as if they were family photographs.

"Her name is Linda Morrison Clement, from Sausalito. She is, or was, only 22 years old. Poor girl! How sad."

She dropped the pile of cards into her lap and took out the section of pictures. There were anonymous photographs of children much too old to be hers. Angie described each picture in detail.

"Aw, this must be the two of them and a little girl," she said, examining a picture of a young man and woman holding an infant. "I wonder if it is them. I wonder if they have a child."

"What do you think?" Angie said, holding the picture for Hill to see. Hill pushed her hand away. He seemed nervous and distracted, glancing constantly into his mirrors.

"Hey, are you okay, Hillary?"

"Maybe we should have headed back to the Coast Highway," he replied. "I don't think we'll find a phone for another 20 miles!"

"Can I call the children from there, too?"

"That's not funny, Angie."

"Well, I guess there isn't a big hurry, is there." She returned to the wallet, digging into a secret compartment for its contents. "I mean twenty minutes more or less won't hurt."

"It won't make any difference, will it?" she repeated. "With them dead and all."

Hill continued to stare out the windshield, turning automatically, shifting down when the road curved significantly, up for the long straightaways, glancing in the mirrors.

"Are you listening to me, Hillary?" she said, angry and annoyed. "That man didn't have a pulse, did he? I want to hear you say, they are dead."

"I'm not sure."

"God help us."

Minutes passed in silence. Angie absently shuffled and reshuffled the little pile of cards and pictures in her lap.

"What if they weren't dead?" she said finally, the issue at last enunciated. A problem of endless repercussions, this invasion of their privacy. The urgency of life slipping away.

"But we are driving to call for help," Hill said. "We can't be blamed because we don't know the roads or which direction has the nearest phone. It's natural to keep going in the same direction."

"What if they die before help comes?"

"We did what we could."

Hill was attending his driving with an intensity that left his knuckles white and a deep furrow between his eyebrows. "That's all anyone could reasonably ask. Or do. Given the circumstances."

"Should we have tried to remove them? Or stop the bleeding? Or, or something?"

"That would have been impossible. Impossible. And, presuming they were still alive, it would have been foolish . . . risky. We

would have put them in more danger by taking them out of the car than by leaving them and driving for help."

"I should have stayed. You could have driven for help and I could have stayed to see what I could do. I'm not a nurse, but—"

"Angie. I could not even move the seat! What would you have done for them?"

Angie dug deep into the wallet again, removing scraps of paper that had directions on them, phone numbers, sizes of various items of clothing for sundry people. And there were receipts, check claims, a safety deposit key. She unzipped the outer section of the wallet and found a larger number of bills of small denominations.

"What if the police, or someone, questions us?"

They had reached a plateau. The road was flat and straight, headed for a range of dark green mountains. The Mercedes moved effortlessly at ninety-five as if the road had become satin.

"What do you mean?" Hill snapped. He pulled his foot from the gas.

"What if the police find them before we call and discover that just the wallet is missing?"

"Don't be silly, Angie."

She waved the wad of bills bound by a red rubber band in his face. "One hundred and fifty-two dollars. I counted it."

Hill pushed her hand away. "What am I, bankrupt? Like we're going to steal \$152 from dead people at an accident!"

"Well, I think there's just too big a risk," she said. She stacked the bundle of bills, the wallet, the pictures, the credit cards, and the slips of paper, and threw them over the windows, out of the car. The stack blew apart instantly — paper, pictures, cards scattering in the wind like confetti.

Hill snapped his head around. The sun mirrored off his sunglasses, blinding her. His face disappeared in the glare.

"What did you just do?" he shouted, touching his brakes.

"I threw it out," she said, turning away. "Don't shout at me."

Hill stomped on the brakes. The tires locked and shrieked. The car fishtailed across the width of the road. Hinged at the waist by her lap belt, Angie lurched forward, caught her forearms on the dash and banged her forehead on the hard surface between.

The car shuddered to a stop. Hill shifted into reverse and sped backward. Angie, with no time to recover, lurched again, catching the dash with her nose. The car backed over the long stretch of swerving black tire marks, over another quarter mile or more of unmarked road,

back to where small scraps of paper littered the edge of the highway.

"Why would you do that?" Hill shouted. "Why?"

Hill stopped the car, got out, and began picking up the pieces of paper. The papers lay here and there on the roadside, in the dirt and sand and grass beyond, on and under the brush and weeds that covered the plateau. Angie slumped in her seat, dazed. A pink egg began to swell on her forehead, rapidly becoming darker. A trickle of blood wandered from the corner of her nose around the corner of her mouth.

Hill darted about, stooping, running, back and forth from the roadway to the brush, here and there, up and down the stretch of road. After five minutes of manic rushing, he stopped. He looked sadly over the miles and miles of brush and grass and weeds. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He walked back to the car with a handful of scrap paper, two credit cards, and the bundle of bills neatly bound by the red rubber band. He leaned on the top of the windshield, breathing heavily. His face was red and swollen; his straw hair lay in damp confusion against his forehead.

3

"What'd you do to your face, honey?" the hostess asked, cheerfully, as the bellhop brought the bags into the room.

"It's a long story," Angie said. She brushed past the hostess and went straight into the bathroom.

"Oh, I don't mean to be nosey. But if there's anything we can do to help."

"No, no, you're not," Hill assured her. "Thank you for your concern. She fell. This noon, as a matter of fact. We had stopped for a few minutes to stretch our legs. It's given her quite a headache."

"I don't wonder," the hostess said, smiling. "If you need anything give a holler. Dinner is family style. We serve at eight."

"OK, one more thing," Hill said. "Can I get a direct line on this phone? We'd like to call home and I'll need to call my office."

"All calls go through the main switchboard," she said cheerfully, "so we can charge them directly to the room. Or you can use the payphones across from the front desk."

"Sounds good," Bill said, handing the bellhop a folded bill. "See you at dinner."

She and the bellhop slipped out.

Hill went to the open window and looked down into the huge

dirt yard that separated the main ranch house from the barns and fenced areas. The gentle, warm breeze held the yellow sheer panel drapes apart. A group of vacationers were riding down a trail that ended near the corral at the other side of the ranch compound. There were six of them wearing bright western shirts and white cowboy hats.

"Should we phone now?" Angie called from the bathroom.

Although it was still light and still early, the sun had passed the crest of the mountain and the ranch was in its evening shadow. Hill turned from the window, found the telephone, and dialed.

"Yes, operator," Hill said, "I would like the State Police, please. There are a thousand to one that they were dead the minute they hit that rock."

"But we don't know that for sure. I . . . I just couldn't tell." Hill turned away from Angie and dropped like a bag of sand into a chair. He covered his face with his hands. "And someone will need to know."

"Someone will know. Other people travel that road. How likely is it that no one else has driven that road and found the accident in the . . . whatever time since we were there?"

Hill sat, slowly shaking his head.

"OK. Think about it. We didn't know it would have been shorter to turn back than to go on for help. And we did go on for help. We had good intentions." She refolded the washrag and applied it to her forehead again.

"We just made a mistake," Hill said. "We shouldn't have taken the wallet."

"Yes - we know that now - but there's no point in getting ourselves in deeper."

"Then why did you ask me to call?" Hill asked. His voice had become a whine.

"I meant call home, not the police. Which we need to do. Do you want to call now?"

"You do it. I don't want the operator to hear my voice again."

Angie called. Hill sat in the chair with his hands over his face, rubbing the puffy flesh around his eyes. The voice he heard came to him from too great a distance: Angie's voice, but different, too.

"Seth. Seth. How are you?"

"Fine. We're fine. The drive was fine. Do you have friends in the house?"

Friends? Hill felt detached, separate from the concern.

"Just records? You're just playing records? What? Okay. Let me speak to Alex.

"Well, where is he?"

Hill stopped trying to listen. The voice was the voice of a stranger. What he had the energy to do was no longer related to what he knew he ought to do. The flesh of his face seemed to slide as he rubbed it, as if it were not attached to the bones underneath.

"They're okay," Angie said, moving into the bathroom. "But I'm worried. I'm not sure they're old enough to act responsibly."

Hill did not answer.

Angie got into the tub. A small TV was suspended from the ceiling over the foot of the tub. Angie listened to it, the cold washcloth over her forehead, as she soaked in the hot water.

Hill sat in the gathering darkness, brooding. How had things gone so horribly, horribly wrong? Who were these people, the Clements? Where had they come from? How had they managed to smash into that rock when it was clearly visible and lying just on the very edge of the highway where it might have been avoided? Why had he decided to drive at the last minute instead of flying his plane as he'd originally planned?

Angie's voice called from the bathroom. He hoisted himself to his feet like an old man and went in. Angie pointed to the screen. A local newscaster was giving details of the accident on a news update.

" . . . police report that an ambulance is on its way to the scene, but we have no information as to whether there were casualties . . . "

Hill switched the set off.

"Hill, you look terrible. Are you okay?"

"I don't know, Angie," he said, perching on the edge of the tub. "This thing is really chewing me up."

"Why? We did what we could. The police found them before we reached a phone . . . "

"But I guess I feel that I have an obligation."

"To whom? To the Clements? Obligation because by bad luck we found them?"

Hill struggled to answer. There was enough truth in what she said.

"Well, yes," he said, finally, "but not exactly. It's like it was a crime scene and we tampered with it. It's like we could have done something helpful, something significant. And we just didn't do anything. We didn't react well. It's as if we weren't responsible enough."

"That's it. We were not responsible," she said. "Listen to me: Don't worry yourself sick."

Hill sat on the edge of the tub while Angie drained the water and dried herself off. Her nose had not been visibly altered by the accident except for a small scratch across the bridge; but the welt on her forehead had turned blue and purple, and the darkness was spreading around both eyes.

When she left the bathroom, Hill reached into his pocket suddenly, as if he'd forgotten something, and pulled out the scraps of paper with the roll of bills and the plastic credit cards. From an ashtray on the back of the toilet he picked up a book of matches. Kneeling before the toilet he struck a match and held it to the corner of one credit card. The plastic was reluctant to burn, but eventually the corner browned and wrinkled. A small flame appeared beneath a wisp of acrid black smoke.

Angie appeared at the door with a puzzled look on her face.

"What's that awful—"

Hill dropped the match, reached over and shut the door.

The burned edge of the card was dark and warped but rigid. He pulled the cover down over the toilet seat, and with a small pen-knife he carried in his pocket he began scoring the card across the raised letters and numbers. The card broke along the scored lines after he'd bent it three or four times, obscuring the names and codes. He broke the cards into strips, wrapped the strips in toilet paper, and flushed each small wad.

The room smelled badly from scorched plastic. Hill got up and opened the window. Then he took the pile of bills. With a quick, practiced motion he transferred the red band from the bills to his wrist. He lit a match and held it beneath the corner of the first bill. One by one he burned the roll of bills and the scraps of paper. When that was done, he flushed the ashes down the toilet. All traces of the bills and cards were gone.

They dressed in silence. Hill could not bring himself to put on the western gear he'd brought so he pulled on a tan golf shirt and running shoes with his jeans. But the blue bandana Angie had tied Indian-style around her head went well with her jean skirt and checkered shirt. After studying her face in the mirror, she added a pair of light sensitive tinted glasses to hide the darkening rings around her eyes.

They stood and looked at each other.

"How do I look?" she said.

"Not bad," he said. "The tell-tale marks are pretty well hidden. How about me?"

She studied him from head to toe.

"Perfect - you're lucky you weren't bloodied by our little episode."

"Obviously the smoke alarm in this room is faulty. Doesn't make me feel too safe."

Hill opened the door. "Dinner?"

They went out arm in arm. At the top of the stairs Hill stopped.

"I'm sorry about your nose," he said softly. "But it's important now that we try to look as if nothing unusual has happened."

Angie squeezed his arm and they descended the public stairs.

"Look! There it is!" Someone called as Angie and Hill reached the bottom of the stairs. The men and women dressed in western attire, pearl buttoned shirts and heeled boots and jeans and string ties and full skirted dresses, rushed to the windows from the long table where they had been seated on benches.

The fashionably casual and western group gathered to look out, chattering and pushing politely for a better view.

"What is it?" Angie said to Hill. "I can't see over them."

In the twilight a truck with a ghostly white car in tow had stopped across the yard. A sharp orange light pulsated rhythmically across the faces watching from the window. The reflection of those faces on the glass drew an intangible but distinct chalky curtain over the scene without.

"It's nothing," he said, the first to turn back toward the long table to find empty places. "Just a white mustang."

The Road Home

The road to my house is a long, dusty logging road. In the late 1800's, it had been a major roadway down from the Appalachian Mountains through the Piedmont to the seaport of Charleston, South Carolina. Over the century, it was gradually abandoned, and only parts are left, mostly as logging roads in the woods.

The road starts on an old concrete and steel bridge built in the 1940's by Roosevelt's New Deal, a plan to use government money to put men back to work after the Great Depression. This bridge has withstood a great many floods and a runaway tractor that got stuck underneath the bridge during a cleaning of the creek bed.

When we walk over the bridge, we can see fish streaking along in the small sunlit creek that meanders along side of the road. A big oak tree grows beside the creek, and a deep pool collects under its roots where mountain trout like to hide. The creek starts way up in the mountains and eventually flows into the Catawba River.

A sharp left hand turn takes us away from the creek. The road turns upward with a steep incline. Rocks slip under our feet and ribbons of quartz rock make white and rusty colored lines in the dirt bank. The air turns cold abruptly to let us know that we are in the Dead Zone, a strip of road about one hundred yards long that goes off to the right side. The stories about this section of the road cover everything from a thermal band to the spirits of murdered black slaves. The latest story is about two men involved in a gunfight. The story goes that the man killed was so drunk that his spirit doesn't know he's dead. Supposedly, he is still trying to find his way home. Many other strange things happen in the Dead Zone. Vehicles suddenly stall, and dogs run quickly past the spot, not even stopping for a quick sniff of the bushes. On either end of the Dead Zone, flowers and lush foliage grow in abundance, but the Dead Zone only supports scrub brush and pine trees.

Once we get past the Dead Zone, the walk turns pleasant again. At the top of the hill, the road turns to the right for a short, flat stretch, giving us a chance to catch our breath. Called the Switchback because of the way the road turns back on itself, this spot has an opening in the trees that lets us look down on the pastures below. A Great Horned

Owl lives in the holler, and if we are very, very quiet, sometimes right at dusk we can see him glide silently through the trees, hunting for his dinner.

A couple more bends in the road takes us to a spot called The Log in the Road. Years ago an old tree fell across the road, partially blocking the way. The log rotted away long ago, but this old log has stopped many runaway vehicles. They were usually the result of the Long Red Slick Spot being wet, or in the winter, from being frozen. The Long Red Slick Spot was made of red clay that no amount of gravel ever helped. The clay just sucked up the gravel like it was quicksand. On a rainy day, a ride down the Long Red Slick Spot is not for the faint at heart.

With a gentle turn to the left, the road becomes steep again. The road narrows to only a single-car width. Trees canopy the road, giving cool shade in the summer. Poplars, oaks, and maple trees reach for the sky on one side, while pink and white mountain laurel cascade down the bank on the other side. Large patches of moss cover the roots of the trees, and squirrels play hide and seek when we walk past.

Suddenly, around a corner we walk out of the serenity to see a mud hole roughly the size of one of the Great Lakes. Fed by an underground spring, The Mud Hole never dries up completely. Many an unsuspecting Sunday driver has found himself buried up to the floorboards in mud. There have been many attempts to drain The Mud Hole, but it's never been successful. Gravel was never an option. There's not enough gravel in the Western Hemisphere to fill The Mud Hole.

The road divides on the other side of The Mud Hole. The road to the right continues on up and over the mountain, winding its way across mountaintops, crossing paved roads, working its way toward the sea.

The road to the left leads to home. This is our driveway. With a slight downward dip, it winds its way around a ridge top carpeted with violets, dark green jack-in-the-pulpits, and yellow and orange touch-me-nots. Blackberry vines droop down the mountainside promising juicy, sweet berries in the summer. A large clearing in the trees lays out a panoramic view of the Catawba Valley all the way across to Linville Falls. In the cool quietness of the evening, a red-tailed hawk does somersaults on an air current. Cars in the valley resemble little ants making their way to unknown destinations. The solitude makes us feel as if we are alone in the world.

As we come around the end of the ridge, we hear our home before we see it. Chainsaws buzz in the yard. Skip and Christopher

carve from wood the bears, birds, and angels that they will sell to our customers around the state. Pup-pai, part domestic dog and part wild wolf, suddenly appears out of nowhere behind us. Silently, with no sign of greeting or friendliness, Pup-pai moves toward the woods again. It occurs to us that he might have been on our walk all along.

An odd looking assortment of other dogs moves toward us in greeting. There is Bo, who looks like a lab and Russian wolfhound mix; Rufus, smaller than Bo, a wirehaired with glittery gold eyes; and Weiner, the mother of Bo, Rufus, and Pup-pai. Weiner is just a big black dog with an odd strip of curly fur down the center of her back. She is friendly and good-natured, but threaten one of our children and she can be ferocious. Then there is Old Stray Dog. Part collie and part who-knows-what, Stray Dog is very much my dog. I found him when he was still a puppy living under the shed. Wild and afraid, and I found out later, also injured, it took a lot of hamburger and even more coaxing to get him out from under the shed. He always walks with a stiff front leg, the result of a broken shoulder.

A small pond is between the house and us. There's a short dock with a one-person canoe tied up to it. Too cold for swimming except on the very hottest days of summer, we refer to it as our Hillbilly Swimming Pool.

And our house, which is a large, rambling log cabin structure. Built entirely by our family, everyone, children included, has contributed something to the building. It's homemade in an almost crazy quilt pattern. This evening warm yellow lights fill the windows. Smoke drifts up from a chimney, promising warmth and comfort. This is the end of the road. This is our home.

Thief of Seeds

Years his swivel of tail taunted
me, that grey fur scurrying and strutting
across my deck as if he owned it,
eager thief stealing bird seeds
from the feeder that hung
on a hook for my own viewing pleasure.

He crashed every party, scared away the birds,
chewed through plastic tube and squirrel
proof claims, inflaming anger
in my chest and throat, gnawing
away at my hope that this feeder would
keep him out. I bought a new one each spring
slowly losing faith in the nod and assurance
from the bird store clerk, his claim
that this would be the one to hold onto seeds
for chickadees, Carolina wrens, red breasted robins.

But year after year that squirrel burgled
his way inside, scaring away the birds,
devouring every grain in his greedy frenzy
with acrobatic maneuvering, upside down
clinging, whatever it took to reach the prize.

Finally, metal doors kept him out, feeder
jerking shut, closing off the seed supply
when his rodent weight jumped on
the circular edge. He waited on the deck
gazing at that feeder, like a mathematician
stumped by an unsolvable equation. Then he scuttled
towards my door, scratching at the screen for answers.

I eyeballed him, he eyeballed me, then withdrew
his paw from my door, scampered away in defeat
leaving me with an aviary air display of feathers
and song, and finally, my long awaited victory.

Dorothy Discovers Sex in the City

After the tornado she thought
life would be dull and grey as Kansas,
but on the new color screen
she watches Samantha bedding
a plethora of men. She relates
to Carrie, lately Dorothy's been daydreaming
about a career in journalism,
she writes columns in her head
about storm preparation, the meaning
of dreams, archetypal figures, red shoes.
She's contemplating a change of hair
style, maybe like Charlotte's – men
don't seem to be drawn to ponytails
anymore. Aunt Em passed years before
but Dorothy is certain she wouldn't have
approved of the show. She turns to
the Weather Channel and monitors storms,
the forecaster's smooth voice soothing
away her twister anxieties
even as she dreams of Oz.

What We Bury

What did you bury
behind the willow tree,
beyond the rusted swing set?

Remember the thin baby bird
fallen from its nest. You brought it worms,
trickled water from a dropper.
It didn't seem such a long topple down
to cause that twisted neck. You didn't understand
why it closed its dark eyes
like rain-glazed stones buried in sand.
Dad dug a hand deep hole,
covered the feathers with dirt.

What did you bury in your yard?
Hard seeds smaller than your
dirt-edged finger nails.
Dad sprinkled dirt again.
Set it down, he whispered softly
and you did.

Elm trees grew inside the yard
after Spring's sudden splatter of rain,
and you waited for that bird
to sprout back up,
to lift and fly from the soil
but it never did.

Baptists

The lifeguard is my chaplain
and water baptism
with sun for sermon
and summer holy season
when all eyes follow the bright star,
some from lawn chairs for pews,
others prostrate in the grovel of a front crawl
as they make their pilgrimage
to touch one wall and next,
returning to the first,
never stroking it the same,
like the voices of the katydids into the trees,
rising beyond the underwater meditation,
where breath resurrects,
and glowing bodies in the sky blind.

ALLEN SMITH

Leopardskin of Light

The leopardskin of light
grows extinct in the late autumn day
though it tread with no sound
at the bottom that, once drained,
will be white as paws.

It grows dark as footpads and spots on a leaf,
small as a baby's hand,
floating at the top,
but otherwise still as though stalking prey,
or aware of a predator's proximity,
till the pool is dry as bones
and winter swallows us.

O.D.

Why the wintry mind
when the brain – dunelike in its shifting –
lets you wander freely as high tide?
No fenced off areas here.

Yes, all sand castles and footprints go,
exchanged for bones on the shore,
but waves – brain or sea –
lift on their own.
They have a will to kiss the sun.

The drifts of sand may not differ so much
in their depth or look from snow,
but the pier they lead to ends
not with a hook through the lips,
but fishermen,
patient as sunbathers,
tan with their catch,
readied in ice before being cooked.

MEREDITH WHITE

Interview with Paul Shepherd



Paul Shepherd is a graduate of the UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC-Greensboro creative writing programs, and earned a PhD with Distinction from Florida State University, where he was a Kingsbury Fellow and is currently a Writer in Residence. He has taught college classes in creative writing, magazine and newspaper writing, and modern literature. *More Like Not Running Away* won the 2004 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and is published by Sarabande Books.

Shepherd's work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Omni*, *Portland Review*, *The Quarterly*, *Fiction*, and *St. Anthony Messenger*. He has also completed a poetry manuscript that is currently in submission to publishers.

Shepherd's community service activities include serving as Executive Director of Rainbow Rehab, a nonprofit construction company that rehabs older homes for sale to low-income homeowners, working as staff Youth Director at St. Stephen Lutheran Church, and helping found the House of Mercy, an AIDS hospice in Belmont, North Carolina. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife Lois, and children Max, Summer, and Charlie.

Meredith White conducted this telephone interview with Paul Shepherd in February 2007. Shepherd came to Gardner-Webb University in March 2007 as part of the Visiting Writer Series.

How did the idea for More Like Not Running Away develop?

I tried to write a book about some other things. A professor of mine at Chapel Hill gave us a writing exercise where we were supposed to write for ten minutes without picking up our pencil. It just broke through. I started writing about something that had happened to me and it never occurred to me that it might be worth a story. It had to do with the drive chapter where a boy and his father are on a long trip. I had tried other things that just weren't me. This one just came out and I couldn't stop it.

So there were characters in More Like Not Running Away based on people or elements from your own life?

Definitely. A lot of it is autobiographical. The names and dates have been changed to protect the innocent. Most of the events in the book come from things that happened when I was younger.

I saw you have a background in carpentry. Other than carpentry, what other elements are based on your own life experiences?

The construction is a big one, and I use that when I teach. A lot of times, people like to write stories about emergency rooms or courtrooms, stuff they don't have a lot of experience with. The reader can tell they don't really know how an emergency room works. I wrote about what came naturally and what I had grown up doing. I worked construction starting the summer I was 12 and then almost every summer through college. That's a world unto itself. When you've learned about something like that, it's good to put into a book. Aside from that, I've traveled a lot. We moved a lot and those things, and they are reflected in the novel. Also, I think the working class lifestyle is worthy of writing about, just the regular working class people.

So are you still involved with construction work?

I've done Habitat in the past, but the last few years I've been working with Rainbow Rehab. It's a local non-profit organization that fixes up homes for low income people. It's kind of like Habitat and kind of like a construction company that does remodeling, but we do it as a non-profit.

In More Like Not Running Away, you quote scripture in the epigraph. The verses from Isaiah describe how God has turned away for a moment. In the novel, it seems that Levi's father Everest is just a "good guy" who has made a few mistakes. He is never redeemed. Is he irredeemable?

I think that is a good question that picks up on some themes I've talked about at various places. I've actually gone to some seminaries and talked in religion classes about this novel. It's exciting to me that readers have picked up on the question of Everest, and Levi both and how they are trying to find redemption. Particularly, in the Isaiah passage, God says, "I turned my face from you for a moment." One of the things I talked about is exploring what it's like to sense that God has turned his face. Everest feels that very much. In the moment he committed the murder, he felt that God had turned away from him. He never forgave God for that, nor himself. I would not say he is irredeemable; I do not think anyone is irredeemable. I don't think he has any interest in redemption, at least in the time of the book. Now there are a few hints toward the end that he might be seeing the world a little differently, but they're only hints. I don't know that you can make a whole lot of them. We'll have to wait for that sequel.

Are you planning a sequel?

The book I'm trying to finish in the next couple of months is actually a prequel that takes place when Everest is a boy in the town of Laurinburg, North Carolina. The main character is named Har Lee, who is mentioned in *More Like Not Running Away*. So, that's next. The sequel, I'm not planning to start for about ten years. I've got about three other novels, four actually, that I'm in the middle of right now. So, I'll finish those before I get to the sequel.

In a previous interview question, you referenced people who, like Everest, have made a mistake. Like some people in prison who have tried to do good, but have just messed up. Again, in reference to the Isaiah scripture, is that because of God turning away or because of their own mistakes?

That's an interesting question. I don't know that I have an easy answer. I'm always suspicious about easy answers when it comes to a question about God. I do think there are people right now who are

in prison who have tried to be good and do the right things and are frustrated that they weren't able to do them. They probably do feel that they have reached out and prayed to be better and it didn't work. I have a great sympathy for that perspective. They are people who feel abandoned by God. I don't think, though, that I would go so far to say that God abandons people. But, I do think the Isaiah quote should raise an eyebrow. He says directly in that quote, "I turned away from you for a moment...I'm angry with you." And one of the things I say when I talk with students is "Wow, what a moment, the moment that God's angry with you and turns away from you." You have to turn around. That can be a long moment. That can be a moment in which lives change.

We are publishing some of your poetry in this issue of The Broad River Review. What makes you want to write poetry and prose?

Frustration. I get frustrated when my time gets broken up. I'm doing so many different things so I don't always have time to work on a novel. I try to find other projects that I can jump in and out of. So, poetry has been good for that. But then I get frustrated, too, writing poetry [laughing]. I find the whole thing frustrating, but it's what I do.

What is your favorite literary work?

A book I come back to time and time again is *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky. I read it when I was 18. I was sick one weekend and read the whole book. It really had a profound influence on me. It dealt with some of the issues I hope to deal with as a writer and has a story that I think is really strong. The last time I read it, I was on a sailboat on the Virgin Islands. I was having a great time, but went to my cabin and read that and lived the nightmare all over again, yet in a pleasant way.

Who is your favorite author?

Dostoevsky is my favorite writer for sure. I like writers who take risks and talk about things they think are really important and Dostoevsky did that. Things they care a lot about. It's one of my complaints with some contemporary literature. Writers seem to write about things that they feel are clever or funny or smart, but not something that really is aching in their heart, that's really intense to them.

Do you have any remarks about Gardner-Webb University and your upcoming visit?

I've lived in a lot of different places. This past year I've been all over the country with my book tour, too, but it's always nice to come back to North Carolina. The one experience I had at Gardner-Webb was when my wife was pregnant with our first kid and we were driving back from the beach. Our car broke down right outside Gardner-Webb. A student stopped, picked us up, and helped us get back on the road. I was working at Belmont Abbey College at the time, and that same student came to set up a radio station at Belmont Abbey. So, I've always thought of Gardner-Webb as a friendly place.

Sierra Leone

The children have come again today
To ask me to return their arms.
It's ok, I say: Your arms are still with me.

I have kept them safe—
I know which fingers are yours
And how they hold a quiet throat.

Your elbows dig at me when I sleep,
Your broken fists beat so softly,
Your hands are heavy, and they do not reach.

But I cannot give you back your arms.
We must all think of other things,
Of sunshine, a lake of it, and plastic toys, and food.

You'll see. I take good care of things,
You'll see. I'll be right here
Next time. No diamonds or machetes can move me,

I have your arms, just don't ask where.

A Part of Her

My wife has a dream, which begins and ends
In panic so utter and sudden that it commands
Her body, and mine, and will not subdue
Until we leave the room. It is this:

That our infant son has been in our bed
And is gone. I know this dream at once, the rush
Upright, the blind hands patting the sheets, the
Still and deadly way she stands, searches again,

And wakens, with the dream still dry in her mouth.
The dream began in pregnancy, but struck
Full force at his birth and continues, at times
To force her to find the part of her that is gone,

And she cannot rest until she knows exactly where
He is. And together we find him, and touch him.
Now our friends have lost a child. And we wonder
In the secret of her night, if his mother dreams,

And combs the sheets, and goes to find him.
But no night is dark enough to sleep,
And no dawn is light enough to wake,
And what she can never find is not a dream,

But every day, every day.

A Little Thing Wrong Makes a Big Mess

Max can't sleep
again. Tonight he's tried
past nine o'clock, patiently,
I pass his dark room
and his eyes shine out,
so I go in and pat his back.
My sleepy fingers
chase his darkness,
his eyes dim, the night sinks in, then—
he tells me, his voice daylight and clear:

*There's a boy
in my class, Michael,
not my friend Michael,
a different Michael.
He did a little thing wrong today,
and it made a big mess.
He had to stay in from recess
and clean it up. Everything,
by himself,
and he didn't have time.*

Hours later, I turn out the lights, feed the cat,
listen to the house sleeping, and make my way
through the Legos and Kin'x mess of Max's room,
and think of the little things I've done wrong,
and the long night ahead, and Michael,
who stayed in from recess.

Stop Breathing

Four black widows screaming
from tortured silences within
ate away the hearts of the children
the night the world wouldn't spin

now Her eight little girls
sit high on a fence
crying coal ashen tears
in a sad self defense

almost six years ago
when this world lost its touch
six billion hearts
stopped feeling too much

now there's a tiny blonde hair
on the marble-slab floor
we could hear little screams
behind the Big Wooden Door

Bottles and belts
leave bleeding hearts dead
crying and dying
with a gun to her head

see, there was a bible outside
and a Dog with three names
in a house with no doors
the night the world went in flames

Clovers and Cardboard

Infestations and congregations
are all I ever see
garbage peels and broken wheels
have become a part of me
Sewer stains and pocket change
have left their lettered scar
Flaming H on shards of skin
help us remember who we are

as if we forgot

alley cats and pity pats
the shame drips from my lip
broken bones and cardboard homes
mocked by apathetic shits
a feast for queens of moldy beans
don't look, it makes it worse
forget the world and their chubby churls
damn this mocking curse

where to from here

beckon bells and wishing wells
the cathedral stands alone
Faces pass with horrid gasps
no mercy they have shown
Thunder rolls and doom bell tolls
His people look right through
religion lies through passersby
so screw their Jesus too

breaking point

Autumn days and homeless gaze
my cup is filled with hate

begging food and sturdy roofs
death won't have to wait
Christian men and trophy pins
they say I need their God
fingers crossed I give my heart
I find their morals odd

none too many

twisted fate and heaven's gate
in something I am sure
bible dreams and ready wings
are cast on homeless shores
cups of tin and old cheap gin
today grants a four-leaf clover
atop a tote that Jesus wrote
my cup has runneth over

hands up high

Hypocrites and christian stiff
they do not relate to Him
solace lost and hearts of frost
they pass on haughty whim
angel eyes and sweet goodbyes
I bid the world adieu
of all the places left to go
Lord, can I come stay with You?

Par Three with My Father

Give me forsythias planted half-moon
Through zoysia fringe, a yellow wall
Downslope of a bentgrass green.
Make it the fifth, 127 uphill,
The fairway slim through apple blossoms,
Just enough sky between branches to loft
A draw short and deep-lip in the bunker.
Make it white sand,
And give the rake to my father.
Tell him not to look at me like that,
And to swallow his advice
When he smoothes the trap.
I don't want to know
How he would have dug this wedge.
Distract him—explode bluebills
Off the water on seven, hang them left.
Tell me he'll follow, and over
The dogwoods forget I'm here.
Lie to me:
Say they look full this season.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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NANCY BOTTOMS is in her twenty-fourth year as part of the Gardner-Webb University community. After discovering that her family has 200-year old roots in the Boiling Springs area, she began writing their stories. As she learns to live with her character-ancestors, often scoundrels, she becomes more familiar with human nature.

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KEITH FLYNN is the author of five books, including four collections of poetry. His most recent collection, *The Golden Ratio*, appeared in 2007 from Iris Press, along with a collection of essays, *The Rhythm Method, Razzmatazz and Memory: How to Make Your Poetry Swing*, from Writer's Digest Books. From 1987-1998, Flynn was the lyricist and lead singer for the nationally-acclaimed rock band, The Crystal Zoo. He has been awarded the Sandburg Prize for Poetry, the ASCAP Emerging Songwriter Prize, the Paumanok Poetry Award, and was twice named the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet for North Carolina. Flynn is the founder and managing editor of *The Asheville Poetry Review*. He lives in Madison County, North Carolina.

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MAUREEN E. MURPHY is a member of the Connecticut Poetry Society and The Academy of American Poets. This is her second contribution to *The Broad River Review*. In 2006, she was selected as a winner in the Eighth Annual Fusion Poetry Contest. Murphy has also been published in two themed anthologies for Forward Press. She is the mother of R.J. Dowden, a junior English major at Gardner-Webb University.

LACEY OSTOJ, from Southern Pines, NC, is a senior at Gardner-Webb University. She is majoring in electronic publishing and plans to pursue a career in the creative design field after graduation. She enjoys writing, running, and attempting to cook. This is her first publication.

JANEY PEASE recently purchased a vintage 1913 home in North Carolina, and now claims sanding and painting as her primary interests. She also devotes time to exploring gourmet foods, polishing music skills, and cultivating an herb garden. She is an adjunct professor at Gardner-Webb University. Her poetry has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

DAVID POSTON lives in Gastonia, North Carolina, where he teaches high school at the Highland School of Technology. He is the author of the poetry chapbook *My Father Reading Greek* (Union County Writers' Club Press, 1999). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *English Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, and *Wavelength*, among other journals and anthologies. Poston and his wife, Patty, co-write and illustrate a line of very, very limited-edition children's books.

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MAUREEN A. SHERBONDY'S poetry has been published in *Calyx*, *Feminist Studies*, *The Comstock Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Cairn*, *13th Moon*, and other journals. Her poems recently received first prizes in *The Gin Bender* and *The Lyricist* poetry contests. Sherbondy's novella, *Someone Drowning*, was a finalist in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Contest. Recently, Sherbondy won the Piccolo Spoleto Fiction Open and presented her story at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. Sherbondy lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and three sons.

ALLEN SMITH'S poems have appeared in such journals as *Bay Leaves*, *Coastal Plains Poetry*, *Off the Rocks*, and *Maryland Poetry Review*. Originally from Durham, North Carolina, and a graduate of Davidson College, Smith now lives in Alexandria, Virginia., where he has recently enjoyed reading *36 Views of Mt. Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan* and *Them: A Memoir of Parents*.

JESS SNYDER lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she spends her time writing, boating with her brothers, and photographing scenic

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