



Winter 2001

## The Forum: Winter 2001

Lucy Esberg  
*University of North Dakota*

Rosy Esberg  
*University of North Dakota*

Catherine Canham  
*University of North Dakota*

Beth Eslinger  
*University of North Dakota*

Maria Kannianen  
*University of North Dakota*

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

Lucy Esberg, Rosy Esberg, Catherine Canham, Beth Eslinger, Maria Kannianen, RoxAnne Moore, Kelly Swenseth, Lauren Hoffman, Curtis Jefferson, and Margaret Mostad

# the Forum

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## Contents

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Lucy Esberg<br>Painting  | Cover |
| Rosy Esberg<br><i>Details, Details</i>                                 | 3     |
| Catherine Canham<br><i>Seeking Meaning</i>                             | 4     |
| Beth Eslinger<br>Photograph  | 8     |
| Maria Kannianen<br><i>This I Am</i>                                    | 9     |
| RoxAnne Moore<br><i>Changes</i>  | 10    |
| Kelly Swenseth<br>Painting   | 16    |
| Meg Ericson<br><i>I Think I Am Pretty Sure I Am Probably Not Crazy</i> | 17    |
| Rosy Esberg<br><i>Fading</i>   | 21    |
| Kelly Swenseth<br>Drawing  | 22    |
| Lauren Hoffman<br><i>Choices</i>                                       | 23    |
| Curtis Jefferson<br><i>Random Thoughts on an Insomniac Night</i>       | 26    |
| Margaret Mostad<br>Photograph  | 27    |

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BOSP Chairperson: Dan Wellcome  
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Rosy Esberg

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*Details, Details*

I stand on the edge,  
Laughing inside.  
Not because I know  
But because I do not know.  
I cannot know.  
All that there is  
Has already been found.  
The rest is just details.  
Details of the time,  
Carvings on the table,  
Marks in the sand.  
We love the details,  
Warming them,  
Bringing them to our hearts.  
Once we are gone  
Where do they go,  
For what is an act  
With no one to show?

Catherine Canham

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*Seeking Meaning*  
*Pleasantville and the Book of Ecclesiastes*

“**M**eaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” This lament seems indicative of a very typical outlook on life in today’s society. These words, however, were written nearly 3000 years ago, and of all places they can be found in the Bible. The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes dealt with an issue with which we in the modern age also grapple. Where can we find meaning for our existence? It seems that deep inside of every human being, there is a search going on, at times a desperate one. We spend our entire lives striving after a never-ending set of goals, all the while wondering where we find purpose. As humanity continues to chase an infinite number of elusive ends, we find ourselves at the same time tangled in a search for significance. On the journey of life we are all seekers. Whether one aspires to be philosophical or not, he must at least once in his life wrestle with questions such as these. Is there really any purpose at all which makes life a worthwhile endeavor, or is it completely and utterly meaningless?

The Book of Ecclesiastes approached these issues through the eyes of the narrator, known only as “the Teacher,” and the lens of his experiences as one person who is seeking after meaning in life. There is reason to believe that this Teacher was in fact King Solomon of Israel, as he was also described as a “son of David and king in Jerusalem” (1:1). In other accounts Solomon was presented as a king of surpassing wealth, splendor, luxury, and wisdom. It would seem that he possessed all that was required for complete happiness. Near the end of his life, the Teacher recounted his personal exploration into various ways of life and offered proverbial wisdom to those who would follow him on the journey. He displayed an extremely jaded perspective, and at times the mood seemed one of pure despair, but after much personal searching, he presented his final conclusion. For a man of such tremendous means, his final philosophy of life was a strikingly simple one.

It seemed for the greater part of the work that the only “meaning” the Teacher found was that none existed at all. Over and over he asserted, “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” He devoted himself to “study and explore by wisdom all that is



done under heaven...." He had "seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (1:13, 14). As one who would appear to have sampled all that life has to offer, he was far from impressed. The Teacher was wholly disenchanted with all that is done "under the sun," yet his message was not one of total meaninglessness as it might seem from his frequent outbursts. Throughout the book he offered glimpses of a deeper knowledge he found. He tantalized his audience for the entire book before offering any conclusive advice. The Teacher's final lesson was the culmination of an entire life spent seeking after understanding and true significance.

The contemporary film Pleasantville presents the journey of two very different, almost accidental, seekers of meaning. Brother David and sister Jennifer, two supposedly typical teenagers of the 90's, are zapped into an idyllic 1950's black-and-white television show. In the vein of such programs as Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best, the television program Pleasantville depicts the simple life of the idealized 1950's. This is a place in which Dad comes home from work everyday at precisely the same time, calling out a cheerful, "Honey, I'm home!" as he is promptly welcomed to a hot meal awaiting him on the table. A truly "picture perfect" setting, Pleasantville presents the appearance of a town without problems, a place for which the people of the fast-paced, high-stress 90's yearn. David is one such person, knowing every detail of every episode. It seems to be a form of escapism for him, a secure, predictable place in which he can seclude himself from the problems of a dysfunctional family, and life in general in the modern world. The image of Pleasantville lives up to its name in every conceivable way, at least outwardly. Once David and his sister are magically zapped into this world, however, the shortcomings of the society become quickly apparent. Within this framework the creators of the film grapple with the question of just what makes our experience of life deep, colorful, rich and vivid. Very literally, they present a transformation from a life lived in black-and-white to one in Technicolor.

David and Jennifer are placed within the context of the show as the characters Bud and Mary-Sue. Playing out their roles as these characters, they gradually expose the ignorant people of Pleasantville to entirely new aspects of life. One of the very first of these new experiences centers around Jennifer (now Mary-Sue) as she goes on a date with Skip, the captain of the basketball team. A self-described "slut" in her 90's life, she does not plan to settle for just being pinned and holding hands like other Pleasantville teenagers. On this, their very first date, she suggests that they go to Lover's Lane, and she takes Skip far beyond merely holding hands. She does nothing short of guiding Skip through his first sexual experience. In a society in which her own parents (and everyone else's, for that matter) sleep in twin beds, this is a pivotal event. At his very next basketball prac-

tice Skip tells his teammates of his amazing new experience, and within a matter of days, Jennifer has instigated a miniature sexual revolution in Pleasantville. It is at this point that everything in Pleasantville begins to turn upside-down. The black and white television show begins to display color never before seen. For instance, on his way home from their first date, Skip sees a red rose. Perhaps a symbol of passion, this is the first of many changes which begin to color the lives of the people of Pleasantville. Some people begin to change colors; even Betty Parker, Bud and Mary-Sue's mother, becomes colorized. This occurs as she reaches new heights of passion after asking her own daughter to enlighten her about what occurs at Lover's Lane. This scene is a role reversal of the classic "Birds and the Bees" mother-daughter explanation of sex. Betty's new experience, in addition to giving her character literal color, causes an unheard-of event in Pleasantville. The tree outside of the Parker house spontaneously combusts in a town which has never known of fire. It would seem that the makers of the film are implying that it is sexual passion which gives our lives true color, and that without sex, the world we inhabit would be one of black, white and gray.

The Teacher in Ecclesiastes also considered this explanation for the meaning he sought. It is recorded in I Kings 11:3 that Solomon had no fewer than 700 wives and 300 concubines, therefore it seems reasonable to assume that he had no shortage of sexual experience. However, he said in Chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes that pleasure proved to be meaningless. Among these "pleasures" he included "cheering himself with wine" (2:3), "acquiring men and women singers, and a harem as well" (2:8). These things he called "the delights of the heart of man" (2:8), yet he reached the same conclusion as before, that "everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (2:11). It would seem from the Teacher's experience, that though these things granted pleasure for a time, they were not the essence of life; lacking in deep meaning, they were not the things which brighten and color our lives.

The people of Pleasantville, aided by their newest neighbors David and Jennifer, also seek meaning in another area: books. Prior to David and Jennifer's arrival in Pleasantville, all of the books were blank and the people ignorant, not even knowing of the existence of any world at all outside of their very own town. Even the high school geography lesson centered around the two major streets in the town, pointing to the overwhelming ignorance of the people who live there. Jennifer and David expose them to books and knowledge, but with this knowledge comes also a power for evil. Before David and Jennifer are zapped into the TV, we see a bit of what they are taught in school in the 90's. It does not appear to be at all uplifting. The knowledge they possess is a burden to them. In school they learn about such things as the spread of HIV, the decline in the availability of jobs, the

ever-shrinking median income, and the ravages of global warming which include erratic weather patterns, widespread flooding, and famine.

In his quest, the Teacher, too, investigated knowledge and wisdom. It would seem that this was another subject on which he must be considered an authority. His insight, wisdom and breadth of understanding were described as "measureless as the sand on the seashore" (I Kings 4:29), and so revered was he for this gift that "men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom" (I Kings 4:34). However he declared this also to be meaningless. In a strange sort of way, his reasoning echoed that which is merely implied in the film. After viewing the scene of school in the 90's and the many social problems which are thrust upon us in our education, one might be led to believe that ignorance, such as existed in Pleasantville, truly is bliss. As the Teacher wrote, "Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (1:17, 18). Though wisdom and knowledge are important, they are not humanity's final purpose in living.

As David searches in Pleasantville for meaning which he cannot seem to find in his life in the 90's, a powerful allusion is also made to the creation account found in Genesis. Everything around him is turning colors, and David (Bud) goes out on his first date, a drive to Lover's Lane. It resembles a beautiful garden, an Eden-like paradise of sorts. They sit enjoying the beauty of their surroundings, much as the other couples around them do. As they sit and converse she tells him she picked the berries he was eating, to which Bud asks, "Really?" and she replies, "Yeah, there's lots of stuff. I'll show you." She then runs and plucks a bright red apple from a tree nearby and feeds it to him. The connection seems an ironic one since in the creation account Adam's bite from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, offered to him by Eve, was the act by which sin entered the world. It opened up a Pandora's Box of problems which continue to plague humankind. It seems that the writers of the film are implying that sin, forbidden fruit, is what gives life color.

David continues to search for meaning in relationships with others and by trying to improve the lives of his fellow men. He begins to find his niche in society, even playing the role of hero-for-a-day after he puts out a fire. This is a skill which no one in Pleasantville had previously possessed or required. He gives others the gift of knowledge, telling them about the outside world and helping expose them to literature. In these and other ways, he wants to make the lives of the people around him better. He finds meaning in companionship. This is one of the few aspects in which the film and the book essentially agree. The Teacher found meaning in human relationships also, but that was only a small part of his final conclusion.

After the Teacher's life of seeking and sampling the many pleasures

life had to offer, he found that two connected sources of meaning remained. The first of these was our relationships with other people, but the second, and most important, was our relationship with God. The Teacher acknowledged our need for people with whom we may share our lives. He declared that "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up" (4:9-10). At the very end of the book the Teacher offered this, his final advice: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth..." (12:1). He followed with his resolution: "Now that all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). He experienced everything and more of that which added color to the lives of the people in Pleasantville, yet the Teacher found that the only aspect of his existence which truly made life worth living was God. As he discovered that meaning was found only within a relationship with the all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the universe, the singular desire of his heart became to live a holy life out of reverence and love for God.



*Beth Eslinger*

## Maria Kannianen

---

### *This I Am*

I am Love,  
red and angry.  
Mocked by bloody rose and pointed hearts.

I am Jealousy and Fear,  
the one left behind  
while he goes to the bar.

I am Cruel and Bleak,  
the Sylvia Plath  
of those yet alive.

I am forever Young,  
Whitman's Song of Self  
Emerges after a hard run.

I am Old age,  
my body complains  
of my constant Mortality.

I am futile Effort,  
years of work to escape,  
and once escaped, aimless and unsure.

I am my Christ,  
my strength is my own.

I am my Satan,  
my own best critic.

I am all this.  
yet none of it at all.

Roll my dice.  
Chance decides  
which face will show.

## RoxAnne Moore

---

### *Changes*

I stood there in early winter's cold breeze, watching my husband drive out of our driveway towing a U-Haul loaded with all of our son's belongings. The destination was San Francisco, California. Our son has lived there for a few months now, surviving on bare essentials — mainly his clothing. When he graduated from Music Tech in Minneapolis last summer, he headed for California in the hopes of breaking into the music world and fulfilling his vow of never again having to survive a North Dakota winter. As the vehicle went around the corner and out of view, I wiped a few stray tears from my eyes, went inside and thought about how my life has changed.



*I can see clearly now, the rain is gone.  
I can see all obstacles in my way  
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind  
It's gonna be a bright, bright, sunshiny day  
- Johnny Nash, 1972*

Though the harsh winds of North Dakota's first winter storm are ravaging just outside my window, yet I feel none of the desolation I have in the past over the prospect of the long cold months ahead. My feelings are those one usually feels with the onset of spring — new life budding forth, fresh hopes and dreams, excitement at what the future holds in store. I have survived the winters of my life thus far. Having done that, I embrace what I've come to feel is the springtime of my life.

It was a sunny November afternoon about a year ago when I made a decision that would change my life — at least as I had known it up to that point. With the music of the Johnny Nash song being played on the stereo reverberating against our living room walls, I felt I, too, could finally see clearly, that (as Johnny Nash goes on to sing) "Here is the rainbow I've been praying for." With rainbows of color dancing on my walls, reflected from the prism that hangs in our window, I decided to go back to college.

The realization that I'm a college student always makes me smile. At the same time I cringe a little at the prospect of whatever obstacles might stand in the way of the degree I now want for myself. As I look through the course offerings for next semester and try to decide which classes to

take next, I remind myself to be careful not to take on a heavier load than I can handle. When a person decides to return to college at the age of forty-six there are brain cells that, quite frankly, have not been used for some time. The past two semesters I've taken a couple of writing classes to test the waters. I believe I'm now ready to jump into the depths of being a full-time student and I'm excited about the challenge.

Yet, at the same time, my husband and I are at different crossroads in our lives with my decision to pursue a college degree. He's a physician and is at the point in his career where he is able to take (and looks forward to) the frequent vacations or business trips that afford him the opportunity to get away from his daily grind. Until now, we've only had to plan around "his" schedule. Mine could always just be rearranged. We've discussed at length how this decision of mine will mean that in the future we'll have to consider my schedule as well. We've talked about the possibility of my not being always able to accompany him on these trips as we've been used to doing in the past. He has assured me he understands and accepts this. I feel lucky to have not only his support, but a great deal of encouragement as well. It enhances my desire to succeed.

The idea of pursuing a college degree gives me goose bumps of excitement. To be doing things for the first time in my life to bring me self-fulfillment and pride at my accomplishments alone is a new frontier for me. I was the oldest of five children and I learned early in life to be responsible for others. Both of my parents worked full time and I, as the oldest sibling, was left to care for my brothers and sisters. So the seeds of being a nurturer were planted in me as a child. It shouldn't be surprising that when I got married and became a mother soon after, I would continue to put the needs of others before my own. Being a good wife and mother became my primary goals. To me, this meant devoting my life to that endeavor, as though it were my career. I concentrated all my efforts on seeing to my family's needs. I felt if they were happy, then I would surely be happy too.

When my husband graduated from medical school, I was proud of the part I had played early on in our marriage, by working as a secretary to help see him through school. At both our daughter's and son's graduations from high school, I felt happiness and pride at the young adults they'd become. I knew I'd played a major role in their lives to that point. I also knew when our son (who was our youngest child) graduated from high school my role as a mother would change dramatically. I began to think increasingly about what I would do with the rest of my life. Over the years I had often felt unfulfilled - sometimes even unneeded - but I would try to push these feelings aside, while I busied myself with trying to be a supportive doctor's wife and the best mother I knew how to be. That meant being a member of various organizations, volunteerism, and, above all, making it a point to be at every school performance, every athletic event, every teacher's confer-

ence. Since my parents were forced by financial circumstances to both work full time jobs, it was often lonely when I would come home from school. I still haven't forgotten the first Christmas play when I was in elementary school. I couldn't wait to have my parents see because I had a speaking role. They ended up not being able to be there. It was the busy Christmas season and they had to work. I did my best with the few lines I had, but I had to choke back tears to do it. I'd wanted so badly to have my parents see me in my first acting role. I didn't want my children to ever feel the kind of loneliness and sadness at any of their school functions that I had felt that Christmas. But sometimes this nagging feeling of wanting more for myself would sneak into my thoughts. I tried not to pay attention. When a series of traumatic events began occurring in our family, I stopped pushing those feelings aside. I enrolled in a creative writing class in college.



So why, after all these years, has it suddenly become so important for me to be in college? What now gives me the confidence to pursue a degree, when I've never before felt I could? My answer isn't simple; I'm hoping it lies somewhere in the following. I'm still not sure I do possess the ability, but I am certain that I finally want to try.

Enduring the chain of events that have occurred in the past three years in our family has helped me to realize the ill effects of ignoring one's own self-worth. Seeing to the needs of others, while ignoring your own can be detrimental to one's mental and physical health. Nowhere is that made more apparent than in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Here is a woman who is driven to the dark depths of insanity because of not being allowed to use her talents. Ironically, the very people who loved her and thought they were seeing to her health and well-being were by the very nature of their acts, aiding in her eventual descent to madness. I know my parents thought they were doing what was best for me when they thought a good future involved finding a good husband, getting married and having children.

While recently reading Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" I found myself relating to her words on a deep personal level. My mother died from breast cancer six months ago. In an effort to keep her memory alive I, too, have since gone in search of my mother's garden. Tears came easily to my eyes when I read "... in search of my mother's garden, I found my own." I'm hoping my search will not only help me find, but more importantly, accept, my own uniqueness.

Walker speaks directly to the concept of stifled creativity when she goes on to write: "For those mothers of ours were not Saints but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release." I felt as though Walker could be referring to my own mother when I read: "...they stumbled blindly through their



lives; creatures so abused...so confused by pain that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope."

Though not a victim of slavery as were the women the essay talks about, my father did not treat my mother with love and respect. She was certainly emotionally and, as we've discovered in recent years, at times physically abused by him. This is the pain he has had to endure and regret since her death. She lived her life solely for her family with no regard for herself. She believed any problems her children had, even as they grew into adulthood, were a direct result of her having been a bad mother. I remember all too clearly sitting by my mother's dying bedside knowing she had not been able to find personal happiness before she died. I promised myself I would not let the same thing happen to me.



I have struggled over how to relate the traumatic events that I mentioned earlier. Should I tell about them little by little? Or, should I list them one after another? I've decided to do the latter, because as I look back on the past three years that's the way it happened. At least it certainly seemed so at the time. A series of life-altering events began to occur, with barely enough time for me to take a deep breath and smile before the next bad thing would happen.

First, I learned that my daughter's marriage of less than two years was over due to the fact that she is a lesbian. Not long after, my husband and I found ourselves in the emergency room of the hospital with our nineteen year old son who was near death due to a drug overdose. During his subsequent treatment for chemical dependency we found out he'd been sexually abused when only five years old by a babysitter. My father-in-law died quite suddenly and unexpectedly. Soon after, my own father was diagnosed with colon cancer and needed to undergo a series of chemotherapy treatments. Almost simultaneously, I learned my mother had discovered a lump on her breast five years ago, but had never sought medical treatment. When she finally agreed to go to the doctor the cancer had spread to her bone marrow and into her brain. She died exactly six weeks after entering the cancer care unit of the hospital.

Each of these events are life-altering in and of themselves, in the sense that one stops and thinks seriously what life is all about. I will not deny it's been difficult dealing with each of the situations. I've always had a great fear of death and had never allowed myself to consider the possibility of losing my parents. When my husband's father died, I told my parents I hoped I would die before they did, because I couldn't envision a world without them in it. My mother reacted with horror to my statement. When she died, I understood her reaction. The pain I've endured since her death is indescribable. I can only imagine how much more terrible it must be to lose a child.

With each ordeal I will admit I've gone through periods of depression and much agonizing over all that's happened. I can't count all the times I've wistfully longed for the happier days of the not so distant past. Yet, I've survived. I believe my decision to return to college is what saw me through some of the most painful moments in my life thus far. I've realized I'm a much stronger person than I've ever given myself credit for. I now know I want to find out what is going to bring me to the end of my life feeling I have lived it well. Self-fulfillment has become as important to me now, as seeing to the needs of others was in the past.

All of these experiences came as a terrible blow to the nurturer in me that heretofore had equated nurturing with power. I found myself powerless to "make things better." I was forced to accept each situation, however unhappy it made me, or those I loved. I realized that I couldn't change my daughter's sexual orientation - nor would I want to, I've since decided. No amount of wishing it weren't so could change the fact that my son had been sexually abused. Nor could I cure my father's cancer or keep either my father-in-law or my mother from dying. But what I ever so slowly found out is that what I could do was to make changes in my own life that would bring me the fulfillment I'd long wished for. Going back to college was a direct result of that realization.

Accepting my daughter's homosexuality was not easy for me. It came as a crushing blow to realize when I'd said so often that all I wanted was for my children to be happy, what I'd really meant was that I wanted them to make me happy. I went through all of the turmoil that any parent of a gay child goes through. I blamed myself; I was afraid what friends and family would say or think; I mourned the fact that I might never be a grandmother. Then, thank God, there came a point at which I realized no matter what, I will always love my daughter. I'm proud of the compassionate person she is and I've learned her sexuality is part of what makes her who she is. With that knowledge began the acceptance. It's led to an even deeper bond between us than I'd ever imagined was possible.

For helping me come to these realizations, I owe some gratitude to Robb Foreman Dew who is the author of a book called "Family Heart." My husband found it easier than me to accept the changes brought about by our daughter's admission of being a lesbian. His very nature is that of a person who adapts more easily to changes, and he is far more compassionate and accepting of people than I have ever been. He suggested we join a support group to help us through the process. It was there we were given "Family Heart" to read. Written in memoir fashion, it is the story of the author's experience in finding out her son is gay. It tells of the struggle their family went through on the path toward accepting their son's gayness. So similar were her reactions, her thoughts, and the ultimate outcome of total acceptance, that I felt while reading it she was telling my story. Since

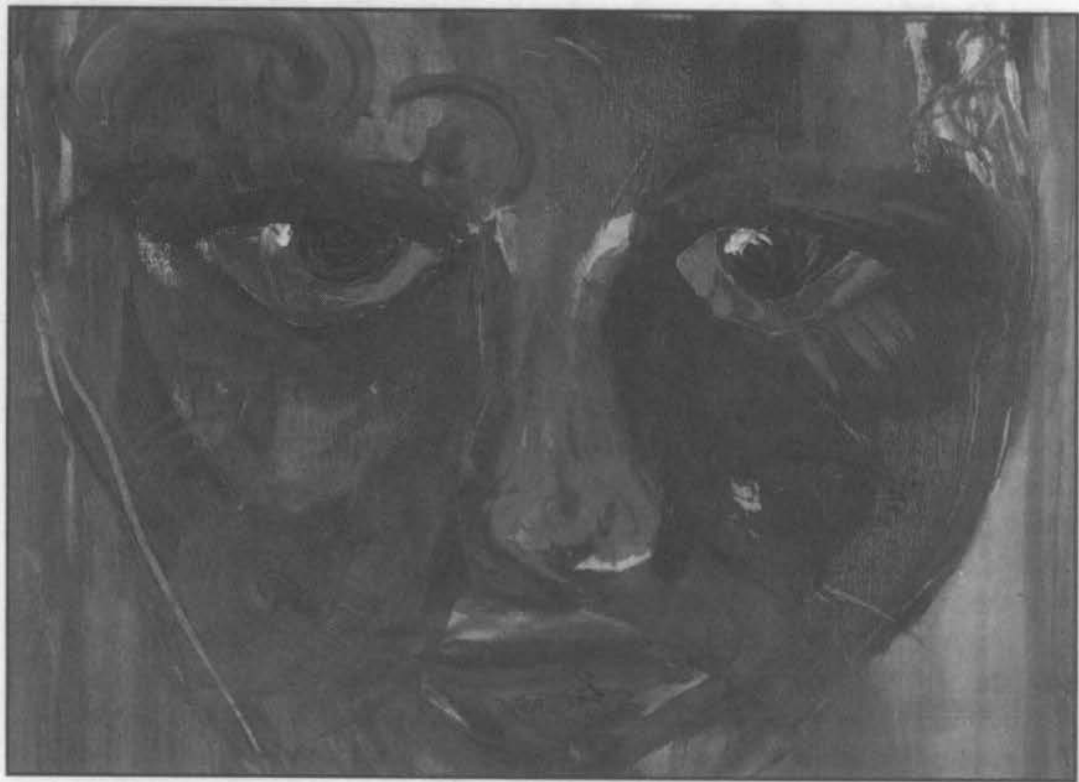
then, I've often recommended this book to people who want to understand what it is like to find out their child is gay. I asked for my own copy of it last Christmas. My daughter gave it to me and wrote the following inscription in it: "I think the struggle to all of us in accepting gayness into this family has made us even closer than ever in so many ways. It's helped us show each other and the 'rest of the world' what FAMILY really means."

I cannot deny that almost losing our son was another factor in helping me come to terms with the gayness. When a parent is faced with the possible death of their child, sexual preference suddenly becomes a very minor detail. I now look back on that experience as if it were a reminder from God to accept our children unconditionally. I would like to write more about our family's healing process in coming to terms with the knowledge of the sexual abuse our son suffered at the hands of his babysitter. But he is (no doubt as a direct result of the experience) an extremely private person. Out of respect for his wishes, I will say only that at least now, with his secret of so many years out in the open, we've been able to begin the recovery.

I am writing this for a composition class I am taking from a professor whose specializes in essay writing. While I've been working on it and trying to figure out my class schedule for next semester, my husband has been on his way to California with my father riding shotgun instead of me. He finished his chemotherapy treatments recently and was given a clean bill of health. When I asked him if he'd like to go to San Francisco for Thanksgiving he jumped at the chance. He's always loved to travel but my mother was a homebody so they never went too far from home. When our daughter found out I wasn't going to California, she decided to come and spend the holiday with me, so it's all worked out quite nicely. While the three men I love most in the world are having their turkey dinner and seeing the sights of San Francisco, my daughter and I will be eating ours here, relishing the rare moments we're able to spend together.

As a result of my decision not to go to California, a small part of me is sad that I won't be seeing my son. An even greater part of me is happy, though, that for one of the first times in my life it was essential to do what was more important to me. I didn't want to miss my classes and I had an important paper to write. It's a small step. It's a beginning.

The first of the two portraits is a study of a young woman's face, rendered in a dark, almost monochromatic palette. The second portrait, which is the larger one, is a more complex work, featuring a face with a dark, swirling pattern around the eyes, suggesting a state of intense emotion or a specific psychological state. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.



*Kelly Swenseth*

The artist's use of dark tones and swirling patterns creates a sense of mystery and depth. The focus is on the eyes, which appear to be looking directly at the viewer, adding to the intensity of the piece. The overall composition is balanced yet dynamic, with the swirling patterns providing a focal point of visual interest.

Meg Ericson

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*I Think I'm Probably Pretty Sure I'm Not Crazy*

- or -

*The Effects of Popular Culture  
on the Teenage Psyche*

All of this is true. Except for the stuff that is not true. I will not tell you what is and what isn't true, because I do not know. I primarily blame the media, but it could be my parents. I am not supposed to trust either of the two, I guess. Maybe I am a pathological liar. My mom told me once she thought I was schizophrenic. She was joking. I think she was right. It is kind of trendy to be mentally ill right now though, so maybe I should stick with it. This could do more for my popularity at school than a tongue piercing.

Yes, that's right. I am just your regular, run-of-the-mill rebellious teenager, blindly following along in the footsteps of my oh-so-groovy parents. I guess you could say I'm just confused. I am seventeen, ok, sixteen, so that's part of the deal. Right? All sixteen-year-olds are supposed to be rebellious and confused. That's how they are on TV and in the movies. Except the perfect kids, but they usually end up dying tragically. So, yeah, I guess these are the "best years of my life." Great.

Personally, I think that is all bullshit. I feel like killing myself, or someone else, one minute and the next I feel like doing cartwheels. And no one is concerned? This is normal? Whatever. I do not believe that this is normal and I would really appreciate if the entire world would stop telling me that it is. A girl can only take so many patronizing comments on hormonal roller coasters and the joys of being a woman before she wants to throw the television through the living room window. My life (My So-Called Life?) is not what I keep thinking it should be; it is real, but it isn't real.

When I think about all the stuff I used to believe, and probably should believe, it scares me. I used to believe that I was pretty smart. That is what everyone told me, so I just believed it was true. Stupid. I am starting to think that, along with probably going slowly insane, I am also getting stupider (is that a word?). In classes I do not ever want to say anything. And, no, it is not that crap about boys being overbearing in classroom situations. It just seems like every time I think that I know something, it turns out to be wrong. But, as always, I am supposed to feel like this. The worst part is, my

teachers are always all over me for not "living up to my potential." I'm not living up to my potential? They are teaching a bunch of losers in a public high school for a salary that just barely keeps them above the poverty line.

And I should not even start with my parents. Jesus. It is such a cliché, I know. I actually do like my parents, honestly. They have never lied to me about the crazy stuff they used to do ("Gee whiz, mom and dad, I don't even know what drugs are"), and I know that I can trust them. But why would I want to?

Maybe it because I am in my "selfish teenager phase," (or is my self-esteem damaged from playing with Barbie?) but I really do not believe that they care as much as they say they do. I sure as hell would not put my life on hold to take care of some whacked out kid. They do, though. Frankly, I think it is kind creepy. They read all these "how to help your crazy, moody, surly, difficult, nasty teenage daughter without hurting her delicate self esteem" books, and then they think they know everything about me. They probably do know more than I do, but I could never tell them that. All I ever get from them is "oh, honey, how was your day?" I know what they really want to do is smack me upside the head and send me somewhere far away, where I can only call them once every six months for ten minutes, until I am 35. Screw the books. That's what I would do with a kid like me. Part of me wishes they would, just so I would be justified in bitching about them.

The thing is, I really do not know if I am crazy or not. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with this feeling inside of me. It is deep and pulsating, like I am charged with an electric current. My heart starts beating really fast and my thoughts go chasing through my addled little brain fifty times faster than usual. These little attacks never scare me. These are the only times that I feel like I am in control, although I am not in control at all. It is only during these pseudo-panic attacks that I do not feel like everything that I think and feel and want has already been predetermined by MTV's think tank. I do not worry that my heart might explode or that it will never end. I just let my thoughts crystallize, into my thoughts, not something that is played-out and clichéd. I know who I am, I know what I want, and I believe myself, no one else.

Usually, something sparks it. The last time it happened, I had recently broken up with my boyfriend, (no, I am not so trendy as to be a lesbian, but my parents told me it would be all right if I was...) the thirteenth love of my life, and I watched this crazy movie. This chick (oh, how un-P.C. of me) kidnaps this guy she met through the personals and held him at gunpoint because she did not want to be alone the night before she killed herself. It was in the comedy section, but I did not think it was funny at all. It freaked me out, because I totally knew what she was feeling. Except that I have never placed a personal ad and I am not, usually, suicidal. Something about the movie, or the night, or simply the fact that I am whacked, set me off.

That always pisses me off. Does the media, or my parents, or God or something have to influence everything I do? It is as if the rest of the world thinks that they know what is best for the teenagers and they hand us everything we need, so we never question anything. I think what bothers me the most about this business of having my life lived out for me is that it means that I do not ever really have to do anything or feel anything. It is all right there for me to process and forget about. My thoughts go racing through my mind faster than I have time to even fully think them. And I believe the bullshit, we all do.

My parents are guilty of this. They were hippies, hardcore baby boomers, and they seem to think that their adolescence was as good as any could be. They want me to be "real" and "open" and they want to give me "everything they never had." Bullshit. They want to sell me their childhood, all for the low, low price of living my own life. Knowing how false everything I see or hear makes my little incidents less bothersome. And I can't tell anyone; I can't be that "real."

All that would happen anyway is that someone (whoever happened to think they knew best that day) would throw some happy pills down my throat and send me off to live with the rest of the socially sanctioned zombies waiting to become grist for the mill o' America.

My God. I really am a stereotype. I am such a product of "the system" (yeah, damn the man), it disgusts me. I buy whatever looks "cool" so I can fit in with the people I hate, knowing damn well that this shit is marketed especially towards kids like me. The worst part is that I know this, and I still buy it. The "counter-culture," especially designed by old, fat hippies who drive their kids to soccer practice and interpretive-fucking-dance lessons in their gas guzzling "Suburban Assault Vehicles," to make sure that there is no question about what is cool, because their generation is the only one that knows. And yeah, I buy it. And I like it.

I think I will eventually be ok. I will finish high school, go to college, do a bunch of stupid shit that I can tell the kids about conspiratorially when they are old enough, and marry some dumb-ass who thinks he understands how crazy I am. Then I will get a nasty corporate job that I hate, buy an SUV (SAV?), have kids to carry on the legacy, and buy self-help books to figure out why I am so unhappy. That seems to be the modus operandi for every Tom, Dick, and Jane (or maybe now it is Clayton, Quinn, and Skylar) in America. Or maybe I will have an affair with a distinguished, older, foreign man who wants to take me away somewhere to care for me for the rest of my life, or the rest of his, whichever comes first. But I, being the moral, red-blooded, God-fearing American woman that I will be, will pass on that chance at happiness. I will stay with my family, because it is their happiness, not mine, that really matters. It will not really matter if I hate my life. Inside, aren't all adults just waiting to open fire on the next person they have to speak to?

I should probably have a moral to this tirade, a lesson the reader can learn. Well, I don't. If I don't know how I feel about anything, I certainly won't pretend that this diatribe has any moral or social value. All I can do is remember not to forget the things that I do know. I know I have crazy thoughts running through my head at all times. I know that I refuse to be part of my parents' own personal love-in, because it freaks me out that they care so much. I still think the government sucks, for no reason other than that "they" (whoever they are) told me that it did, and that it was trying to brainwash me. (Congratulations, it worked.) I think I spend too much time trying to be cool, without realizing that I probably am, which no one will know until I am famous or dead, whichever happens first. I also know that I still think I am crazy, but that I am supposed to be right now.

Some might say I am too cynical for a sixteen-year-old. I should try to be more idealistic or something. Really, isn't that what these years (oh, my God, these "Wonder Years") are for? I should be in love, again, and "marveling at the wonder that is my body." I should also be trying to make a difference in the world, all while experimenting with different substances and being promiscuous. This is what teenagers do, evidently.

This notion of "typical teenage behavior" is why I will never be normal. I refuse to have my adolescence bought and sold by a bunch of people who thought they could change the world and only managed to mess it up worse than it already was. I refuse to believe that it is my job to fix it. I, along with the rest of the children of the lost children, do not know how to fix the ozone layer or reinstate values and morals that are so antiquated they have no place in society. If I have never had to think an original thought, how am I going to accomplish this? I would like to decline this honor, I think.

My life is just a minuscule part of the rest of the world. All I can do is live my life and hope that I somehow make a difference. But I know that I will never change everything all at once. Bitching about it won't make it better. All I know how to do right now is wait. Wait for someone else to see it, to recognize that we all live in a gigantic lie. None of the things that everyone else thinks are so important even matter, only people do. Not stories, not movies, not television, not shopping, nothing that we do to make ourselves believe we are happy. People. As soon as someone else figures out what is true and what is fiction, I hope they let me know. I am sick of waiting for the answers, so I am going to make up my own.

Perhaps that is the moral. I will be a part of the problem, not the solution. I will think my own thoughts for the first time when they happen for the first time, to me, not on TV or in a movie. I will not be comfortable in my own complacency. I will stop trying to be cool and just be me. I will be the complete nut-case, overly emotional, ridiculously moody, "normal," "healthy," sixteen year old girl that I am, riding the peak of some kind of psychotic episode. It is ok, it is normal, and I am fine.

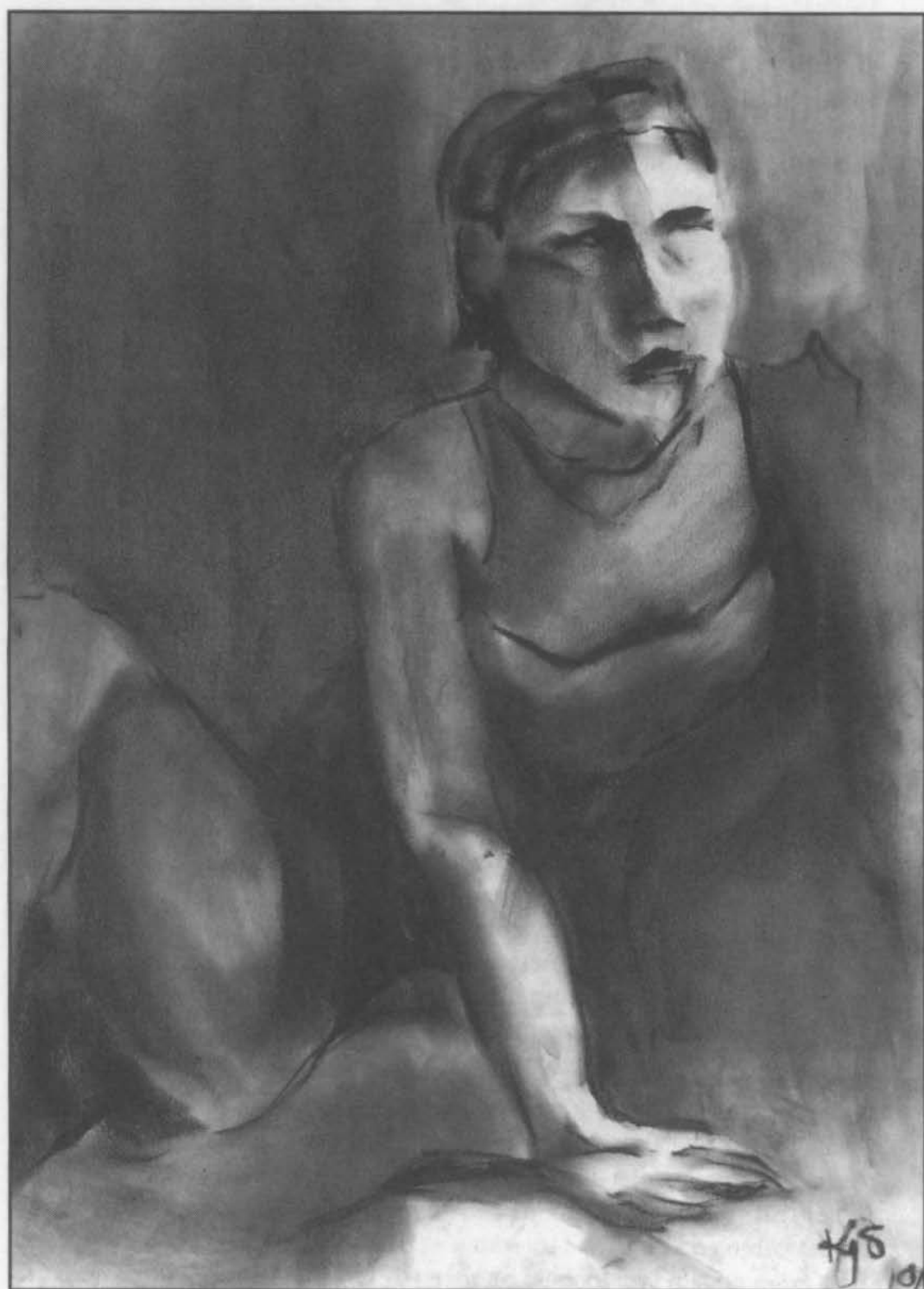


Rosy Esberg

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*Fading*

I sit on the green leather couch.  
Its green engulfs me,  
Hugs me,  
Lets me sink in,  
Hiding me from the world.  
I close my weary eyes  
Hoping that no one  
Will see me listening.  
The girls nearby  
Speak of toilet paper and t-shirts,  
The important things in life.  
Trivial to me,  
Yet indulging to them.  
To each their own  
And to own their each.  
Daylight pours in,  
Making me want to stay  
Away from the stream,  
For a man nearby  
Has much to say.



*Kelly Swenseth*

## Lauren Hoffman

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### *Choices*

It was a rainy, cold Thursday evening. Sam was sitting out on the porch in Taylor's woolen sweater, and the quilt given to them on their wedding was wrapped around her. She had been sitting there for quite some time and didn't care that the hours seemed to pass without notice. Sam was heartbroken and had a lot of thinking to do before the next day. She and Taylor bought the cabin next to Oskinwa Lake four years ago. Some of the best times during their marriage were spent there, but those were happier days. Sam came here now to get away from everything and everyone.

She sat on the porch watching the rain shatter the mirror surface of the lake. Next to the dock in front of the cabin she could see a muskrat swimming its heart out to get to shore and fix its home before it was washed away. Sam saw all this life in everything from the trees, to the muskrat, to the lake itself and wondered how she could carry on. Her eyes, already tired from crying, lulled her back into that safe place where no one could intrude. She fought this urge to sleep, trying to hold on when she knew that she had already let go. Her mind ran through the memories of the times that she and Taylor had spent together. The past six years kept flooding back.



She met Taylor four months into her sophomore year at Penn State. They were on a collision course the moment they set foot on the same sidewalk. Sam was in a hurry to get to her next class across campus. She would be late again because of her previous professor's rambling on frogs and what they had to do with organic chemistry. Needless to say, she wasn't paying attention to where she was going; she just wanted to get there. Taylor was also in a hurry, he had to get to the library and borrow a book he needed two weeks ago to write a report due in a few hours. He sped up his pace to a mild jog and was watching the ground to make sure he didn't slip on any ice. Suddenly, he hit something and papers went flying everywhere. Sam was so shocked at the entire event that she didn't even look up to see with whom she had collided. "Ah, man... Why didn't you look where you were going!" she blurted out, bending down to rummage through the strewn papers.

"I am so sorry. I'm such a klutz. Here let me help you with those."

After Taylor spoke, Sam looked at him and saw a not too bad looking guy. He had sandy brown hair, dark brown eyes, nice teeth, and if he had not been hunched over helping her, she would have known his height and

build too. "So, um, do these things happen to you often?" Sam asked trying to make small talk, hoping he hadn't noticed her checking him out.

"No, not really... they did in high school, but I was clumsier back then. Oh, by the way, my name is Taylor."

"Sam, and I'm sorry I yelled earlier. It's just that I'm late for class and I don't need this right now," she said with a sigh. He tried to help her up but she just ended up dropping her papers back onto the slush-ridden sidewalk. About three minutes later they were walking in opposite directions wondering if they would ever see each other again.



The memory made her laugh a little bit considering she had acted like a total ice princess. The next day they saw each other in the science building and found out that they were in the same class. They decided to sit together during the lecture and ended up switching lab partners later that week. Both of them weren't looking for a relationship, but somehow fate had brought them together.

After the memory faded, Sam felt more confused than ever. She didn't know where to turn to next. She asked all of friends what they would do in her situation, but they just said to get out of the city for a while, take time and think about your future. What future? As far as she was concerned there was no future without Taylor. She needed him so much that neither of them had spent more than two days apart since they were married. Of course they had their share of arguments, but what couple doesn't? The most reoccurring one had to deal with children. Taylor had stated early in the relationship that he didn't want to have anything to do with kids, but Sam knew he would be a great father. His entire theory for not wanting children was based on why he couldn't connect with them. He was afraid that he would turn out to be like his dad, who was abusive and put Taylor in the hospital a couple of times when he was living with him. He didn't want to take the chance that this might repeat itself, with him being the abuser. Taylor's decision on not wanting children is what made the options left for Sam so hard to choose from.

She was two months pregnant and had to make up her mind about what to do with the child. Earlier that day, as a last resort, she had called the First District Health Unit to arrange an abortion. She sat on the pine weaved chair that Taylor had given her as a birthday present. Sam put it on the deck of the cabin because this is where she could ponder her thoughts with a clear conscience. "If I kept the baby, how could I raise it on my own? I don't make enough on my salary to raise a child... With an adoption, how could I deal with the knowledge that I gave up my own child? Would the baby be placed in a loving household or fall through the cracks of the system and live in foster care its whole life? Not knowing where the baby would be or if he or she was okay would kill me... No, I have to go through with the abortion. It's for the best." Sam started to cry again and when she

was through, she didn't fight the urge to sleep.



She awoke to find herself sitting in her chair looking at the sunrise. It was beautiful how God had changed the dark blue of the night to a half golden sun with pink, purple and light blue surrounding its beginning passage through the sky. "God, give me the strength to go through with this," she prayed silently to herself. She stood up and walked into the cabin to get ready for what she had to do today.

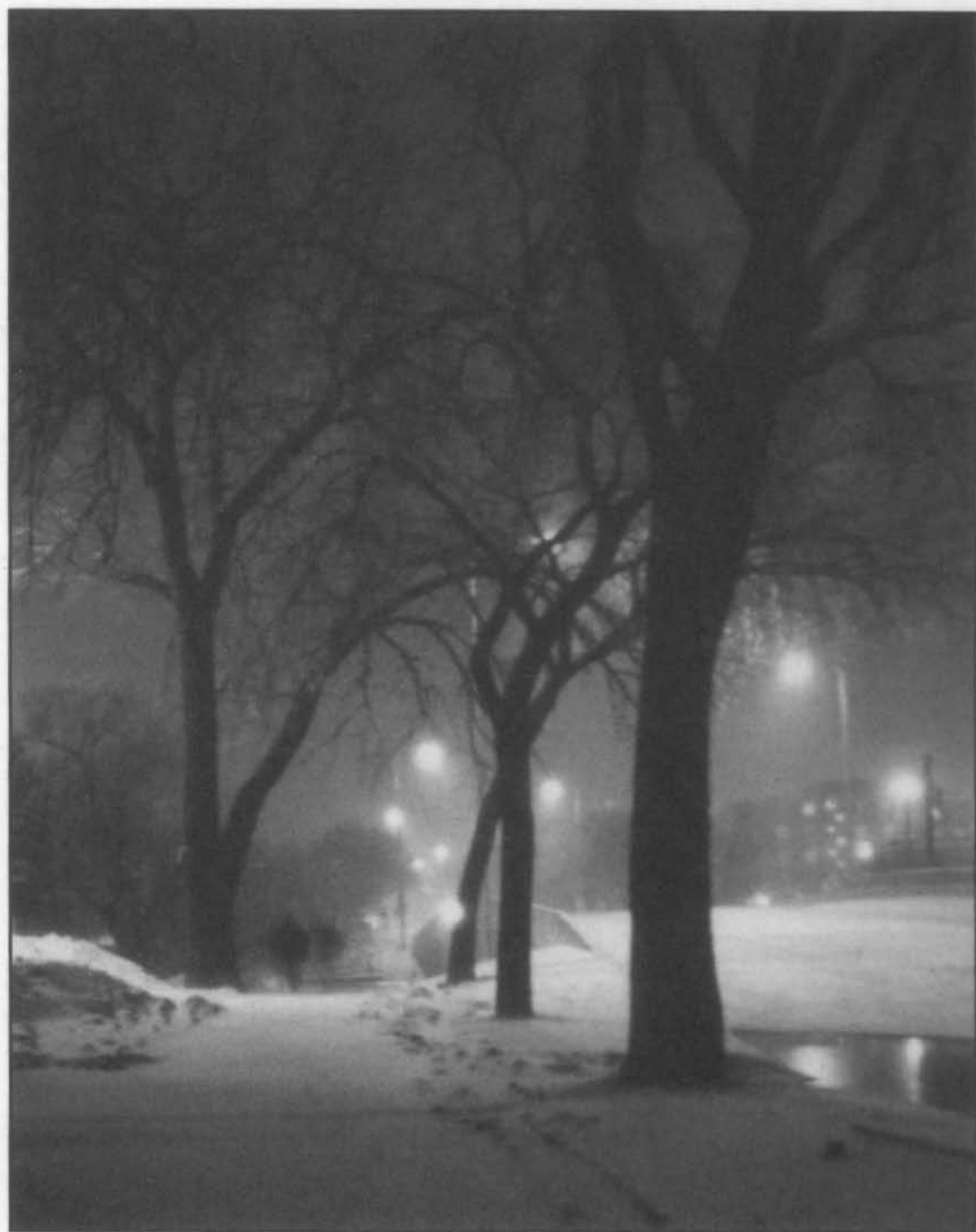
With the early morning sun shining in her rear-view mirror, Sam drove to the city to finish what she and Taylor had started. She drove to the clinic and circled the block a few times before deciding to park in a lot. As she was walking to the building, Sam noticed the children laughing and playing on the school ground across the street. She stop and looked at a little blond-haired boy climbing up the monkey bars. She couldn't stop the tears from falling down her cheeks. She thought, "That's what our son would look like." Sam looked down at the pavement and then started to walk again. When she had reached the doors, she put on her sunglasses and wiped her face before going in. Sam read the map of the building posted on a wall and then turned to walk up the two flights of stairs to the second floor. She sat down in the waiting room and picked up a pamphlet, a nurse came over and asked for her health information. After digging around in her purse, Sam gave it to her and the nurse left. She looked back down at the pamphlet, which asked, "Are you making the right decision?" A cold sweat came over her, and she repeated the question to herself, "Am I making the right decision?" Sam recalled the children playing across the street and began to cry once more. The nurse came back to lead her into the surgical room, but Sam stiffened and couldn't understand a word the lady spoke. She saw the smiling face of the young boy and couldn't go through with it. Sam stood up, ran out the door, and down the stairs, crying harder than she had ever done before. She had made the right decision for herself, but at what price? Trying to walk calmly through the front door, Sam noticed that her mascara was running down both cheeks. "I look like death warmed over," she said as she took a couple of steps on the cold pavement of the sidewalk. Suddenly, she bumped shoulders with someone, and when Sam turned around to apologize, she saw that the man was Taylor.

## Curtis Jefferson

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### *Random Thoughts on an Insomniac Night*

**C**alm  
Soft  
Breezes Coming  
Sleeping  
Waking  
Traveling Alone  
Eating  
Fasting  
Waiting in the Sand  
Trees  
Rocks  
Bushes and Birds  
Trains  
Cars  
Little Red Wagons  
El Capitan  
Governors  
Duke of Windsor  
Distant  
Nausea  
Delirious but Coherent  
Consciousness  
Subconscious  
Reality and Unreality Merge as One  
Coming Together  
At Their Finest Hour  
Working to a Common Goal  
Where All is Calm  
Soft Breezes Come  
To Bring Sleep  
And Eventually the  
Dawn



*Margaret Mostad*

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3. Complete a Submission Release Form.
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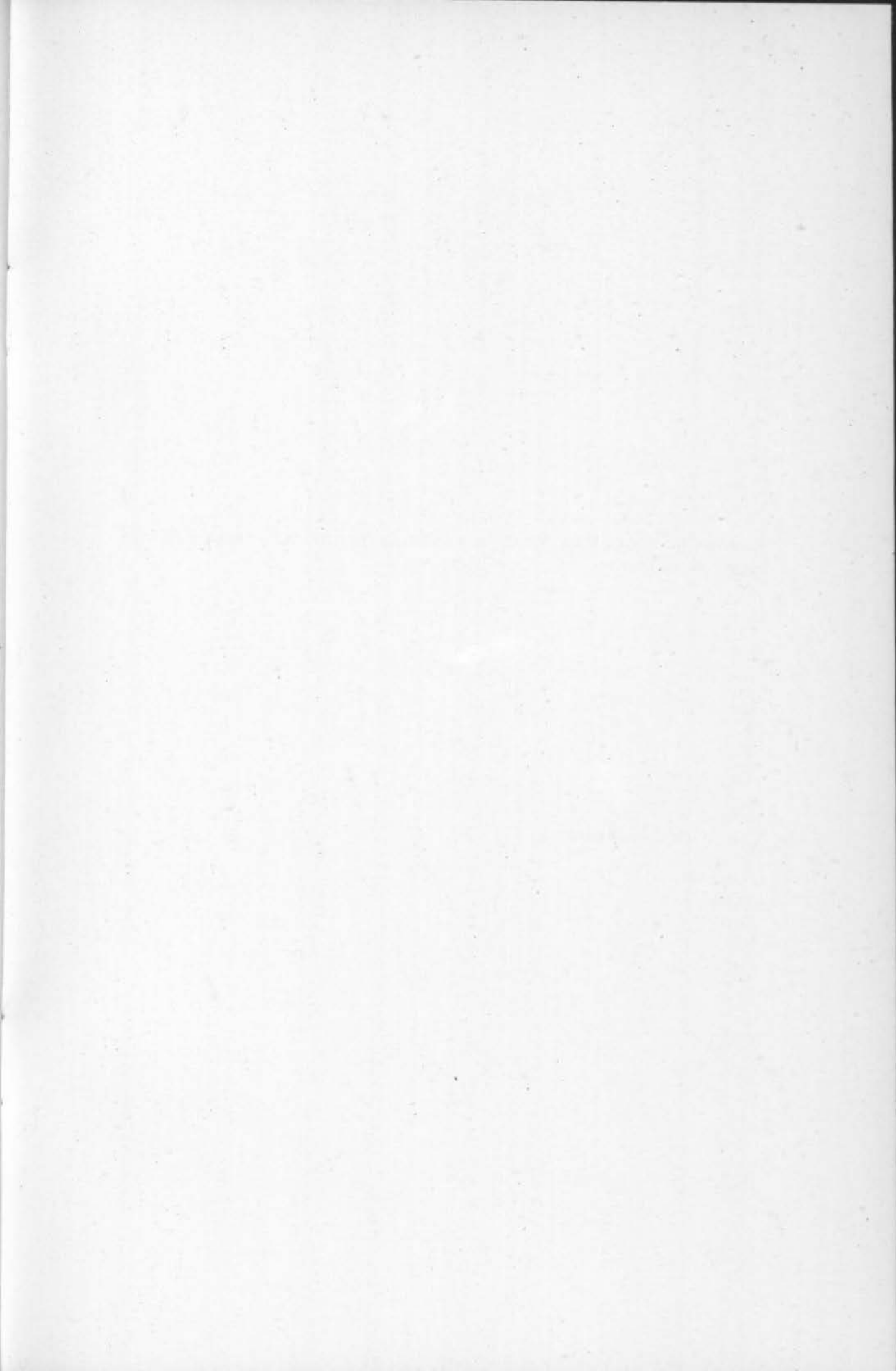
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Thank you,

the Forum Editorial Board





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University of North Dakota  
Honors Program  
Robertson-Sayre Hall  
Box 7187  
Grand Forks, ND 58202-7187

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