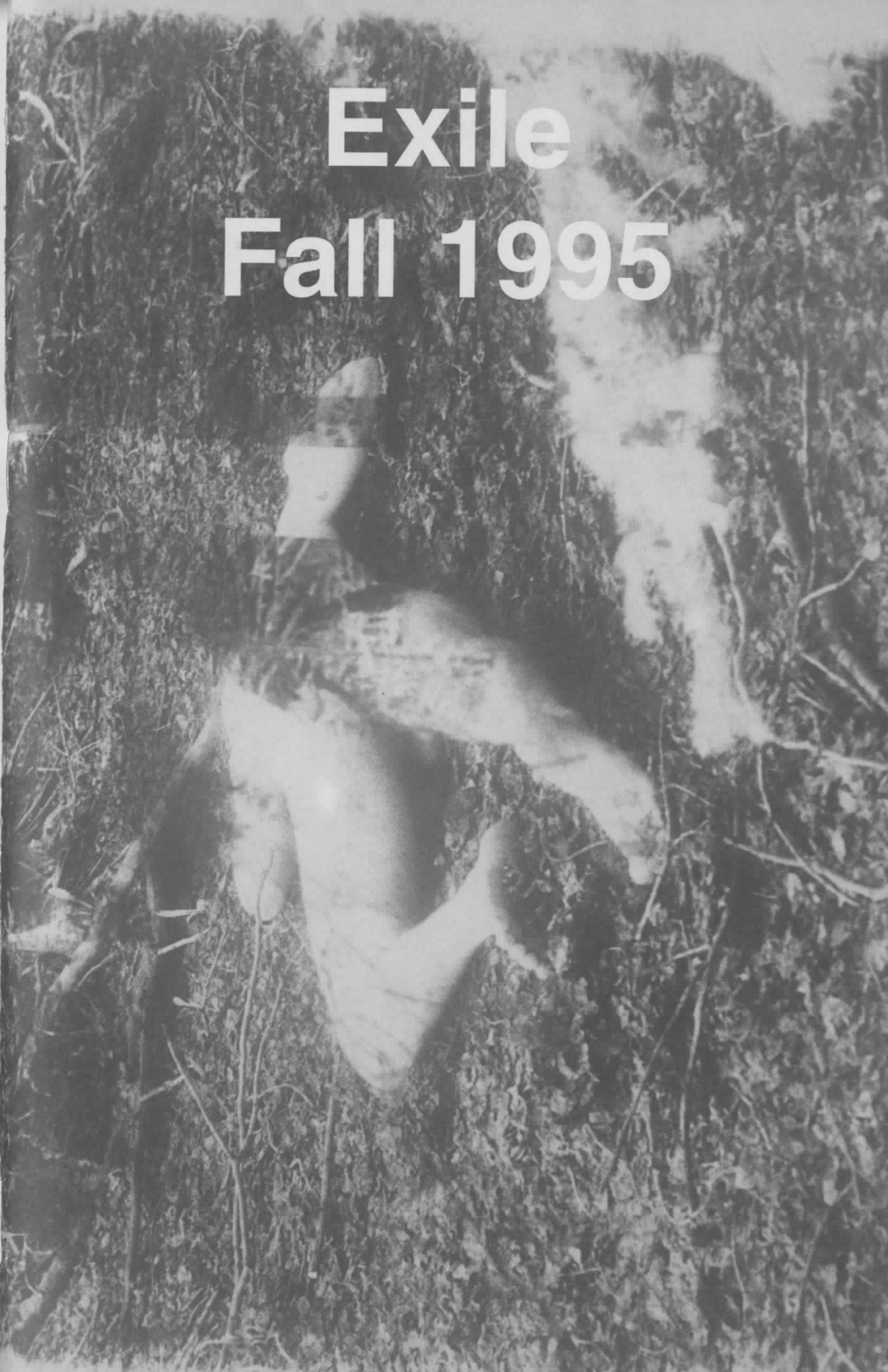


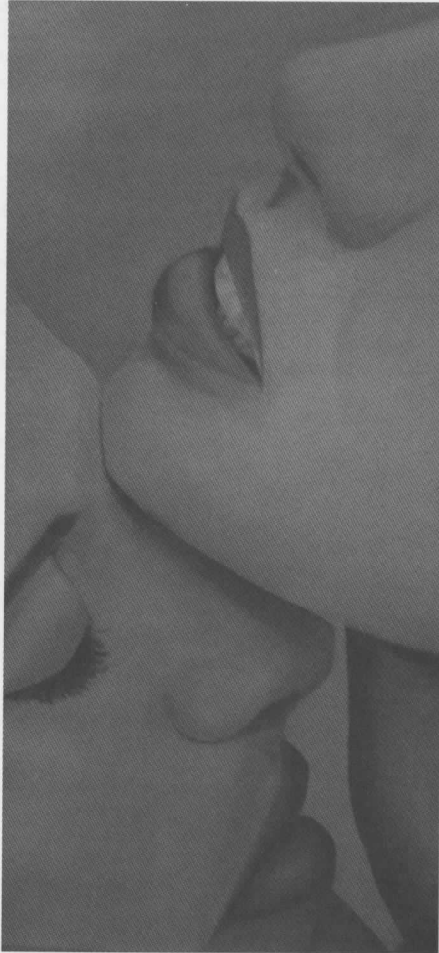
# Exile

## Fall 1995



**Exile**  
**Denison University's**  
**Literary and Art Magazine**

**40th Year**



**Fall Issue**

You of the finer sense,  
 Broken against false knowledge,  
 You who can know at first hand,  
 Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought:  
 I have weathered the storm,  
 I have beaten out my exile.

*Ezra Pound*

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Georgel Agly, Graduate



Photo: [illegible]

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## Breughel Again, Brussels

She scoops the frites into the paper cone,  
Arms like melting wax.  
Oily warmth glowing yellow.  
Kermess.  
I eat, walking,  
scenery sliding down my throat.

Circling.  
Midnight in a crowd,  
We move together.  
Around lipstick and frizzed hair,  
Men with scars,  
Arab boys with smirks  
Pinching butts.  
Moving

Around the rides with Techno music.  
Americanized.  
"Le Splash"  
"Le Rock"  
"Youpi!"  
Steel rotations.

A boxing match is about  
To start.  
I stop  
Next to a tall man in a fez.  
He turns and shows me  
His golden teeth.  
*At the Kermess, you have to keep  
Moving or you'll slip under.*

Slot machines.  
Dart games.  
Herrings and chestnuts.  
Cotton Candy.  
Fleshy Women, oiled,  
Edible.

Flemish laughs,  
French whispers

---

And sex noises in corners  
 Behind the stands.  
 In the painting,  
 A man in a bodkin with an erection.  
 Here, pareil:  
 Spandex and hard-ons.

"Le Splash"  
 Again.  
 Lights and motors,  
 Screams of thrills  
 Of the circling carnival machines.  
 Clunk and fall.

Spinning again.  
 Upside down  
 In Flemish, like Breughel.  
 "Le Rock."  
 A boy in a suit, slicked,  
 I looked too long  
 And he follows me.  
 I can feel my hips swaying.

French whispers:  
*C'est marrant, hein, on tourne.*  
 Cement littered  
 Mayonnaise and frites,  
 Waffle fragments  
 Greasy napkins.

Screaming mouths.  
 He is following me,  
 My hips move nervous.  
 A woman with one arm.  
 A boy with an eyepatch.  
 A cigar, ash in my hair.  
 I turn  
 And the crowd is rushing at me.

He is there, his gray suit,  
 With a rose.  
 I have to turn back,  
 Moving with the others  
 In our circle.  
 And he is beside me.

Rotating skewers of lamb  
 Dripping fat.  
 Cherry-filled gaufres.  
 I try to smile.  
 His slight mustache.  
 I pull the wrapper from the rose.  
 Its petals break off the  
 Bulb, rotted.

His lips open:  
 A golden tooth.  
 Ferris wheel.  
 "Youpi!"  
 Slot machines,  
 Ring toss.  
 There is a man with a spider monkey  
 Spinning Roulette for gerbils.

I push into a knot of people,  
 Soft bodies,  
 Polyester, cotton, patches of sweat.  
 The rose falls to the cement  
 With cigarette  
 Wads of gum, butts.

Someone hit a jackpot.  
 I have lost him.  
 The crows moves on and I relax,  
 And follow the Techno  
 Screams and motors,  
 Red, blue, orange.  
 "Le Splash."  
 French Fries.  
 She scoops the frites into the paper cone.

Adrienne Fair '96

---

**for play with whitman**

face it  
 passion is a cold lobotomy  
 except when I read you  
 soft soulful singing shell  
   its advocate  
   his reconciler  
   her conductor  
   and my lover  
   (being precedes not shell  
     nor shell precedes not being)  
   bearded bard  
   minstrel minister  
     you always  
 accept when i read you  
 other crawfish toy with me  
 flirt twelve inches below sea level  
 waves distort and wrinkle my view  
 i surge forward to paw them  
 and they skirt backward  
   but you  
 you always accept when i read you  
   i surge backward to paw you  
   and you rush everywhere to greet me  
 bursting           through fluid space  
 exploding         through water time  
                   simultaneously  
   my future my past my life and my lover  
   and you soul shell become still my present  
   lifting drifting floating bloating  
 with life and time  
   you know  
   not dry stream nor net  
 for you always  
   accept when i read you

*alex e blazer '97*

---

**Saeta Sunday**

Miles Davis hearkening the lost  
 sensuality of Spain, you at the stereo  
 toning the volume of his trumpet,  
 blissfully dripping in your shower towel.

What else do I need, my own  
 backyard cabaret, my personal quintet  
 of Harlem heroes sweating, straining  
 at their art to please me? When you,

cheeks the hue of cherry wine,  
 hair glistening more sweetly than Monk's  
 piano keys, sway before me  
 in a syncopation unique, sans melody.

*Carl Boon '96*

---

## An Abbreviated Life

Born J.H.  
 Doe in K.C.  
 Went K-12  
 in L.A.  
 Got B.S.  
 in C.S.  
 from O.S.U.  
 in '89.  
 N.A.S.A. hired  
 at 25K.  
 I.B.M.  
 V.P. at  
 60K to  
 put O.E.D.  
 on C.D.  
 R.O.M. (His  
 P.C. had  
 40 gigs  
 R.A.M.)  
 Drank 2 kilos  
 MD 20/20  
 last P.M.;  
 B.M.W. hit  
 semi at  
 80 m.p.h.

*Mike Westmoreland*

---

## Anthem of Governor's Bay

I often believed that my greatest power was the worldly knowledge you lent me in my youth. It assured me that my life might prosper out of Governor's Bay. Now the tide creeps away from those summers of hurried talks on the hot docks of the bay, and becomes faded like the teak of an antiqued yacht.

Across the inlet, a stately mansion was built. It stared into the sound, and often the land marked itself for drunken navigators. It was here where you and your wife threw Gatsby-style galas, inviting club members and island folk from the Gold Coast communities of Eaten's neck, Quogue, and East Hampton. I watched from my launch boat as couples mingled their ways across the pristine lawn to where you and Mrs. Faircloth sipped dry Martinis and greeted with unnatural hugs. Later, you discussed your hatred for those well-dressed events. You told me about your youth, and an October afternoon at Yankee Stadium, sitting high in the nickel seats when you caught a ball barehanded from the legendary 'Mick' during his final games in the Bronx. Your memories of youth were precious. You never spoke of your wife, except when she refused to join you during your afternoon hunts for Bluefish off the banks of the island. She called it mundane; sitting hours in a fishing chair, beer in hand, waiting to reel in finned seafood. I was fourteen when you called your wife's name as you stood on the afterdeck of your yacht, and triggered your life away.

\*\*\*\*\*

You spoke to me only on the weekends when you arrived with your long-haired Sheepdog named Beaches; both of you awaiting your delivery to Insanity. He occasionally perched himself on the bow of my launch, as I throttled an Evinrude fifteen horse through the harbor, dodging the wakes of larger seacraft. Governor's Bay was nested in the banks of the Connecticut River, which emptied itself into the Long Island Sound across from Montauk Point. It was my home and yours. The harbor ran deep into the coast, turning itself into a fresh water river within five miles of the pebbled shoreline. Governor's was the home of fresh and wealthy executives and old money families. Its beaches were occupied by lavish whitewashed weekend cottages that could have been used as year round palaces. Yours was on a bluff, where white waves crashed against the jagged rocks below your lawn. It was a weathered mansion with forest-colored awnings, wrapping around the veranda that was blanketed by towering oaks.

My father restored an '81 Boston Whaler and made it into a launch boat. He crafted a cushioned seat that curved around the body of the boat with plenty of space for sailbags, coolers, graying fathers, and their pampered daughters. On both sides, was the name Harbor Son, painted delicately with a deep red glossy paint. It was designed to hold a much larger outboard than the small Evinrude motor mounted to the stern, but harbor police enforced a no wake zone on all boats. My job required me to bring families, young couples, and fish-hearted men to their moored boats in the harbor. I made most of my money through tips handed down to me from the teaked decks of Hatterases, Chris Crafts, Bertrams, and various modern sloops. At sundown I collected

my passengers from those floating pavilions, and brought them to a dock by the clubhouse, where they discussed their latest Caribbean adventures over a bottle of Chardonnay.

Yours was a fifty-two foot Grand Banks, white with a navy blue hull. Insanity was nestled in between smaller vessels, making it appear royal and important. The flying bridge shot skyward, and had a sophisticated panel of controls which you controlled to maneuver her on your escapes to Block Island and the Vineyard. It was this passionate boat which lured you away from your home atop the bluff, and gave you a delicate feeling of youth.

I picked you up on the lee side of your home, where a jetty calmed the water, and created a small inlet. Every Saturday at ten. That was the routine. You boarded and bellowed a huge welcome with Beaches by your side, tongue out and tail wagging. He loved the salt in the air.

"Graham, my boy. How's business? Right on time. Hear anything this morning? Anything 'bout the blues bitin'?"

"Ah...yeah. Some guys out at Lighthouse Point said they were really snappin' all morning. "Round eight or so. Don't think you'll have any trouble, Mr. Faircloth. Ya always know where they're hiding out."

"Hope so, my boy. Really hope so. Rough week in the city, son. Need to get a little r 'n r. Don't you get caught in that nine to five crap. Ain't worth your time. Get out into that country, smell the mountain breezes. Heck you're what...fifteen? Ahh, what I'd give... Best years of your life, Graham. Best damn years."

"Actually, fourteen, sir. Wouldn't mind going to college someday. Somewhere. I don't know."

"Nothing beats an education, son. But you get your best just from livin' everyday. Being happy by being yourself. That's what it's all about."

"Yeah...well, I guess so."

Together, we cruised through the harbor, the crisp breeze rattling masts and main sheets, stewing them in the silence of the morning hours. I asked about your plans; the travels you intended to make with Insanity after the summer months passed, alone. You mentioned how tempting the Maine coast was in early autumn as the maple leaves turned a brilliant auburn; the trees draping over the inlets of Bar Harbor and Portland. You told me your independence was a rare privilege after marriage; that every once in a while you needed a dose of privacy, away from Governor's Bay, separate from your home atop the bluff.

We stopped by Bruce's Bait 'n Tackle so that you could pick up fresh chum, and maybe tray a new lure. I brought you to Insanity and helped you aboard the elegant yacht, and waited for my return commands. I wondered where Mrs. Faircloth was, and why she didn't keep you company on those day long travels, but you seemed satisfied by yourself.

"Well, I'm off, my boy. Gonna catch some rays, gonna catch some game fish. Have a good one, son. Don't spend too much of that cash, save a little." Once aboard, you always chuckled and cracked a beer, then waved me off.

"Thanks, Mr. Faircloth. We'll see ya around six, and don't worry, I'll be on time."

"Ya always are Graham, ya always are."

I was relieved in the middle of the day as boats began to empty out of the basin and retreat into the sound. I often fell asleep with the sun and salt around me, tied to a cleat on the gas dock, meditating silently as the sun beat into my skin. This routine continued until the sun banked the water, calming it with tranquil waves and slow incoming boats. The harbor was a nightly cradle for coastal traffic, sailors and yachtsmen heading north toward the summer races in Newport and vacationers on their way to the islands. Insanity crept into the bay, signaling with red and green bow lights. The entry of the yacht was overwhelming as she slipped by much smaller boats, boats with names like Sweet Pea and Hot Tuna. Names that were suddenly forgotten after each passing.

You navigated your boat back to its mooring with a special finesse. Sometimes, you held your blues like a man holds a new born, gently across his veined arms, showcasing them, I climbed aboard and marveled at your trophies, gasping as a half dozen fish swam within the holding tank.

"Ya see anything you like, son? Had a good day out there. Hot, but decent. They were really jumpin' today, just like ya said. Good job, my boy. Damn good job."

"I bet they were, Mr. Faircloth. Man, ya caught yourself some biggies."

"Take your pick, son. Any fish ya want. You deserve it. Being out here must drive ya crazy. Ain't life grand, Graham? Ain't nothing better then a day at sea, kicking back on the fighting chair. Reeling 'em in. Ahh... makes me feel young, ya know?"

"I guess so, sir. But I can't take your blues. You were out all day pulling 'em in. You worked hard for those."

"Ahh, I work hard everyday son. This ain't work, this is play. It's what makes life worth living. Out here, nothing goes wrong. Ya notice that, son? Go ahead, take one home. Getcha your mother to skin it for dinner tell her it's for all her boy does for me. All the days he spends dragging me 'round."

"Yeah...I guess so, sir. Well, thanks. Thanks a lot!"

You rewarded me with simple gestures like these, always with a grin and a hint of appreciation.

I awaited the weekends when I could rest from those exhausting days, and listen. You explored windless inlets, where you read Hemingway in peace, alone. You told me about the races in Newport and the graceful sloops which sliced through the Atlantic. You boasted about pulling in a Mako shark off the east side of Nantucket, when you fought for two hours, only resting for a few sips of beer. I opened my eyes wide and child-like when you described its size. Five feet, three inches. It measured my height at fourteen. I felt safe in this harbor with you, and me, barefoot and bleached, standing as the sunlight fades this enchanted Connecticut village.

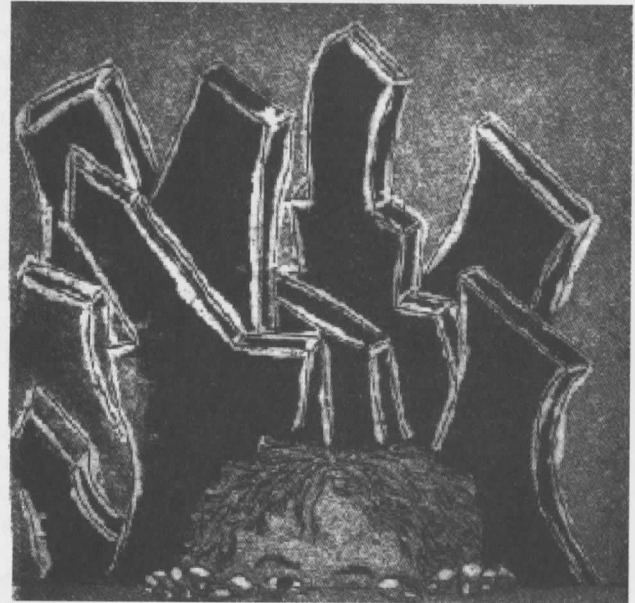
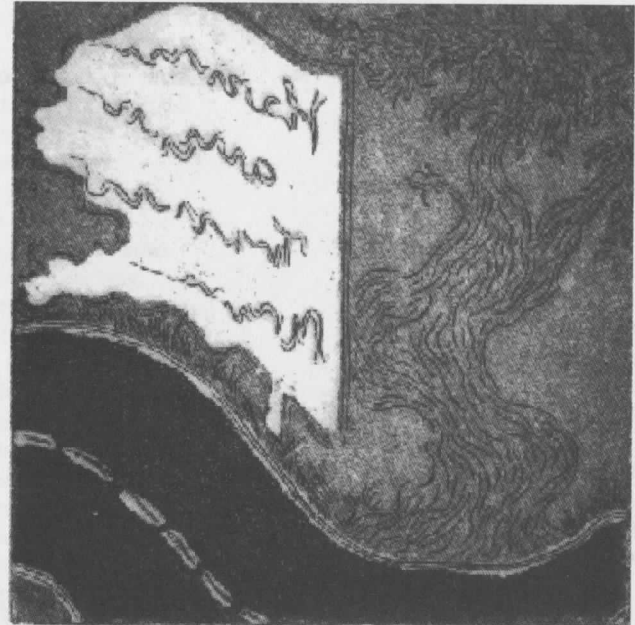
Early September pushed weekend travelers back to their home ports along the east coast of New England. Summer people headed home, leaving their cottages, and returned to the rhythm of life of Manhattan or Boston. They left the salt of the sound and the cries of seagulls for the stench of city life. You told me it may be your last summer at Governor's Bay, that your wife needed a new scenery, a new ocean to stare at while she drank her morning tea. Labor Day was the last time I picked you up on the lee side of your home, and taxied you and Beaches to Insanity. You mentioned your wife being

busy with the caterers, and her preparation for your Labor Day gathering, but you said nothing else. I returned a dusk and heard you cry her name, but found you lying, clenching a pistol with fresh blood saturating the teak of your Grand Banks. In your other hand, you held a note which read "My youth is eternal. I simply...lived."

\*\*\*\*\*

After seven years I come back as a young man who dreams beyond that summertime harbor. The opening line of my graduation speech read, "A humble man once told me there is a feeling of eternity in youth." I stood in an ivy filled quad and tried to capture your spirit with these words. Later I marched to Pomp and Circumstance with the Green Mountains surrounding, entering a feared adulthood. My professors spoke in white classrooms about the dimensions of a novel, Breugel's satirical paintings, and Pavlov's discovery about dog saliva, but no one had mentioned this phrase to me. I sought you as a mentor, someone whose charmed talks were worth more than a tip received on the fueling dock during a scorched 4th of July. A week before that summer's end I watched you die from a skiff you traveled on with me as your launchboy, with me as your friend.

*Jamey Hein '96*





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**Crosses**

Tired of crank out windows and prefab paneling,  
 she grips the armrests of her chair  
 when summer's heat presses too close.  
 Then, she writes letters. Under her pen  
 epistles of accusation and apology  
 appear in her tiny, tight handwriting,  
 to the father she could never please  
 and the mother who couldn't care.  
 She writes to save herself from them.  
 They are letters she will never send.  
 When she tears up a letter, she also rips  
 the sheets beneath – afraid  
 someone will read the indentations  
 and see what haunts her, keeps  
 her in that chair in a trailer with a man  
 she cannot love. He does love  
 her – that's his cross to bear.  
 But she knows it, and that is hers.

*Liz Bolyard '96*

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**Raccoons at the Cats' Food**

I know I shouldn't ignore them,  
 but it's much easier to continue  
 chopping garlic,  
 to pretend that they  
 aren't at the screen door  
 gobbling cat food  
 from our wide, metallic bowl.  
 I can hear them crunching,  
 grunting irreverently as grandpa  
 belches at Thanksgiving dinner.

I often watch  
 their feast before intruding.  
 Raccoons dine as if they were  
 stuffed animals  
 attending a child's tea party.  
 They sink back on haunches,  
 potbellies protruded,  
 and scoop up cat food  
 with almost royal grace.  
 Our cats watch this banquet,  
 perhaps paradoxically amused  
 at the raccoons' gradual enslavement.  
 Only twice have I caught  
 'Cisco bristling. She must know  
 that their castes stem from our favor,

And that humans always  
 have loved cats best.  
 Cat dependency probably  
 began with the Egyptians, but raccoons  
 newly live from garbage cans  
 filled by our decadence.

Sometimes I slip off  
 my sneaker, stare down  
 an approaching thief  
 and then, Thunk,  
 hurl it at his portly body.  
 He cowers to please me  
 and ambles off toward the woods,  
 keeping one eye fixed on his meal.



I wish I could drive  
 them away, force  
 them to forage  
 for berries and fish,  
 revoking their indenture.  
 But, already they've trampled  
 a path from their home,  
 through the weeds,  
 right to the kitchen  
 door.

*Jennifer Rudgers '96*

## Father Federico

The ridges of folded strata, trace of Cuban cigars  
 furry knuckles, worn, well-used, with a scratch  
 on the left thumb base where Rocky played too rough,  
 ruddy, dark, talkative, holy hands.  
 He shakes the gold watch down on his wrist,  
 tucks the handkerchief into his pocket, tugging  
 the sleeve of his purple vestments back  
 where it belongs, folds his hands in prayer, pauses.

Hot quartz, shells, magma under feet, excitement,  
 sizzling, the place is going to erupt.  
*Father, let's take a vacation to Aruba, feel  
 the spray on your face, hold a tall cool glass...*  
 Lips moving, deep in prayer, out of habit he chimes,  
*Watch your language, you are in the House of God.*

*Trish Klei '97*

---

## Dream Poem 1

Had another dream about you.  
 Filled me with double rainbow happiness.  
 The moment became a multi-faceted gem,  
 skin felt so soft,  
 eyes big deep,  
 shifting from green to blue, hazel to black. We lay;

in a field of daisies pansies pink roses wildflowers.  
 I ran my fingers through your hair  
 as it turned from long brown to  
 short smooth fuzz.

The dream was not about growing old together,  
 it simply was one perfect moment  
 stretched to infinity.

*Colin Bossen '98*

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## Virgin Mary in Kentucky

I'm standing in a K-Mart parking lot feeling just plain dumb.  
 The lawn chairs march by, trundled across the asphalt by corpulent  
 men in camouflage. Large breasted women cuddle small lumps  
 of children who bounce up and down with each determined step.  
 Closer and closer to Mecca.

They have grown accustomed to slowness. Time moves across  
 their bodies like a sensual massage. They are prepared to wait  
 all night. Toys for the baby, the last of the diapers  
 and a bottle of coke.  
 This is the place to be.

Old friends gossip on the curbside...Mary's rosary's turning gold.  
 Sarah saw the priest last week about Mitchell. Not everyone sees  
 her here, you know. Dick didn't see her last year. A pack of boys  
 terrorize the girl in the shiny shoes and frilly socks.  
 A festival of light.

The sidewalk is narrow but the march has begun. To step out of line  
 now would be costly. The sidewalk empties into another lot.  
 The crowd spills into the open space, splashing in the mud,  
 dancing over puddles. Statuesque in the frenzy of this celebration.  
 A fine mist presses down.

Closer to the prophesied time, 11:53 PM. Excitement is passed  
 like a lit stick of dynamite crackling and sputtering  
 its way to explosion. Choruses of Ave Maria, swelling and thrusting  
 the collective group to watchful anticipation.  
 Her time has come.

Flashes of light, and I feel nothing. Gasps. A small child, he could have passed for Jesus  
 in a Sunday School learner, whispers, Where is  
 she? Is she here? Momma heaves him up for a closer look  
 and the pop of lights from cameras illuminates his cherub face.  
 Has he seen her?

Is it possible that in the tangled branches of the tree,  
 against the backdrop of stained glass windows and symbols of faith,  
 he has been fulfilled? The throng empties in a slow and solemn march,  
 retracing the narrow path to the K-Mart parking lot.  
 Faithful disciples.

I watch long enough to see the last camera bulb flash, final confessions  
 pass among friends. I look again at the picture in front of me,  
 tree branches still and the quiet light filtering from the painted windows.  
 I turn for home, glancing back, hoping  
 She will appear.

Amy Ard '96

## the jig is up

"she" bruises poems on-  
 to your silk back. you

say "stop it! quit it!"  
 they hurt, and they drain."

\* \* \* \* \*

at the first tunnel  
 the buddha, teacher,

waits for the thesis  
 called om, my god, the

life force-you, broken  
 boxed and late, crawl through

primordial ooze  
 and tadpole to punt

the seed  
 to pooh  
 to goo  
 in vicarious you  
 slit punta  
 we're thru  
 the shot glass  
 slicked with tampax

and the metaphysical note of  
 the lobotomized jig  
 is up and out  
 through our nostrils  
 and you, drunk with your own  
 lackadaisically apportioned maculation,  
 tunnel your vision

to the phosphorescent protrusion  
 rutting the blue off the gill  
 of the only fizzed fish still strong enough  
 to pull the emasculated and hysterectomized  
 fisher thing into the already lyed in

jacuzzi creek  
 crossing beneath route fifty-two

which itself pools westward  
to a not so well faring  
welfare utopia

bamboo underwear and all

*alex e blazer '97*

## Visiting Uncle Ernie

i

When Uncle Ernie and Aunt Pauline still lived  
at the farm, we'd drive the forty  
miles every weekend to see them.  
Ernie'd turn on the TV to boxing  
and posture his eight arthritic fingers  
best as he could into fists, punching  
with the boxers while Aunt Pauline fussed,  
telling him to watch his heart.  
He'd roll his eyes at us, but reach  
over and click off the set.

ii

Aunt Pauline would take my mother out  
to show her the garden or get the mail,  
and mom would come back puffing.  
I can't keep up with that woman.  
Then Pauline would go to the kitchen  
to make bread. Dirty Bread  
Uncle Ernie'd call it — said she kneaded  
it with her feet. When I was very young  
my eyes would get big every time  
he said that; then he'd wink at me.

iii

My dad would go pump water for her.  
They didn't have indoor plumbing  
until Uncle Ernie's third stroke,  
and then reluctantly. Ernie was proud  
of his outhouse. A two-seater, and carpeted  
too. Clean, and it don't even smell  
in the summer. He'd show us 'bout every  
time we visited. Then he'd take  
my dad to the fruit cellar to drink a beer,  
thinking he was pulling one on Pauline.  
She'd smile and keep kneading her bread  
(with her hands, not her feet).

iv

Ernie would show dad his mining helmet  
with the lamp on top Pretty fancy, huh?  
and tell him about his first job in the mine  
when he was ten years old, tell him about  
the shaft collapsing, and him barely getting  
out, Hell, I didn't all get out. Left  
two fingers down there. They'd laugh  
and Ernie would pound him on the back and tell  
dad about digging graves, by hand, after the mines  
shut down. He'd say he figured he'd been in more  
graves than anybody else walking around.

v

Ernie and Pauline were married seventy-five  
years, longer than lots of people live. When  
Pauline was ninety, she died  
in her sleep. Ernie started failing.  
Six months later he was in the nursing  
home. We'd visit him. He'd be lying  
on the edge of that single bed. Dad would ask  
him how he was sleeping, and Ernie would look  
at that empty spot next to him,  
Oh, I don't sleep so well no more.

*Liz Bolyard '96*

## A Capuchin Monk

*We were once as you and you will be as we.  
—sign in the Capuchin crypt*

At the open door to this sacred chapel,  
he encourages change from tourist-class gawkers  
by shaking a plate of percussive coins  
and grunting in anger if he's ignored.  
He hoods himself to care for this church  
and to face the hordes which flock to it  
solely to glimpse its dismembered monks.

Friars conceived of a baroque decor.  
The ceilings are graced with their sacra in stars.  
Femurs frame ribs nailed in scrolling arrays  
and intricate garlands of vertebrae.  
Some robed remains were left intact,  
hands poised in prayer or holding a cross.  
Their heads are pillowed by piles of ulnas,  
and around them are mountains of other arm bones.

It is his brothers' skulls which flank the altar,  
and their scapulas hang as shields round a painting  
of Jesus extending his flesh-covered palm.  
So daily the door monk hallows this place,  
fills vases with blossoms, and waters his pots  
of spider plants issuing shoots of new life.  
He knows this crypt holds his ultimate worth.

*Linda Fuller-Smith*

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**Sunday, October 15, 1995**

Jurgen Moltmann, the tenacious German theologian of hope, greets me in the morning. He scratches the leftover sleep from my eye in a fashion no pallid Baptist preacher

could approximate. He's blasted Kant, and Schopenhauer, too, and he's gearing up to slam God head-first into his concrete mat of condemnation. What a furious transition

from the spell of Saturday afternoon, my feet propped up, my knees balancing an easy beer. Saturday night, a red Corvette so confident around the curves, no seat belts, and Sunday

morning, a vacuous, viscous Volvo heavy on the highway, pursuing the crimes of the Lutheran Church. Who changed lanes? I feel like a hostage confined to the realms

of tedious claims of faith before breakfast. Where are you, Wallace Stevens? Your citrus images, your New York Times spread out against the kitchen table? I am envious of your ease.

*Carl Boon '96*

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**Old Man and the Marriage Party**

He totters on three wobbling  
Legs across the manicured lawn.  
He stops to wipe his etched brow  
With an old yellowed handkerchief.

A lonely pit reaches out, beckons  
The cane — the man crumples.  
The Samaritan swoops in,  
Using the lifeguard grip.

Body heaves, ribs shudder,  
Bones creak, life is leaving him.  
He huddles on the doorstep,  
Between here and where

Life is easy and no more.  
He wants the fight to be done.  
The marriage party in the backyard  
Pays no attention, gaudy blue hats,

Silk flower bouquets, wine, and baby's  
Breath mingles among the crowd.  
The old man turns toward the party,  
Yearning. His hat has fallen off,

His left lens, cracked. He turns to  
The Samaritan and begs  
To be left alone. The party  
Roars on, and the old man

Closes his milky blue eyes.  
A dark cloud drifts overhead.

*Trish Klei '97*

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## Cowboy Up

He bought his son's boots upstairs in the western Salvation Army, size four and a half. He cleaned the dust from them with two quick slaps of his buckskin gloves and even found tiny spurs under a shelf behind a spider's home. He spun the jagged wheel like a miniature propeller, and it squeaked at first, then whirled in the shimmering afternoon sunlight. As he approached the counter, floor boards creaked at the weight of his boots, and he heard the same sound within himself. His denim was tarnished the color of the soil and his face was creased and worn like a stone from a dried out creek.

"This all for ya'?" The young woman asked the cowboy, but her face had more questions for this man.

He lowered his head and gave her a humble nod then muttered, "mm-yep."

"Aren't these the cutest things."

Again, a nod.

"I'm just so glad someone's getting them. Oh, and you got the spurs too."

He tucked up his chin and brushed his left thumb underneath his Stetson reaching behind him with his other hand as if to sling a pistol.

"Oh. It's five all together." The clerk cocked her head to the side trying to look in at the cowboy but with his hat tipped over his eyes she could not see past it to his face. She popped some buttons on the old hunk of metal on the counter and a drawer blasted out, starving for green paper.

The cowboy slung a crumpled wad of cash from his back pocket.

"This for your boy?" The clerk, not a day over eighteen, dropped her head only to see the brim of his hat, and hear the husky tone of his voice from a small shadow of his face.

"See if I can teach him to ride."

"Is that down at the pee-wee rodeo thing at Rosebud Farm?"

"It is."

"That's my daddy's farm."

"Is it?"

"Shoot I ain't kiddin'."

"You're Malone, are ya?"

"Yes sir, and it's nice to make your acquaintance cowboy."

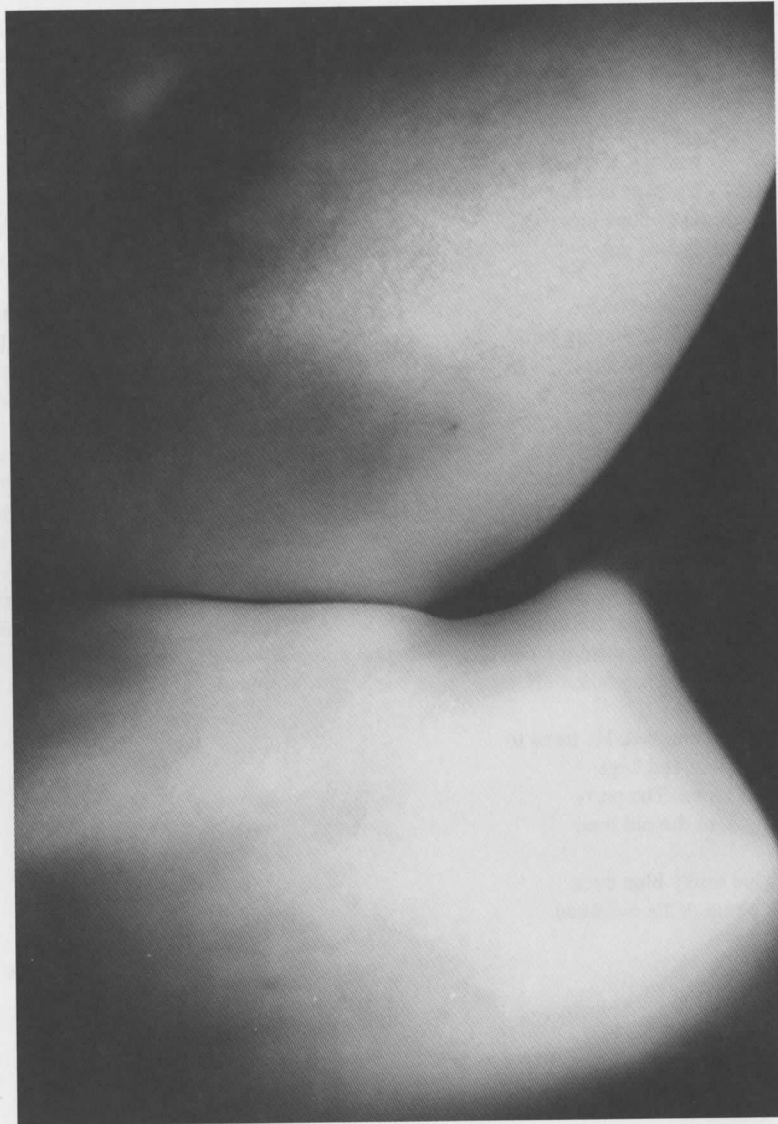
He pushed his hat up with his trigger finger to let her see who he was.

"Damn! Well, I know you. You're Tommy Shepherd!" She jumped up and down with excitement.

The wiry man removed his hat and graciously bowed with a grin.

"The two time world champion cowboy, standin' across the counter this whole damn time." She shook her head in amazement. "My Daddy sure's gonna' be happy to see you." She slapped both hands on the counter.

He watched to see if anyone was looking at him. No one paid him any attention. They knew him years ago. But they don't talk up anyone's name when they leave the sport. Only in the highlight reels. Only the clips that show those cowboys tossed up and mashed into the ground.





"You're in town for the pee-wee rodeo?"

"I'm here with my boy, yeah."

Shoot I'll bet that boy could ride a greased watermelon off a high dive and all the way out of the pool."

The cowboy chuckled and tipped his hat to customers. They passed, asking each other who he was, and he could hear them.

"Hey, Mr. Shepherd." Malone laughed. "My daddy will be pleased."

"I was hoping it would be a nice surprise."

She stuffed his things in a paper bag. "I still have pictures from the last time you had been here." She held her hand by her thigh. "I was about this high."

Shepherd crossed his arms at his chest and laughed.

Malone now held both hands at her hips bowing her arms out to the side.

"Well I sure would like to see that boy a yours."

"He's down the street there, over by the car."

"Well, I'll get to see the two of you tonight then I hope."

"You can count on that. You look great."

"Good to see you."

Shepherd creaked toward the door, smiling and nodding to the folds in the store...

"Oh, Tommy."

Shepherd turned.

"Thanks, for coming here and everything. I know my daddy will be happy."

Shepherd winked to her, followed by a comforting grin and took long strides out to the street. Inside he could hear Malone, "That was Tommy Shepherd. The Tommy Shepherd! World champion cowboy, folks..."

Rosebud farm was on a rusty colored stretch of land, protected by a muscular red rock mountain on the north side. The stables dwarfed a small house in the center of open pastures. Red, white and blue ribbons streamed their way down the fence lines around the center paddock by the largest barn.

The cowboy drove a black '78 Pontiac down the dusty stretch of road. His boy was belted in beside him. He spoke to his boy as the Pontiac sliced through the chalky brown air of Rosebud's driveway.

"You git your hand in real tight, see." He made a fist and held it in front of his son's face. "If you're locked in, you got the upper hand. You see, you can then dictate the moves of the animal, instead of the animal showin' you."

Clint stayed quiet and watched his father.

"You understand what I'm sayin'?" Now, now, you see what I'm tellin' you...you hold on to that mean old bastard like a son of a bitch and you tell him you're takin' him for a ride." He extended his arm, tapping the chin of his seven year old boy with that long and crooked finger.

The cowboy approached the door with his son following behind like an obedi-

ent hound. "You mind your manners in here, this man is an old friend." He pounded three times, next to the giant brass door knocker on the towering wooden door. An old Mexican woman answered and attempted to ask their business. The cowboy quickly declined her mixed English with a "no gracias" and proceeded through the living room, tugging his miniature rodeo star with him.

Wickets was a mountainous man. He was sitting alone, in his living room, under a giant set of bull horns mounted on the wall. Mr. Wickets had organized and sponsored many of the world championship contests but was now retired from that. There was a massive oil painting of four Indian scouts on horseback surveying a setting of the western frontier. Shepherd cherished this painting. He stopped at the door to watch the picture stare back at his friend. Shepherd bought that painting a long time ago. When the money was there. It was quiet, the air thick with the smell of cigar, and Wickets sat like a cast iron sculpture at his throne in the den.

The Cowboy entered with his son.

"There any good ridin' to be had here?"

Wickets lifted himself from his chair. An elevated grin turned into a belly laugh. The floor boards were stained oak and they all cracked as Wickets approached his guests. Mr. Wickets embraced his cowboy friend and held him. Then a hand shake. The cowboy laughed and held him in his eyes.

"Shepherd, you slippery little man." Wickets covered the cowboy's shoulder with grip of his hand. "I thought you had fallen from the end of the earth. I write you, I call, I even sent a fax to that mixed up publicity agent you used to talk to." Wickets tilted his head downward. He bent his knees and lowered his giant frame to the boy. "How are you there?"

The cowboy watched the two of them meeting eye to eye like a bear to a squirrel.

"Fine."

"Well that's fine. What is it that they call you?"

"Clint, sir."

"Clint. Well, Clint, you can call me Bill. I'm your friend."

"It is nice to meet you sir."

"Bill."

"Bill?" Clint shyly smiled and tucked his head into his fathers leg squeezing the denim firmly with both hands.

"He's got strong hands, Shepherd, you can see that already."

"Can ya'?"

Wickets pugged up his lips and gave a reassuring nod, then smiled at the sarcastic tone of Shepherd's voice.

"Are you here for a stay?"

"Just a day or two. We'll be on our way to Sacramento afterwards."

"Ah yes, you're going to see your grandmother." Wickets reached inside of his worn down leather coat and produced a piece of caramel candy and handed it to Clint. "It's good to see you again, my friend. Come, let me show you what I've done to the place." Wickets handed his friend a cigar and directed them to the door.

They strolled along the open acreage of Rosebud and Wickets pointed at

everything with his cigar before explaining it. They were between the house and the largest stable. The junior rodeo was to be held in the center paddock, nearest to them. On the other side of the barn was another paddock with a stallion in it.

"Why are the ribbons up a day early?"

"It has...become such a...a town event. Christ, I think that they will turn it in to a village holiday around here in the years to come. It's a lot of hoopla for just a one day joy ride for little boys--"

"--Turned it into a money game didn't you?"

Loose gravel kicked up some dust at their feet when Wickets stopped walking.

"Clint, my young friend. If you run over to the stable there you can take a look at that stallion we have. He's in that field there."

The cowboy watched Clint peer up at him and Shepherd dismissed him with his eyes. Clint ran to the far paddock and jumped onto the railing of the fence.

"I'm sure in some trouble Tommy."

"What are you crying about?"

"This is no joke. I'm afraid I'm in over my head."

"Oh yeah, how deep?"

"Woah, deep enough." Wickets lifted his arm up to just under his chin.

"I guess asking you for help is out of the question."

"Why? You too?"

Shepherd held his arm high above his head, bent his wrist, and flattened his hand. Totally relaxed he grinned as if he knew things would get better.

"Is that right?" Wickets scratched his head. "What about all the publicity?"

"No."

"Gone?"

"Forgotten."

"Jesus."

"Yep."

"There's gotta' be somethin'."

"Huh, like what?"

"Shit, I don't know. You gamble all of it away."

"Some at the beginning. Then, after Helen passed...well I just ran out after a while."

"What about your agent, and the sponsors?"

"Vultures."

"Really?"

"I don't really spend my life around a man who does everything in the world for personal gain. Besides it makes me nervous to talk to a someone who always has a watch on and a pen in their pocket."

"Well it probably don't make them feel real good to do business with a cowboy who carries a loaded pistol in his car."

Shepherd shrugged, then watched as his boy reached out to feel the stallion. "Careful with him." he shouted. The stallion snorted and pranced, then backed away quick, letting his eyes roll back to white. Shepherd inhaled a deep breath at a sight that was all too familiar. That horse pulled back, jerking, and whining with a high pitch that

hit the cowboy in a place close to his heart.

Wickets threw his cigar in the dirt and stomped on it.

"You gonna' tell me what happened?"

"What? With me?" Wickets shrugged his shoulders and straightened out his jacket, adjusting his overall appearance. "I got too many horses. No one wants to buy 'em. The business ain't the same anymore and I can't compete with the other sponsors." He kicked gravel over his broken cigar and ran his fingers through his silver hair. "It don't make you one bit nervous does it?"

"Shit. I been banged up much worse than any bank would do me." The stallion threw up his hind legs, then pranced around the paddock. "You stay clear of that fence now, you hear? He's just showin' off for ya'." Clint nodded back to his father, then returned to the wild horse.

Shepherd spit in the dirt and dropped his cigar.

"That's a fine Cuban there buddy, you better finish it."

"You got any whiskey?"

"Wait, I'm not done about the cigar."

"I met Malone today."

"So it's whiskey you want."

Shepherd smirked at the red face of a long time companion.

"My damn daughter won't stay in school. She took her money and opened her own store...sellin' junk that no one wants."

"Junk?"

"Yeah, well, she seems to think the past will make her future. Let's have that drink before dinner."

Shepherd whistled and Clint cranked his head around with an attentive smile. Shepherd waved him in as the two men turned and made way toward the ranch house. The burning sun slowly sank at their backs, as the boy ran behind, trying to catch up.

The steak burned black and spicy over hot coals out on the porch. Malone, in the kitchen, dug her hand through a salad bowl, tossing freshly sliced vegetables with green lettuce, then adding dressing. Outside by the fire the settling dust and sleepy sun kept the two men company, while the young rider watched the fields of horses play and tufts of long grass sway in the evening's breeze. Ice swirled in the short glasses of brown water and the men spoke of their Texas past.

"You rode a big mother, as I recall, by the name of Bear Claw. Was that it, Bear Claw?" Wickets sipped from his glass and watched the sky.

"Sshht. Sona' bitch cracked my sternum in three different spots. Threw me, then put his skull square into my chest. Laid me up against them metal bars, got me to where I's just crying for help. 'Cept I couldn't say nothing, not with my chest caved in like it was. Believe me I was trying."

"Yeah, that was the last that bull ever went out, I think."

"Um hm, it was. Matter a' fact, a fell' down in Fort Worth sent me a box full a frozen steaks in the hospital sayin it was the last a' Bear Claw."

Malone listened through the kitchen window, half cringing and half amazed

that a man could live to speak of such stories.

"How 'bout that night in cow town with the Leary brothers?"

"Oh, Jesus." Shepherd coughed and jiggled in his chair. "Holding you off a' that tall skinny one was harder than riding any bull, that's for damn sure."

"Yeah, well I's taken him on as God intended. Fist to fist. I didn't resort to braking no whisky bottle over that big one's head, like someone I know."

"As I recall you were not the one get'n pounded and spun like some hairy Italian was making a pizza out a' you all afternoon."

"Jesus, Tommy when you turned and smashed that big one over the head he fell like a ton a' bricks." Wickets smiled and carried on. "The skinny one just opened his mouth wide in amazement, so that's where I put my fist."

They shook their heads, moved slow in their chairs, and thought silently with the birds' songs, sizzling steaks, and the rushing water of the sink in the kitchen.

"Of course it was that silly damn fool idea of yours to sponsor that gig with the mean black boy."

"What are you talkin' about Tommy?"

"I'm talkin' about Midnight, you simple son of a bitch."

"You asked to have him. So I fixed it so you'd pick him. I figured there'd be no dispute about who the best damn bull rider in the world was if Tommy Shepherd could stay eight seconds on Midnight." Wickets poured himself another and added an ice cube. "Clint my friend. Come here and listen to your daddy tell us a story. He's gonna' tell us the story of Midnight."

Shepherd sipped his glass, then finished what was in it. Then he let it alone on the table beside him, so the ice would have time to melt. Malone leaned in from the kitchen window with her ears up and ready. Wickets flipped the steaks and sat down with a full drink and young Clint crawled into his spacious lap.

"I was gettin' old. Gettin' to where my bath tub filled with ice was the only place cozy enough to lay down in. I think that bull Midnight had been rumored to've killed a man right there in the ring. Killed a rider just like that. Crippled a clown too, if I'm not mistaken. I bought a spanking new outfit for that ride; all black with tassels and silver studs. I thought I'd show 'em all. What's eight seconds anyway? I'm tellin ya', I'd watch this bull, day in and day out. He was as smooth as an oil slick, but strong. They dropped me in the cage with that ogre and I knew it was goina' be my last ride. "Cling-Clang" went the latch on the gate and ringin' bell, and woah! Hurlled me up and down, then across, and over top a' him. That was it for my wrist. I coulda' rotated my whole hand around if I wanted to, the shock a' being in that dirt by myself. Holdin' my floppy hand into my arm, gasping for breath 'cause he threw me so far I flipped, hit straight on my back. I never will know how I lost my hold so fast. Never has seemed important. When you're lookin' eye to eye with the blackest, biggest, baddest bull you ever seen, you just don't do a bit of thinkin' of any sort. Just the fear. He watched me. Two spears for horns like a radar zeroin' in on me. It seemed like hours he watched me, and where were the clowns? They never came, and I couldn't move. Just held my sorry self together, finally pulled in a breath, and then he came for me. Charging! I turned to run but felt something terrible that stopped me. I didn't look down to see what it was, by that time I was in the air again, goin' around backwards this time, watching the world upside down

with shouts and screams. He hit me the hardest on my way down but that time it didn't pierce my skin. Black hooves is all I remember from down there with my face in the dirt; I forgot about my wrist, didn't think much about the hole in my thigh, just happy to see the clowns, runnin'." Shepherd slung the water of dead ice cubes over the railing of the porch. "You better check on them steaks, I like 'em bloody."

The next day, it was hot. A scorcher, where the rattlesnakes had to hide in the ground because their bellies would burn like bacon on the surface. The stallion danced in the paddock nearest the barn. He kicked up dust and snorted at the incoming vehicles, the farmers in their pick up trucks and old Cadillacs convoyed across the chalky road of brown dirt.

The old woman who answers the door swept up the kitchen. Malone moved around her and set up breakfast. The old woman brought her two teenage boys to show the people where to park. They like to play cards, and whisper funny things to one another. Malone sang country music songs and cracked eggs.

"Malone, honey," said Wickets as he entered the kitchen. "You get out to the barn and help the boys with the pigs." He noticed sizzling bacon. "Of course, finish what you've already started." He smiled and scratched his enormous, hairy stomach.

"Your shirt sir." The old woman handed Wickets a pressed white shirt.

"Gracias." He slipped one arm through the sleeve. "Have you seen Tommy?"

The old woman was short. Malone spoke right over the old woman's head to answer her father. "He was up before anyone. He's out on the deck, drinking ice water."

Wickets smiled and held out his hand. Malone reached out and squeezed it. His palm was calloused and it made her feel safe. He walked to the deck and watched the line of cars file in.

"Howdy partner." Wickets gave his old friend a familiar and sarcastic expression.

Shepherd laughed at Wickets and his unbuttoned shirt. He put his coffee cup down on the table next to his hat. Moving his eyes in the direction of the center paddock he brought Wickets' attention to his son. Clint held himself against the fence. Standing on the middle rail he watched the pigs in the pen. The two men could hear them, squealing and whining.

"I used to watch my bulls before I rode them," Shepherd said.

"I know you did."

"He's a damn fine boy, you know that."

"Well, he's yours." Wickets shaded the early sunlight from Shepherd's eyes. They watched the young boy hanging from the creosoted fence boards.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

They turned to each other. Shepherd, gangly with a strong narrow face, Wickets, chiseled and broad like he was carved from a giant block of ice.

"Don't leave that boy with Helen's mother in Sacramento."

Shepherd said nothing. He looked at Wickets then turned away. The people were filling in around the paddock. Clint leapt backward from the fence. He straightened his miniature cowboy hat and walked slowly by the crowd that was filling up

around the center ring. He changed his walk to a slow strut and that made his daddy smile.

“Shoot I couldn’t do a thing like that I...”

“It’s not gonna’ get any easier.”

Shepherd stared at Wickets. He was not smiling. “Now I’ve got a commitment.”

“That’s right.” Wickets nodded and turned toward Clint. The two men faced the boy as he approached them. “And you are a man of your word.”

Malone helped to set up the pigs. Big sloppy suckers that smelled like shit. They whined and squawked. They made ill noises. Malone got dirty and smelled like the pigs but the children loved her for it.

Wickets told jokes and shook hands. He raised money and showed off his horses to people that would never buy them. He smoked his cigars. He spoke louder than the others.

Shepherd, the cowboy, watched from the judges platform. Elevated, so he could see his son. So his son could see him. He shifted his weight with his right hand holding his belt buckle. His left hand tipped up his hat so he could see better.

Clint was up for his first ride. Malone picked him up and helped secure the pig. Clint wedged his hand inside the leather strap and pounded on it, like he’d been told. He nodded and they released him.

Fast and building up speed, straight ahead, not making a single turn. Its front legs buckled. The pig and pee-wee rider hit the red dirt face first. They disappeared in a cloud of dust. Clint lifted his face from the earth. Raw, and skinned with rock and dirt.

Cry boy, Shepherd thought. It’s okay to cry now. It is never going to get easier. Now pick yourself up. Cry.

But Clint did not cry. He stood, boots wobbling in the ruts of the ground. Not one tear rolled down his soft face. He spit dirt, then rolled his tongue around his lip to clean the soil and blood from his mouth. Eyes met with his father and he smiled. Teeth soaked red and stained brown, he swallowed the rest.

*Murdoch Matheson '96*

## Fragments

*—a series of short poems*

i.  
A sound sustained indefinitely  
Om  
breathed by ancient  
goddesses birthing the universe  
purest poetry

ii.  
ground up mashed minced mulched pulped flesh  
turned to paper  
painted with graphite then ruined

iii.  
lack of perception  
constant dream states  
natural ends of breath

iv.  
jealousy and flowers  
words thrown together, without images

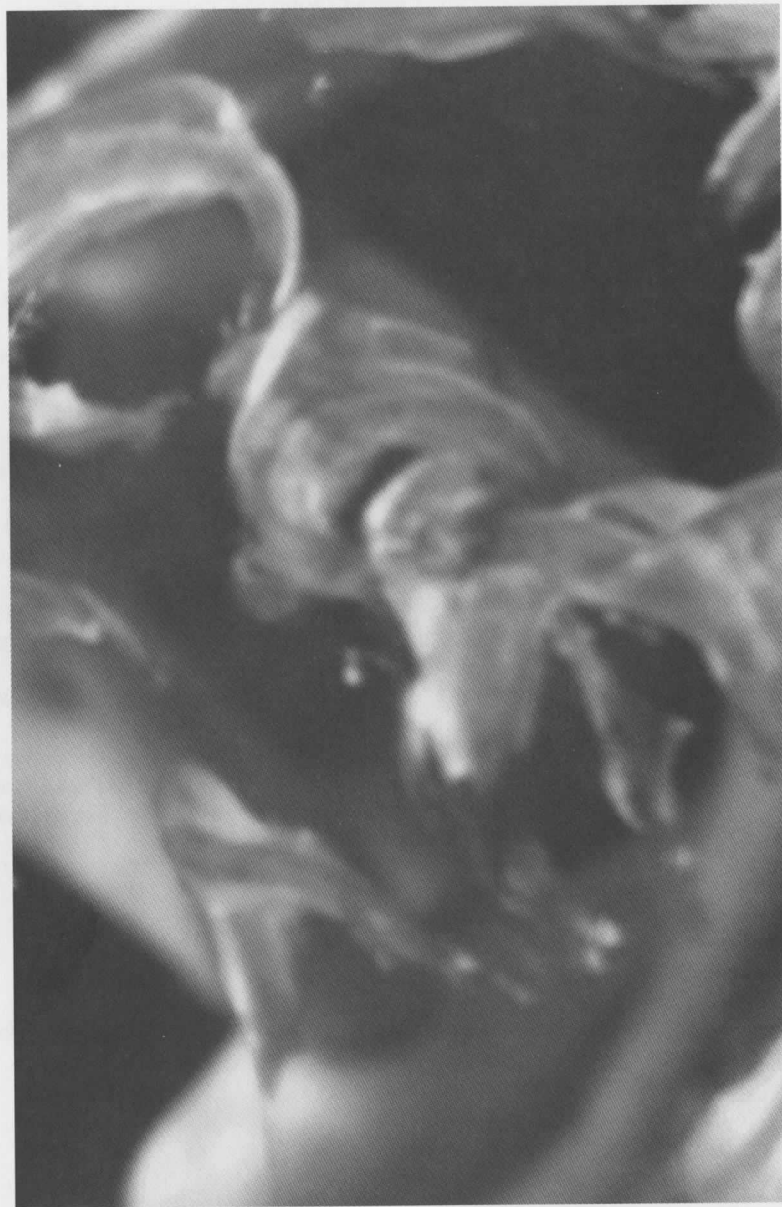
v.  
cut adrift from the world  
bread is smooshed  
the short order cook is too hot

vi.  
been eating too much and acting too little

vii.  
off some back back road in the middle of  
green grass trees  
grows a new fresh spring

*Colin Bossen '98*





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## Palazzo Rezzonico

Rigidly ordered, the bearded guard  
led me to a shadowed room  
then pulled aside a panel of black  
allowing the cloudy dawn to unveil  
human forms encased in glass.

Living trees had been felled and carved  
to wear the clothes of Venetian dead,  
and here they stood alone or paired, baroque displays, bored by time,  
locked within this noxious cell.  
I logged with word and awkward sketch

Long hidden details of fabric and fit.  
I counted beaded bodice pieces,  
drew skirts held wide by padded hips  
and the placing of laces, ruching, and feathers,  
and rows of dimmed metallic gimp.

One chiseled frame wore Carnival clothes:  
floor-length black cape over rich velvet coat,  
buttons embroidered yet not meant to bind,  
and a three-cornered hat over a painted white mask—  
hard to the mouth, in traditional form,  
then continued below by a beard of black cloth.

His case blocked our view of the Grand canal,  
so my guard became cloaked in his own wooded mask  
and, tired of watching the plod of my hand,  
stared through a dirty, uncurtained pane  
at an open-air courtyard in lifeless collapse.

Then under their bearded human forms,  
I saw by the motionless leather shoes  
industrious worms had started to work—  
their boring task so precisely done,  
that the sawdust was piled in uniform mounds  
as though pinched through the waist of an hourglass.

*Linda Fuller-Smith*

## A Poem About The Photographic Imprint I Would Leave If A Nuclear Bomb Hit Nearby As I Took Out The Trash One Night

Take the trash out, dad says.  
Grudgingly, she grips the two sides  
of the plastic parcel and with a heave  
hauls it over her shoulder. She

pauses at the door. A plane rumbles  
overhead. She dashes on tiptoes  
towards the end of the driveway,  
hoping to make it before the bomb hits.

She thinks of her family, and the future.  
How close would the mushroom cloud  
have to be to incinerate her on contact?  
Will she be discovered thousands of years

later as a Pompeiiian, a shell of a person  
walking the trash out next to a battered Buick  
in the driveway of the remains of a house in  
West Virginia? Will she be a great mystery

like the Ice Man, arrested in the prime of her  
development by nuclear war? What will they  
say about her neon green shoelaces and high  
tops? Those things will last, won't they?

Trish Klei '97

## The Crazies I've Called

I have a reoccurring nightmare that one day Bryant Gumble and Willard Scott will actually duke it out on the *Today Show*. I don't think it'll actually happen, but sometimes when Bryant asks Willard for the weather report, he sort of rolls his eyes at Katie and acts all mighty and smart over Willard. My husband thinks I'm turning real freaky, and that I should go back to work at the gas station soon. It will be a while though, because my C-Section a month ago really put me under. The doctor in the delivery room decided to do surgery at the last moment, because Ralph Joseph Potter, Jr. wanted to come into this world feet first. I knew he'd be ornery, just like Ralph Wayne Potter, Sr. Since my husband's working two shifts at the factory most days, I just talk baby talk all day long, and clean and cook and sometimes watch the talk shows.

I think those shows get a lot of bad rap sometimes. *Sally Jessie Raphael* is not all about transvestites who are gay but want bisexual partners. My husband always used that one example - he hates Sally and her red glasses, but she really cares about her guests. One guy was reunited with his son yesterday after thirty years of being separated. I cried while I folded Joe's diapers. We call him that because one Ralph is enough, especially since it's Ralph, Sr. It's not that I don't love my husband, I do, it's just that he likes to boss me and control me like nothing else.

My sister lives in the same town as us in Beauford, Tennessee, twenty miles outside Nashville. She told me Ralph wasn't good enough for me, but the man works hard and doesn't drink. That's sure a good enough man for any woman. You won't see me on Sally or Phil, rapping on my husband because he doesn't kiss me and hug me enough. Those women are just crazy. But I like to watch them, because they do more than Joey, who just cries and wets his diapers. They keep me company during the day when Joey's napping and I'm dusting our tiny apartment. One woman was a little too nice though, on *Geraldo!*, because she gave her husband permission to have sex with her friends. Now, I know that Ralph's messed around before, but I really think that if I ever caught the girl, I'd shoot her dead. Of course, Ralph denies things always. Working two shifts three days a week gives him some time in between to do his dirty work. I'd have to be a real smart one to ever catch him.

Speaking of smarts, they had a baby on the *American Baby Show*, and that baby was pointing to colors at the age of one! The mother was one of those real ritzy moms you see that wears denim jumpers from L.L. Bean. I wear sweats, and Ralph always rags on me for that, saying that was sure a lot sexier when we met in Nashville with my leather mini-skirt. I always tell him that babies and leather just don't mix, but he says I'm a woman full of excuses. My sister Nancy says the same thing, but she's usually talking about me staying with Ralph.

Today Nancy is coming over with a friend. It's someone she wants me to meet that will "change things for you, Alena." I put Joey down, and for once, his crying stops after only a few minutes. I hear the knocker and run to the door. It's Nancy and an older woman, about my mamma's age. She is very tiny and short, with reddish hair. She smiles at me, and I let Nancy and this woman inside.

"This is Bevvie Lane, Alena. she's from Corporate Enterprises out of

Nashville," Nancy says. She picks a piece of invisible lint off her red blouse. Nancy is about four inches taller than me, and today, with her heels and jeans, she looks like a thin, beautiful Hollywood actress. God, I feel dumpy.

"Hi, Alena, your sister was talking to me the other day that you might like to work at home." Bevvie looks at me and smiles. The gold chain around her neck glistens with the pretend wealth of middle-class people.

"Yeah, Alena, I thought you might like to do some work calling people for Corporate. You know, keep your mind busy while you watch little Joe." Nancy looks at me, her face reddening. I know and she knows that she has always been trying to take charge of my life. She's a year younger than I am, but she always has the right answers, or so she thinks. She fought the hardest to keep me and Ralph from getting together. Even when we were in the church parlor, with pink taffeta and lace flying in the bustle of three bridesmaids and flower girls, she was telling me that this could still be stopped. I ignored her then. That was my plan now.

"Alena, basically we'd have you calling customers, taking surveys, etc. We're hired out by lots of different companies to do this kind of phoning to the public. There really isn't much training involved, and you'd make five fifty an hour." Bevvie smiles at me and smooths her woolen suit.

I look at Nancy. I know Ralph will let me take the job, especially since we need the money, and he could make sure "I wasn't screwing with any man" if I was stuck at home, as he often tells me.

I realize we are still standing by the door. "Uh, do you guys want some coffee?" I ask. Without waiting for an answer, I move into our tiny kitchenette and pour three cups from the lukewarm pot. It's the breakfast coffee, but since this lady is coming to offer me a job, I don't bother to warm it up. I look out into our living room, where I can see Phil running up the aisle in his studio to talk to an audience member. Nancy and Bevvie sit on our country blue love seat, which doesn't match any of our other second-hand furniture. Behind Bevvie I notice a wrapped up plastic diaper that I was throwing away just when they came. I can't help laughing about what must be going through her mind right now.

Bevvie looks over at me, ignoring the stink coming from behind her. "You know, Alena, I was at our branch office in Beauford, and Nancy called me up and told me to ride on out with her to see you. I'm hoping you'll be interested. We could use some non-crazies working for the company."

I want to tell her that I am crazy, and that the killer-bee personality might take over now, but I decide to behave. Instead, I avoid her question and ask, "How did you two meet?"

"Over at Blackstone Community College," Nancy answers. She has a two-year degree at the school in business. Nancy is the motivated one. I never went anywhere after high school, but just worked as a cashier at my uncle's gas station and married Ralph.

I hand them their coffees, and then sit in the rocking chair across from them. We make small talk for a while, and then Bevvie stands up. "So, Alena, what do you think? Are you interested? I can get the training manual in the mail tonight."

"I'll think about it, Bevvie," I say. But I know that I want to take it.

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Ralph gets home around eleven. He looks angry, but I'm used to that. I put a plate of spaghetti in front of him and sit at the table. "How was your day?" I ask.

"Crappy. We got five new shipments of light fixtures in, and Jackson didn't want us to get backlogged, so we had to work an hour overtime," he says, shoveling the spaghetti into his mouth.

I decide that this is the time to ask. He'll always be in a pissed-off mood, and I might as well do it while he's got a full stomach. I stand up and rub his shoulders. I can feel the tightness under the blue cotton shirt begin to loosen. He leans his head back and his thick black lashes fall over his eyes. This smooth, soft face belongs to the gentle Ralph I fell in love with. "Nancy stopped by," I say.

"God, what did she want?" His muscles instantly tighten.

"She brought a woman over from Corporate Enterprises. She offered me a job calling people for this company from right here," I say, walking to Joe's playpen where he's sleeping. I pick him up to take him into our bedroom. He wriggles slightly in his little yellow sleeper, and then lays quietly against my chest. I walk into our bedroom and put Joey in the crib. Ralph walks in with his napkin still tucked into his shirt.

"How much?" he asks. I tell him, and he walks back into the kitchen without a word. Any silence like this usually comes before a major explosion, and I frantically try to figure out what he could be mad about. Instead, I am surprised. In the kitchen, he wraps his arms around me and kisses my forehead. "Take it," he says.

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Three days later I'm cradling Joey while he sleeps. Nancy has called me already this morning and asked me if I've gotten through the manual. For once, I'm a step ahead of her. I motivated myself to read the whole thing yesterday, and I just got back from a required test at the branch office. "Impressive, Alena. I'm proud you're doing this," Nancy said. I knew she was really thinking, *Now, if you'd just dump Ralph, I could really turn your life around!* A woman at the office handed me my first assignment this morning. I am to call up people and ask them information about their CD players. I put Joey into his crib, and then turn on the T.V. While Bob Barker turns people's lives around with his giant magical wheel, I start calling people to make their lives a little more hectic.

I have been warned that people will hang up on me most of the time. They do with my first ten calls. On the eleventh call, an older woman picks up the phone. I tell her I am doing a survey, and she asks me to repeat myself. I do, and she says, "Why, yes, I'll help you." I'm so relieved, I forget for a moment why I have called. I ask her if she has a CD player. It turns out that this questionnaire is going to be short and sweet, because the lady only owns an eight-track. "But honey, my daughter owns a CD player. Don't know why; she works all the time. Doesn't seem to have time to even call me, let alone listen to tunes." I thank the woman and hang up. I call a few more numbers and get either answering machines or slams. I suddenly feel very isolated. Me and that old



woman with her eight-track. Everyone else is busy.

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I call Bevvie the next day. "Everyone hung up on me except three people, and none of them had CD players," I complain.

"Well first, you need to call people after dinner, which it says on page four of the manual. And secondly, you just have to make yourself heard," she says. "That's the secret of this business, Alena. You let them know you're not out to sell them stuff. You just want to help create an informed American public. Let them know that their opinion is important."

This is quite the motivational speech. Helping America stay informed. I look down at the bit spit-up stain on my t-shirt. I don't feel much like an important bearer of information. Oprah reaches all these people with her show, and I'm certainly not in the same category as her.

While Ralph sleeps on the couch with Joey, I start dialing for my next assignment. This time it is finding out people's restaurant habits, and what they expect from "the dining-out experience." Again, slams in my ear and stupid answering machines. Until I finally hear a man say, "Hello?" I catch my breath and then give him my spiel as fast as I can. He laughs and says, "Sure."

"How often a week do you eat out?" I ask.

"Hardly ever," he says. "I can't afford to. I'm in grad school."

"Well, I guess the next question will seem pretty stupid then," I say. "But do you enjoy lower priced fast-food or higher priced sit-down restaurants?"

He laughs again. "McDonald's."

"Okay, low-low priced," I say. "Do you generally eat out with someone, or alone?"

He hesitates. "Alone. Like I said, school and everything. I'm kept busy enough with that."

I ask a few more questions, and then thank him. As I start to hang up he asks me why I'm doing this.

"Just for a company that does surveys for other businesses. I have to take care of my baby at home."

"You have to?"

I start to feel angry. "Yeah, he's a month old. Who else is going to do it?" I say.

"Sorry. I just meant that when you said *I have to*, you didn't sound that excited," he says.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm just a little tired."

"Perfectly understandable," he replies. We say our good-byes and hang up. I sit for a minute in my chair. He is one of the few people I've called who actually seems like more than a voice. I wonder why he doesn't have somebody special. He seems like a really nice guy, and I don't buy that crap about being too busy for everything but school. I want to call him back, but I hesitate, and walk over to the living room. It's none of my business, and he could get me fired.

I sit in my rocking chair and turn on the tube. Regis and Kathie Lee are taping their show in sunny Arizona, with warm winds and happy people. I turn off the T.V. and stare at my family.

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Four days later I'm giving Joey a bath in the bathroom sink. He lays here quietly, staring up at me. I rinse the soap off his tiny body, carefully cradling his head. When he's really quiet like this, I'm glad I'm his mom. I can't say that all the time though. I had wanted to wait, but Ralph was so persistent about getting a family started, even though we're always broke. When Joey was born, he was really glad it was a boy so that the oh-so-elegant Potter name could be carried down, I guess.

Joey looks up at me and starts to cry. I saw *Oprah* one time go to these people's house and baby-sit their kids for free. I wish Oprah would come over here once in a while.

I dry Joey off, and put him in diapers and a sleeper. I balance him on one arm with the bottle while I read over my next assignment. Windows. People will definitely think I'm trying to sell something.

Joey spits up, and then we go through the daily routine of changing his outfit. I put him down in his crib, and he points his tiny finger at me. I kiss it, wishing he could smile and laugh right now. He has less personality in this stage of life than Nancy's retriever. I'm a terrible mom for these thoughts.

I go back to the living room and start dialing. The usual, until the fifteenth call.

"You trying to sell something?" I hear a man's gruff voice say.

"No, sir, it's just a public opinion poll."

"Dammit, why should I give a shit what the public thinks? They never gave me nothing," he says.

"Thank-you anyway, sir," I say. I start to hang up; I'm not getting paid to listen to this kind of crap.

His voice suddenly softens. "Public opinion." He snorts. "Well, Miss, what exactly does the public need to know?"

I decide that this man is willing to talk, and I certainly need some data—we'll cooperate until he decides to scream again.

"Sir, we're collecting data on the type of windows you have in your home."

"I live in an apartment," he interrupts.

"Okay, are the windows there casement, crank-style, or wing-fanned," I ask.

"Ma'am," he says angrily, "I am a shut-in. Do you know what that is? A shut-in." He literally spells it for me. "That means I don't move out of this damn wheel chair all day. I have a nurse who bathes me, feeds me, and puts me to bed. Why should I give a crap about the damn window? Tell me that. I'm half blind, and I just..." Suddenly I hear muffled sounds and a loud yell.

A women's voice comes on the line. "Excuse me, this is Mr. Feinland's nurse. Can I help you?"

"Uh, no, that's okay." I hang up. My heart is racing. Hearing the phone slam is

one thing, but that was terrible. I feel so awful, like I should have done something, said something. I make a few more calls, and then go through my lists. Of the two-hundred numbers I've called in the last week, I've gotten only twenty-seven results.

I look at these names again. At least ten of these people actually told me something interesting about themselves, or asked me about myself. I wish I could talk to these people again and find out what some of them are really like. There is a lot of loneliness out there.

I give up calling for a while, and shakily pour myself some coffee. A woman is on *Maury Povitch* crying because her sister always comments on her weight. Get real, that's what sisters are for. A least mine is. But I sit down and watch the two anyway. I start to realize, that even though these people's ridiculous sob stories happen to everyone everyday, these talk-show guests at least have an audience to cry with them. Nobody gives a damn about public opinion on CD players or windows, but the few people who do take the time to answer my questions just want an audience. I think it's time that I talk to Ralph.

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"Ralph, I need an audience," I say as he stuffs a hot dog with mustard and chili piled high into his mouth.

"I'm tired Alena," he says. "What do you want?"

I know this will be difficult. I look at the rooster clock over the stove. Almost midnight.

"I need an audience to listen to me. I'm not asking to be on a talk show or anything. I just want to invite a few people over for dinner. Have a conversation, 'cause you're usually tired and..."

He looks at me as if I'm crazy. "What the hell, Alena. I come home from working all day long, and *you* want an audience? Give me a break. Tell it to the weirdos you call everyday."

I stare at him. He has set himself up very nicely. "I do. Besides you do have an audience, Ralph, on your lunch breaks." The words pour out before I can stop them. "You think I don't know what goes on behind my back, Ralph? This is a small town," I say, walking to our bedroom.

He follows me with quick steps, but I pick up Joey, who is sleeping in the crib, and put my finger to my lips. I know Ralph is running one excuse or denial after another through his puny little mind. He's an easy person to figure out. Just an ordinary lady's man with a nice body.

He looks at my face for a minute. I'm thinking that he has probably decided on the truth-but-with-great-remorse approach. "Alena, I'm really..."

"Look, Ralph, this wasn't what I wanted to talk about tonight," I say. I can't go on with where this conversation is now headed without crying, and it surprises me that it hurts so much. "What I really want to do is ask some of the people..."

He interrupts me. "Alena, I don't sleep with her. We eat lunch together sometimes. That's all. Promise."

He's lying. But I don't tell him I know this. "Okay, Ralph, I just want to know

if I can call some people over for dinner sometime." This has turned into a power of will, because I only want one audience right now. I want Ralph. I don't really care if I ever see these people that I call — but I need Ralph to say yes, to win just once.

His face looks as though he will cry or scream. He wants me to weep for joy and tell him how glad I am that he isn't having an affair. I refuse to play his game.

"I don't sleep with her, Alena," he says again.

"Ralph, I can hear your shit some other time. I'm asking you something else now."

"What?" He sits on the bed. I put Joey back in the crib, who miraculously has stayed asleep the whole time. For once I seem to have Ralph's attention. But is this the kind of attention I'm looking for?

"I want to invite a few people over whose numbers I've gotten through this job. I know it sounds really corny, but I've talked to some really lonely people over the line, and I'd like to have a few come over for coffee or something."

He looks at me like I've gone over the edge. I wait impatiently. Just say yes, Ralph. Then it will be over, and we can move on.

"Invite a bunch of loonies over who have nothing else to do but talk to you on the phone?" He is amazed. "No way, Alena. That's stupid. Do you know how many crazies there are in this world? The hell they'll come near you and Joey." I've heard the word crazies before. Bevvie. It seems to be the word for both the strange and the lonely. Only the people who are busy and don't have time to think can use that word. Ralph's protectiveness, which is one of his few merits at times, now disgusts me.

"Just forget it, Alena. We're not going to talk about it." He takes off his work shirt and pants and walks towards the shower.

I follow him. "You can't stop me, Ralph."

"Bullshit, Alena. Just try it." He strides into the bathroom naked without looking back.

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The next day I am feeding Joey, and then I begin the weekly ironing. First my blouse I wear to pick up my assignments at Corporate Enterprises, then Ralph's work shirts. When I'm finished, I put on some make-up and try as hard as I can to put my unruly hair back into a clip. I bundle up Joey and walk the seven blocks with him in his stroller over to Nancy's house. She greets me with rollers in her hair.

"Come on in, guys. Do you have extra diapers?" she asks.

I kiss Joey on the cheek and leave. I walk five blocks north and turn onto main street. I open the door into the cool darkness of Ferric's Bar, the only half-way successful pub in Beauford. I find a small booth in the back, and wait for Ralph to show up. It's as if I've got one of those hidden cameras they set up on *Hard Copy*. I'm not cool and distant like those interviewers, though. I get hurt, unfortunately. I don't know what I'm going to say to Ralph if he comes with his pretty lady. If he shows up with her at all.

I said I would shoot any woman dead that I ever caught with my husband. I know it won't happen. I'm not a killer, and I certainly don't care about Ralph that much

to land in jail for him. Something will happen, though. I order a coke and lean back in the dank, worn booth. The place is deserted at 11:30 in the morning.

The waitress sets down a glass, and I fiddle with the zipper on my purse, so that she won't recognize me. Inside my coat pocket, I'm carrying two hundred dollars and the phone numbers of Mr. Feinland and all of the other lonely people I've ever talked to on my job. I also have the phone number of the Nashville bus station. Today I don't think I'll need to call these people, though. My audience is here.

Julie Christine Johnston '96

## Contributors' Notes

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