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C. V. Davis

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The image is a full-page background photograph with a monochromatic blue tint. It depicts a wide river in the foreground, with a dense line of trees on the opposite bank. In the immediate foreground on the right, the intricate, bare branches of a tree are silhouetted against the sky. The overall mood is quiet and somewhat somber due to the color palette and the lack of leaves on the trees.

THE  
BROAD RIVER  
REVIEW

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THE LITERARY REVIEW OF GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

**THE  
BROAD RIVER  
REVIEW**

**VOLUME 34  
SPRING 2002**

**GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY  
BOILING SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA**

THE  
BROAD RIVER  
REVIEW

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### **The Broad River Review Student Writing Awards**

David Parker  
Darlene Gravett  
Janet Land

### **The J. Calvin Koontz Poetry Award**

Ron Rash

### **The Broad River Review Student Art Awards**

Susan Bell  
Doug Knotts  
Matt Theado  
David Parker

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“Jericho” — *Time of Singing*  
“Over Betsy’s” — *The Raleigh News and Observer*

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*The Literary Review*  
*The Kenyon Review*  
*The Iowa Review*  
*Gulf Stream Magazine*  
*The Georgia Review*  
*Fourteen Hills*

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THE  
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*Severed in Spring*

Her voice dances nervously down a line extending  
four hundred and eighty miles.

It flirts with the Atlantic, before jutting  
west through silent Virginia battlefields  
and brooding Carolina mountains, before stopping  
and lingering in my room.

Her voice should lounge in comfort, with ease,  
as old friends do.

But it doesn't.

It shifts anxiously, like an atheist at a revival,  
and I wonder why she called.

She's looking out over the Potomac,  
but can't see me because  
her heart can't travel as fast as my Nissan.  
Nor can it travel as far.

She labors, painfully:

"The cherry blossoms are beautiful,  
it's a shame you can't see...."

But as I gaze across this hillside of pines,  
the apparition of her face disappears, and  
I know I'm missing  
much more than trees.

*Jazz*

The simple word rolls off my tongue  
and down my cheek and hip before  
strutting into the smoky room  
where the sultry siren sways  
to the crazy rhythm of the saxophone,  
reigned in by the constant piano.  
A cool, deep drink flows from her moist cherry lips.  
Then  
crawls off to a summer day  
on the damp grass with a clear blue sky,  
and jazz breezily affecting  
my inner beating.  
And now,  
there is no more grass, no more rooms, no more sky.  
only a liquid womb—  
lazy and warm.  
And there is nothing to breathe  
but jazz.

*theology with steve*

born and raised in brooklyn.  
fought in 'nam.  
my son wants to die for his country  
but it ain't an honor.  
had an out-of-body experience in 'nam  
when i got blown up.  
saw the light and all.  
my buddy died.  
after they stitched up my front,  
they had to turn me over and wipe my butt  
because that's what happens  
when you almost die.

\* \* \*

i ain't a religious man.  
call god when i need him,  
but mostly i'm just nice to people,  
if they're nice to me anyway.  
some people ain't  
worth messin' with.

\* \* \*

i love lacrosse.  
people should play more sports.  
that's what's wrong with america.  
damn 'em for making sports like war.  
it ain't the same.  
it sure ain't the same.

*Leah's Grandmother*

Leah's Gram, curled, plastered and bosomsome  
Saturn Smoke Ring encircling her planet-head  
sits; among the flowers and roses, daisies and lace  
awaiting my response to her jokes on friendsnowdead  
grandchildren, interracial couples, the woes of gossip...  
and I make a face — not good or bad  
and await further talk of bad health and lost values.  
Grandpa silently sneaks, boxers and tightwhite T  
bedroom to kitchen without a sound; Gram says  
the door-bottoms are shaved off because the house leans.  
Grandpa says nothing, but I believe Grandpa.  
But enough about me, enough, enough...  
And smoked-chicken-salad is offered  
on smoked-bread, with smoked-tea,  
Oh, have some sweet bread or have some sweet-bread.  
The bag-of-flour-sized-dog does not let lunch  
interrupt his barking, just as our conversation did not bother  
him one bit; return to the imposter garden livingroom —  
Saturn Ring follows and sends noxious gases my way,  
I swallow-smoked-lunch-whole and await our departure  
from Gram and shaved doors and humping dogs and  
Arkansas altogether. My feel for it now smoke tinged  
Hanging on a door hinge, not touching the bottom.  
It's been nice meeting you too (get me out of this place  
— In the car — Can you believe that place,  
it's like stepping in the twilight, wait)  
Can't say that. It's Leah's Gram were talking about here.

*Kokinshu Poems*

1.

Unseen by men's eyes,  
a baby eagle soars under mother's care  
finally spreading its own wings:  
Celine Dion singing  
in a local karaoke bar!

2.

Since little birdies tell,  
we shut and barred the windows  
Why, then, is G-Dubb covered  
with rumors like sandstorms  
that leave the desert smooth and flat?

3.

Less profitable  
than asking for an engagement ring  
from a man who just bought a boat —  
such is the futility  
of loving your third grade teacher.

4.

My body fills with despair  
as I watch the parts sag,  
the inevitable platinum ball appears  
surrounding folds of cares  
on the face in the mirror.

5.

Less profitable  
than eating cafeteria  
    Jell-O with a knife —  
such is the futility  
of love that is not returned.

6.

Unseen by men's eyes  
a wild volcano spews into the air  
    on an island in the Pacific:  
surely one can say, like Chris Rock entertaining  
in a Jewish retirement center.

### *Summer Work*

I saw Cecil Ledbetter last week for the first time since I'd seen him dragged unconscious and bleeding from a truck eleven years ago, and I thought again of my role in what had happened to him. I was back home in western North Carolina, visiting my parents and sister. I've lived in southwest Virginia the last decade, a region completely ignorant of red cole-slaw and ketchup-based pork, so on my infrequent trips back to Cliffside I indulge myself by eating lunch at Henson's Barbecue Lodge.

I drove uptown with my sister, past the closed-down theatre and new supermarket, on past Hamrick Mill where my father worked. At Cliffside's stop light we turned right, parking in front of Cliffside Junior College's administration building. We crossed the street and stepped into Henson's.

Cecil was sharing the table closest to the door with a couple of college-aged boys. They had spent the morning cutting grass. Their tee-shirts were sweat-stained, and I could smell the gasoline lingering on their hands and clothing. As I passed the table Cecil looked up at me, but there was no blink of recognition in his blue eyes. Whatever link he had to me had been severed when his skull cracked the windshield. He looked back down at his plate, my face one more lost connection. In a few minutes I watched him take short steps toward the door, his gait slow and deliberate, like a man who'd suffered a stroke.

In my mind I followed him across the street, across eleven summers to the August after my junior year at Chapel Hill, the summer my college roommate Ben Grier and I worked on the maintenance crew at Cliffside Junior College.

Our plan was to work at Hamrick Mill as we'd done the last two summers. Ben's father and mine were shift supervisors, so they'd been able to get us work in the past. But during the spring there'd been layoffs at the mill. The only summer job we could find was working at the junior college for minimum wage.

Our mill jobs had paid a dollar an hour better, so I had to



recalculate my student loan. Ben didn't have that worry. He'd scored 1560 on his S.A.T. and received a full scholarship to Chapel Hill. He was, however, saving money for medical school. Like me, Ben was already ticked off about making less money.

But I don't think that had anything to do with what happened that summer. I'd known Ben since second grade. In high school we'd been lab partners and in the Beta Club together, but I'd never thought of him as a friend. I didn't know anyone who had.

We, students and teachers, had known even in grammar school that he was different, smart in a way that the rest of us would never be no matter how many books we read, how hard we studied. Ben didn't draw attention to his brilliance. He never raised his hand in class, though he always knew the answer if he were called on. But sometimes when a student or teacher would say something he found stupid he'd make a sardonic comment, as much to himself as anyone else, and you wondered if in that moment he'd shown what he thought of all of us.

In the spring of our senior year in high school Ben asked me to room with him at Chapel Hill. I was surprised and flattered but shouldn't have been. He was already planning for medical school and didn't want to risk a roommate who'd be cranking up the stereo at 2:00 A. M. or bringing a bunch of drunk friends back to the room for a party. I suspect he saw me as dull enough to have to have to spend a lot of time studying, introverted enough to keep to myself.

So one Monday in late May Ben and I punched in at the junior college's physical plant office. Mr. Priester, who'd hired us, nodded toward the other man in the office.

"Cecil will show you boys what to do," Mr. Priester said, then disappeared into the air-conditioned office he strayed from as little as possible.

We walked out to the blue truck with Maintenance painted on the side.

"Get in," Cecil said but didn't unlock the passenger door, so Ben and I climbed into the back. We rode past the gym and curved around the math and science building and on past the springhouse abruptly in front of a quonset hut, causing Ben and me to slide against the cab window. We jumped out of the truck as Cecil unlocked the quonset hut's sliding metal door.

"Listen, college boys," he said as we stepped inside. "This machinery don't care how smart you are. You get careless

and you can get hurt bad.”

We stood among the big Yazoo riding mowers, the push mowers and weed eaters. It was already hot inside the hut, and the reek of oil and gasoline made me nauseous.

“I reckon you boys know all about equipment like this but I’m going to tell you anyway, once. That way my ass is covered if you cut your fingers off doing something stupid.”

Cecil bent down on one knee beside the weed eater.

“Come over here,” he said to me. “You too, four eyes,” Cecil added, not even looking at Ben. If he’d looked up he might have been surprised at the anger that flashed across Ben’s face, but it didn’t surprise me. Ben was tall and skinny and had worn glasses since the second grade, but his looks were deceiving. He was quiet but not timid. Yes, he looked the way you’d expect someone who’d nearly aced the S.A.T. to look, but he was also an athlete, hard nosed and competitive, something you wouldn’t expect. Our senior year he had been the pitcher on the baseball team. He was smart and he knew how to keep hitters guessing, but he also knew how to intimidate his opponent. Rutherford County had a first baseman that year who was all-state. The first time up, he hit a home run off Ben. The second time he came to the plate Ben threw two head-high fastballs right at the guy. Ben rattled him so bad he fanned on called strikes the rest of the game.

Cecil tugged six inches of monofilament from each of the three holes on the weed eater’s plastic head.

“That’s the length you need.” Cecil looked up at us. “Wait till you got it running full speed before you try to trim. You understand?”

Ben smiled at him.

“Do you mean do we understand the concept of centrifugal force?” Ben said, still smiling. “Yeah, I think we understand that, Cecil.”

As soon as the words were out I knew Cecil Ledbetter would be a long time in forgiving Ben for what he’d said, would make him, and maybe me, pay for those words the rest of the summer. Ben’s words didn’t surprise me. He’d said similar things in a similar tone to other men when he’d worked in the mill. A couple of times I’d thought his words were leading toward a fight, and maybe they would have if his daddy hadn’t had some rank in the mill.

Cecil looked up from where he kneeled. He was in his late

twenties but he looked older, his forehead already creased, his long hair and beard flecked with gray. He was almost as tall as Ben and outweighed him by fifty pounds.

“Well,” Cecil said to Ben. “Since you know so much about weed eaters we’ll let you run one this summer. Me and your buddy here will ride the Yazooos.”

Ben shrugged his shoulders. “Fine,” he said.

So that Monday morning our routine was set for the summer. I’d do trim with a push mower, but most of the time I was atop one of the Yazooos making a week-long journey that started at the springhouse, then around the dorms and classroom buildings, across the acre of open ground at the campus center, and ending at the administration building facing Cliffside’s main street. It would be Friday afternoon when I finished and the following Monday I’d start over. Always somewhere behind me was Ben, moving around the trees and buildings with the weed eater. Meanwhile, Cecil kept the machinery running, changing oil, tightening belts, and sharpening mower blades, usually down by the springhouse where he worked in the shade of century-old oaks. The rest of the time he drove around campus in the blue maintenance truck, ogling sunbathing co-eds or trying to catch us slacking off.

By lunchtime that first day I was feeling guilty about riding while Ben lugged the weed eater in my wake, so I decided to say something. We got our bag lunches out of the office’s refrigerator and walked down to the springhouse. You weren’t supposed to drink the water because there might be bacteria in it, but most people did anyway. When the college had repaired the springhouse years back they’d built a roofed lattice with a door. A concrete bench curved around the spring like a horseshoe. Ben and I bent down and filled our hands with the water so cold it hurt our teeth when we drank. We sat on the concrete and opened our bags.

“I’m going to talk to Cecil about us switching off this afternoon,” I said. “It’s not fair for me to ride the Yazoo all day.”

“No,” Ben said sharply. “He’ll think I asked you to say something. I don’t want you to give him the satisfaction of thinking that. You just keep your mouth shut.”

Ben looked up.

“Here comes the bastard now.”

I turned and saw the blue maintenance truck curving around the math and science building and heading toward us. Cecil

drove onto the grass and parked in the shade of an oak ten yards from where we sat. He opened the truck door but didn't get out. His metal lunch box lay open on his lap.

Ben stashed his sandwich back in his lunch bag, the paperback he'd brought to read in his back pocket.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to spend anytime around him I don't have to," he said, getting up from the bench. "I'm going to sit outside the library and eat." Ben walked out the door.

"I'll go too," I said, packing up my lunch.

"Suit yourself," Ben said, not looking back.

After that first day Ben and Cecil pretty much stayed clear of one another, but in early June Cecil caught us talking to a couple of co-eds in front of the cafeteria. He bumped the truck over the curb and drove straight up to us.

"Get back to work," he said. "You can chase poontang on your own time."

The girls and I were embarrassed. Ben was too, but he was also angry.

"You ignorant redneck," Ben said.

"What?" Cecil cut off the ignition.

"Don't say it again," one of the girls said.

"You heard me," Ben said.

"Yeah, well, just remember this ignorant redneck gets to tell you what to do."

"Only one summer, Cecil," Ben said.

"A summer can be a damn long time, college boy." Cecil cranked the truck and drove off.

For the next ten weeks Cecil made sure we worked every minute we were on the clock. He watched us take our breaks at ten and three and saw to it they were exactly fifteen minutes. He wouldn't let us bring our equipment back to the quonset hut until five minutes before lunch or quitting time.

By mid-July the temperature was over ninety every afternoon. I was riding at least part of the day, but I was still exhausted by five. The mill work had been hard, but we'd been out of the sun and our bosses, probably out of deference to our fathers, had cut us some slack when we got tired. At lunchtime Ben no longer read. He ate quickly and then napped under an elm tree in front of the library. At five minutes to one I'd shake him awake and we'd walk down to the quonset hut.

He never complained, not to Mr. Priester, Cecil, or me, and he never eased up. Sometimes on afternoons when it was so hot I could see heat rolling across the campus in waves, I'd risk Cecil's wrath by parking the Yazoo under a tree a few minutes, but Ben never stopped. He was always moving, always wearing his eight-pound albatross.

It was in late July that I caught the snake. Ben and I were walking to the office to check out. I thought it was dead, but when I stepped closer I saw the red tongue flicker. I picked it up to take home and let go in the woods behind my house.

Mr. Priester and Cecil were in the office when we walked in, the snake coiled around my hand.

Cecil stumbled back against the refrigerator.

"Keep that damn thing away from me," he said.

At first I thought he was joking.

"Keep it away from me," he said again, and I saw he was truly frightened. He punched out and left the office.

"It's just a green snake," I told Mr. Priester, holding the snake up for him to see.

"Cecil's scared shitless of snakes," Mr. Priester said. "He got bit by a copperhead when he was a kid. It almost killed him."

"A green snake isn't a copperhead," Ben said. "Even Cecil should be able to figure that out."

Mr. Priester shook his head.

"What kind it is don't make a difference to Cecil," Mr. Priester said.

Cecil had been right. A summer can be a long time, but August finally came. Whatever battle of wills Cecil and Ben was over. Ben had won and even Cecil realized it, and though he'd have died before admitting it, you could tell Cecil respected Ben for sticking it out, for never once complaining. Those last days he no longer checked our breaks. If we saw him at all he was bringing us a cooler filled with water from the springhouse, some paper cups to drink from.

It was eleven-thirty of our last day when Ben waved me toward the quonset hut. He carried our lunch bags in his right hand.

"It's a little early, isn't it?" I asked as I climbed off the Yazoo.

"It's our last day," Ben said. "What can they do to us."

Besides, I've got some lunchtime entertainment you might enjoy. It's going to be at the spring, so we better get going."

"Is Cecil in on this?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," Ben said. "He just doesn't know it."

I followed Ben up the road past the springhouse. We went up the hill to the side of the math and science building.

"This will give us a good view," Ben said and sat down on the grass.

"What are we waiting to see?" I asked.

"I added something to Cecil's lunch box a few minutes ago when I went to get ours. A snake."

Ben grinned.

"Don't worry. It's just a hog-nose snake, but it looks enough like a copperhead to give Cecil a good scare."

"He'll know who did it," I said.

Ben looked at me. He was not longer grinning.

"I don't care. I'll risk a concussion just to see that asshole when he opens that lunch bag."

"This is a bad idea," I said. "This is wrong."

"Well," Ben said, looking up the road. "Here he comes. If you want to tell him, flag him down."

And I almost did, because I realized at that moment I liked Cecil more than I liked Ben, that a part of me would enjoy watching Cecil kick Ben's ass. But I didn't. I just sat there and let it happen.

The blue maintenance truck curved around the math and science building and passed thirty yards below us. I saw Cecil in the cab, the window open, only his left hand on the steering wheel. I watched him glance down at the passenger seat.

People who have been in wrecks talk about how everything slows down, but to watch a wreck happen is a different matter. It happens so fast you can't believe what you've seen. Cecil's truck swerved then accelerated across the grass and crashed through the springhouse lattice and into the concrete bench. The impact was so loud faces appeared at the doors and windows of the math and science building. In the few seconds I sat there trying to get my brain to believe what my eyes had just seen, students and teachers ran out the doors toward the crumpled truck, its doors flung open.

Ben and I followed. Inside the cab I saw Cecil slumped over the steering wheel, the windshield cracked where his head had hit.

One of the students was a nursing major. She checked Cecil's pulse and kept anyone from trying to move him.

"He's alive," I heard her say.

Mr. Priester showed up a few minutes later and pushed his way through the students and teachers. He was talking to Cecil but getting no response. An ambulance finally arrived, and we all backed up to let the EMS crew work.

They gently removed Cecil from the truck, placed him in the ambulance and drove off. At the stoplight the ambulance wailed eastward toward Charlotte, not west toward the county hospital.

The students and teachers went back to their classes.

Ben leaned toward me.

"You're not going to tell," he said, and whether his words were a question was unclear.

"No," I said, as Mr. Priester walked toward us.

"You boys know what happened?"

"No, sir," Ben said. "We heard the crash and came to see what was going on."

"Well, he wasn't wearing his seat belt. That's a school regulation," Mr. Priester said, looking at the truck.

"Do you know what to do this afternoon?"

We nodded.

"Well, go do it. I'll probably be in Charlotte."

At five o'clock I walked into the physical plant office and punched a time clock for the last time in my life. Ben and I stepped into the parking lot where Mr. Priester and the college's vice-president were talking. Mr. Priester waved us over.

"The doctor's say he'll live, but they're pretty sure there's brain damage. They don't know how bad yet."

The vice-president looked at his watch.

"It's time to leave," he said, and it was.

Three months passed before Cecil left the hospital, and it was almost a year before the college, whether out of compassion or fear of a lawsuit, rehired him. He no longer worked on the equipment, however, or drove a truck or Yazoo. They let him use the push mowers and weed eaters. In the fall and winter he raked leaves.

The night before we were to go back to Chapel Hill, Ben called.

"Listen," he said. "Don't take this personal but I put in a request to live in Johnson Dorm. It's closer to my labs. They told me it would take a couple of weeks to make the switch, so we'll be rooming together a few days. Is that O.K.?"

"Sure," I said. "I never asked you to room with me. That was your idea."

"I guess that's right," Ben said, as if he had forgotten.

"I think we need to talk about what happened," I said.

"What do you want me to say?" Ben asked, then answered his own question. "You want me to say I'm eaten up with guilt. Well, I don't feel bad at all, and I'm not hypocritical enough to pretend I do. It was an accident, and it happened to a dumb, mean red-neck. It's not like the world's lost some great contributor to mankind. But do I wish it had never happened? Sure. And that's more than Cecil would have felt it if had happened to me."

"You don't know that," I said. "I feel bad about this even if you don't."

"You shouldn't," Ben said. "It's on my conscience, not yours, and if you're stupid enough to feel bad about not telling what happened, let me ease your mind. All that would have done was risk ruining two lives instead of one."

I didn't say anything else to Ben about the wreck, not that night or any other night. There didn't seem to be any point.

Ben went on to medical school at Emory. He did his internship at Boston General, marrying a fellow intern. He's now a G.P. in a Boston suburb.

I do not know if Ben is haunted by what happened that summer. I do not know if when he worked the emergency room at Boston General he was reminded of Cecil each time he looked into the face of a wreck victim. Perhaps he saw so many damaged humans that Cecil became one more blurred face on the emergency room's assembly line of catastrophe, an unlikable man who from his point of view — unlike the eight-year-old child or pregnant woman he might minister to — had some responsibility for what had happened to him.

As my sister and I walked out to my car last week, I saw Cecil running a weed eater in front of the junior college's administration building. He held it in front of him as if it were a metal detector. He looked like a man searching for something lost long ago.



*1972*

Rubber ripping rubber —  
transporting smoke  
swirling trees on mushroom clouds  
Hendrix rattling eight track radio —

My father

high  
pressed against an A-cup aspiring actress  
sweat on leather seats —  
brief and bare

Escaping

the mother-abandoned home  
the piano-filled air gone  
now contaminated  
with the stench of man.

*The Back Door*

All the strength it takes  
to leave your world  
to open this door to humidified air  
isn't worth the pain of my collapsing lungs  
and the sound of vertebrae shattering  
in my avocado back.

*Untitled*

It doesn't matter what facade you pick —  
soldier  
Wall Street suit  
professional athlete.  
I'll know  
the way you  
enter a room —  
behind clothes you can't afford.

The next time  
though,  
I might  
not be  
here —  
waiting

legs spread  
back arched

licking  
clean  
the

staccato rays.

*The Organ Recital*

A crowd gathers to hear the old man play.  
There is something spiritual in his hands  
and feet as he glorifies our great king.  
With every note he plays, a certain type  
of drama fills the small room.  
Then he talks.  
A picture he now paints for us,  
one of Holy Manna.  
I look at the people as I receive a blessing.  
The old hymns received in their gold splendor.  
The newer works than can move one to tears.  
Some get what I'm getting.  
One distracted from her work to listen.  
Her thesis can wait.  
A prof closes his eyes to take in the beauty.  
Yawns trying to be hidden in the back  
while a girl writes a poem.  
Oh how strange!  
Expected to be boring and so dull  
now brings a heavenly peace!

*Night Club*

Massaging honey from the ivories,  
digits dance,  
then pause  
wait for the muse to descend again  
between smoke-filled walls  
where grey veils each blurry face  
under the rumble of polite conversation.  
Bodies drowning demons  
in a sea of ice and fire on leather covered chairs.  
Someone laughs too loudly  
then fades back into the din.  
And the figure on the dark beast  
pounds his agony on black and white teeth  
prophesying, pleading, praying  
for release.

*Untitled*

A war no one understood —  
you joined for discipline, benefits,  
for lack of anything better to do.

John Doe,  
your twisted torso  
caked brown  
with dirt, sweat, blood.

Promises abandoned.  
Riddled with regret.  
Your body danced eerily as the nameless man  
gave you thirteen holes God never intended.

### *Loops and Fireworks*

North Cove, North Carolina lies in one of “The Loops” of the Clinchfield Railroad, a series of switchbacks that gently descend the rugged Blue Ridge Mountains from Spruce Pine. The grade is gouged through nineteen tunnels and many deep cuts to level out in the foothills at Marion. The railroad carries coal from the mines of West Virginia and Kentucky to the southeast coast.

Among my most vivid memories of North Cove are those of the huge black steam locomotives and the lonesome wail of the whistle. I remember the sound abruptly dying as the train went into Honeycutt Tunnel behind the house where I was born. The hot boxes of the brakes glowed bright red as hundreds of wheels pressed against the steep four-mile loop. High clouds of steam rushed from the stacks on cold winter days as the powerful locomotives crawled up the mountains. Now and then one of the trains derailed, folding itself in a cut or down a fill, interrupting the slow pace of the valley. Folks would rush to pick up the free coal for their winter fires; I always hoped for candy or toys. Sometimes a hot box would break, sending glowing steel off the tracks, catching the mountain on fire. The men of the cove would hurry to keep the fire from racing with the convicting wind up the side of the mountain.

North Cove had a little depot on the Clinchfield called Linville Station. The name didn't make sense but the wealthy who summered fifteen miles away in the resort town of Linville wanted the name recognition. Until the late 1940's the station served passenger trains which have since disappeared from the route. Ironically, as isolated from the world as we were, we could catch the train to anywhere from just a mile up the road. We can't do that today. The depot also served a huge packinghouse owned by Ed Robbins. He hauled shrubbery from Blue Ridge Nursery at Pineola, about ten miles up Linville Mountain, to be shipped out by rail.

My family had a very different purpose for the depot. We used it as a way to get fireworks, which were illegal in North

Carolina. We had great shipments brought in from Zebra Fireworks Company up north. We saved our money all year and poured over the Zebra catalog for our Christmas order; we bought them by the case. Excitement built for weeks until the train brought the prized cargo.

The Christmas fireworks display and the powerful reports of now illegal M80s, double shots, aerial and cherry bombs were shared by the whole valley. My dad was never content with the power of the fireworks. He always wanted the biggest, loudest aerial bomb ever built. Maybe it was because he was the youngest and smallest of five brothers. So he searched all of the catalogs of the fireworks companies for the pinnacle of power. He found it. Everyone would know that the explosion that was to rock the silence from a thousand feet above the valley was caused by Gene Brown's big red ten-dollar aerial bomb. It stood eighteen inches high with a diameter of four inches, a five-inch fuse and a six-inch square wooden base. It was magnificent, made by Black Cat Fireworks in Akron, Ohio. The money he saved for it would have bought a large assortment of Roman candles, rockets, double shots, pinwheels, fountains, ladyfingers, side loaders and Cherry bombs, not counting the regular little firecrackers with the gray paper fuses that came in packs you could light all at once. Instead, all of his money went for the big show. Dad was at the depot early each day. He sat waiting on one of the big green freight wagons on the platform beside the tracks. Finally one day, the train hissed to a stop. Sam Brown, the station master, shoved the latch open, disappearing into the darkness of a red boxcar. He came back with a single box and handed it down to Dad, label side up. "To GENE BROWN from 'BLACK CAT FIREWORKS.'" Dad's heart raced as he gently carried the box away.

Christmas Eve night was the time for the fireworks. Everyone converged on Grandad and Grandmother's house for Christmas celebrations: Santa Claus, eating, raucous drinking and exchanging gifts; it lasted for days. Dad was going to put the capstone on the fireworks with his aerial bomb. He took the marvel a safe distance from the house, placing it on the ground with its red shaft pointing menacingly skyward. He struck the match: "Take cover, men!" The match touched the thick fuse. "Tssssss," it ignited. With fingers stuck firmly in their ears, uncles and younguns scattered behind the well house into the smoke house, behind the



woodpile, under dense boxwoods, and behind the lattice under the porch. The women squinted into the darkness through the windows — then, a thick silence of expectation. Straining eyes could see the dim fuse sputtering its sparks into the cold night air.

The silence and my dad's spirit were broken by a quiet "pffftt," as a puff of smoke weakly ejaculated from the big red cylinder. Another silence preceded the humiliation heaped on him by his brothers.

Undaunted, Dad turned to dynamite. He began detonating whole sticks from low limbs of trees on the hill above our house. Windows rattled for a mile up and down the valley. The deep rumble bounced around for half a minute between Linville and Honeycutt Mountains. Shattered scrub pine limbs and compliments from all were testaments to his revenge on the Black Cat Fireworks Company of Akron, Ohio.

Toonie McGee (his name was really Julius) was a friend of the family who joined the Christmas fireworks traditions. He and his wife Lara were coming to visit my Grandad and Grandma one crisp December day in their Model A coupe. Uncle Hud was coming too, but he was walking just up the road from the house. Toonie and Lara were rattling along in their car when they saw him. Toonie liked practical jokes and decided to throw a cherry bomb out of the Model A window near Uncle Hud to scare him. A cherry bomb is a powerful firecracker about the size, shape and color of a large dull red cherry with a fuse for a stem.

A match was struck; the joy of anticipation caused Lara and Toonie to laugh inside with perverted pride at their prank. Their adrenaline burned like the fuse, now lit.

Toonie slowed down and pitched the bomb with its sizzling stem toward Uncle Hud, one minor detail forgotten. The window in the car was still rolled firmly up against the cold wind. The cherry bomb bounced off the window and fussed around inside the car as though it knew what devilish deed it was about to do.

My dad saw the activity from the front porch of Grandad's house. He described a metallic sound, "FRANK!" as the bomb jabbed against the sheet metal inside the little coupe. A blue translucent cloud filled the inside of the car and pressed against the windows. The little Ford veered off the road into the grain stubble. Both doors sprung open like the wings of a scared chicken trying to avoid becoming Sunday dinner. Toonie and Lara rolled awkwardly

onto the ground as the little Ford squirmed to a driverless stop.

The ringing in their ears, and a few scratches and scrapes were temporary reminders that would sustain their embarrassment for the rest of the holidays. But the witnesses would never let them forget.

The Clinchfield not only brought us commercial pyrotechnics; it also unwittingly provided us with other creative fireworks. We would get torpedoes, called "tarpeters," from people who worked on the railroad. These quarter-pound brown waxed paper-wrapped devices were bulging flat objects that looked like big stale ravioli. They were filled with black powder. Two lead straps on opposite sides were used to anchor them to the rails. When trains ran over them, they would detonate with a loud report to signal the engineers of danger ahead. We put them on creek rocks under the foot-log crossing the Hog Branch on the path from Grandad's house to his barn. We would drop another heavy rock off the foot-log on the tarpeter. The loud explosion would split the quietness of the valley, sometimes the rocks as well.

The railroad gave us the means to make another insidious device: black powder, from a couple of shotgun shells, was dumped into the cavity of a large railroad nut with a bolt screwed a short distance in one side. A second bolt was screwed into the other end trapping the black powder inside the nut between two bolts. It could be dropped on a rock to strike the end of one of the bolts, detonating the powder with a loud explosion.

Uncle Walter built one of the contraptions except that he dumped the contents of two tarpeters in the nut instead of the usual measure from the shells. He stood proud with his creation on the foot-log, held it over the edge, took aim and dropped it toward a big rock below. The loud shock stripped the threads of the nut and sent the big rusty bolt straight up. It clipped off the end of Uncle Walter's cigar on its way to knocking his floppy felt hat into the Hog Branch below. No one ever heard the bolt return to earth.

Today, cheering crowds of strangers sit on the hoods of cars listening to Reba and watching the brilliant Fourth of July fireworks at the Mall. Then they drive away marveling at the show.

Roman candles cradled in little eager hands, held gently by big leathery farm hands, send glowing spheres of colored light into the night. The fade over wheat stubble into the silent darkness of Christmas eve in North Cove. The bright joy binding us together fades in my memory.



*Oddities*  
watercolor, 15" x 19"



*Eyes Watching*  
watercolor and graphite, 15" x 23"



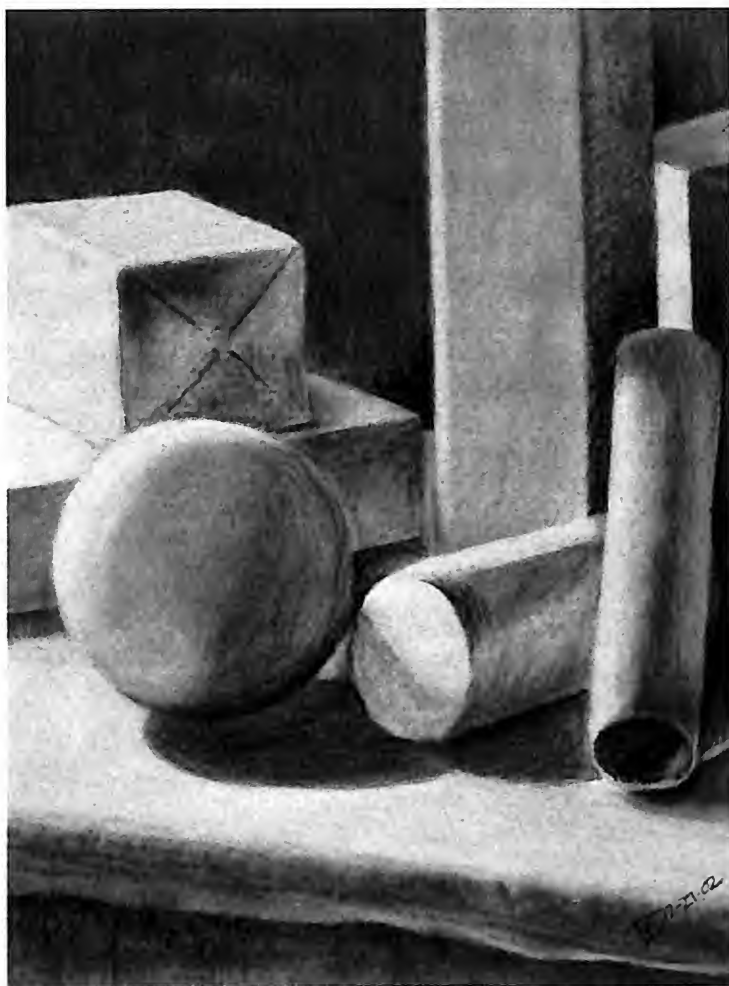
*The True Gospel*  
acrylic on canvas, 27" x 20"



*Broad River Coffee Co.*  
acrylic on paper, 23" x 35"



*Green Feet*  
watercolor, 15" x 21"



*Box Forms*  
charcoal, 18" x 24"





*Sitting Pretty*  
watercolor, 11" x 15"



*Social Commentary*  
4" x 6"

*Untitled*

Colorful confetti falls like rain  
as the tall, green man waves his arms and cries.  
The blue box of sunshine covers his pain;  
stripped naked, he's abandoned to die.

Music that once filled the air is replaced  
by tearing flesh and breaking limbs.  
Past his body crawls a ghost with no face  
who whispers secrets of the coming end.

A white sheet is placed over his body.  
He remains breathing under darkness —  
clawing the ground to satisfy his need  
for something to feed life into his chest.

Tears of joy stream down his body and bring  
life to the world; birds lift their hearts and sing.

*Untitled*

Truth would be known  
if my thoughts were heard.  
Words fail me.  
My heart whispers  
but silence crowds the air.

She asks for a chance;  
I give an insult.  
My eyes never see  
the lacerations of her heart.

Her dream is someone's reality.  
She sits in darkness.  
Is joy supposed to feel like this?

*Untitled*

Apart from You, I am  
nothing but a fragile man  
hiding under a colorful robe  
and a crown of pride.

I cannot walk on my own  
and will slip and crash to the bottom of life;  
remembering that falling down isn't graceful,  
but thanking you that it is full of grace.

*Peace Sign (WTC)*

Two fingers  
Once stood on the horizon  
as a peace sign  
Symbols of prosperity  
You despised  
Nothing could express my rage

Here's to ignorance  
Here's to the spirit of false religion  
Here's to senseless killing in the name of your illusion

I'm no theologian, but I know:  
The love of life  
is the beginning of religion  
The loss of life at the hands of  
"holy men"  
Is a hell of a contradiction

## *Landfall*

"Hey Jill. I saw Margie Fortenberry at Ingles yesterday." They had finally managed to pull two sheets over the big oak wardrobe Emmie had in the downstairs hallway, and they were taking inventory of what was left to cover.

"Really?" Jill dropped the piece of plastic she was holding. "Shit." She picked it up and threw it over the hall tree. "Did you talk to her?" Everybody knew about Margie and Earl being back in town, and there were all sorts of rumors about where they'd been and what they'd done.

"Yeah. I said, 'Hey Margie. How was Germany?' And she said, 'It's Anna. And Germany was very German.'"

"What did you say?" Jill thought about the last time she'd seen Margie. She and Earl had just finished their 30 hours of community service for jumping off the Second Street Bridge. They celebrated by getting wasted in the only club in town. Margie had one leg wrapped around Earl, and they danced so close they looked like one person. It was the nearest thing to sex you could have with your clothes on.

"I said, 'well, Auf Weidersehen, meine bitch.'" Emmie laughed, and so did Jill. "I was glad I remembered enough German to tell her off. I can't believe Margie is so full of herself; she used to be fun." Emmie arranged a plastic sheet over a small table, the last piece of furniture left in the hallway. "There. I'll start in the hallway and work my way up the stairs."

"Are you sure you want to paint the stairs themselves? You'll be stuck up there until they're dry." Jill shivered.

"Either way, I'm stuck somewhere. Up or down. I'll make myself two peanut butter sandwiches and put them in my bedroom," Emmie said. "I've got a bunch of Cokes in that little refrigerator in the music room, and there's a bag of pot in there, too. I'll be fine." Emmie was getting that deer-in-the-headlights look now, which meant it was time for her to start painting. She would probably still be painting well into the evening. Once Emmie had set

out to paint the kitchen cabinets, and by the time she was finished, she'd also painted the walls and the downstairs bathroom.

Jill wanted to ask more about Margie, or Anna, as she now insisted on being called. What happened over there in Germany? But Jill knew better than to start in on that now. Emmie wanted her to leave.

"Okay. I'm going. I may stop by tonight if I get bored," Jill said.

Emmie nodded. She was already painting in her mind, applying straight highways of color to the brown landscape of the steps. Other people had ceased to exist. She heard the back door shut, and she went into the kitchen to make those sandwiches.

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Jill had heard all the stories about how Earl Morris and Margie Fortenberry jumped off the Second Street Bridge one warm night, got arrested a quarter of a mile downstream, and avoided jail by picking up trash along the highway every Saturday for a month. In one version of the story, they held hands and jumped together. Other people swore Earl went first, followed by a screaming Margie.

But Jill suspected Margie led the way, while Earl did his best to keep up. Margie had a well-deserved reputation for risk-taking: for years, high school boys swore they'd visited Margie's house after dark and that she'd relieved their stress manually through her bedroom window. Anybody who'd do that wouldn't hesitate to jump off a bridge with her clueless boyfriend.

For months after the jump, Margie and Earl had been local heroes. People expected them to settle down after their big night on the bridge. Instead, they'd moved to Germany, the last thing anybody had expected.

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Once, on a dare, Jill drove all the way to Madison, Wisconsin. It was the day after their high school graduation, and she and Emmie had been sitting on Emmie's back deck drinking beer. Emmie's older brother was there, too, and in a mood.

"Look at you. Two good-looking girls wasting away the summer."



"Well, hell, we just graduated," said Emmie. She finished her beer in a long gulp. "Would you get me another one?"

He grumbled, but went inside for the beer. He came out with two, and handed the second to Jill. "That's the thing, Em. You have to have a plan at least, or you'll both be drinking beer on this same porch come August. The only difference is you'll have tans."

"Just because we're here now doesn't mean we'll be here all summer," Jill said, as she rubbed another layer of suntan lotion on her arms.

"So what do you two have planned?"

"We don't have anything planned, but..."

"And you're not going to do a damned thing but sit on your asses all day and work at McDonald's all night." He winked at Jill, which infuriated her.

"Forget McDonald's," Jill said, fiercely. "We'll go somewhere tomorrow."

"Like where?" Emmie was startled enough to put her drink down.

"Anywhere. Bring us a map."

"Goddammit! I am not your servant," he snapped.

"Fine. I just thought you might want to come along." Jill knew what worked with Emmie's brother and had been sleeping with him on the sly for the past three months while his new girlfriend guarded her virginity like a prized ruby.

He slammed the back door behind him, but returned with a map of the United States. Jill spread it out on the deck and they all looked at it, waiting for inspiration. Finally, Emmie asked, "Where should we go?"

Before he had a chance to say anything smartass, Jill spoke. "Blindfold him and let him pick the spot. But it has to be in America," she said, emphatically.

His finger landed on Madison, and they left the next morning at four o'clock. Jill liked driving so much, she drove all the way. They found a cheap motel outside the city, stayed three days, then drove back to Cartersville, Georgia, where they spent the rest of the summer working, partying, and feeling as though they had accomplished something important, though none of them could put a name to it.

Jill surprised her friends by going to Community College that fall. She worked hard, earned her Associate's in a year and a

half, and took a bookkeeping job at the shirt factory when she finished. Ten years later, she was still there.

After leaving Emmie's, Jill drove absentmindedly to the Mexican restaurant and ordered two beef burritos and a margarita. Jill ate quickly, then sipped her drink and stared out the window. She wondered what people ate in Germany. Sauerkraut and sausage, she guessed. And beer. Jill moved to an outside table where she could smoke and watch the cars pass by. After awhile, she ordered another margarita and some chips to keep it company.

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Jill let herself in when Emmie didn't answer the doorbell. She went to the edge of the stairs. "Emmie? Are you up there?"

"Jill? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Why didn't you answer the door?"

"I can't."

"Why not? Are you hurt?" Jill put out her foot, then stopped, remembering the paint.

"No. I'm stuck." Emmie's voice seemed to come from far away. Jill leaned in as far as she could without losing her balance, but she couldn't see Emmie.

"Well, you knew that was going to happen."

"No. I'm really stuck, Jill."

"Where are you, exactly?" Jill looked up at the ceiling.

"Right over your head. In the corner under the window. I got a little carried away."

"You painted the floor up there, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Emmie's voice trailed off, then came back. "But it looks great – this color is exactly what I needed. I couldn't stop when I got to the landing. Everything up here looked so drab compared to the stairs."

Jill flipped the light switch. "They do look good," she agreed. Emmie always chose the right color.

"Thanks. Hey, Jill. Could you do something for me?" Sweet Emmie was back, the morning's bitchiness obviously exorcised through painting.

"Sure."

"Could you get me some food? Emmie's voice creaked like an old piece of furniture. And a Coke? And a joint! My God,

I need a joint. I left the sandwiches and the pot in the music room, then I painted right past it." She sounded wild.

"Sure I will. But how do I get it to you?" Jill looked up the steep walls, thought she could throw a sandwich up and over the rails, but Emmie was too far back to reach it.

"I've been thinking about that. I can jump from here to my bedroom without screwing up the paint too much. If you go outside and stand under the window, I'll lower something down to you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Jill?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Jill went into the kitchen that she knew as well as her own. She found cheese and leftover chicken in the refrigerator, made Emmie a sandwich with plenty of both and a little mayonnaise. From the cabinets over the counter, Jill took a small bag of potato chips and a brownie wrapped in plastic. She grabbed a Coke from the fridge, and surveyed the lunch. It was plenty; even hungry, Emmie probably wouldn't eat it all. She put everything in a plastic grocery bag, added a couple of joints and a lighter, and tied the ends of the bag tightly.

Emmie was leaning out the window when Jill came outside. Jill held the bag up, and Emmie nodded. "I've got just the thing." She held a small wicker basket; Jill recognized it as the one she kept on the dresser to hold her earrings. Emmie was tying something grey to the basket's handle.

"What are you doing?"

"Tying my shoestrings to this basket. I could only find four pairs of shoes with strings, so that'll have to do. Okay, I'm sending it down. Watch your head." The basket came rushing toward Jill, banging against the side of the house as it traveled. Jill thought about Margie, flying toward the water, not afraid of the cold or the current. The basket stopped, spun upwards, then down again about two feet above Jill's head.

"Dammit!" From Jill's perspective, Emmie's face looked like a walnut.

"Lean out a little. Not too far, Emmie." Was that what Margie had done? Did she think about the drop first, or just take a deep breath and fling herself over the edge?

The most dangerous thing Jill had ever done was sleep around, but all her friends had done that. None of them had traveled outside America. Only Jill and Emmie had left the Southeast, and then only that one time. Did jumping off the bridge that night make Margie fearless? Jill stared at the side of the house, forgetting all about Emmie, the food in her hand, why she was there.

"Jill! Is this enough?" Emmie was bent almost double, dangling like a piece of laundry left on the line. Jill looked up — first at Emmie, then at the basket, hanging over her head. Jill had to stretch, but she could reach it.

"I put a lighter in there, too, in case you need one."

"Thanks, Jill. I might have starved to death if you hadn't come back by."

"I doubt that." Emmie had the basket now. She unwrapped it, and took a few quick bites of the sandwich. She opened the chips and ate several, then popped the top on the Coke and drank half of it. Jill smiled. She hadn't seen Emmie enjoy food that much since they were in high school.

"God, this is great!" Emmie ate most of the sandwich — everything but the crusts, which she threw back down for the birds. She finished the Coke, too, and Jill offered to get her another. When she came back outside with Coke number two, Jill looked up, at the basket coming her way again.

"Emmie, do you want to go on a trip? I've got vacation days I need to take. I'll drive." Jill pictured the map they had spread out on the deck ten years ago. All the expressways like arteries and veins pulsing from their little town to all the other towns and cities she'd never seen. They were still there, and she was still here. That could change, though. Jill placed the drink in the basket and watched Emmie pull it up. Emmie popped the top and drank.

"Emmie. Do you?"

"Do I what?" Emmie frowned.

"Do you want to take a trip? We could drive my car, and we can pack a cooler full of food and drinks to save money."

"A trip?" Emmie sounded confused. Jill wondered if the paint fumes had gotten to her.

"Yeah. Let's go somewhere."

"Where?"

"Anyplace we can drive. You pick."

"I can't afford to close the flower shop for more than a couple of days, but I guess we could go to Chattanooga."

"No, Emmie. Not Chattanooga." Jill felt a pain in her stomach, but she wasn't hungry. "Let's go someplace we haven't been. And let's stay long enough to see it."

"Like I said, I can't afford to be away that long. But you should go, Jill. Go someplace great and then tell me all about it." Emmie finished the Coke and sighed. "I really like the new color. Everything looks so much better now."

Jill nodded in Emmie's direction, but she was thinking about Margie. Would she have jumped off the bridge by herself? Jill felt the pain in her stomach again. What if it was all Earl? Jill suddenly had another vision of that night on the bridge. In this version, Earl talks Margie into jumping. They hold hands, and she screams all the way down. Maybe Margie was just along for the ride. Jill shook her head.

"What's wrong, Jill?" Emmie said. "Is a bee after you?"

"No. My head hurts," Jill lied. "I'd better get home. Do you need anything before I leave?"

"Yeah. A bigger bladder. Nah, really. I'll manage. Thanks for taking care of me."

"No problem." Jill drove straight home. She looked around the living room until she found her Atlas, a gift from Triple-A. She sat with it on her lap a long time before she finally opened it to the complete map of the United States. Laid out that way, the country looked so organized — manageable, even. All those red and blue lines crossing all those state boundaries, all the imaginary lines she could cross, too, if she wanted. Jill pushed the Atlas away, stood up, and spread her arms wide. She spun herself around until blood pounded like a spring flood in her veins, until she stopped thinking about Margie and Emmie and how all of their lives had turned out. When she couldn't stay on her feet any longer, she slumped down beside the open Atlas and let her finger land where it would.

*She Smiles*

Such a sweet face in the picture.  
It's hard to believe that this weathered, tired face  
that I see here is the same one.  
She doesn't talk much anymore.  
Just a few mutterings now and again about  
people she knew, about her children  
now long grown with their children and grandchildren  
of their own.

Grandfather used to take her driving after church every Sunday.  
She can't leave the house anymore.  
She can't leave the bed.

"Bobby, did you visit Aunt Bertha today? How is she?"

He's sixty-four now, but she still calls him Bobby.  
Aunt Bertha has been dead for over fifteen years.  
"She's doing fine, mother."

Aunt Marlene is taking care of her. She sings  
songs to her, making up the words as she goes along.  
She sings about the people she'll see: Brian and Jesus.  
She sings about Nate.  
"You'll see Nate when you get there Grandmama."  
And she smiles when she hears his name.

She smiles when she hears his name.

*Interstate 84*

The song left me on Interstate 84.  
I could remember the words, but the essence  
was gone. Torn  
between whether I should return or press on.  
(Either I had left it behind, or it went on ahead, waiting  
for me to come sing.)

It was a fleeting hope that vanished  
unseen into the trees, into the sky,  
into memory. The soft glow of the  
ashtray light made visible the vice-grip  
of scared hands on the wheel.

\* \* \*

It was so long ago, eons in fact.  
I don't even remember the words anymore.  
I remember...nothing. But I  
drive on, Interstate 84 so far behind.  
I don't even look for it anymore; wouldn't  
recognize it if I saw it.  
So, I wrote a new song.

*Clumsy Words*

A poet once said,  
“I did but see her passing by,  
And yet I’ll love her ‘till I die.”

I understand the sentiment.

If I had any courage, my pen would remain idle.  
So, I write.  
I try to put down on paper the intangible, the beauty  
I have seen. But, all the  
good words have been taken, used, and re-used.  
How about, “I saw a lifetime of dreams in that moment.”  
Quite pathetic.

I could talk about her beauty, her dark, enthralling  
eyes from which her smile gracefully reflects  
like majestic trees on the water’s edge.

I could say words like forever, but oh what a cliché.  
There are words about dark hair that glistens  
like the wings of a crow against a summer sky.  
And of course there are all those things we’ve heard in love songs,  
but the words wouldn’t be my own.

So many words, but none are sufficient.  
So, perhaps I’ll just say,  
“hello.”



*Baby 11th*

I just wanted to tell you that it hurt, Momma. It was such pain, the way I left your world. I cried and cried, and you never heard. But now I know why. Now I can see why you did not rush to save me. Why you did not even name me. I can see why you left me alone in those red, green, and white bedsheets. God let me see it all from heaven. So I saw how you were washing clothes in the lavadero. I saw how my little brothers and sisters were running circles around you and playing in the dirt. There was ten of them — four girls and six boys. I saw how your forehead was sweating and how you tried to hide the pain that came from giving birth to me not even a week before. I saw that you were bleeding from below. I saw how my Pa was working in the fields collecting cotton to sell so that he could bring some money home for milk and beans and rice. I saw how the sun was burning your brown golden skin and how your feet had blisters from walking barefooted through the thorns in the backyard of our home as you tried to pick up the vegetables Pa used to grow. I saw how your breasts were leaking milk and you paid them no attention. I saw how firm your muscles were from all the work of being a momma so young. You were so beautiful, more than the angels here. That day I could smell the beans in the stove. I could also smell the alcohol my Pa used to heal his wounds. Sometimes the wounds were on the inside, and sometimes they were not. I saw you from heaven, Momma. I saw you, and if I could have, I would have touched you. Kissed you. I would have comforted you.

Our house was two bedrooms my Pa made with his bare hands. One of them was the kitchen and the other our bedroom. I saw how you all used to eat in the ground covered with dirt. I saw how hard you tried to sweep and sweep but you just could not clean the dirt. I saw how you went out of your way to keep your children warm in the cold. How you would stay up all night and dream all day. You would wake up before the sun to cook

lunch for Pa. You would then stay awake and look at me and my brothers and sisters and cry. Why, Momma? I could feel your tears sometimes when you fed me, running down your eyes into your cheeks, then to your neck and finally your chest, where I was. Why did you cry? Was it because you wanted us to be fat and warm? Because you did not want to hear our stomachs growl? I wish I could tell you that it was enough. That even though I did not make it through, it was not your fault. Well, at first I did blame you because I tried to tell you. But you did not hear me, I thought. But you did hear me. Why did you not come rescue me?

Momma it hurt so bad.

First I heard it coming and it woke me up. I lay in the bed quiet for a minute until I felt it pull the sheets. That when I began to yell for you. I got scared. Then it pulled the sheets so hard that I fell off the bed and hit my head. My head was hurting like when I tried to come out of you. Except this time there was no you to come to. Then I felt its teeth in my stomach.

But don't cry, Momma; it didn't hurt as bad as your inside wounds. God had taken me before it ripped my arm off and chewed on it. God took me before it opened my stomach and ate from me. Don't cry, Momma. Don't cry.

I saw from heaven your expression when you came into the room. I saw how you screamed and screamed and screamed. I was hurting with you too. I felt your pain then and you felt mine. I was inside of you again. I know you could not handle looking at the piece of me laying in the flood. You could not handle the blood pond in the floor. That's when Luis came into find you searching for me in the pond of baby blood and dirt. His eyes popped open and he ran to tell Pa. Minutes later Pa came through the door and there we were. You were soaked with my blood and I was inside of you.

Pa was stunned. He did not know what to do. He saw my arm here and my leg there and the pig in the corner eating my head. He pulled his knife out of his pocket and sent Luis away. He stabbed that pig so many times, Momma, that even you got scared. He opened him up as if trying to get me out of it. But he was too late. He was too late. The pig was hungry.

But I forgive you, Momma. I forgive Pa, too. Tell him

not be mad at you. I miss you deeply, and I wish to be with you. But I will be here waiting for you when you leave. I will always love you and you will always be my queen. I miss your milk and your touch. I love you, and I forgive you. That's all I really wanted to say, Momma, that I forgive you.

*Tennis Ball Philosophy*

My fur is ruffled as the tension strings stinging brush my side,  
Punctuating my pain with a grunt  
as I struggle  
to stay between the lines.

Compressing and expanding at expended will with a will to  
maintain my form,  
but I remain as flat or round as they wish me to be;  
uncontrollably controlled as I am.

I make my mark on the court as I am ferociously pounded,  
losing yellow,  
losing bounce.

Spinning with English cotton candy delicacy as I am parlayed  
with effortless serendipity.  
They call it love, when I am first thrown up, slammed hard and  
hit again.

They run to seek me, having misplaced my presence, they find me  
waiting.

for I cannot move unless they make me, and I will not rob them  
of their pleasure.

Of their sport.

They put up a net for their safety, not mine,  
And one day, when I am too deflated for proper use, I will be  
thrown and fetched;  
Gnawed to death by a best friend —  
Doing what is expected of both of us; us in our respective places.  
But for now, it is as always

back

and

forth

Hit both ways both times both sides. Useless otherwise.  
up

back ,

I mean

back  
down.

I am

the

opposite

and equal

reaction you need to feel.  
To feel.

*The Finding*  
(for James Still)

I have come at last to the place I know.  
Not the place my mother knew but my place still.  
I know why the ant husk hangs by a thread on my clothesline.  
I know when the katydids will sing in the harmony of  
pulsing shrills.

I fear the drought that sucks the water from my well  
And listen for the throbbing sound of piliated woodpecker  
pounding on hollow tree.  
I know the slippery rocks of algae-wet and the burning rocks of  
summer's glare.  
And I know the deer's brown eyes and the sting of cat briars.

I see bear-claws clutching sunflower feeders  
And the endless patience of wasps to build and build again.  
I take my garbage to the tree's feet beside the  
deep green galax.  
I watch brown grasshoppers lunge zig and zag against  
the roar of machine.

I walk in a place where dry leaves fall and dark holes  
harbor the timber rattler.  
I stand beside the yellow pines that cling to the  
thin-soiled rock.  
There is a room for me in the clear still waters touched  
by water striders and crayfish  
In the presence of the patterned glow of  
the striped water snake.

*The Banana Pudding Dish*  
*(for Marjorie)*

The rose in my mother's banana pudding dish  
blooms through the dust  
glows pink when I slide my finger  
over its flat smooth petals.

China glass still wears its gold-veined rim against  
shades of fading green  
still pings in high-toned fragility  
at the staccato touch of nails.

Fragile recollection sits on the varnished walnut shelf  
of somebody's discarded family cupboard  
secure from hot steaming custard  
and vanilla wafers and banana platelets  
plopped on its frail pink bloom  
in Sunday morning haste.

Oh gone are its days of centerpieced glory  
on the white only-a-little frayed  
damask cloth draping the mighty circled table.

No longer positioned by matriarchal hand  
which spooned out just desserts  
into clear squat goblets to all

Whose bleach-white napkins remained lap-bound

Who sat up rigid on cracked-leather seats  
in stiff dark chairs

Who poised in post-church glory  
clothed in itchy-stiff organdy dresses  
with pastel ruffles

wearing thin lace socks

in black patent shoes which never

drifted upward upon the leatherstiff chairs

but always hung downward uniform and shining

Who had endured Saturday claws  
scraping tender scalps  
and twisting hair for rag-sock Sunday  
curls

Who laid all forks and knives and spoons  
in their respective places with proper  
deference to the triangular positioning  
of those only-slightly-frayed white  
damask napkins

Who spilled no sweet-sticky tea from Iris-  
adorned clear thick glasses

Who ate acceptable portions of tender-baked  
steak and creamed potatoes lathered  
with deep brown gravy  
and minimal quantities of green beans  
accompanied by lettuce-tomato salad  
dabbled with Dukes mayonnaise

Who did not fight with their brothers during the  
meal and

Who waited for blessing  
before stretching arms outward  
toward glorious aromas.

So that redemption was earned through deference to ritual  
signified by a well-filled banana pudding dish

So that even when a heart-attack mother lay between two worlds  
a daughter plopped banana platelets into the fragile bowl  
and a brother stood hot and sweaty stirring a Sunday  
morning custard

So that order and life might prevail a few more years  
for organdy-clad little girls with black patent shoes and  
clean shiny dark-brown curls

So that lanky boys already once bereaved might have on more  
chance at childhood's return.

A china dish sits in somebody's old cupboard.  
No sweet tea is spilled.  
No brothers fight.  
No sister's nails bring shiny ropy curls  
to grey-streaked strands.  
My mother's dish blooms in the darkness.



### ***Fumbling Toward Destiny***

*“A writer,” I said shakily, when asked for the first of many times what I wanted to be when I “grew up.” I was sure of this in my heart, but when my mouth said it, it sounded ridiculous. My cheeks grew hot, as they often did in second grade, and I wondered why I hadn’t thought of a lie. When skeptically asked what it was I wanted to write, I quickly said, “Ummm... books?” Evidently this answer would suffice, or rather, it had to, and Mrs. Johnson slowly shook her head as she moved on to the next contestant on her personal game show.*

It is fifth-grade career day, and those childish aspirations seem so distant now. When the man across the table asks me what I want to be, I (glance at Joana and Ali for affirmation, await their nods, and) proudly reply, “A fashion designer.” My eyes dart back and forth around the table and I am relieved to be met with nods and raised eyebrows. Whew. Never mind the fact that I have no interest in fashion and no artistic ability; it makes a lot more sense than being a writer. Who would ever want to be a writer anyway?

*I was late for dinner. Again, and they all awaited me with “the look.” They weren’t mad, couldn’t really be, but the chicken was getting cold and this was becoming a common occurrence. “What does she do out there anyway?” John asked, with the intonation only a younger brother can have. Mom halfheartedly explained my “hobby” to him, but I was not offended. I wrote because I loved to, but even at eleven I knew there was a deeper reason. We were on vacation in Ontario, and my spiral notebooks accompanied me everywhere. In the hammock, on the seawall, on the beach, in my bed, at the kitchen table, or in the minivan, I wrote. About me, my life, and the lives of all the people I could be. I always wrote about girls, and they were always older than I was. They had “significant” problems that rarely happened to anyone, and their stories had clichéd titles. Drawers in my room were devoted to*

*half-filled notebooks. Word pairings I liked, ideas for stories, and alphabetized lists of names for characters, scrawled across the pages. But be a writer? No way. I was going to be a singing superstar; everyone knew that.*

“Thanks so much, we’ll get back to you. Have a nice day,” the director says, without looking up from his clipboard. I have gotten to the point where I know that “We’ll get back to you” only means “If we want you,” and that is rarely the case. I shrug my shoulders as if the physical act is capable of shedding rejection. It’s fine; maybe the roles I had in the past were only given because the competition was not very stiff. Maybe my parents and friends and voice teacher were all biased and wrong. Either way, I guess I will have to find a new dream.

*I wore cut-off jean shorts, a nondescript white T-shirt from fifth grade, and Keds — no socks. My tanned legs were meticulously shaven, although badly nicked, and my face was free of make-up. I uneasily shifted my backpack from shoulder to shoulder, unsure of the cool “way.” I shuffled my feet on the way to the bus stop because I was twelve, and because that automatically meant that I could not be the first one there. I was still holding out for that elusive girl who lived on the corner, anyway. Maybe she would get there before I did and want to be my friend.*

Wearing a sticker touting my full name, which no one calls me, and my hometown, of which no one has ever heard, I walk uneasily with a group of people walking just as uneasily, only I think that they are confident. In the 500 miles that separate home and this college, I know one person, and he’s off to teach English in China tomorrow. I better meet somebody soon, so that I can’t say I know nobody for 500 miles. I just do not think I could take it if that were true, and those cool and confident people absolutely cannot see me cry.

*Meredith’s gum was smacking loudly in my ear as she told me I was Christi, she had heard. She briefed me on all the social do’s and don’ts in addition to giving me the abridged “Who’s who at Mayfield Middle School.” She wore her backpack on both shoulders. She wore mascara. I would have to remember that.*

The girl in the blue dress is walking beside me, but we are not speaking. No one is. It seems ridiculous; this is not the way I have lived my life. So, feeling like an idiot, I extend my hand and introduce myself in a way that makes me feel like I'm forty, wearing white pumps at a Baptist church potluck. She returns my greeting, and although she is just as scared as I, I convince myself that she too thinks I am "that lady" at the potluck. Once again I tell myself that there is no one like me here. I promise myself that I will jump off a bridge if that conclusion is true.

*Meredith led me to my "exploratory." She was right; "homeroom" was so.... seventh grade. Tom was already seated when I got there. Wow. He had legs hairier, shoulders broader, and eyes bluer than I had ever seen on a boy at Owen Brown Middle. As I sat next to him, he smiled at me and I felt fire race up my chest and throat and I wondered if he could tell.*

The professors in the meetings keep stating that my "mate" may be right there in this room. "This could be it!" While I know this is meant to be encouraging, to me it might as well be the prophecy of the apocalypse. I'm looking around this auditorium and am definitely not struck by the urge to grow old with any of these young men. My eyes are assaulted by camouflage and dip cans, and I begin to think that Paul was right. Maybe the single life has its blessings, too.

*It is wrong for a high school sophomore to be on Prozac, but I could name at least four who were, and they were my friends. Samantha was bipolar, to say the least, Kristen had an eating disorder, Alex was brilliant but had an inferiority complex and a drug problem, and Jenn was just always sad. I felt helpless against all of that darkness, but it seemed like I was the only one who could fight it. They ran to me and I would have loved to help them. It just seemed that if I pulled in too many directions, I'd be bound to break. I wondered, was it normal to cry every night?*

After a few months at college, my sanity has returned. I remember that I don't need to have someone with me all the time. I never have, why start now? My confidence and security that temporarily faded are back in full force, and I am happy. I am trying

to share that happiness with these others, whom peace has somehow evaded.

*I decided last night. Or rather, God did — I am going to be a psychologist. That is why all of these people surround me, and it's okay if I have no one to hold me up. Either I will just have to be strong enough or I will lean on God. Maybe if I got out of this place, I could reach that potential. I keep telling myself that it will all be worthwhile once I have left and my life gets real. But this is real, and will not change. I have found my calling, so if nothing else, that makes me feel validated.*

Psychology 280 is my least favorite class I have taken. I've not learned anything I did not already know, and I am dreading the remainder of college if this is what it will be like. I have been considering another major, although it feels sacrilegious. I love to write. All my life, it has been omnipresent. I guess I thought my passion and my career could not peaceably coexist. Dad says I don't need to pursue counseling as a career to serve God. I guess it's not necessary for me to tell God what my calling is when it is evident I am wrong.

*Writing my own credentials was harder than I thought. I had never been very adept at "selling myself;" it always seemed pretentious. Evidently, colleges needed to be sold, though. My accomplishments spoke well for themselves; there was no need to embellish. I was stuck, however, on "hobbies." Writing seemed to be the one activity that did not belong. Placed strategically between softball and singing, I think I hoped no one would notice. If they did, I knew I would have some explaining to do.*

"Well, why don't you write?" The professor, a stranger to me, says this as if it is blatantly obvious. I am looking at her, incredulous. She might as well have six heads. "Write? You mean, for a living? I can't do that; it's not practical!" She nods and tells me how practical, although not always lucrative, writing is. I am convinced she is right; that is no longer the problem. The issue becomes convincing my parents that I can manage to be a "writer" without starving or living with them until my retirement. A mere technicality, I am sure.

## *Culmination*

*Now I am about to graduate from college, and my best friend is the girl in the blue dress. I finally declared my major, and I'm contemplating marriage (could those crazed prophets be right?). However, I am still completely unsure of what my future holds. A glamorous profession, writing for highly touted publications while living out my musical and domestic dreams as well? Perhaps. There are still many days I am asked of my career goals, and once again I am the second grader with the burning cheeks. My eyes become captivated by my shoes, I shrug my shoulders and mutter, "Umm... I want to write." My friends at home respond with semi-belittling nods, and allude to their chemical engineering and other world-changing majors at expensive, prestigious schools. I try to be unfazed. Once, however, I was met with a response that was far wiser than it was intended to be: "Not only second graders say they want to write. Writers say that too." Writers? After years of fighting, maybe that is all I am.*

*Doesn't It Make You Feel Better*

Everything is so black  
soot dusted and covered  
breaking off and crumbling down  
it's an ugly, ugly day  
we're teetering on the brink  
and all they do is talk at us  
I guess it makes them feel better  
repeat after me  
you've been brainwashed with propaganda  
our left over cold war rhetoric  
don't you feel warm inside  
don't you feel better now  
we all feel safer now  
and you're still unsure  
you can just sing along

*Trespassers*

I float above the ground  
nothing can touch me  
you can't own the air  
so stop yelling  
I float above the ground  
we'll all float soon  
because that's what happens  
when there's no place to go  
your deeds and titles are useless here

## *Over Betsy's*

My father drove us across Betsy's Mountain to Pink's Store not long before my great-grandmother died, managing the snug lanes of shimmering asphalt like a man who was comfortable living in high places. First he ran the flats of Spring Creek, where we lived, and then followed the creek water through Luck and Trust, before taking us up and over the mountain. He drove with his left arm draped out the Chrysler window like a listless flag, his right wrist limp over the steering wheel, tipping a single finger to cars approaching in the opposite direction.

I sat in the backseat with Great-Great, who watched out the window with disinterest. Her mind had almost finished its process of leaving her, and for that last year I typically did not know what to expect from her. Snuff plugged her lip, as usual, and she clasped one solemn hand upon the other, gripping the wooden cane wedged between her knees. I can't recall now exactly what item she claimed to have needed that day, although I don't believe she really wanted anything except a chance to get out of the house.

When we arrived at Pink's Store, my father took Great-Great by the elbow and helped her out of the car. All the old men — the ones who sat on the porch and talked about days before I was born, days when, they'd always told me, people had a reason to be proud of their country and their government — gathered their aging bodies and greeted her. "Morning, Mrs. Ferguson," they said in unison, like children. Out of respect, they still called her Mrs. Ferguson even though my great-grandfather had been dead since 1961. This was 1980. I was ten years old.

"Morning," she said. My father nodded at the men, who sat back down after we passed.

Once inside, my father went directly to the counter to talk to Pink. They conducted a good deal of business together, and liked to be secretive. I followed Great-Great down the aisles as she examined the dry goods, fondling a bag of cornmeal and then a box of Epsom Salts, both of which she took from the shelf and tucked



in her arm. She finally stopped in front of the cigarettes. She traced her finger in the air, across the Winston's and Salem's and settled on the Lucky Strikes. "A pack of those," she whispered to me. I had not known my grandmother to ever smoke. I reached for the cigarettes anyway and handed her a pack. She casually slipped it into the pocket of her dress just like it was her pair of reading glasses. At first, this appeared to be an absentminded move on her part. Then she winked at me. My neck flushed hot and I turned around to see if we were being watched. We were not. My father had his back to us in such a way that blocked Pink from our view. I looked at the peppermint candy sticks on the bottom shelf, which I'd had my eye on for some time, and Great-Great nodded, as if to say, go ahead, so I kneeled down and selected a red and white swirl about the size of a pencil. I slid it in the pocket of my shorts and stood up.

We took the cornmeal and Epsom Salts over to the cash register. My father paid for them. "Mrs. Ferguson," Pink said. "Looking well."

"Thank you, Pink." Great-Great sounded like she was ready to burst into song, or at least a good round of laughter. My father handed Pink an extra dollar.

"For whatever it is they got," he said.

I sat in the front seat on the way home, a mistake, I knew, my hand hiding the peppermint stick and the ridge it made along my leg inside my pocket. My father seemed to be teasing me with the switchbacks while coming down the mountain, waiting until the last possible moments to ease into and out of the curves. Every half-mile or so, I could feel him studying me.

Just as I was about to give up and confess, the rear car door on Great-Great's side mysteriously flung itself open. We were heading into the last curve before valley straightaway. I flipped around in my seat to see if I could help. "Great-Great," I yelled. For that moment, I saw her as clearly as I ever had. She was not panicked. Rather, she was perched on her seat's edge, peering into the trout water rushing alongside the car as if she were contemplating placing her foot on a smooth stone to help her run the creek. Her stare bent forward, it seemed, into the future, as if she understood something about her life that my father and I never would. I tried to reach out to her, but my arms were not long enough.

My father slowed the car down, although he could not find room to pull over. I considered climbing over the seat. Then, with-

out even shifting her hips, Great-Great stretched out and fished the door handle with her canehead. She hooked it and pulled the door shut. "Sorry," she said to my father, who had now managed to stop the car a hundred feet before Grover Frisbee's mailbox. "Keep going. I'm fine," Great-Great said. She waved her hand in the air like she did not want to be bothered. Both my father and I watched her closely for a few seconds and then faced the windshield again.

My father, comfortable once more, eased the car back on to the asphalt. He drove very slowly before picking up speed. I felt my pocket for the peppermint stick, which was still there, although it was broken to pieces inside its cellophane wrapper. I pulled it out and showed it to my father. He nodded and smiled. Then he flashed a one-finger salute to Grover Frisbee as we passed his drive. That old man sat in his idling Ford pickup by his mailbox, evidently a witness of Great-Great's unruly car door, as his face was empty and pearled like the underbelly of a cottonmouth.

*firebird*  
(for rick)

rain thrashing  
the stained-glass window  
of Jesus carrying  
the forgotten sheep  
home from the pasture

how selfish to think  
of death when you  
were thinking of life

swirling, whirling  
red and orange leaves  
of the ashes and maples

who heard your song

weather-beaten rooster  
receiving his 39 lashes  
of unremembered earth

through the haze  
moonlight streams  
like a phoenix  
rising from the ashes

eternal firebird

*Jericho*

I sleep, slowly into stronger dreams,  
collapsed in the rubble of broken glass,  
wearing the mantle Rahab passed to me

through the window as I ran. Marching  
in circles, they crushed the idols of my past.  
I sleep, slowly slipping into stronger dreams

of sunshine and spies and sandy fields  
where my little sister raced the baby calves,  
wearing the mantle Rahab passed to me.

Fire devours the children who were playing  
barefoot under the wall when it crashed.  
I sleep, slowly slipping into stronger dreams.

Tonight the Jordan smiles maliciously  
as I struggle to stand on bloody grass,  
wearing the mantle Rahab passed to me.

I sleep, not hearing my loss and defeat  
being praised with dances and drums and brass.  
I sleep, slowly slipping into stronger dreams,  
wearing the mantle Rahab passed to me.

*raspberries*

savory sap  
bleeding  
on my lips  
like leaping fish

making ripples dance

in my eyes  
last summer  
as i sat watching  
sparks flicker

on the asphalt  
in the 90° heat  
of independence

the phone ringing  
in the neighbor's house

as i sat alone

*Nervosa*

flush the toilet while the water runs  
thinning hair falls from rinsed brushes  
“at least we’re in control”

naked teeth bared in the mirror,  
Neosporin on second-knuckle cuts  
flush the toilet while the water runs

your voice, sparse feathers on roadkill crows,  
whispers the words through layers of pain,  
“at least we’re in control”

acid-pharynx, always short of breath  
hide the choke-tears, now quickly  
flush the toilet while the water runs

pray the needle falls still farther  
abusive thoughts escape, repeat in silence  
“at least we’re in control”

flee from grace and stumble onto porcelain  
they know — will not allow you to  
flush the toilet while the water runs. they sigh.  
can finally say, “at least we’re in control.”

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Kelly Ergle** is a 2001 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. She is from Saluda, South Carolina, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in English at Gardner-Webb University.

**Adam Gaske** is a Health and Wellness major from Hamburg, New York. His interests include running, music, writing, computers, movies, and reading. These are his first published poems.

**Andy Greene** is an English major from Forest City, North Carolina. He is the Student Minister at Cornerstone Fellowship in Spindale, North Carolina. His writing has previously been published by the *Vital Worship Music Resource Company*.

**Christi Hallis** is an English major from Columbia, Maryland. She is the Copy Editor for the Gardner-Webb newspaper, *The Pilot*, and she is also a member of numerous honor societies, including Alpha Chi, Sigma Tau Delta, and Pi Delta Phi. This is the first time her writing or photography has been published.



**Stacey Homesley** is a Communications Studies major from Charlotte, North Carolina.

**Tara Hostetler** is an English major from Charleston, South Carolina. She is a Gardner-Webb University Fellows Scholar interested in black and white photography and pottery. She received one of *The Broad River Review* Student Writing Awards for 2002. This is the first time her poetry has been published.

**Tim D. Livingston** is a Communications Studies major from Wilmington, North Carolina. He works at WGWG (88.3 FM), the Gardner-Webb University radio station, and has previously self-published *Midnight Leads to Daybreak*, which is a collection of poetry and artwork.

**Miriam Oviedo** is a 2001 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her work has previously appeared in *Reflections* and *La cara nuestra*.

**Ron Rash's** first novel, *One Foot in Eden*, will be published in the fall by Charlotte's Novello Festival Press. He is an alumnus of Gardner-Webb University, and he currently teaches at Tri-County Technical College in Pendleton, South Carolina, and in the M.F.A. program in creative writing at Queens College. Rash has also published two books of short stories (*The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth in Cliffside, North, N.C.* and *Casualties*) as well as two books of poetry (*Eureka Mill* and *Among the Believers*). His third book of poetry, *Raising the Dead*, is also due out this fall.

**Sarah Thomas** is an English major from Statesville, North Carolina. She is the recipient of the 2002 J. Calvin Koontz Poetry Award. Her poetry has previously appeared in *Reflections*.

**Erik Wince** is a Physical Education major from Lattimore, North Carolina. He is varsity wrestler for Gardner-Webb University. His artwork has previously appeared in *Reflections*.

**Abigail Wolford** is an English and Spanish major from Newark, Ohio. She serves as Editor of *The Broad River Review*, and her

poetry has appeared in several publications, including *Time of Singing*, *Tucumcari*, *Reflections*, *La cara nuestra*, and *Poetry Motel*.

**Jonathan Wood** is an English major from Roaring River, North Carolina. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, and is interested in music, reading, and Great Britain. This is his first publication.

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