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Quiz and Quill



Spring 1999

Quiz And Quill

Otterbein College
Westerville, Ohio

Spring 1999

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Cover photo by Martha Schultz

Editors' s Notes

We are excited and relieved to present this year's *Quiz and Quill*. It is the result of a year long effort to compile works by Otterbein's talented and unique writers.

The staff has worked year-long on promoting the writing contests, holding poetry and drama readings and sponsoring events which focus on writing. To the full-time staff members, thank you for your help. We'd also like to thank the students who helped at different times throughout the year: Michael Smith and Fon Ngu.

Thank you, Dr. Bailey, for your assistance this year. We appreciate your time and willingness to listen to endless questions. Thanks for the sugar rushes during the long winter months.

We'd also like to say thanks to the faculty and staff who have supported us throughout the year. Dr. Rittenhouse, thank you for wearing your black shoes to our meeting. And Patti Kennedy, thank you for all your help in getting the magazine published. We'll miss you next year!

1999 Quiz and Quill Writing Contest Winners

Poetry

- First Place: Rome by Carrie Leonard
Second Place: You Step Into the World by Jacob Calloway
Third Place: Moonlight Sonata by Erin McDonald

Roy Burkhart Religious Poetry

- First Place: Such A Large God to Fit in Such a Small Head
by Micah Fitzgerald
Second Place: Grandpa by Amy Peirano
Third Place: Spirituality: The Great Sham Fest and Debacle
Scheme by Chris Smith

Short Story

- First Place: I Lost My Nuts in Gym Class by Anthony Fulton
Second Place: The Hospital Tank by Courtney Vanderpool
Third Place: What I Know About Ed by Kyle Mossman

Personal Essay

- First Place: Never Forget by April LeCroy
Second Place: The Ghosts at Cu Chi by Carrie Leonard
Third Place: Lighthouse in the Dark by Courtney Vanderpool

Playwriting

- First Place: Writer's Block by Carrie Leonard
Second Place: Wo/Man by Robin Seabaugh
Third Place: Jellyfish Look Like Plastic Bags, Sometimes
by Carrie Leonard
Roses and Easter-Lilies by Mark Snyder

The Walter L. Barnes Short Story Award

- First Place: I Want to Hold Your Hand by Anthony Fulton

Louise Gleim Williams Newswriting Contest

- First Place: Mark Kish
Second Place: Andrea Kesterke

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Writing Contest Judges

Poetry and Roy Burkhart Religious Poetry

Steve Abbott teaches creative writing at Columbus State Community College and has been active on the local poetry scene, reading at Larry's and helping to organize the recent Whole Web Poetry Fest and Feast, a celebration of National Poetry Month.

Personal Essay Contest

David Kimmel graduated from Otterbein in 1985 and earned his Ph.D. from Ohio State. He is an assistant professor of English and Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum at Heidelberg College.

Short Story Contest

Candyce Barnes has taught fiction writing at Ohio State. Her most recent publication is the story "Alligator Husbandry" in the December 1998 issue of *High Plains Literary Review*.

Playwriting Contest

Doreen Dunn has twice received playwriting fellowships from the Ohio Arts Council. She directs the Eastland Vocational Performing Arts Program. Her script "Excuses" was a winner in the Short Short Play Contest sponsored by the *Columbus Dispatch* in April 1999.

Louise Gleim Williams Newswriting Contest

Jean Kelly has more than 13 years of experience in all aspects of publishing, marketing and new technologies. At Otterbein she has taught Internet research and design, publications design and other journalism classes.

The Vandals

We would always sneak from Casey's house,
abandoning the slumber party
out parents thought we were having.

Our floppy Converse shoes
slapped the cold sidewalk
as we ventured in
dark suburban streets
which looked like an
amusement park in the winter.

We talked into the chilly blue cold,
about girls, our future rock stardom,
and who would win if
Luke Skywalker fought Captain Kirk.

Nothing could stop us,
except the street signs.

We were young.
We didn't want to
STOP,
definitely not
YIELD,
and no way in hell
were we going to
WATCH FOR CHILDREN.

Armed with black markers,
which gave us a buzz,
we changed the signs.

Now they say
STOP being normal,
don't YIELD to conformity,
and WATCH FOR CHILDREN to shit on you.

The streets were ours.

No one
Could make them for us.

-Anthony Fulton

three

he is a child
 and i love to play with him
 watch him smile
 see his eyes react to life
 every time the first time
 to hold him and hug him
 wishing i could make it all better
 if only in his imagination
 and to watch his body think
 right up to his forehead

where i remember he is a man
 and i love to listen to him
 to the stories he can tell
 and the fears he has found
 to try and tell him mine
 trading questions and doubts
 to be a child shaped in his arms
 feeling warmth his body always made
 to share responsibility

because now he is a lover
 and i love to explore him
 and be explored by him
 to kiss him again again again
 and feel the heat drip from his lips
 and make my body blush
 to talk without words
 only sounds fumbles and looks
 secrets only we can tell

though not everything,
 he is

at least

these three

-Jeremy Fulwiler

Broad

I am a broad woman.
Broad of mind.
Broad of shoulders.
Broad of feet.
Broad of heart.
Broad of thoughts
Ideas
Hands.
I have been called a broad
A broad Broad
Broadest broad in town
That broad's so broad she
Could write a book on it
So broad she likes it
So broad she brags about it.
So broad. So broad.
The strong
The tender
The loving
The angry
The respectful
The respectable
The wise
The beautiful
Broad.

-April LeCroy

The Blunder Years

by Kyle Mossman

I don't remember much about high school. Most of it is a blur to me now, and the rest I would prefer to forget. I did well in my classes and thought a lot about going to college—no college in particular, just the concept of college. My classmates were the same way. We would sit around during study hall and talk about the kind of parties we would attend, the kind of girls we would meet, and debate whether or not it was cool to join a fraternity. We all shared the same dream, that college was going to be a lot more fun and exciting than high school.

I was involved with a number of extracurricular activities. Our teachers and guidance counselors stressed that good grades and standardized test scores would not be enough to get us into college, and I believed it. The goal was to be well-rounded. To the faculty at Maumee High School, it was completely unacceptable to be good at just one thing. We were lectured on the dangers of "putting all your eggs in one basket" and the importance of having "something to fall back on." For example, a kid could be a genius at math, but it didn't mean a thing if he was not also in the marching band. Because, who knows, maybe when the kid grew up, the market for math teachers would be flooded, but there might be a heavy demand for tuba players willing to wear funny hats. That was the idea.

For the college-bound, it was absolutely necessary to be deeply and extensively involved in extracurricular activities. As a result I was on the wrestling team, the volleyball team, the speech team, the French club, and I performed in every school play. I was also involved in student government, serving as class president my freshman year, and class treasurer my junior year. I, for one, avoided the pitfalls of being good at just one thing by being mediocre at a wide variety of things. My goal, my dream was to become so well-rounded that no college on the planet could refuse me.

Many of these activities seem ridiculous to me today (particularly the ones that required me to sing, dance, and/or wear a costume), but they were important at the time. Often I would go to school at 7:30 a.m. and stay until eight or nine at night. Then, of course, there was homework to do. In terms of actual time spent out of bed I was much busier in high school than I ever am now in college. I was very stressed out all the time, and I would get sick four or five times a year. Each time I came down with a cold, there would be a good deal of paperwork involved. My mother had to write little letters to all my teachers, coaches, advisers, the choir director and on and on. I often imagined them all sitting in the teacher's lounge comparing notes from my mother, to see if my story checked out.

The worst part of it all (I can admit this now) is that, aside from academics, I wasn't very good at anything I did in high school. For one thing, I was a horrible wrestler. I came to practice every day; I even worked out in the off-season, but somehow I never improved. I was what they called a "fish." When the whistle blew, my opponent would invariably take me down in three to four seconds, then I would

just flop around on the mat until the match was over. However, owing to a joint disorder, which the coach referred to as “rubbery arms,” I was rarely pinned. I had (and still have) the unusual ability to dislocate both my shoulders at will, making it extremely difficult for my opponents to turn me over onto my back. Both shoulder blades need to be touching the mat for a “pin” to be called, and usually my own rubbery arm was the only thing standing in the way. But I did not lose all the time—most of the time, yes, but not all the time. When I hung up my headgear at the end of my sophomore year, I’d racked up a grand total of three victories—one against a girl, and one against a guy with one leg. The third was a fish.

I wasn’t much better at volleyball. Very few guys went out for the team because, as everyone knows, volleyball is for sissies. At 5’11”, I was the tallest on the team so the coach usually put me in the middle of the front row and told me to just keep my hands in the air in case anything happened. I’ll never be able to forget my old volleyball coach. His name was Mr. Hafeman and he was a Spanish teacher by day. He was also extremely effeminate. His rear end wiggled when he walked and he spoke with a heavy lisp, which did nothing for the reputation of volleyball in our school. We referred to him as Mr. Hafeman-Hafewoman. It was very funny at the time. He compensated for his swishiness by bringing his wife and children to all the games and by yelling a lot, not at them, but at me. Mr. Hafeman and I had what I now recognize as a communication problem, centered around the fact that I never had any clue what he was yelling about.

The language of volleyball was as foreign to me as Spanish. I never learned the difference between a “bump” and a “set,” and I never knew what a “sideout” was except that it was good when we did it and bad when the other team did it. Eventually, Mr. Hafeman and I worked out a system whereby we communicated through the use of short, simple phrases. He would say, “Mothman, get your head out of your ath!” to which I would respond, “Okay, Mr. Hafeman!”

My major weakness as a volleyball player was that I couldn’t jump, at all. My other weakness was serving. I blame Mr. Hafeman for that. Just as I was ready to serve the ball, he would always yell, “Conthentrate!” Half the time, I would call out the score, toss the ball up in the air, and miss it completely. The rest of the time I would serve the ball into the first or second row of the bleachers. The fans liked me, even if Mr. Hafeman didn’t, because I always got them involved in the game.

Many people in my high school might have thought that I was a good actor because I always had a leading part in the school plays, but those were the people who never actually saw them. Yes, I usually did play a fairly big role in our school plays but only because—a) I could memorize lines fairly easily, b) I spoke in a loud, clear voice (a practice I’ve since abandoned), and c) I was the only guy who auditioned; the rest had to be recruited. The director, Ms. Myers, was always pleased that I knew my lines, but very frustrated that I delivered them all in exactly the same tone of voice. Usually I played somebody’s father, which was fine because, generally in plays, the father is *supposed* to be dull and boring.

One year our school did *Grease* and, since there are no fathers in *Grease*, Ms.

Myers gave me the role of Vince Fontaine, the greasy, middle-aged radio personality who emcee's the high school dance. I read the script and found out that Vince had to kiss one of girls of Rydell High right in the middle of his big scene. And this was no little peck on the cheek but, rather, an all-out, taste-your-partner's-tonsils kiss. The script said that it was to be done *passionately*. I was terrified.

Some horrible mistake had been made, I thought. To make things worse, the girl I was supposed to kiss was played by Missy Degroff who, just by coincidence, had been slipping notes into my locker since the sixth grade. She had the hots for me, in a completely G-rated way. I never gave much thought to girls back then—I spent most of my time trying to get through volleyball practice. I certainly had never *kissed* one before and I wasn't about to do it right there on-stage with my parents and her parents and virtually the entire community watching. I pleaded with the director, "Couldn't I just give her a firm handshake? A slap on the back?" For weeks and weeks of rehearsals, I avoided kissing Missy. I could tell that she was a little nervous about it too, so we just hurried past that scene. Come opening night, I was shaking. I couldn't avoid it any longer. When the big moment arrived I grabbed Missy tight, turned my face away from the audience, covered her mouth with my upstage hand, then proceeded to kiss my own hand, *passionately*. Missy and I never spoke after that incident. Come to think of it, I'm not sure that we ever spoke before that, either.

In retrospect, I could have been a great student governor. I had a strong speaking voice and I was well-liked by most of my constituents. The only thing holding me back was the fact that I didn't care; that is, I rarely had an opinion on any of the issues. For example, I would be sitting quietly in a student council meeting while the other students were discussing the current state of the school's recycling program. Then someone would ask, "Kyle, what is your opinion on recycling?" and I would say, "I don't know, what does everybody else think?" I spent most of my time nodding in agreement and voting with the majority.

I was only involved in the French Club and the Speech Team insofar as I showed up for the yearbook picture.

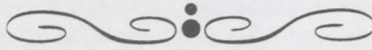
My old wrestling coach had a saying—"Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I did a lot of things in high school, none of which killed me. So, by his rationale, I should be one awfully strong person by now. But I don't feel stronger, I just feel stupid. Looking back, I wonder how I could have been so easily misled, and I suspect it had something to do with the cafeteria food.

It's easy to look back in anger and blather on and on about my disillusionment and wasted youth, but I refuse to do that. Instead, I have resolved not to repeat my mistakes. Since I started college, I've made a serious effort to become less involved. I spend more time relaxing and, as a result, I am healthier and happier than I ever was in high school. I've put all my eggs in one basket and, if that basket breaks, I have nothing to fall back on. My Senior English teacher would be disgusted by that mixed metaphor, and my guidance counselor would be mortified by its implications. So be it.

Rome*First Place, Poetry Contest*

Where else can you die
 and go to heaven
 and still walk the earth
 and throw out your arms
 and spin
 and fall to the ground
 and bleed sweet wine

-Carrie Leonard

**Ice Storm**

bare branches encased in glass
 quietly reflect the sky
 daggers crash into the fragile ground and
 shatter the stillness
 shimmering sheets of diamonds
 crunch under the
 weight of humans

the sun's heat does
 Nothing
 the cold wet slick ice prevails
 chunks splinter
 crack
 crash to the sidewalk
 endangering passers-by

fragile strength
 dangerous beauty

paralyzed cities
 ignited imaginations and
 immobilized humans
 empowering nature

-Erin McDonald

In Pieces

I.

He closes the door behind him and sits down on my floor.
His soft brown eyes trace the tears which streak my cheeks,
and a flicker reflected in them from the candle on my desk
takes me back to the starry night on a playground
where he first touched his lips to mine
in a magical kiss.

It had been there in the moonlight when I had first noticed
that his eyes,
up close,
are not really brown at all,
but a dark green surrounding an amber flame:
two souls filled with passion
and fire.

But now his eyes are brown again from where I sit
on the other side of this canyon
which divides the Arizona
that is my room.
I remember my super-hero days
when I could cross canyons in one swift stride.
I once had the strength and the will to try.

But now as I sit here trembling
I am reminded of my glass heart
and the steel body I keep it in,
and I realize
that both strength and will
are shattered with glass.

II.

He asks me what I see when I look into his eyes,
and I wonder if he can see the pieces of me lying everywhere.

Here, with his eyes focused on mine,
no canyon is wide enough to protect me
from my stale feelings.
My eyes, which have always been able to out-stare anyone,
now look everywhere,

but at my old love.

I see myself in pieces on the floor.
The candlelight reflects off each piece of my shattered heart,
and I am a rain cloud
trying to hide behind the sky.

III.

After awhile he is gone.
I am left amid the memories
reflected in glass by a small candle.
I look longingly into each piece
and slowly rise to my feet.
Walking quickly around my room,
I gather each piece into my hands.
Each cuts deeper than the last,
and the blood pours out,
but I don't notice.

IV.

Suddenly, I'm holding nothing.
The glass is back in place.
Or maybe it never left me.

My love is old,
but my heart is new,
and I am a rain cloud
coming out to face the sun.

-Ellen Beversluis

I Lost My Nuts In Gym Class

First Place, Short Story Contest

by Anthony Fulton

I had this theory once that high school gyms were air conditioned every day of the school year to give them that whole cold as death dungeon type atmosphere. Shit, every day of my junior year I thought I would fuckin' freeze to death. It was kinda my fault 'cause they made us wear these shirts that said "Wellmington High Athletic Department." Well, underneath that I wrote, "Can suck my cock!" on my shirt with a marker. I just did it to fight the system, and I thought it was kinda funny.

I got in trouble and our gym teacher, Coach Abe, took my shirt and gave me a new one that was three sizes too small. I walked out of the locker room already shivering, but had no idea that it was going to get a whole lot colder.

"I think they make it really cold in here on purpose," I said shoving my arms into my ultra thin gym shirt.

"Cold, When I have cold I use only best, Tylenol Cold Medicine." Pavemen Mendez said to me nodding his head. Pavemen is the exchange student from Spain; who everyone just calls Pavement. He can barely speak English, and what little English he knows is what he's learned from American television. When I first met him I thought he was so funny that I'd invite him over to my house every day.

I showed him all the classics, Casablanca, Indiana Jones, Back to the Future, and of course the Star Wars Trilogy. Then this one horrible day he came over and said he wanted to watch...Disney movies. I stopped inviting him to my house. That's when he got himself a membership at the video store. Ever since then he constantly sings mind warping Disney tunes.

"Can you feel the love tonight?" Pavement sang as we lined up for roll call. I didn't find him too damn funny anymore.

Our class sucked 'cause we were surrounded by like twenty blood thirsty jocks. This happened to me every year. All my friends would end up in a gym class together and I'd be alone. I had Pave, who was my friend but couldn't really speak English. The only reason I didn't skip gym is 'cause it was between lunch and English, two things I wouldn't fucking skip.

Suddenly, the wooden gym doors flew open and Coach Abe strolled in with his muscles almost ripping through his tight red ADIDAS shirt. He was wearing dark glasses and twirling a whistle around his fingers.

"Wha-blah-ganna-beh-blah-blah!" Coach Abe shouted as his booming testosterone voice bounced around the gym.

"Oh Christ," I mumbled, "doesn't he realize that it echoes too damn much in here to shout? We can't hear a damn thing. He sounds like Charlie Brown's mom."

"Why can't I have normal dog like everyone else?" Pavement said quoting Charlie Brown.

"Well Charlie Brown, we're probably gonna fail this class, 'cause we can never hear our names called for roll." I said to Pavement.

The whole time in that class I never once heard the name Keith Miller, that's me, being called.

"Wha-bah-haba-wha-wha-wha," Coach Abe bellowed.

"Here," a tan muscular boy shouted.

"How the hell do they understand him?" I said. "You know what Pave? I bet Coach Abe is a robot. He's gotta be. He comes in, takes roll, in which his voice operates on a frequency only jocks can hear. Then he tells us to play the game for the day and if we don't want to we can play Ping-Pong. He never answers the questions, or makes small talk. He's a robot, damn it, can you believe that, Pavement?"

"I can't believe it not butter," Pavement said shrugging his shoulders.

"Ha, come on, Pave, I'll play ya at Ping-Pong," I said.

"Wha-blah-wahba-blah," Coach Abe shouted as we walked towards the Ping-Pong table.

"Hey freaks!" This big red faced jock with a buzz cut yelled. "Didn't you hear coach? The Ping-Pong table was broken last period when one of those fat ass chess club geeks fell on it."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, you two are playing with us today, heh-heh," the jock chuckled with an evil grin on his face. "Get ready to die, you Juan Valdez mother fucker!" he said as he grabbed Pavement by the arms and shook him.

"Take your stinkin' paws off me, you damn dirty ape!" Pavement shouted.

"Wait," I said trying not to panic yet, "don't go Charlton Heston on his ass yet. It might not be so bad, what's today, Wednesday right?"

"Yep," the jock sneered "and it's dodge ball day, heh-heh."

"Oh shit," I whispered. "Pave, we are going to die!" I screamed grabbing Pavement and moving away from the jock right next to the Ping-Pong table, which was now cracked and splintered all over the tiny room off to the side from the rest of the gym.

"Pave, I don't know if you understand me but it's dodge ball and that means they're going to flatten us," I said.

"When I have flat I call Triple A automotive service on call twenty four hour a day."

"Oh shit," I muttered, "What am I doing here? I wanna be a fuckin' writer, which has nothing to do with dodge ball!"

To those jocks I was just a big pussy because I gave a rat's ass about sports and actually liked English class. I mean English class was cool 'cause that week we were reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. I thought it was pretty deep. I liked it because the main character wasn't all old and crusty and from another century. Holden was on my level; I could see where he was going, man. The jocks just called it, "the book with the swear words." I stood there frozen watching these blasts warming up and getting ready for the kill.

"Hey Bull," one jock said. "Didja see da game on Sunday?"

"Nah," Bull replied, "Kathy came over and I fucked her hard all night!"

He said, kissing his pulsing biceps. The jocks exploded in laughter and high fives.

"Oh man, these guys are worse than those animals that eat each other on those Discovery Channel shows," I said.

Pavement's tan face turned completely white all of a sudden. For once I was talking in terms he could understand.

"Wha-blah-zaha-nablah!" Coach Abe shouted as he emerged from the storage room with four red rubber balls. Now, these red balls were always over inflated and stung like hell if you got hit. It was even worse when thrown by a steroid filled jock. They threw so hard you were at risk of losing a couple limbs.

All the jocks sprinted onto the floor as Coach Abe launched the balls into play. Since Coach Abe was a robot he hadn't changed his game schedule since the seventies. He still made us play dodge ball. Most kids played dodge ball in elementary school, but we still played it in high school. Coach Abe would throw the balls in and it would be a free-for-all. No terms, no rules except you were out if you got hit. But in this class if you got hit you were probably gonna need surgery.

Me and Pavement slowly scuffled over the white line putting us right into death zone. Rubber balls were already slamming off the hard walls and echoing around the gym. We flew across the floor as whizzing balls zipped over our heads. We huddled in the back of the gym against the wall.

"They call this fucking education?" I yelled over the screams and sounds of guys getting pegged with balls.

I was going crazy trying to keep my eyes on all four balls. Just then Harvey Donswick, this toady little towel boy for the football team, joined us along the wall. Harvey was a jock wanna be guy who thinks jocks are his friends, but the jocks only keep him around to carry their books or their trays up at lunch.

"It's getting a little crazy in there for me," Harvey said.

Just then a fiery red ball nailed Harvey right in the face. Blood gushed from his nose as he flew back into the air. He landed on the hard wood floor convulsing in pain.

"Damn," a jock shouted. "I was aimin' fer dat foreign kid but I got fuckin' Harvey."

"I don't think we in Kansas no more Toto!" Pavement said.

"Well then get your God damn red slippers in gear, Dorothy!" I said as we started sliding down the wall staying the hell away from the center of the gym where the blood thirsty jocks were.

"You call this Archeology, Dr. Jones?" Pave said. I didn't even respond. I just shoved him to make him slide faster. Geez, you would have thought I was havin' a fucking epileptic seizure the way I was shaking, I was scared. I couldn't believe that I was in this dangerous situation with Pavement, the foreign kid as my only ally. Right then a ball slammed right above Pavement's head taking a few hairs off.

"Great Scott! This heavy," Pavement stuttered. He stopped sliding and just stared at the center of the gym with a cold look in his eye. It was freakin' weird.

"Pave," I shrieked, "what the hell are you doing? Keep movin'."

Pavement turned to me with his lips all quivering. I thought he was going to explode. I mean, after all a lot of people do spontaneously combust from stress each year.

"May the force be with you!" was all he said to me when he bolted directly for the center of the gym.

"Pave!" I screamed still clinging to the wall. I watched as the jocks surrounded him. Balls shot at him from all directions. He dodged one and somersaulted under two. It was pretty impressive until he ran right into the fourth one. It caught him right in the face, smack! I watched him topple to the ground as spit and blood spurted from his mouth.

"I fallen and can't get up," I heard him mutter quietly.

"Great!" I shouted. "Just fucking great. Now I'm alone."

I slid along the wall faster than beer down a jock's throat. In my mind I was trying to figure out why Pave just cracked. I mean he just took one nasty suicide run. He wasn't the best ally I could have had, but he was an ally none the less.

But I didn't want to go out like Pave. I wanted to live. I wanted to see my friends and parents again. I wanted to live to next period English class to see how *The Catcher in the Rye* ended. I wanted to see the jocks squirm once more as our English teacher asked them questions about the book they hadn't read.

I just kept sliding to get to Coach Abe. I mean he was a robot but I had to try to get him to stop the game. My life was at stake here.

One of the death balls slammed against the wall right next to my head, almost taking my ear off.

"Whoa! Shit!" I cried. This was getting heavy.

That's when I bolted from the wall, sprinting like mad to Coach Abe's chair, only to find it fucking empty. I almost started crying, but that's when I saw the best sight of my life. I saw Coach Abe with the school nurse helping Pavement to his feet. Harvey Donswick was standing behind them with a wad of Kleenex on his nose.

"That's it!" I said. "The nurse! That's my ticket out. Pave got hurt on purpose."

That's when I knew Pave had the right idea. The school nurse was my only chance left. I had to get hurt. As much as I didn't want to, it would get me out of this never-ending class.

I broke from the wall heading towards the center of the gym. The jocks immediately started launching balls at me. The first came in low, off to the side, heading for my legs. I vaulted over that and kept running. The second buzzed past my nose. I ducked under the third one 'cause it was a weak shot. If it would have hit me it would only mean a time out in the game till I got up.

The last ball got picked up by the captain of the football team, the biggest

jock in school. He whaled the ball at me. I stopped dead in my tracks telling myself the pain would only last a few seconds. I closed my eyes and kept wincing, waiting for the ball to crack me in the chest. I waited with my eyes shut only to have the most unbearable pain explode in my crotch. The ball nailed me right in the nuts. You know, nuts, balls, jewels, rocks, potatoes in the sack.

Needless to say I was on the floor screaming in no time. If you've never been hit in the balls before then I can only tell you that it's a hard pain to describe. Picture someone holding your balls and squashing them directly with a hammer. Your arms and legs painfully tingle, your eyes water and if you try to walk it's like you're trying to walk with twenty pound weights strapped to every part of your body. I shuddered on the floor and then the gym spun around and went black.

I woke up to see this white light floating towards me. Then a figure came in front of the light. She was dressed in white. She had wings and sang a melodic siren song guiding me into the light. Okay, okay so it was the fat school nurse who smells like rubber gloves.

"Are you all right, son?" the nurse asked politely.

"Yeah," I coughed, "I think."

"You got hit hard, can you walk?"

I was scared to get up. I pictured my balls rolling out of my shorts when I stood up. That's when I thought of the idea for my first novel, "I Lost my Nuts in Gym Class." On the cover would be my smiling face while I held two shiny bronze balls in my hand.

Luckily, the pain in my groin was starting to pass. Which is a good sign 'cause if it hurts more than twenty minutes, then any dreams you have of being a father are shattered.

"Come on," the nurse said helping me up. "You can rest in my office. I'm sorry but you're probably gonna have to take a week off from gym. We don't want you to have any permanent damage to your...lower abdominal region," the nurse said embarrassed.

"Wa-blh-haba-zuba-blah," Coach Abe yells, and the dodge ball game continues. Me, Pavement, and Harvey followed the nurse out of the gym down the hall.

"A week, Pave," I whispered, holding my nuts. "No gym for a week. The Ping-Pong table will be fixed by then, and we get to spend the week watching from the bench."

"This could be beginning of beautiful friendship," Pavement said.

"Yeah, these jocks and their games don't amount to a hill of beans in this world," I said, putting my arm around Pave as we walked towards the nurse's office.

Who I Am

I've been whispering
 for so long
 when what I really
 meant to do
 was scream.

Scream from the
 rooftops,
 hilltops
 mountain tops

Who I Am.

So I shall scream.
 And yell and fight
 with all that's within me.
 I will kick my feet
 until I break free
 on my own accord.
 And I will make sure you all know

Who I Am.

I will make myself known.
 I've been living
 like a caged bird
 Singing, eating, shitting, sleeping
 like it's all that's out there.
 But now I've seen
 the sky,
 the clouds, the trees
 and I want to possess them.

I've been told for so long
 because I am woman
 to obey and follow
 without question.
 And now I've seen
 the stars
 and the craters of the moon
 and I want to posses them.
 So you can all know

Who I Am.

-Beth Gartland



Carrie

So I wanted to find you a special gift.
 Something like a piece of me.
 Not an ugly piece of anger or hurt or disgust,
 Just a beautiful slice of my soul,
 So you would forever remember me.
 And I searched my whole heart but found emptiness.
 It's too late for me to give you my love;
 besides, you already have it.

So I wanted to find you a special gift,
 Something like the best parts of the world.
 And I tried to capture a shimmery rainbow,
 a hazy morning sky,
 a puffy cloud's interior,
 But they refused to be wrapped in ribbons.

So I thought long and hard about your leaving,
 How you will be gone and far away.
 And maybe someday when my theme song
 Dances through your mind,
 A trace of laughter will creep across your face.
 And I will have given you a smile.

-Marian Jarlenski

What the Rattling Once Said

What did he say?

I think he asked if it was going to be cold that day.

He always made his bed after he got up in the mornings.

I saw the most horrifying incident.

It must have been a new fashion for him.

His shirt was missing, found later coated in blood.

I hope I never see that fad again.

I told him to be quiet, he never listened.

I couldn't cope with craziness.

I wanted to hush him, the pleasure of silence.

He told me if I couldn't contend he was going to slit his throat.

How was I supposed to respond?

Stupid me never believed his words.

I was used to him acting insane, fooling around.

I let my thoughts get comfortable.

I should have listened to them rattling.

After all, they were the words of truth that led to his death.

-Heather Prater

Writer's Block

First Place, Playwriting Contest

By Carrie Leonard

Characters

X: an author

Y: another author

Scene

A room, empty except for two simple wooden chairs and two wooden desks pushed together so they face each other, at center stage. The walls are plain. A wire waste paper basket, overflowing with crumpled paper, sits next to the desks. Two men sit in the chairs, slumped over the desks with a notebook and a pen in hand.

X: *(Suddenly sits up straight, holds notebook high and proudly reads)* 'She was cold and starving, but she had to keep moving. If they found her it would mean certain doom— marriage. Her father was forcing her to marry a man she hated...hated so much that she would rather die than wed. But she had no choice, her father was king, and his word was law. So, she ran, in the night, made her escape. If she could only make it to the next village, she would be safe. No one knew her there. She could find shelter there, and food maybe. She'd have to find work, but where? And for who?'

Y: *(without moving)* Trite!

X: What?

Y: Trite. That is so over done. And, it's 'Whom.'

X: Whom?

Y: Whom.

X: No, I think it's who.

Y: It's whom.

X: *(pouting)* Well, it sounds stupid.

(X scratches out the word and changes it. Slumps over desk again.)

Y: *(Reads from notebook)* Darkness enveloped him with an icy grip that threatened to drag his weakened and wounded body into the depths of oblivion. But his will was stronger than that of the unseen force which seemed to drain every drop of energy from his cells. *(Y stops, scratches out the last line and rewrites it. Reads again.)* ...seemed to drain the few remaining atoms of energy from his under-respiring cells. *(Looking pleased with himself, Y slouches over the desk again to continue writing.)*

X: *(Sits up, looks at Y, then turns his head back to him, still pouting, as he reads)* It was beginning to rain and the road was quickly transforming from dry dust to sticky mud. There was no shelter in sight so she kept moving— no time for rest. Her soaking dress clung to her heaving breasts and as she ran, the

muddy road snatched the delicate slippers from her feet. No time to retrieve them, she told herself, but alas! They would give away the direction of her flight to her persuaders (*Turning to Y again, slaps the notebook on the desk, startling Y into looking up from his work*) Ha! Now that's original!

Y: You mean pursuers.

X: Nope.

Y: But isn't she running away?

X: Yep.

Y: So she's running away from her pursuers. Pursuers are the people who pursue the pursued. It doesn't make any sense the other way.

X: Yeah it does. See, she's running away cause she's being *persuaded* to marry that guy. The people who are chasing her are the *persuaders* and the *persuaders* want to *persuade* the *unpersuadable* cuz she won't be *persuaded* to marry even though the *persuaders* won't stop *persuading* her 'til she dies cuz then the *persuaders* have to stop *persuading* if she's dead cuz then she can't hear the *persuasion*. That's why she's running away. (*Contended with his explanation, X goes back to writing while Y stares in disbelief for a moment then continues his own writing.*)

Y: (*reads*) He turned the corner with a quivering hand trying to balance his weapon... (*pauses to think, then writes a new line and reads.*) Each step he took imbedded the fear deeper and deeper... (*adds a few words*)...and much deeper...into his throbbing... (*scratches out and rewrites*)...pulsating heart...

X: (*interrupts, reads*) She looked over her shoulder but found the road behind her to be empty. But she was not watching where she was going and, whump! She tripped over a hunch and fell face down in...

Y: (*interrupts*) What's a hunch?

X: What?

Y: You said she tripped over a hrunch.

X: (*looks at his notebook and scratches his head*) hmmm. hrunch... (*sounds out word slowly*) hr... un... ch. hr... an... ch. (*Looks up in triumph*) branch! she tripped over a branch! (*scratches out word and fixes it, looks at Y and smiles*) Typo.

Y: (*going back to his writing, mumbles*) Man can't even read his own handwriting. (*pause, then reads*) He turned the corner... blah blah blah... then stopped suddenly. Something was...

X: (*interrupts*) She tries to get up but... (*stops, scratches out line and rewrites*)

Y: (*ignoring X, continues to read*)... slippery on the floor—slime! Gobs of green goo...

X: (*interrupts, reads*) her dress was torn but... (*stops, scratches out and rewrites*)

Y: (*reads faster and louder*)... He knew the creature was watching him from some secret lair hidden within the shadows of the walls but he could not

decipher any shapes from the darkness . . . (*takes a deep breath. Pauses to write.*)

(*X looks up and opens mouth to read but stops and scratches out.*)

Y: (*Reads from his notebook dramatically.*) He stood motionless, afraid to breathe.

The creature was only inches away. Its putrid stench soured the air and its clammy skin sent shivers . . .

X: (*Stands up and throws pen across stage*) I can't work in these conditions!

Y: (*ignores X*) . . . down his spine. The creature's teeth quivered by his ear, dripping saliva down his neck. (*Pauses, turns to X.*) What conditions? You were fine a second ago.

X: *These conditions. Desks, chairs, (Motions around room.) Walls. I need freedom!* (*jumps up on desk*) Open spaces! (*Throws arms out and spins.*)

Y: (*Slouches over desk to write again.*) Dripping saliva down his neck . . . (*Looks up*) Will you please stop that!

X: (*Stops*) The girl begins to run again. Her hands guard her face from . . . Quick give me your pen!

Y: Where's your?

X: I threw it.

Y: But I need mine.

X: I'll give it back. (*snatches the pen from Y's hand and begins to write.*) 'The girl begins to run again. Her hands . . .' (*Pause.*) 'Her hands . . .' (*Looks up at ceiling, and bites pen.*) 'Her hands . . .' (*Throws pen across stage.*)

Y: Hey!

X: Oh! Now I've lost it.

Y: That was my only pen. (*rummages through desk drawer*)

X: (*ignores Y. Jumps down from desk heroically and begins pacing.*) She's cold. She's starving. She's running. She's lost her shoes but she's still running. But where? (*looks around*) Where? (*loudly*) Where?

Y: (*looks up startled*) What?

X: No, Where? (*stops behind chair. Pulls it away from desk.*) She finds a cave! (*crawls under desk and tucks his legs in.*)

Y: What are you doing? (*stretches neck to see around desk.*)

X: Shhhhhhhhh! I'm thinking.

Y: (*Spots pen across stage.*) Yes! (*Runs over and grabs it greedily.*) Thank you God. (*Y Holds the pen high, then kisses it and runs back, around X's desk towards his own.*)

X: (*sticks his head out.*) Hark! A stranger doth approach.

Y: (*startled by X's outburst, does not see the chair and trips over it.*) AAAhhhhg!

X: Ah Ha! I have caught you in my trap. There is no escape.

Y: (*rubs knee.*) What? What are you talking about?

X: (*emerges from desk.*) I have been running from you for too long. I will not marry you!

Y: (*looks shocked.*) What!

X: (*looks around room, notices waste basket and pauses for a moment, thinking. Then*

swoops down on the basket and in one swooshing motion, flings its contents over the stage. Then, puts the basket on his head like a helmet.) I shall become a knight in a distant land, far from my father's evil throne and your hideous face! And I'll never have to see you again . . . *(pauses to think)* . . . unless of course you get imprisoned in a tower, then I'd have to come rescue you, hideous face or no, just because I was a valiant knight whose code of honor could not allow her to let even the lowliest of innocent creatures perish helplessly in a tower. *(pauses to think some more)* On the other hand, if an evil sorcerer decides to turn you into a dragon I'll have to hunt you down and sever your head from your disgusting body and ram it through with my lance so I can parade it through the town square.

Y: Well, that's...

X: *(interrupts)* No, do not try to *persuade* me otherwise. I shall become a knight and neither you nor my father can prevent me. *(Rolls notebook into a sword and points it at Y's throat.)* I am no longer afraid of you.

Y: What? Are you going to paper-cut me to death?

X: Hush, you fool!

Y: *(backs away, X presses forward.)* Here . . . here, I found your pen.

X: Ha! What feeble weapons you have. *(removes notebook from Y's throat. And steps back.)* On guard!

Y: *(Fumbles to his feet.)* What?

X: Defend yourself. Do not underestimate my skill as a swordsman. I am the daughter of the king. I have been trained by the best. *(Swooshes notebook in front of Y's face. Y jumps back, drops pen, and runs around desks. X gives chase.)* You coward! Looks who's running now!

(X pokes Y in the back with notebook making Y jump.)

Y: Aaaahhhg!

(X stops and changes directions and surprises Y when they meet face to face.)

X: Aha!

(Y turns and runs the opposite way around the desks and X gives chase in high spirits.)

Y: Aaaahhhg! Man, all I wanted was my pen back.

(they round X's desk. X stops suddenly. Bends down and picks up pen. Pulls chair back to desk and sits, slouching over desk to write. Y, still running, laps X's desk again, then notices that he has stopped. Y, out of breath, returns to his chair, keeping an eye on X the whole time.)

(Long Pause.)

X: *(jumps up on desk, startling Y, and reads.)* 'She was finally safe, free from her father and free from the man who would never be her husband. The village was just ahead. Her body ached with the thought of food. Just a little farther, she thought, and picked up her pace. Suddenly, all the anxiety of being alone in the world flooded back. Where would she find shelter? Where would she find food? Where would she work, and for who?' *(Closes*

notebook, satisfied.)

Y: (*Timidly.*) It's whom.

X: What? (*turns to Y.*)

Y: 'for Whom.'

X: Whom? (*slowly gets down off desk.*)

Y: (*more confidently.*) Whom.

X: No, I think it's Who.

Y: It's whom.

X: (*Pouting.*) Well, it sounds stupid.

(*X opens notebook, scratches out word and changes it.*)
Curtain.

Loneliness Contemplates Life on the Highway to Paradise

Mother mercy be on my side
Riding down this road tonight
Encompassed by mass desolation
Bearing the weight of helplessness on this barren road

Riding a storm of thought
Confused with determination
To reach salvation
My eyes thirst to see

Weeping tears of spiritual lotion
Spreading over my body
Making me all right
In this strange foreign land

Hands bare white knuckled on the steering wheel
Taking me into this cacophony of emotion
Creating a kaleidoscope of light
Passing tumbleweed dreams of past lives long lived

That last past will live on

Nicotine burns my innards with aspirations to break rules
Puffing like a locomotive
Down through faces of decades
Mocking my attempts to ascertain eccentric desires

Watching the smoke rise higher
An offering of my journey's way be peaceful
Listening to melodramatic melodies
Of melancholy maladies

Afflicting me with happiness
Of a young boy after his first kiss
Cruising moronic thought
For phonic sounds of instrumental dope

Pumping my veins full of rhythm
My body succumbs
Gyrating to the ecstasy presented to it
Loneliness never felt so good

Blazing like a bullet through fields of dirt
 Climbing the mountain of aspiration to see the other side
 So still we see paradise tomorrow mother mercy
 Or will utopia be another day off in the foggy distance

In which time will be the form of transportation

-Eric Weiss



Kissed

on tiptoe—
 little girl kisses bald head
 light patters of her feet
 kiss the ground
 even
 man hole covers

-Kate Thomas

The Hazards of Writing in Public Places

I just came in for a cup of coffee
and a place to write,
but I might have been staring.

The waitress caught me
scribbling something about
the shape of a pear.
Her face scrunched up
and she punched me.

"I'm not a piece of fruit!" she shouted.

No, of course not, I said,
spitting teeth into my cup.
You're a human being—

a mammal with hair and teeth
that eats and shits
and bleeds between the legs.

And the most I can say
without really knowing you is that
you're softer and sweeter smelling
and, well, prettier
than the other waitresses.

"I'm not a flower, either!"

No, but you are soft and fragrant like a flower,
I said, trying to smooth her ruffled petals.

"Shut up and stop smelling me," she said,
"I'm tired of being objectified."

-Kyle Mossman

Words on the White Padded Walls

by Beth Gartland

His icy blue eyes locked on mine right before he decided to throw himself in front of my car. I slammed on my brakeshard, which sent the air bag bellowing towards me at full speed, slamming into my stomach, swollen with the growth of an eight month old fetus. My furious braking wasn't enough; I couldn't stop in time. The twenty-year-old male, whose name I later learned was Matthew Douglass Louis, had successfully committed suicide under the tires of my 87 Mazda. I felt him scream with every fiber of my being, and I almost felt as if our voices were one. The noise from the moment when my front tire hit his head and crushed his skull is forever impacted in my memory. The sound was not enough. One could expect to hear a sound like the setting off of the A-bomb, something vivid, and impactful. Instead it was more like the sound of a nutcracker opening a walnut. Lights flashed, faces surrounded my car. I lifted my hands in front of my face and pushed the pillow of air that had saved me from brain damage down from my line of vision. I could see blood seeping from over the hood of my car. There was so much blood. I shook my head and reached for my door handle. As soon as I opened my car door, and began to step out, I felt a hand on my forearm. "Just sit down," the voice said. It was a strong, confident tone of voice. Steady, unlike mine. I looked up and saw his eyes. He lowered me down into my car again and reached for his car phone. I tried to ask what had happened, but couldn't find my voice. He had called the hospital, they were on their way. I could hear the sirens, and see the flashes of light in the distance. The race of the ambulance to the scene of the accident mixed in with the excitement of what had just occurred was too much for me to handle. I was unconscious.

When I awoke, I was in a hospital bed, nurses and doctors running every where. Voices, machines, footsteps, all overwhelming my thoughts. And then I heard it. The cry of a newly born baby. The excitement from the day's activities had forced him from my womb a month early. No one was sure if he would even make it, with the blow I had suffered from the airbag. They rushed me into emergency, and began the procedure as soon as they could. Fortunately I had been unconscious for all but the tail end of it, and they had pumped me full of anesthetic in case I did wake up. I couldn't feel a thing. I wasn't even aware until many hours later that the baby crying in the distance of my daze had been my child emerging for the first time into this harsh world.

I layback, unable to move, not wanting to think or feel anything. Tears of rage and fear raced down my cheeks, over my chin and catapulted onto my hospital gown. The main doctor on call came into my room and sat on a stool beside my bed.

"Heather is here." He informed me. I lifted my chin slightly to gaze

towards the door where she was standing. I reached out a hand to her, and she approached my side. Her face warmed and comforted me. I could finally stop crying long enough to ask the doctor if my baby was OK. He looked down. I took a deep breath and asked again. Heather took my hand, and her eyes welled up with mine. He began to tell me about the boy I hit, petty information, his name, age, occupation, family history. Then he asked me if my husband could be reached, and the tears came harder. Heather told the doctor of Preston's recent death, and he grimaced as he apologized and placed his wrinkled hand on top of mine. Next came the news of my baby. The good news: the baby had survived. It was a boy. Heather squeezed my hand. Pause. The bad news: the baby had suffered from the impact of the airbag. It hit my stomach from the top down, which is what had started the labor, and caused the brain trauma. What he said after that I do not know. I drowned him out with the Muzak playing in the lobby. As far as I can tell he began to recite the words to Chicago's *You're the Inspiration*, and tell of other emergencies being rushed into the ward. I couldn't cry, so I began to sing along with the songs. He stopped talking and Heather shook my shoulder, but I couldn't stop. After what seemed like a decade, I could finally cry again. Finally he got up to leave. Heather stayed. She always stayed.

They brought my dinner. I stared at it for a long time and then placed it on the stool where the doctor had sat, and curled up in my bed. There had been enough surprises in my day, and even something as little as what was under the plastic plate cover was too much for me to handle. Heather crawled in beside me and lay holding my back against her stomach. I could feel her heartbeat, and felt a bit more whole. She rubbed my arm and said everything would be fine. "Just keep on living, Sade." Words that I etched on the walls of my mind. I had to keep living. I had my baby to think of. My poor sweet innocent boy who had come so unexpectedly into my life. It was not his fault, but he was suffering. I was fine, but he was not. I suddenly hated that boy who caused my life to erupt into this madness.

I began to shake violently. Heather rubbed my arm and called for help. A nurse came in with what I later referred to as my "care package." Large doses of medicine pumped straight into the inside of my elbow to nourish my body, due to my loss of appetite, and help me "rest" (rather, knock me out cold). The world faded to black, and I was asleep.

I was back in my car, but the atmosphere was not chaos, it was peaceful. He was there, the man who had placed me back into my car with his gentle, flawless hands. He reached for me and drew me from my seat. We began to walk. I gazed at him and was transformed into someone new. Someone whole, holy. The morning air brushed against my cheeks as his lips gently glided over mine. The cool rain glistened off his face. Every cliché in the world came into my mind and I fought like hell to suppress them in fear I would sound uncouth and he would run from me. I smiled and stared at him, at morning, rebirth. I let myself feel everything I knew I shouldn't. The world was new. The grass in my nostrils, the wind in my hair, wings expanded. I took flight when he held me. Feet firmly planted, but

my mind somewhere else. I didn't love him, not yet, but I wanted to. I wanted to feel everything with him.

We walked along, shoulders grazing against each other, fingers entwined, spirits mingling. He was not my better half, never would be, never could be, because we were both complete, but still somehow one. How could that be? How could it be that everything we learned was so in kindergarten was not? One plus one is not two, but one. I felt the lightheadedness of caffeine and nicotine on an empty stomach. Dizzily walking as though I was taking my first steps. My shoes felt too big for my feet, my head too heavy for my body, my person too big for my skin. It was then he kissed me in full. Under the awning of my apartment, he took my face in his hands and entered my mind with his tongue. I could feel his lips on mine and his body all throughout me.

I took him in my house then, wanting more. I wanted him in my life, my heart. Our worlds collided. Thunder clamored, lightning struck, and rain shimmered on the windows. He leaned over me and whispered "are you all right?" Again, he said it. I felt fine. Tunnel vision, his eyes were now all I saw, then day began to break around them, and his face beamed. Suddenly I was back in my bed. Gown still intact, life still a mess, but he was still there. The dream had ended, yet his face still surrounded me. Then I realized he really was there. Standing above me, holding a bouquet of white tulips and a "get well soon" balloon.

I tried to force a smile, but grimaced instead. Heather walked up beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder. She told me he was the man who had called the ambulance. His name was Jonah Parker. I could feel a sort of polar pull towards him the first time I saw him, and felt it again as he stood above me in the hospital room. He asked my name. I started to say Sade Bradshaw, which was my married name, cleared my throat, and corrected myself "Sade Oliver." He smiled, and offered me his hand. I shook it, and almost couldn't let go. I introduced Heather, who thanked him for stopping that day. Most people would have just kept on driving. He shook his head "I just did what I felt was right" never taking his eyes off mine. I sat myself upright. His presence along with Heather's made me feel as if I could conquer anything. Jonah grabbed a chair for Heather, and then one for himself. I began to tell the story of that afternoon for the first time since it had happened starting with my near nervous breakdown at the register, and ending where he came into the story. Jonah placed a hand on my arm.

The doctor came into the room, and seeing me sitting up and talking, smiled. I smiled back without even thinking about it. He went to his stool and began his regular morning check up. Then he asked if I was ready to see my baby. My face lit up, the morning had instilled so much confidence in me that I felt more than ready to see my baby. Slowly the doctor and Heather helped me out of my bed, and into something that covered my ass. I put on slippers, and pulled my hair back into a ratty ponytail at the nape of my neck. We began down the hall, my entire entourage: Heather, the doctor, and Jonah all close behind. The nurse offered me a wheelchair, and the doctor began to insist, but I turned it away. I didn't want my

baby's first impression of me to be in a wheelchair, defeated. So they allowed me to walk.

We approached the glass wall that stood between parent and child, and the doctor pointed him out. "Baby boy Bradshaw!" the name plate read. He was so still. All the other infants around him were crying and fussing, but he just lay there in his tiny incubator looking around and smiling. He was so beautiful. I placed my hand on the glass and began to talk baby talk to him, as though he could hear me. The doctor informed me that I should probably pick a name. "Preston," I said, confidently. "Preston Davis Bradshaw!" I said smiling. Heather took my hand. I had named him after his father, and my best friend, Heather Davis. I hugged Heather for a long time. When we pulled apart, we both had tears in our eyes. I knew I had made a step in the right direction. I knew then that I would be all right. No matter what happened, I would survive it. I just had to concentrate on what was most important, and learn to pull all my courage from there.

Sweet Memories

by Erin McDonald

Driving through the backroads of Ohio, I see church bazaars, children on motorbikes, and orchards full of apples and pumpkins. Traveling down I-71, I think about the winding mountain roads through West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland that will take me home to Virginia. I see leaves of brown, gold, yellow, red, and orange covering the grass or hanging precariously from the trees along the road. My mind wanders to my home as I sit silently and remember autumns of my childhood.

When I was nine years old, my dad started making apple butter for our church's Fall Festival. The copper kettle and handmade wooden paddle he used had belonged to his father. Dad learned the process from him, and they passed their knowledge on to me. There were various stages and tools involved. The first step, preparing the apples for the kettle, was a tedious operation. Dad had an apple peeling machine which cored and peeled the apples. I loved using this but it had a tendency to squirt juice all over me. After peeling five apples, I was as sticky as an overcooked marshmallow. The people using generic hand peelers may have made more progress, but I was having the most fun. A little apple juice in my hair and on my hands added to the experience. The apples were cut into cube-sized pieces and thrown into large garbage bags. In four hours, all the apples were peeled, sliced and ready to be melted down the following day.

I would go with dad to the church yard to help him set up the fire and make sure he had enough sugar and apple cider. During the festival, I switched between being a face painter and a professional apple butter stirrer. When I was low on customers, I walked the fifty feet over to where the kettle sat. Dad dodged the billowing smoke as he stirred the mixture. While absorbing the smoke fumes, I stood mesmerized by the power of the paddle. How could a piece of wood that looked like Swiss cheese create such delicious apple butter? Dad noticed my curiosity and taught me the secret stirring technique: move the paddle twice across and three times around.

The apple butter was done after a good six to seven hours of simmering and stirring. Dad poured ladles full of warm apple butter into the plastic containers which were donated by another church member. As people walked by, they sampled the treat on cornbread we had made the previous night. The apple butter sold for \$2 a half-pint, \$3 a pint. Dad couldn't pour it fast enough. For the next three hours, the concoction flew off the table as the church's profits increased. The following day, the priest delivered what my dad called the *Apple butter Sermon*: talking of the splendors of fall and encouraging the congregation to purchase some of the leftovers. After the 10 o'clock service, almost all of the containers had been sold.

Two years after this tradition started, we were told we couldn't make the apple butter because no one could pick the apples or help prepare them for the kettle. I was upset by this announcement, but the youth group volunteered to pick the

apples so that the tradition would continue. We took a hayride down to the orchards and were told to pick apples until our arms fell off. Within two hours, we had accumulated about twenty bags of apples. I was glad that the group was able to help continue the tradition. It was the highlight of my fall to breathe the thick smoke mixed with aromas of apples and sugar.

As an unexpected surprise for me that year, my parents told me that Granddad and his wife Mary Jane were going to stop in Falls Church on their way up to Canfield, Ohio. I knew I had to stay home and learn the secrets of making apple butter from him. Granddad and I had a special bond and I cherished every moment I was able to spend with him. Of course, using the excuse that I had grandparents visiting from out of town wasn't going to get me out of school. Luckily for me I had sprained my ankle. My parents said it was okay if I stayed home from school to "rest." And what better place than outside making apple butter with my granddad, dad, and my golden retriever?

It was a perfect fall day: about 50 degrees, partly cloudy, slightly breezy. This time I was involved in every step of the process—from lighting the fire to covering the containers. I stirred the apples methodically like I was taught: twice across and three times around. I sat outside from eight in the morning until three that afternoon, choking on the smoke and salivating from the smell. I was extremely happy. Every time I said something, Granddad or Dad would laugh and tell me I was their "silly Erin Boo." Never have I had so much fun talking and laughing with them. There was nothing more exciting than sitting with the two men I adored the most in the world, continuing a tradition of making apple butter. Being eleven years old, I thought that times like this would last forever. I frequently thought about that wonderful day throughout the following winter and spring months.

When the phone rang at 8:00 on May 8, I could tell by dad's facial expressions and tone of voice that something was wrong. I went upstairs to my mom's room and found her listening on the extension. She looked at me and said, "Granddad died." I shook my head and went running into my room. I sat on my mattress next to my dog and started sobbing. I cried into my golden retriever's fur, my pillow, my sheets. I was devastated. How could this happen? Wasn't he just here a few months ago, sitting in the driveway, laughing at me while we made apple butter? I was lost. I felt like a traveler standing in the woods without a compass. I wanted to crawl into a hole and stay there forever. People saw me as a strong, brave little kid. I was invincible. I didn't want people to know how hurt and upset I was over his death.

Granddad's funeral was the hardest day of my life. I had never experienced such extreme sadness. During the service, I stared out the stained glass windows, determined not to cry. People would then see that I was no longer the kid who had it all under control. I relived the night he scared the life out of me when I was two. He intended to scare one of my older cousins by standing in a dark stairwell while wearing a Halloween mask and a raincoat. Unfortunately, I was the first child who started up the stairs. I heard him laughing at the silly questions I would ask while I

sat on the teeter-totter. I listened to him tell me hilarious stories about dad's childhood. I smelled the beer bread we made together baking in the oven. I watched his homemade waterwheel spinning in the backyard. I felt the wind blowing through my hair as he pushed me on the wooden swing tied to the huge oak tree by fraying ropes in his yard. I saw the tears in his eyes the day of Grandma's funeral. I felt his enveloping arms hug me tightly. And I pictured that wondrous day we spent making apple butter. The thirty minutes we spent in the service felt like thirty years.

The church festival rolled around again the following fall. I didn't want to have any part of it. I couldn't bring myself to stir the sweet mixture in the kettle with the paddle that Granddad owned. It was too sad. Dad understood, but he told me that Granddad would have wanted me to help out. I did my share, but the final product tasted bitter to me.

That was the last year we made apple butter. For reasons unknown to me, the church no longer held a fall festival. Therefore, we had no reason to make gallons of apple butter. The kettle still sits in the basement of our greenhouse. I wonder when it's going to be used again. I remember the smell of smoke mixed with wood chips and apple cider, the wind rustling the leaves under our feet, the taste of hot apple butter, and the laughter of the world's greatest men. As I arrive in Westerville, my mind returns to the demands of school. However, my heart stays in the bottom of that kettle, hoping that one day it will be filled with chunks of apples, pounds of sugar, gallons of apple cider, and tons of memories and love.

Third Place, Burkhart Religious Poetry Contest

Spirituality: The Great Sham-fest and Debacle Scheme

Guised within mysticism

 gravity
Can defy in the wink of an eye

Can create a boulder too big to lift.

Can't?

Can't you?

In your mind...can't you can all day long?

Spirituality can.

 pray.
Let us.

-Christopher S. Smith

The Cheerleader

Her long hair,
tied back in a tight bun,
so it doesn't fall
on her red and white uniform.

She was a cheerleader
in high school,
popular, rooting for the team
on the rowdy sideline.
I think it's weird.

Gimme a "W"
Gimme an "E"
Gimme an "I"
Gimme an "R"
Gimme a "D"

What's that spell?
Weird!

I think of her
waving pom-poms as
boys in sweaters strut
through her thoughts.

She's in a Poodle skirt hopping
in the school gym.
Afterwards, a waitress on skates
serves her a Cherry Coke
at a brightly lit high school hangout.

Mostly, I think how
she graduates and grows up,
because I need my mom back.

-Anthony Fulton

Borneo Rainforest

The sun gnaws at the bald spot in the jungle
like a trapped animal.
It beats the earth into hard clay
and sucks it dry.
The trees are felled, still screaming
from the flames that consumed their lives.
I bend down and touch a charred branch—
it turns my fingers black.
The forest hovers around its wound—
umbrelled mourners at a funeral.
No birds cry in this place,
or sing,
or laugh.
No leaves rustle in the wind,
or bend,
or fall.
No spiders spin webs.
No seeds grow.
No grass.
No ferns.
No flowers.

I turn my back on this place
and let the green jungle consume me again.
The ground here writhes with insects,
the air is alive, the trees chatter.
Nothing stands alone here,
every leaf, every vine touches another.
The forest embraces its creatures.
Then the rain comes.
A whisper at first,
holds its breath and tiptoes across my skin,
then explodes into the booming voices of the gods.
They sing together, drown the thunder,
and dance in the pink lightning.
I stick out my tongue to taste the drops, cold, sweet,
and take off my hat,
let my hair wash clean.
The soot flows in rivers from my fingertips
then runs clear again.
I spread my arms wide,

raise my face to the sky.
And laugh.

-Carrie Leonard



Grandpa

Second Place, Burkhart Religious Poetry Contest

I can sit in my car,
sense you.
Marble plate commemorates—
birth, death, service.

Sun catches,
glare causes me to squint.
The oak shades my face,
if I shift to the right.

I wonder,
Are leaves part of you?
Am I breathing the air
buried with you.

Roots wrap around
What is left.
A piece of you I don't have.

I can sit here,
Open window
Breathe in all you were,
smell, yellowed teeth,
fuzzy whiskers that
would rub against my cheek
every morning.

I can get it all back,
tree is you,
growing out of you.

-Amy Peirano

Caught in Wonder Woman's Magic Lasso

by Anthony Fulton

When I was eleven I really had no clue who JFK was, or who the hell Albert Einstein and John Wayne were. The answer to why I didn't know these great guys that shaped American history was simple. They didn't have action figures made of them. That's right, action figures (don't call them dolls) was how I knew my heroes. At age eleven I would of known who JFK was if he shot missiles and came in his trusty battle ready convertible.

I knew who Batman, Luke Skywalker, Cobra Commander, and even Hulk Hogan were. They were my heroes because I was in charge of what they did, who they fought, and whether they lived or died.

When I was eleven I was master of the action figure world. Sure, eleven is a little old to play with action figures but it was a secret never known to my fifth grade classmates. I was ashamed then, sure who wanted to be uncool? Now I don't care who knows, I'm twenty and I still take my Star Wars guys in the bath tub with me for an all out water war!

Anyway, creating huge battles and aerial dog fights was my secret pastime locked away in a drafty basement. Batman and Robin had "Kung Fu Chop action," which came in handy when the Joker came to town. They were the best. Spiderman had suction cups that if you licked them he could stick to the wall avoiding danger. He never hung long and the suction cups tasted like that liquid candy that came in those waxy tubes— it was weird. Proud Captain America had awkward factory formed feet that prevented him from ever standing up. He was always the first to die, lying on the green carpet missing all the action.

It's pretty needless to say that when Christmas of 1989 came along I was pretty excited. All night I wrestled with what new figures I would get from my parents. Hey, just because I still played with toys didn't mean I still believed in Santa. When six thirty rolled around my younger brother ran around our bedroom screeching like mad and eventually puking from all the excitement. By this time the whole family started to congregate in the living room where the tree was.

"Ooooh, look at the pretty wrapping paper!" My dad said as I flung the red and green paper all over the living room. I got the new Wolverine with action blades, and Doctor Doom, and had one present left to open, knowing it had to be the Penguin. I ripped the paper off the carded figure not seeing the fat umbrella welding Penguin, but a shapely anatomically correct figure of Wonder Woman.

My mouth dropped as I gazed up her bright red boots cutting off at her thighs. Her brightly painted red, blue, and yellow top showed off two plastic lumps which were her breasts. On the package a drawing of Wonder Woman stood with her legs spread wide open and her magic lasso swirling above her head ready to catch somebody in it. It was a pretty kinky picture now that I think of it.

I was terrified. A woman action figure! What was I gonna do with a woman action figure? I had no clue. I flung Wonder Woman under the big brown

chair by the Christmas tree. I couldn't let my older brother see her; he would make fun of me until I started bawling.

Wonder Woman wasn't cool, she was a girl. I panicked. I ran upstairs to get dressed. I sat on my bed and stared at all the figures on my shelf I already had. They all had huge exaggerated muscles no real human being could have. None of them had shapely hips, boobs, or a glittery piece of thread called a magic lasso.

On that shelf I had left spaces for new figures. They were big spaces ready to be filled by big brawny superheroes and villains. Where would I put Wonder Woman? How did she fight? It seemed kind of dumb to get upset about, but this was my world at the time. These were my friends, and what I did after school.

I went back downstairs and the living room was empty. By this time my older and younger brothers were in the next room already fighting over who got to play their new Nintendo games first. My mom and grandma were in the kitchen starting to prepare the Christmas feast. I tip-toed across the floor trying to avoid crushing any toys or video game cartridges scattered around. I returned back to the big brown chair only to find my dad passed out in it with the newspaper over his face. He was snoring like some beast.

I dropped swiftly like a ninja and started crawling on all fours. It was one of those Lazy Boy chairs that turned into a recliner. My dad had the footrest up and was slouched all the way back. My hand crept under the footrest and felt around for Wonder Woman. Just then my dad stopped snoring. I snapped my hand back and just froze there wondering what to do. Fortunately, it was a false alarm and his snoring continued. I snagged Wonder Woman and ran upstairs again.

Once I returned to my room I cracked open the package and held the tiny figure in my hand. She had long black plastic hair that went all the way down her back. Her head couldn't move from side to side because her hair was molded onto her neck and back. Her waist moved but I was afraid I'd snap her in half because she was so fragile. Her mouth and eyes were bright and happy. She was smiling, which in the action figure world was unheard of. But, she wasn't an action figure, she was a doll, and dolls were for girls. That's what I was taught, not by my parents, but by my rowdy brothers, and my friends.

I decided to give Wonder Woman a fighting chance anyway. At the time my room didn't have a locking door so I put a chair in front of it so no one would catch me playing with a doll. I wasn't worried about my mom or dad bursting in because they bought the doll for me. I wasn't worried about my little brother, Mike, coming in either. It was his room too but he only slept there or occasionally would pop in to pick his nose or something. I was worried about my older brother, Joe coming in. He was fourteen and would never stop picking on me. Even worse than him was my Uncle Art. He was an old farmer, a real macho guy that would object to a boy with a doll.

With the chair in place the stage was set. The Joker broke out of jail with the help of Doctor Doom, The Riddler, and one of the Ghostbuster's Ghosts. The

four villains flew away in Doctor Doom's getaway jet. Flying right on their tail was Superman along side Batman and Robin in the Bat Wing. The Bat Wing shot two missiles and Doctor Doom's Jet was out of control. Superman leapt to the rescue. He grabbed the jet and guided it safely to the ground. Once on the ground Superman lifted the cockpit to apprehend the villains. That's when the bad guys, amazingly enough survived, shot Superman with a Kryptonite ray which Doctor Doom had. Superman fell to the ground helpless and yelling for Batman's help.

The four villains rushed across the open field, okay I mean my bed. They sprinted away only to have Captain America jump out from behind a giant rock, (my pillow). The Joker didn't even hesitate; he quickly shot deadly hot acid from the squirting flower on his lapel. Captain raised his shield, but it was no use. The acid ate through his shield and then ate through his skin. Poor Captain America crumpled to the ground while the acid ate down to his bones. He lay in that puddle of tap water on my bed for the rest of the battle.

The villains made it to their secret lair under my desk. They had a teleporter device that magically whisked them away to another planet far from the superheroes who wanted them. Joker, Riddler, and Doctor Doom climbed into the teleporter, which was an upside down plastic cup. The ghost stayed behind because his big green tail prevented him from fitting under the cup.

However, the villains didn't know that Batman and Robin infiltrated their lair and secretly set the teleporter to zap the villains directly into the Hall of Justice playset where Wonder Woman waited to capture them. The villains arrived and Wonder Woman's lasso fell out of her hand when the button on her back was pushed. It was supposed to move her arm up and down to show "Real Whipping Action!" The piece of thread slipped to the floor, and then Wonder Woman herself fell over. She just lay there. She wasn't dead, she was still smiling. Her body was perfectly straight. She couldn't even crumple up and look mangled like Captain America. Wonder Woman couldn't even die right. I didn't know what to do. She messed everything up.

That night after Christmas dinner I paced the kitchen with Wonder Woman in my back pocket. I nervously wrapped the gold lasso around my finger as I thought. Finally, as my parents were on the porch waving goodbye to my uncles and aunts and various other relatives I decided what to do. I wrapped Wonder Woman up in a napkin and shoved her in the garbage can underneath all the wrapping paper and other garbage. With a pair of scissors I cut the magic lasso up in tiny pieces and threw it away too.

I find it rather weird that when I was eleven the biggest problem I had concerned an action figure. If only things were that simple now. These days I have to worry about taxes, a career, relationships, and money. I have yet to solve those problems. Fortunately, I solved the action figure problem two years ago when I proudly purchased a Princess Leia action figure in a gold bikini.

today i got tested

my fear has found room to run around in:
does benign contact sometimes forget to be benign?

i consider this now
that my blood has slid into a couple tubes
labeled only with a number and a code
 free
 confidential
 anonymous
tubes of red warm smooth information
which, depending, could congeal into a knife
and puncture my white blood cells
 my body's little speedy nurses
this reminds me of the clinic i'm in
 the white clean kind relaxed center
 for children and expectant mothers
 with a couple rooms (thank god with windows)
 each with a bed full of pamphlets and condoms
 where a nice woman asks me if
 i've given it to a girl
 gotten it from a guy
 and have i worn a condom
 have i done drugs
 and which ones and how
 and with how many people have i done any of this
 and there are many more questions
 many i forget
 and am thankful that by answering 'no'
 or 'none'
 i could allow myself to do so

and i wonder what she thinks of my sexuality
and how long it took her to figure it out
or even if she ever did, but finally reconciling that

my identity

right now

doesn't matter

only that these questions brought me fear that spread
gradually and quickly
 who would i tell first
 when would i cry
 when would i stop
 who would cry with me
 who would cry as they were running away
 when would i suffer
 when would i die
 and would i have to

then i realize that i'm enjoying this
the drama has fed on itself
i play my video-documentary in my mind
and before i realize it
the credits are rolling over scenes from my funeral

i disgust my own self

and realize how little i must know of pain
or how eager i've been to forget it
and how scared i am
just how scared i am
and that my fear has found a living room for the next week
 of my life
until the test results
clean it out
and after that
it will just keep running from room to room

until my life runs it out

-Jeremy Fulwiler

For Your Heart, for You, for Love

I see them as they slide slowly down the smoothness of your face,
and I can taste them—
the salt running across my tongue,
the liquid instantly blending with my saliva,
becoming my own.

If I close my eyes
and push away the pursuit of life,
I can feel you,
not the tender flesh of your inner arm,
or the texture of your mocha tinted hair,
but your most secret inside—
the part of you that you keep locked away
in a sort of sponge-like "soul"
absorbing your failures...
your crumbled dreams...
your darkest pain.

and if for but a moment, I hold my breath
and feel the panic of my chest,
I will make your anguish my own—
embracing it,
clinging to it,
becoming it...

And I will wrap my arms tighter, and tighter, and tighter
until its last breath
becomes my first.

And then I will have absolved you of your pain,
and it will not be my own so much as
it will be my identity,
for I so loved you as to give myself
and ask nothing in return...

-Mary Logan

Alive and Kickin'

by Mark Snyder

It's taken almost three years of college, but I'm finally "getting" Ani DiFranco. Like beer-bongs and pot smoking, liking certain artists who encourage rebellion and hell raising could be too a 'rite-of-passage' phase one goes through during college. However, transcending the stereotype of the wild and angry singer and learning to appreciate the artistry and the music from a performer can elevate a timely fad into a true example of fandom.

I've reached that point with Ani. I'm particularly proud of this achievement. The self-ascribed "folk singer," punk poetess, and icon for independent-thinkers-and-doers everywhere stalks my dreams, salt-and-peppers my conversations, and stimulates my eardrums with her songs of love and betrayal, confusion and politics, social problems and good, old-fashioned sex-capades. Ani takes us on her musical adventures with only a guitar in hand—adventures that stretch my ideas on identity, culture, and (oh, yeah, that word again) sex.

Angela first revealed the World According to Ani to me. For all outward appearances, Angela was our resident freak: a girl who believes that frozen yogurt could and should constitute an entire meal. Angela had so many piercings that she could never get past the metal detectors at the airport. Instead, she would have to rely on her dreams—and the messengers who brought them to her. One day, she proclaimed Ani DiFranco to be one such gifted individual: "She's the only singer that sticks her mouth in my ear and speaks directly to me. I mean that."

Angela means a lot of things she says.

I borrowed an album from Angela that very day—the caustic and biting 1994 release *Puddle Dive*—and dubbed her entire Ani catalog two days later. It became quite an ambitious undertaking: to master the entire concept of "Ani Ideology" in under two weeks. I was ravenous for her music and greedy in my consumption of everything and anything I discovered. Soon, I was listening to the albums almost eighteen hours a day, memorizing such lyric lines as "Every tool is a weapon if you use it right" and "Life is a b-movie/It's stupid and it's strange/It's a directionless story/ And the dialogue is lame" so I could transcribe them on to Post-It notes for my friends. Ani references began creeping into my classroom references, which startled those who knew me and shocked those that didn't. This was Mark, after all—the cultural snob that only listened to Tony-winning composers and dearly departed Baroque-style icons.

Almost three years later, and I eagerly await Ani's newest studio creation. Ani is a confessed tour-aholic who spends up to 300 days a year on the road, playing shows to support her latest release. She has a reputation within the music industry as being fiercely independent. She started her own record label in 1990 in order to release her debut album, which she sold out of the back of her car after shows. Eight years and nine albums later, her tours sell out within minutes. It was Edinburgh, Scotland, where I found several Ani releases in a record store specializing in Celtic

music. Our girl had gone international!

Experiencing "Ani Live" is required admission into her cult of followers. And not just once—you've got to start knowing the sound man by name in order to *truly* qualify (his name is Andrew Gilchrist, by the way). Even after seeing her three times myself, I felt on the periphery. So I turned to *Living In Clip* for solace. Recorded live between the autumns of 1995 and 1996 and released in 1997, the double-disc album documents Ani's artistry, her way with words, her vocal abilities, her incredible guitar work—as well as the gutter goofiness she indulges during her shows.

Part head-banging rock concert, part spiritual revival, part hippy-love-fest, Ani's shows make the meek outspoken and the nay-sayers mute. Ani in person is a fascinating vision: standing just above five feet tall (aided no doubt by the three inch heels on her KISS boots), with dyed hair and a silly grin that seems painted on her face, she combs through the "singer-songwriter and her guitar" convention with her brand of spiky humor and silly antics.

As a fan, I rejoiced over *Living In Clip*. It captures the very essence of Ani (sounds like a perfume) as well as capturing all of our biggest hits and "musical statements:" "Untouchable Face," with its "Fuck you" chorus that has made it a showstopper; "In or Out," her tribute to the joys of bisexuality; and "32 Flavors," an anthem to the multi-dimensional individuals out there.

Along with drummer and comic foil Andy Stochansky and bassist Sara Lee, Ani transforms many of her songs into animals quite different from their studio incarnations. The mere presence of an audience seems to stimulate the folk singer into attacking the conventions she herself set up for her songs: melodies bend, bridges slow to a crawl, and lyrics run the gamut from explosive to confessional. This attention to detail elevates early songs like "Every State Line" and "The Slant" into the kind of folk areas that no one, including Ani herself, could have predicted. The album is a terrific way to lure the uninitiated without compromising the integrity of her music.

Ani is a very ambitious and experimental musician, but some moments of *Living In Clip* left me trying to find justification for them, especially the three collaborations with Doc Severinsen and the Buffalo Philharmonic. These renditions reek of pompousness and musical banality—why Ani? Why?

Still, it is impossible to deny the impact Ani continues to have, even as her music speaks to more than her core audience—the lesbians and young women who were the first to buy her records and circulate her name. Ani is speaking to my teenage younger brother and his friends, my English professors, the guy on the subway that overhears my walkman and takes a listen. The live album shows how Ani remained true to her own way of doing things throughout her career, and examines how that dedication has blossomed into a universality in her music.

A few weeks ago, at my latest (and greatest) Ani show, I ran into the infamous Angela. She was about three rows behind me, wearing lots of jewelry and spurs on her boots. Her mascara was painted onto her tear-streaked face. She smiled when she saw me, for she had witnessed my conversion first-hand and finally realized

everything she had done for me. She told me that Ani was still her favorite person to listen to, because "Nobody gives good advice like Ani! Did you see her during that last song? She was singing right at me. Right at me! She fuckin' rocks!"

How true, Angela. How true.



Close Up

We walked down the steps
arms and fingers entwined.
My lips brushed against your neck as
you kissed my forehead.

I'd like to think you cared.
It wasn't a drunken act
of adolescence.

The next morning,
you awake me with
a brush of your
sweet lips between mine.

I like the way it felt
to be wrapped in you,
warm breath tickling
my ear.
The caress of my neck,
with your tongue.

Now I like to watch you,
and realize how
vulnerable I made you.

-Amy Peirano

Religious Candy Sermons

1 Peter 2:2

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:"

My mom always gave me that religious candy.
 I can still remember my puckered Lemonhead cheeks after
 tithes and right before the ministry.
 Dad would preach with a rock-candy hard tone, speaking
 sweet candy necklace words
 as the audience would
 soak up his message and
 chew on the word of God.
 I would chew on Skittles, paying more attention to the
 hand that was feeding me that sweet attention getting candy,
 rather than the mouth that was speaking about hellfire and brimstone.
 During the message, Elder Dad would give me a stare
 to make sure I wasn't eating candy,
 "No candy in church," he'd say.
 And if I got caught, I'd get spanked and mom
 would get yelled at!

But still she fed me religious candy.

Twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday
 we would walk the road of religion
 with candy whistles in our mouths
 while dad prayed for our souls.
 As followers soaked up sermons that promised life everlasting,
 I soaked up the crunchy goodness of Smarties,
 and peanut filled M&M's.
 Maybe my mom knew there was more to saving this child's soul,
 than a tough dad's religion.
 Because the lessons I learned from those religious candy sermons
 Have stuck to me like icing on a cake, during my
 Candyland journey through life.

-Kyle Mossman

Moonlight Sonata (1st movement)

—for Greg

Third Place, Poetry Contest

Listen to the ripples
 slide gently across the
 still water,
 gradually strengthening
 ...ebbing
 falling...
 ...ebbing
 smoothly splitting the silence.
 Listen to the light
 reflect the waves,
 lap the air,
 quietly creating moon music.
 See the wind
 bathe the water in coolness,
 calmly breaking the wall
 ...ebbing
 falling...
 ...ebbing
 Listen to the smell of
 the moon:
 crisp, fresh, sweet.
 unconsciously entering your head,
 filling your brain,
 consuming your body
 making you
 part
 moon,
 part earth,
 part whole.
 ...ebbing
 falling...
 ...ebbing
 softly resolving into nothing.

-Erin McDonald

The Meat Grinder

by Carrie Leonard

I slid out of the raft like the Navy Seals do in movies, back first. Instantly the rapids consumed me and swept me away. My hands went numb in the jaws of the forty degree water and my face contorted, wanting to scream, but no sound escaped – it was all I could do to get the air into my lungs without allowing icy liquid to follow.

Breathe between the waves, my mind shouted.

I'm trying, my body screamed back, just as everything went white.

When I resurfaced, I could see the blue tubes of the raft again.

"Swim back," yelled a voice, and a paddle was extended to me.

I grabbed it and pulled myself to the raft's side. Hands from all directions grabbed at my yellow and blue life-jacket and hauled me in. I flopped face down on the rubber floor, then scrambled to my post as two other rafters were pulled in.

"So how was Swimmer's Rapids?" asked our raft guide.

"Wow! That was great," I gasped as I shook my hands to get some feeling back in the fingers.

"I can't believe you guys did that on purpose," Jen said. "Wasn't it cold?"

"No," I said between chattering teeth, "I'm warm now." The sun had finally come out and was soaking into my rented wetsuit.

I was surprised Jen didn't jump in with the rest of us. She always said she'd do anything. Just yesterday she missed a catch at Frisbee and it landed smack in the middle of a poison ivy jungle. She ran after it in bare feet like she ruled the world and could command those leaves not to secrete their evil juices on her. But this time she refused the glory of conquering the rapids because she was cold.

We almost didn't come on this trip because of the weather, but mostly because of money, and people. The last three weeks of school had been hell – too many research papers to write, too many people to face. I was at that point of swearing I'd become a hermit up in the Alps somewhere. Then, when I heard almost everyone had backed out of the trip, I almost snapped, for good. But, somehow, we're all here. I'm still not sure why, probably for fear of my mental sanity and my wrath.

"... and, when the men came back with their truck, her body had disappeared," our raft guide said. "And even to this day, no local will dare walk on those tracks up in that holler."

She had a story for every ruin, every ghost town, every tree out of place along the river. These mountains that exhale green breath and scream in countless wild tongues were once stripped bare of all life by the loggers and miners who inhabited great mansions on the river's banks. But nature triumphed in this place, so that nothing of the past remained, save an occasional frame of brick or steel beam intertwined with poison ivy and birds' nests. I gawked at the trickling waterfalls that combined sweet springs with the river and let the stories absorb me. Between the

tales of deceit, greed, and horror, we practiced our paddling strokes in preparation for the first big rapid. There were five commands our guide could yell at us: back right, back left, easy forward, pick it up (double our pace), and dig.

"If you hear me say 'dig!' then that means paddle like hell, we're in danger. But don't worry, you'll probably never hear it come out of my mouth again. I've only had to use it two or three times in my entire eight years as a guide."

I felt so relieved to have this guide on our raft. Maneuvering the rapids was easy with her to tell us what to do. I remembered the last rafting trip I went on with three of my high school friends. It was the day after graduation and promised to be the worst experience of my life thus far. The first bad sign – a middle-aged woman and her mother chose our raft, out of twenty others, to join. Not only were these women two extra bodies who weighed down our raft every time a rock came our way, but they were extra bodies who could not paddle and could not swim. And, to make matters worse, we had no guide in the raft – they followed close by in kayaks and yelled commands from shore. So, we had to elect a leader to call out commands and no one was listening to anyone, so we got hung-up on every single rock in the entire river. So, we finished every rapid last and constantly held up the rest of the group. It was horribly embarrassing. We argued the entire two-hour drive home.

But this time would be different, I told myself. This was the Outdoor Adventure Club in my raft, and we were its founders – the core of the club. These were some of the first people I met in a college where I knew no one the day I moved in. Now we were putting our lives in each other's hands and I was confident and fearless. These friends enjoyed being outdoors, and loved the excitement of doing something daring, and didn't mind the cold water, and didn't complain about bugs, and *listened* to the raft guide. The seven of us worked together. We snapped-to at every command. We were strong and fast with our paddles. And, according to our guide, we were the best group she'd had all year.

"OK, are we ready for our first class five rapid?" shouted our guide and we all screamed "yeah" in return.

"The Meat Grinder is our first class five. It's a five because of its difficulty and because people have died." she said lightly.

"Do people have to die to make it a class five?" asked Jen.

"Pretty much, but the rocks make it a five too."

"So, how high do rapids go?" asked someone behind me.

"Class six is the highest level you can raft..."

"What's a class seven?"

"Niagra Falls," said our guide with a smile. "OK, we're coming up on Meat Grinder. It's an undercut rock that creates a hole of churning water at its base. And under that water are a bunch of pointed rocks that look like this," she meshed her fingers together, "that's how it got its name."

We all chuckled, gripped our paddles tight, and wedged our feet into the sides of the raft. We could see the rock in the distance.

"If you fall out," said our guide with a voice raised over the approaching

thundering water, "swim as hard as you can to the left shore. *Do not* just float down the rapids, The Meat Grinder will suck you under and churn you around in its rock teeth before spitting you back out, forty minutes later."

Don't fall out. Don't fall out. Don't fall out, I told myself.

"OK, let's take it easy forward now," said our guide as the first of the white water lapped at the raft. "Pick it up now."

The water came at us in waves like the ocean, huge waves. They slammed us with water from all sides and over our heads. Suddenly my side of the raft was thrown into the air and then it smacked back down in a riveting jolt. Screams of excitement burst from our lips. Then, as if from a great distance, I heard,

"Where is she? Find her!"

"Find who?" I said as I turned around. I didn't see anyone missing. One, two, three, four... then, I realized I was staring at an empty seat in the raft. Who had been there? My mind went blank, I couldn't think.

"It's Jen, where is she?" shouted our guide with an urgency that made my heart jump.

"I don't see her," I yelled back and everyone stopped paddling to look over the sides. I stood up, but could see nothing but raging water. Everything was moving in slow motion. My mind stopped working, my hands stopped working. *Oh God! Where's Jen?* Earlier, we had jokingly voted Jen the most likely to fall out first. But, I never imagined this. I looked towards the left shore, empty.

"People..." our guide's voice broke into my head, "that is Meat Grinder!"

I spun around and slammed my back into my seat. There was the infamous rock, directly in front of us. I could see every crack, every bird dropping on its gray surface. Then, my lungs froze as my eyes fell on the churning hole at its base. The sound was deafening. The water screamed at me, its tongues lashed out in my direction – I was its closest target.

"Back left!" came the command that slammed me back to my senses.

"Back left!" it came again, and my arms started paddling without my brain's consent. The raft had started to turn away from the rock, but not enough.

"All forward!" I heard our guide shot, then, "Oh shit! Dig!"

My arms stabbed at the waves with my paddle and my whole body made it move. Every muscle burned with the fires of Hell that shot from the gaping hole of Meat Grinder.

"Back left!" came the command.

"Back left!"

"Back left!"

"Back left!" we all echoed.

"Shit! All forward!"

"Forward!"

"Forward!"

"Dig!"

"Oh God!"

"Dig!"

Meat Grinder was almost on top of us, or vice versa. If it was waiting for the perfect time to strike, now was the time, the whites of my eyes were visible.

"Paddle!" cried out guide in a voice that almost didn't escape her lunges. But it did, and it cut into me like a sword. Our guide was terrified and that meant trouble. I hadn't really comprehended the danger until now. We were within feet of certain doom and we were leaving Jen behind. No time to save her, sacrifice the few to save the many. If we hit the rock, the raft would flip and spill us all into the Meat Grinder's mouth.

"Dig!"

"Forward!"

"Paddle!"

"Go! Go!" I screamed, more to my arms than to the others. My arms wanted to quit, to accept the icy coffin that awaited. But, I kept paddling with more strength than I possessed. We all did. My side of the raft teetered on the edge of oblivion.

"Back left!"

"Back left!"

"Back left!"

"All forward!"

And with that final command, my paddle scraped the lips of the demon rapid. I saw the fringe of white water slide under the raft, then we turned. . . The raft slid over a ledge of water that created a five foot drop-off not one foot from the churning hole. Everything stopped.

"Is my nose bleeding?" someone asked behind me.

"No, it's OK," I answered, then realized it was Jen who was rubbing her nose. "Are you OK?" I gasped.

"Yeah, but is my nose bleeding?"

I laughed. We were all laughing as our bodies shook uncontrollably. None dared release a grip on a paddle even though we were floating easily down river. Everyone began talking at once.

"Did you see that?"

"I don't believe we made it."

"I can't breathe anymore."

"Can I get out and walk?"

"I saw you fall out," said Megan, who had been sitting behind Jen. "I reached for you, I saw you look at me under the water, but I missed you and you were gone."

What had happened, I learned, was Jen hadn't resurfaced because she was swept under the raft. That's why no one could find her. Eventually, she came up right next to our guide. She hung on the side for awhile and then was hauled over the edge. She had been safe long before I thought we were leaving her behind to

save ourselves, but no one else knew it until now.

"I'm sorry I cussed back there," was all our guide could say. We all looked to her for comfort, some reassurance that the next set of rapids would be less eventful. We got none.

Don't fall out. Don't fall out. Don't fall out.



Navy Man

Handsome man, Navy man.
White sailor hat, blue dungarees.
Dress uniform ironed and starched.
Do you realize your appeal, Navy man?

Strong man, Navy man.
Experienced hands, knowledgeable eyes.
Steadfast chest his woman's support.
May I lean on you, Navy man?

Wise man, Navy man.
Eyes that have seen, ears that have heard.
His mind absorbing all around him.
Can you tell me what you know, Navy man?

Traveling man, Navy man.
Port to port, wandering with the waves.
No roots holding this man down.
When are you coming home, Navy man?

Proud man, Navy man.
Strong loyalty, love of country.
Living and breathing what he believes in.
Will you defend your country, Navy man?

-Dawn Wood

Rantings

Keep mind on the goal.

Mind your manners
mannerisms are hard to follow.
Never underestimate the power
Of doubt.

Don't doubt where you are,
or where you could go.

Compasses fail.
Maps go out of date.
The sun may not rise,
leaving nothing to follow
but instinct.

Instinct fails you
mistreat it.

Never underestimate the power
of self.
Depend on no one.
Everyone goes away,
it's all in timing.

Never keep time when you are having fun.
Don't keep records.

Pictures yellow

Pages tear

Love fails

Self fails

Rent raises,

and the one you love
raises the gun

-Beth Gartland

Such A Large God To Fit In Such A Small Head

First Place, Burkhardt Religious Poetry Contest

My dad got his head examined for \$50.
 He's an ex-preacher you see.
Maybe they give ex-preachers and their kids discounts,
 Cause if they don't they should.
My head hurts quite often.
 My dad's head always seemed so small to fit
such a large God.
 And I feel mine is even smaller.
Which makes it even harder for me to fit
 God and dad in my head.
If I had a choice, I'm not sure which one I'd choose.
 I've tried to truly see both, but like atoms,
they remain invisible to me.
 So I'm not sure which option is better.
Dad said that with insurance covering most charges,
 the doctor scanned his head for only \$50.
I hope God will scan for about that price,

I pray all the time for his help—

-Micah Fitzgerald

Never Forget

First Place, Personal Essay Contest

By April LeCroy

When I was fourteen years old, I was fat. My favorite clothes were too tight and all the other ones were lewdly uncomfortable. I decided to starve it all off of me. Needless to say, with exhausting two to four hour workouts and only enough for about one adult size meal every day, I got sick. Really sick. There I was, sleeping eighteen hours a day and having constant nightmares. Some days, I was too weak to eat. I got weaker and weaker until I was sleeping almost twenty-two hours a day. To top it all off, I started hallucinating. I heard unidentifiable voices nobody else could and thought my bed moved underneath me. All the adults around me were too stupid to realize I had an eating problem, more like an eating disorder. They said I was nuts and they stuck me in the mental ward.

People who know me will probably laugh. I bet they'll say they can picture me in the mental ward with other eccentrics. But it's no laughing matter. It was scary. They psychiatrists who were in charge of me, henceforth denoted as witch doctors, put me on all kinds of prescription dope. Lithium, Buspar, Tegretal, Wellbutrin, and Vistral were just a few of the psychiatric medications. I was in a constant fog. I couldn't think straight. I kept a headache and was always afraid of the witch doctors. My mom loved me sedated. "You're so much more manageable. I think you're really getting better," she said to me one time. Another time, she said to me, "You're so much more respectful now. You mind me so well. You're mama's little girl again." The witch doctors suggested shock treatment since I was not responding well enough to the dope. I remembered Jack Nicholson from "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." I didn't want to be like that. I told them absolutely not. I remembered stories in the news about prisoners whose brains were fried and left to rot in their heads like eggs while they drooled and wet themselves all day. The witch doctors told me they wouldn't do anything against my will. Do you think I believed them the day they dragged the girl off and strapped her to her bed just because she was in a room she wasn't supposed to be in? They had told her to leave the game room because there were already the maximum amount of kids in there. They told her to wait her turn. She told them absolutely not. So one of the nurses gently touched her arm and said reassuringly, "Come on, you'll get a turn." She yanked her arm away like he'd bruised her or something. He got hold of her and tried to drag her from the room. That's when she got scared. She fought him, determined to stay. Determined to resist his authority over her. Another nurse ran in and grabbed her other arm. There she was, yanking as hard as she could against them both. Her tiny body useless against their power. Other nurses in urgent tones told the rest of us to go to our rooms. I remember one nurse pushing me into my room and shutting the door. I half expected her to lock it, but she didn't. I tried to see out my tiny window, but it was covered with a towel. I felt blinded, trapped, as the girl lay strapped to her bed shouting at the top of her lungs, "You think you can shut me

up? I'll scream all I want to! I don't have to shut up until I want. You got me strapped down, but I'm still talking!" There I stood; looking out my little towel covered window at nothing, wondering if they were going to tie me up to shoot lightning in my head. But life goes on.

After a while, my mom got worried. "It's not normal for somebody to sleep so much," she realized aloud. "You're a kid. You should be outside playing with your friends or drawing pictures or something." I just looked at her through my swollen up dope eyes. I wanted to play and sing and dance. I just didn't have the strength. Some of the kids in the mental ward really were crazy. I had seen people with a slit on either wrist before, but these kids had seven and ten and twelve slashes on either wrist. They beat themselves with their fists. They tore their mattresses off their hospital cots. They drank hairspray and got high off the fumes of nail polish. They chased people around with knives. They threatened to beat their parents. They were uncontrollable. They were brave. They were strong. They had waged a war against the whole world simply because their parents beat them and raped them and tried to kill them and they wouldn't be taken down by anything but death. They would go down fighting and they would take somebody with them when they fell. But their fury, their very defiance intrigued me and I made some of the strongest bonds with them that I have ever made with anybody in my life.

We all had to watch out for each other. We comforted each other rather than beg the witch doctors for pity and mercy. We were all each other had. This was a time when we hated our parents, but at the same time needed them desperately. They were our only ticket out of the hell we were burning in. We worshipped our parents and cursed them at the same time simply because they were to blame for us being in this hell in the first place. One boy was as sane as anybody and his dad had damned him to hell just to get rid of him. Another boy was there because he was depressed and just wanted to die. His despair was understandable. No matter what he did, being a sophomore in high school who was already learning calculus, his parents still demanded more. They always let him know his best was not good enough and he was born to quest for nothing but pleasing them. His life was not his own. In his struggle to claim it, he planned to take it, and liberate himself from their tyranny. They kept him doped just like I was. He ate, slept, and planned how to win his war.

So, what had my mom done to me? At least she wanted me, one of my aunts told me. She always fed me and clothed me well and kept a nice clean home for me, another of my family members pointed out. Mom said she never broke my bones or beat me bloody or let some man rape me, like her mother had done her. My family tells me I was one lucky kid and all mom's neighbors said what a good mother she was. So what was I whining about? Sure, I had it made when mom stayed naked almost constantly around me and was always wanting some sort of "massage." It was great when she was strangling me or bruising me. It was terrific when she banged my head against brick. It was just dandy when she threatened to kill me, and the time she suction-cupped her pistol to my head was a very enriching experience. I was so lucky to have a mother who screamed at me for having

accidents like spilling cake batter while I was stirring it before I was even in first grade. I loved it when she told me how fat and ugly and stupid and worthless and untalented I was. I think the times when she knocked me on the floor and sat on me to beat me were even better. My fondest memories were the times when she shoved me out the door and locked it, telling me I was a bitch and should find someplace else to live. I had a wonderful childhood.

The witch doctors that said I was nuts were wrong. I was suffering a mild malnutrition, which can cause hallucinations and energy loss. What didn't make sense was the fact that after I finally started eating again, I was still tired...although all the dope was out of my system. I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. A lot of people who have it are first diagnosed as being nuts because there are no symptoms that can be traced under a microscope. They are all outward symptoms. They include fatigue, chills, short-term memory loss, low immunities, which cause more colds, flues and infections. Chronic Fatigue is caused by the Epstein-Barr virus, which also causes AIDS. Chronic Fatigue sufferers sometimes have to walk with a cane to keep from involuntarily plunging to the floor. We are supposed to eat four or five small meals instead of the traditional three. We have to take it easy on exercise or else wear all the strength we have out on toning up our muscles. Then, there's nothing left to do but sleep and sleep and sleep.

I can tell you, it isn't easy to convince people you aren't crazy. A stay in the mental ward will creep into your files years after you leave, like say your college files. I wonder if the people who take a resume to hire me after I graduate will refuse to employ me if they find out where I've been. The really terrifying fact is, after awhile, you start believing you're crazy too. You develop this phobia of associating with people. Like you think they will run screaming from you and tell the whole world to hate you. When you're scared somebody will strap you to your hospital cot and fry your brains, you start to see the world differently. You lose track of who your friends and enemies are because you realize you were really mistaken about who was which. When you find out those witch doctors who tried so hard to lie and convince you they are your friends are just out to earn your insurance money, you know they're enemies. When you see your mother is more concerned about herself than you, you know she's an enemy. When you realize these poor kids who are violent and profane and lewd and hateful and terrifying are going through the same things you are, you know who your friends are.

Next time you see a tantruming child, who hits his teachers and tells them he hates them, watch his mom make excuses for her poor discipline style by telling the teacher, "We're trying to get his Ritalin ironed out." Next time you see an article about a dad who got his head blown off by his "delinquent teenager," look a little closer and view it from the kid's side. You might find out the kid was constantly showing up at school with new bruises and nobody cared enough to do something about it. This won't make the kids any easier to deal with, but you'll know where they come from.

I can't really point out exactly whose fault it is I wound up in the mental

ward. All I can say is I lived through it and it made me stronger. If you live through something and don't lose your sanity or ability to cope with life, you're won a medal. It is inside your heart. Display it proudly year round. Every morning, thank God you are alive. Speaking of God, no matter what happens to you, always forgive. But don't ever let anybody tell you to forget what happened. Never forget.



Second Place, Poetry Contest

You step into the world as if you're leaving
A brothel or garden—
My hero
 An angel indeed with a head full of acid
You don't know how tragically real you are
 Are you having the
 time of your life yet?

- Jacob Calaway

Separated by Glass
(Are you just like me...?)

She looks into my eyes through the mirror.
She cries out for me,
the anguish showing in her cheeks and brow.
She holds out her arms,
inviting me to join her through the glass to the future.
She cries and pleads,
her eyes wide, her arms outstretched.
She promises that we'll go away from here,
that we'll forget these days
and these pains.

I can't believe my eyes,
so I close them
and reach out to her.
I can almost touch her hands,
they are so close.
I reach for them,
but something is in the way:
I feel the coolness of the glass.
It freezes my lonely hands
and forbids me to leave this place.

I open my eyes.
The eyes of a tragic angel stare back at me.
She looks sad
and alone.
I have let her down.

I look away in shame,
but her penetrating stare
draws me back,
and I am forced to look at her
although I can hardly bare the guilt.

I smile at her.
She half-heartedly smiles back.
I open my mouth to speak.
I tell her that it will be all right,
that we will be okay by ourselves.
I tell her that it won't be long

before our dreams meet and become
reality.

I remind her that this will soon be over,
that she is hard
that she is strong.

I hold out my arms
as a promise of someday.
She smiles at me and holds out hers.
We put our hands up to the glass.
Hers are so beautiful,
I long to feel them against mine.

She crawls up onto her bathroom counter
as I do.
We try to get closer,
our bodies pressed up against the
cold-hearted glass.

She looks up at me
and smiles.
I smile back.
It's all understood.

We close our eyes,
Falling asleep to the sound
of two hearts beating
in one aching body.

-Ellen Beversluis

Inside Out

by Courtney Vanderpool

Denny chewed absently on the eraser of his number two pencil, staring at the blank piece of notebook paper that seemed to glow in the light of his desk lamp. He began to stencil his thought rapidly, absently encouraged by the volumes of spy books under his bed. His twelve-year-old mind, fresh with ideas and miles away from the dirty dinner dishes littering the kitchen table downstairs, raced with pencil. Only the sound of the dull lead against the paper and Denny's slight wheezing from leftover childhood allergies filled the quiet room.

Charlie was the kind of guy who got things done, Denny wrote. *He was a one of a kind classic much like the BMW he drove to his nine to five job. Charlie was debonair in appearance from his top of the line suits to his neatly polished shoes and metaphoric speech.* Denny stopped and rubbed his eyes trying to remember the name of suits. Something with an "Ar" at the beginning. Shrugging he rubbed his pink eraser over the words and rewrote, *from his armento suits*. He studied the word, knowing it didn't look quite right. He'd have to remember to ask his mom. She might remember. After all, it was the kind his Dad had worn.

Charlie had a girlfriend, too. Her name was Roxy, Denny wrote. *Roxy and Charlie met late one night in a club.* That was where everyone met in Denny's spy books. *Charlie was the kind of guy who could turn women's heads. But it was Roxy who had turned his head. Her hair was long and blonde, and,* Denny stopped to study the list of spelling words he had to use in his story. *Slender*, he finally decided, would be a good one. It was a good, girl word. *Her blonde hair fell in long, soft tendrils down her slender back. Even though Roxy smoked cigarettes, she always smelled like cinnamon.* Denny stopped writing to read over what he had written, smiling when he read the word tendrils. He'd found that one on his own without the spelling list. Denny closed his eyes. He wondered what the other kids in his class wrote about when they had to use spelling words to make a story.

"Hmm, they probably just write any old thing down," Denny thought. But not him, he was going to be an artist, a writer. In fact, he had dreams all the time about what his life would be like, about the things he wished would happen. Denny smiled as he remembered his daydream from today. He was sitting in Miss Cooper's World Geography class when the lights had gone off. The whole room had become as dark as his baby brother Gary's room when he just had on his Elmo nightlight. Miss Cooper had laid her chalk down on the desk her soft green eyes darting to the windows where the light outside had vanished and been replaced with an overcast grayness. She shivered. The other kids had begun whispering back and forth. Lucy Jenkins started to cry and Jerry Johnson rolled his eyes and laughed at her.

Denny smirked, his eyes still closed. He would get even with Lucy someday for turning him down for a dance at the seventh grade dance.

That was when the humming began. A throbbing hum that caused Miss

Cooper to dart her eyes furtively (Denny smiled at last week's spelling word) around the room. He watched her. Several kids began to panic as screaming could be heard from down the hall. A white mist like on all those old black and white thrillers he watched on cable began to seep through the crack under the door. Then, the door opened to find—

"Denny! Did you do the dishes yet?"

"No, Mom! I'll do 'em in a minute." Denny rolled his eyes. Just as he was remembering the good part, too. The part where the deformed alien comes in and takes him and Miss Cooper away on the spaceship. Unfortunately, his daydream had never reached an ending. He always got interrupted. Denny got up from his desk. He pictured Miss Cooper's soft red tendrils as he walked downstairs to the kitchen.

Denny's mom stood at the sink barefoot, her hose bundling slightly at her ankles. She rolled up the sleeves of her light blue blouse, her back to her son and the dinner table.

"Okay, Mom. What do you want me to do?" Denny waited, lost in the messy white-tiled kitchen. His mom turned to look at him and rolled her eyes.

"Men! You're all alike!" She walked to her son and ruffled his hair smiling, not noticing Denny bristle at the thought of being compared to Bob or his father. Denny thought her make-up looked like a clown's. Her eyes seemed hidden behind the bags of skin that swelled beneath them. "Just start loading the dishwasher, I'll do the gross ones in the sink."

Denny smiled, relieved to get out of washing the pots and pans. "We got an assignment at school today to write a story with spelling words. I'm making mine a mystery."

"That's nice. You'll have to let me read it sometime." Some water splashed over the sink as she plunged her arms into the bubbly basin of hot water.

"Okay," Denny scraped off a plate. He looked at her rumpled form hesitantly. "Mom, do you think—"

"Moooom! Gary won't lay down and go to sleep." Denny's little sister walked in the room struggling to hold the squirming baby in her arms. Denny's mom looked over her shoulder holding a large skillet. "Well, honey, at least he's not crying. Just let him wear himself out. Let him crawl around on the floor."

"But, Mom, I have homework to finish." Gary stuck his bottom lip out and pushed harder against his sister and began to whimper. His pink fleshy cheeks puffed in and out as his pudgy arms flailed to be let free.

"Well, then you come and finish the dishes and I'll take him, Marsha." Marsha looked back and forth from the baby to the sink. She looked at her mother, the skin around her brown eyes narrowed. Gary burst into an explosion of screams and tears.

"Fine, take him." Marsha glanced at Denny and walked to the sink. "I can't see why Denny can't do all the dishes anyway. It's not like I never did it at his age." Marsha pulled up her sleeves as she walked to the sink. Gary began to quiet down as

he felt the familiarity of his mother's arms.

"Not tonight, Marsha. I've had a long enough day without you playing pity party. She began to walk away when Denny called out to her as he watched his chance slip away.

"Um, Mom, do you think you could read my story after I finish it tonight?" Denny looked at her hopefully. Marsha clanked a pot in the sink.

"Sure, Honey. Just let me deal with Gary first. Hey, why don't you ask Bob to help you? I'm sure he'd love to." She smile her tired smile and turned to Gary, blowing on his forehead to make him laugh. Denny stared after her, his face drawn in disappointment.

"But, Mom, I...Bob doesn't..." He wanted to say Bob was just a big dope and didn't understand him. He would probably want to know why he wanted to write a story about anything other than baseball or football. Denny watched Gary bounce up and down in his mother's arms as they walked down the hall to the baby's room. A room that used to have movie posters on the wall and Denny's bed. But, his words were lost in Gary's coos. Denny turned back to the dinner scraps.

Denny wordlessly scraped a piece of chicken bone off a yellow plate. The clank of the metal fork against the glassware made him feel empty. He wished for a moment he could scrape Bob, Gary and Marsha into the trash, on top of the cardboard KFC containers and the leftover chicken bones. At least his mom had made the mashed potatoes and dessert herself. She hadn't completely given up cooking for them – just mostly. Denny pictured all those old women in garden club who had sat eating his mother's food, *Debbie's Catered Delights*. He thought of them wolfing down his mother's deviled eggs, sliced ham, green beans and brownies, the food slopping out of their mouths as they talked about who had the best flower gardens or magnolia blossoms. As they gossiped about what Mary Lou Johnson wore to the last meeting wondering why he hadn't shown up today, he saw his mother pouring more punch, standing on her swollen feet after staying up half the night before finishing the meal preparations for a customer on Thursday. Denny clanked a fork against another yellow plate and piled the leftover chicken bones on top of the others.

"Denny, will you stop messing around and finish the dishes already."

Denny looked at his sister, her braces exposed and gleaming at him inside her sneer. "You're such a little jerk." Denny wanted to cry but he knew he couldn't let her bully him. He was a man, and real men didn't let their insides out. *Charlie would never cry*, he thought. Denny realized he should put that in this story.

"Oh, shut up, Marsha," Denny said, grabbing another plate to scrape. He wished for a moment for childhood. He thought of a much younger Marsha who played house and who hugged spontaneously. He thought of the matching pajamas Grandma Peterson had sent them when Marsha was five and he was three, almost too young to remember. They had been Smurf pajamas and together they had sung the one word "la" chorus memorized from their Saturday morning cartoon picnics under afghans in the living room. "Leave me alone," Denny said.

Marsha shifted her attention to the ringing phone in the hall. Denny zoned out, quickly tiring of Marsha's meaningless chatter to one of her girlfriends on the phone, her voice floating in the breezeway mingled with the roar of baseball fans on Bob's television in the living room. Denny did at least remember the seasons for sports, just no team names or player "stats," as Bob would say. It had all been a part of the "learn to like Bob" maneuver his mom had shoved on him and Marsha over a year ago. Not wanting to forge an alliance with Marsha the Meanie, he had tried to like Bob, tried to get into his sports, and tried not to make it more difficult to get along when Bob and his mother had gotten married. Shortly after, as he had feared, things had changed between him and his mom, and it was nothing that could be cured by pretending to like baseball or praying that Bob fell off of a tall building and lost his memory, which hadn't worked either.

Denny pictured trying to share his story with Bob, his thick, forty-something face sporting a look of bemusement. Bob didn't even know what Denny liked or how much he read, he thought turning on the dishwasher. He looked back at the sink and considered finishing the pots and pans for Marsha – for his mom really. The water was murky and Denny pictured Marsha's scowl at him despite the fact that he was trying to help. His chore done he turned to poke his head into the living room.

Denny's blonde hair flickered in the light of the T.V. screen. Denny squinted at the screen trying to make out which field the team was playing on. He sighed, it was no use, he couldn't tell one baseball diamond from another. He had seen that movie *Field of Dreams*, though. He had even gone so far as trying to watch it with Bob. But Bob had had little interest and Denny had spent most of the movie watching Bob out of the corner of his eye. Bob was constantly tapping his foot or finger or scratching or watching Denny when he thought Denny wasn't looking. Denny had finally made up some excuse to not watch the rest, turned the movie off and ran outside to play with his friends next door. He had really run to his secret place under the elm tree in the yard to hide until Bob went home, the happy days when Bob still had another home to go to, away from Denny, his mom, and even Marsha.

The tree was thick and sturdy and guarded the flat, wooden, red swing Denny's father, Charlie, had hung when Denny was younger. Denny often went to the tree now just to sit in the grass, look at the swing, and remember. He remembered his Dad's hands coaxing him higher and higher as he pushed his legs against the air, knowing that if he fell, his father would catch him. Denny would often go and sit on the grass, his back resting against the bark and stare at the swing. Sometimes Denny had nightmares about those times, at first falling asleep to his father's laughs as he pushed him higher. Denny could feel only the slick wood beneath him and smell the residual wet-paint that remained despite having dried seven years earlier. He dreamed of slipping off and falling, knowing there was no longer anyone there to catch him. Denny hadn't actually sat on the swing since his father had left.

Charlie left when Denny turned five. He had said goodbye and told him he

would “keep in touch” and the he “loved him very much.” Denny had tried to cut the swing two years and five short handwritten letters later. Denny’s mother had found him, the old rusty handsaw from the garage gouging the faded red seat into two halves. She had yanked the handsaw away and held him and cried, rocking him back and forth. Her face slick with tears, she sniffed and called Charlie a rat for leaving her and her two babies alone. Denny cried for the swing. He had trouble picturing Charlie anymore. Instead he always saw the swing, hanging off the elm on the thick pieces of white cord wrapped securely around the only swing worthy branch. His mom had offered to have Bob take it down, but Denny had refused. He didn’t know why, but despite how much he hated the swing, he needed it to be empty and alone with him in his place on the grass resting against the rough bark. Besides, he hadn’t been trying to cut it down, he had just wanted to separate the center. It somehow didn’t seem fair that it was still the same when everything else was so different. He didn’t tell this to his mom though. He just let her rock him and cry.

Denny snuck back upstairs to finish his story. He had thirteen words left to use and he still didn’t know what Roxy and Charlie were going to do. Denny flung himself on himself on his bed trying not to look around the room at the baseball cards, sports pendants and other sport paraphernalia Bob believed a growing boy had to have. Denny wondered if he should look up the word *metaphoric* and see if he had used it right. He didn’t want to let Miss Cooper down. She was the first person who had ever taken an interest in him even though she didn’t have to. She had told him the day she had worn a pink, angora sweater that felt like a rabbit (but wasn’t made of rabbit she had assured the class that morning after Joanie Black had asked), that she had liked his story. He had asked her why. He had sat amazed in his seat as she described in detail her favorite part about the giant lizard that had wiped out the entire town “with the flick of his tongue.” She had quoted his story! He had never heard a girl teacher ever like a story about guy things. She told him he should try to make it longer and give even more details about how the boy managed to capture it using his giant dart ray. Denny had looked at her in amazement as she told him he had a wonderful imagination and how she looked forward to his next story.

Denny looked up at his wall, his cheeks pink with the memory. He wondered if Miss Cooper would figure out that she was Roxy. He wondered if she even knew she smelled like cinnamon. Denny closed his eyes and buried his head in his crossed arms. But how could he keep writing when he didn’t know how to end the story? He didn’t know enough about Charlie to write any more about him. He wanted to know what Charlie did, why Charlie had a great life without him. Denny opened his eyes and walked back over to his desk. He pulled open the drawer on the lower right-hand side. Allowing himself to fall on the floor, he dumped the contents out, ignoring the balled-up white school socks and brown church socks that fell out onto the carpet. Denny looked up and made sure his door was locked. He stuck his right hand inside, feeling around for the felt flap he had made himself.

Sliding his fingers along the corners of the false bottom, he pulled it out. Below the bottom lay his father's wrinkled, handwritten letters and his phone number. Denny stared at the wilted piece of scratch paper and rested his chin between his thumb and forefinger.

He closed his eyes to remember his father, but only came up with the pictures his mom kept stored in the attic. In the pictures his father always wore a bright grin and his blonde hair feathered around his scalp just like Denny's. Denny stood and laid the scrap on his nightstand beside his phone. It was a long distance number that Charlie had sent in his last letter telling them he had moved to California. Denny used to think it was the number to Disneyland. The only thing that he had known about California at the time was that it was where Disneyland was, and that Charlie had promised to take Marsha and him. But there Charlie was, in California without them. And now it was six years later and he knew it was the number to his father, a father he hadn't seen in seven years.

He waited a moment and then picked up the receiver. Only a dialtone filled his ear, Marsha having been warned to get off the phone and finish the dishes for his mother. Denny gulped feeling his chicken roll through his stomach. He looked at his unfinished story on his desk and thought of the almost-sawed swing in the yard. *Nothing was finished.* He was tired of not knowing why his father had left, not knowing what Charlie did, and why he hadn't just had Bob take down the stupid swing. Without even glancing at the numbers, Denny dialed. He had known them all the time. In his hand the receiver came to life and began to ring.

"Hello?" Charlie's voice was gruffer than he remembered. Denny lost his voice. He began to breathe a little heavier. "Hello?" Charlie asked again.

"Charlie?" Denny's voice was small. He didn't know what to say.

"Yes, who is this?" Denny felt the tears come to his eyes.

"This—this is, is your son." A long pause made Denny fight harder not to cry. "Denny." Denny's voice was wobbly and smaller than he had ever heard it before.

"Denny? I—I'm surprised. How are you?" Denny took a deep breath.

"I'm okay – Dad." Denny felt a pain fill his chest. The word "dad" came out sounding strange. Denny realized he hadn't said it aloud for a long time.

"What – how's your sister? How's Marsha?"

"Bossy," Denny's jaw tightened. He had said it quickly, without thinking. The man on the other end of the line gave a small laugh causing Denny to calm down.

"Denny, does your mother know you're calling me?" Denny wondered what that mattered. But suddenly he was scared to answer.

"I just wanted to ask you something."

"What is it, Denny?" Charlie asked.

Denny's mind went a thousand places. It went to the swing, to the Charlie in his story, to Bob, Gary, Marsha and his mother. His memories passed behind his closed eyes. Denny wanted to say he wished Charlie hadn't left, he

wished he could see him, he wished Charlie could live with them again and fix everything.

"I am writing a story and I wondered what those kinds of suits were that you – I think, you wore. They were top of the line." Denny spoke rapidly, not pausing to breathe, even as he waited for the answer.

"Armani?"

"Yeah, Armoni, that's it. Thanks." Denny waited for something, anything from Charlie. A cue to continue.

"You're welcome." The silence deepened. Denny decided to finish what he started.

"Goodbye, Dad." Without waiting for a reply, Denny hung up the phone.

Denny refilled his secret drawer. He went back to his desk and pulled out a new piece of paper and began to write, *Denny was the kind of guy who got things done, along with his partner Roxy.* It was a fine line, Denny thought. His insides out, he let his imagination begin to travel. He was pretty sure this story, he could end.

