

# The Oval

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## The Oval, 2010

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# OVAL

VOLUME III



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# THE OVAL

the university of montana

VOLUME III  
2010



# Oval undergraduate literary arts journal

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*The Oval* is a literary magazine published annually by the Associated Students of The University of Montana (ASUM), the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, and the Creative Writing Program of The University of Montana English Department. Each volume is printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper by The University of Montana Printing & Graphics.

The University of Montana Bookstore, Fact & Fiction, Shakespeare and Company, and The Book Exchange in Missoula, Montana sell copies of *The Oval*. Griz-card holders can buy a copy for \$5.00 and the standard price is \$8.00.

*The Oval* cosponsors monthly readings with the University Center Student Involvement team called “Prose and Poems” on the first Tuesday of every month at 7:00 P.M. in the University Center Art Gallery.

*The Oval* cosponsors annual readings with the literary magazine Aerie Big Sky every spring: usually a general reading and poetry slam.

The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses’ (CLMP) Literary Press and Magazine Directory and NewPages.com’s index of Literary Magazine include *The Oval*

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# submissions

OVAL.SUBMISSIONS@MSO.UMT.EDU

The Oval accepts electronic submissions of  
fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual art from  
September 1 through February 15.

Only previously unpublished work by currently enrolled  
University of Montana undergraduates will be  
considered. Submissions must be in RTF, JPEG, or TIFF  
format and their genre (essay, short story)  
must be defined.





# Dear reader,

College has its own culture, jargon, and rituals much like a country. We only live in this country for four years, but when we want to revisit, we do not have yearbooks, nor can we keep every weekly *Kaimin* newspaper. *The Oval*, a literary magazine with stories, visual art, and poetry captures themes, emotions, and memories experienced at college that a record-book cannot. In the third edition of *The Oval*, we hear a variety of voices speaking of unique experiences, but they all come from the same country—they're University of Montana undergraduates.

In fall 2007, the founders of *The Oval* named it after the grass-filled open space at the center of the University of Montana campus, because it's the locus where thousands of students of all disciplines cross, and this spring, the Oval will mark the spot students graduate. I hope that *The Oval* becomes an increasingly cross-disciplinary journal in the years to come, and I also hope that it resonates with UM graduates eager to remember their four-year vacation at UM.

Thank you to Dean Bonnie Allen and Sue Samson of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, and ASUM for their generous financial support allowing us to publish *The Oval* and co-sponsor *Prose and Poems* readings.

A personal thank you to *The Oval*'s faculty advisor, Robert Stubblefield, my favorite professor at UM both in the six classes I've taken with him and in my three years working with him on *The Oval* staff.

Further thanks are extended to the University Center Student Involvement team: Josh Peters-McBride, Derek Johndrow, and Samantha Guenther.

Finally, thank you to all *The Oval* staff and contributors—this is your book and your voice!

— Samantha Steven,  
Editor-in-Chief

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# table of contents

## Prose

|   |    |
|---|----|
| DIGGING IN OCTOBER (FICTION) // Ryan Landolfi       | 13 |
| UGALI BORA (NONFICTION) // Joshua Kieser            | 23 |
| SHADES OF BLUE (FICTION) // Claire Mikeson          | 27 |
| INTERIOR DECORATING (NONFICTION) // Paige Tresidder | 34 |
| THE BEST POLICY (NONFICTION) // Bryanny Froehlich   | 37 |
| FRESH EARS (FICTION) // Rachel Rawn                 | 46 |

## Visual Art

|  |    |
|--|----|
| SUNSET BUS (COVER) // Tiana Jenson         |    |
| STAGECOACH // Sean Leary                   | 55 |
| UNTITLED // Jaysen Tinker                  | 56 |
| PARKING LOT NIGHTLIGHT // Matthew S. Riley | 57 |
| BLACK SPIKES // Matthew S. Riley           | 58 |
| SOFIA // Kevin Wright                      | 59 |
| TO LOVE AN ARTIST // Kaitlin Perrodin      | 60 |
| FEELING SMALL // Amanda Opitz              | 61 |
| BA SADI // Kaitlin Perrodin                | 62 |
| FELIX'S KITE STORE // Kylie Campbell       | 63 |
| EASTER ISLAND // Charnay Murphy            | 64 |
| COMMUNE BY THE ROAD // Amanda Opitz        | 65 |
| LUTION MONSTERS // Kylie Campbell          | 66 |
| MADDOCK'S MERMAID // Jenny Gessaman        | 67 |

## Poetry

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ALGEBRA APPLIED // Charnay Murphy                     | 71 |
| EXPOSURE // Chloe Haagen                              | 72 |
| OCTOBER // Kristi Gilleon                             | 73 |
| TOLERANCE // Kevin Sheetz                             | 74 |
| SANDCASTLES // Kevin Sheetz                           | 75 |
| IT IS ALWAYS RAINING IN PARIS // Kevin Sheetz         | 76 |
| ODOMETER // Rachel Smith                              | 77 |
| ALWAYS TREAT ROBOTS WITH RESPECT // Sally Finneran    | 78 |
| EXCERPT FROM "A DAILY CONSCIOUSNESS" // Ryan Landolfi | 80 |
| THE TOWN AND ITS RELIGION // Jacob Kahn               | 81 |
| COCHLEA // Alyssa Terry                               | 83 |
| FINE // Aubry Nicholson                               | 84 |
| ORIGINALITY CALLS // Aubry Nicholson                  | 85 |
| ASPEN // Dan Droughton                                | 87 |
| SULLIVAN COUNTY // Troy Smith                         | 88 |
| GOD BLESS THE DIESEL ENGINE // Troy Smith             | 89 |



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s

o

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# DIGGING IN OCTOBER

Early. This morning, the day I don't have to beat God and daylight to the job site, my quiet dreams are torn from me before dawn. I haven't even flipped on the living room lights and I can see Rich's big red face stretching before the window next to the front door, pushed up against the glass between the panes and the untrimmed bush, a look of agitated hurry among the leaves. A constant knocking drone. This time he's awakened Lilly.

"Daddy, Uncle Richie's at the door," Lilly says, dragging her yellow blanket from her bedroom.

"He's not your uncle, honey."

Rich needs my truck. Always needs something. A wrench, a power vac, my hiking boots. Never has any problem asking. He's been seven years older than me my entire life, but I often wonder how much he's aged in the last twenty years. Today I tell him that there's no way he'll ever take my truck.

"Isn't there a reason you can't drive your own truck, Rich?"

"Yeah," he says, looking at the ground. "But most days I don't need a truck. Today I've got to get a load of dirt. I'm building motorcycle jumps in the backyard," he says.

I don't mean to be a pessimist, but with some people the glass isn't half empty, it's been stolen, smashed and picked up by some poor bare-footed pinky toe.

"Rich, you don't even have a motorcycle. And if you did, the judge would probably take that away too." But he has an answer to this. His new scheme has something to do with building a track for kids who want to learn motocross. Says he'll start a new wave of interest in the community. The only interest the community has in my brother Rich is keeping a safe distance away from whatever he's got going on. "Sounds great. But you don't have a backyard to put dirt into," I say.

"Yeah, but you know that lot across the street? No one's ever doing anything over there, and if I put the dirt down before anybody says anything, there's no way they'd make me move it, especially if they see all the hard work I put into it."

I tell him that's not how the world works, that as soon as the property owner sees the heaping mess he's created they'll be on him like cops on a bearclaw. But my brother is incessant. He asks me what family is for, then he makes the most shameless begging face I've ever

seen. It's the same look he's been improving for years. "For God's sake," I say. If he wants to waste all his money on dirt, I figure it's better than wasting my entire day hearing him try to convince me.

Rich and his sliced-cantaloupe smile.

In the truck my daughter has questions.

"Where are we going Uncle Richie?"

"He's not your uncle sweetie."

"I am so, why would you say otherwise?" He looks offended in the half-dark of the cab. Our frosty breaths mix and rise to the truck's ceiling. "We're going a few places to get a few things, then we're going to my house to play in some dirt," Rich says. I have to stop his promises before they get out of hand.

"But remember," I say, "You've got gymnastics at four, so we won't be able to goof around with Rich all day." I'm supposed to meet Lilly's mother at four fifteen at the café across the street from Lilly's gym. She's been gone for almost two years.

"We can play until Little Gym though, right Daddy?"

"We'll see where our day takes us honey," I say. I've never been one to make a five year old cry. Distracting works a lot better than disappointing.

Driving through the center of town, Rich tells me to pull into the hardware store's parking lot. It makes enough sense.

Inside, Rich fills his shopping cart full, so he asks me to grab another one. An electric drill, a router, PVC pipe with all kinds of ridiculous looking attachments, rubber gardening gloves, about thirty Slim-Jims, a birdhouse, and a light fixture sit on the top layer of the incredible tangle of crap he's got accumulating in his cart. There's no way he can pay for everything in the first cart, let alone another. I tell him he needs to buy a shovel and get out before he spends himself into the poorhouse again. He laughs and wheels into the next aisle, which is packed with hammers and crowbars. Lilly stands next to me, eating the store's complementary popcorn out of a brown paper bag. I've always wondered what it is about hardware stores and popcorn that goes together. Lilly seems content. Her flushed little cheeks fill like water balloons as she chews. I call her my little squirrel monkey. She giggles and spins in the middle of the nail aisle scratching under an armpit, her chocolate curls swinging.

I find Rich with a second cart already full in the toilet aisle, sitting on each seat making ponderous looks as if he were sampling wines.

"A connoisseur," I say.

"You know, this Kohler guy probably shits in a golden toilet. I bet



he's got that much dough." I shoot Rich a look that lets him know Lilly is around here somewhere. "Sorry," he says. "But seriously, I've just got to find something that everybody wants that I can sell."

"Yeah, and the last time you were selling something everybody wanted, you had a nice little relocation for awhile didn't you?" I say. He says that was different. This time he'll take the straight and narrow. Toe the good line. Right.

The October light at ten thirty has finally diluted the night's darkness despite thick, desperate clouds. Daylight savings time ought to kick in here pretty soon. The sunless mornings and afternoons are killing me. It's hard to spend so much time in the dark alone. Lilly and I sit in front of a little coffee place while Rich runs in. I leave the engine running. The dry heat smells like the truck's musky polyester upholstery. I pull Lilly from the middle seat onto my lap.

"Remember when we lived at Grandma's house and everyone used to eat dinner there, you, me, your aunt Kathy, Mommy, and even Silly Richie?" I ask. She says she does. "Did you like eating dinner with everyone together?" She says she did. "Me too. I think we'll be able to do that again real soon," I say. Immediately I realize I've said too much. Just being around Rich makes you say things you wish you hadn't.

"Mommy too?" she asks.

"Well maybe," I say. Luckily Rich interrupts our conversation, appearing at the door, his hands full with three paper cups, steam rising from the lids. He slides his head back and forth across the window, smiling like a goon.

"The truck is old," I tell him, "but you don't have to spread your forehead grease all over the windows." Rich keeps smiling and hands me a coffee. He sneaks a candy bar out of his pocket and gives it to Lilly, as if I can't see what he's doing. She really shouldn't eat popcorn and candy bars for breakfast, but at this point taking it away from her would be like stealing meat from a lion. Shaking my head, I move Lilly back to the middle of the bench seat and strap her in. "Where to now, King Richard?"

We're on the highway. I told him I didn't have all day, that we can't cross the entire state just for a pile of dirt. But he's positive the best dirt is found in Granite County. Frost along the gray river bank reminds me of how quickly the summer disintegrated. Winter elbowed its way in like a sweaty mean drunk at the bar hollering for more

drinks. Eventually Rich points to a dirt road past a fishing access and says that that's our dirt mine. As he explains how this dirt we're picking up has the perfect combination of soil, clay, and moisture to build sturdy jumps and rollers, I realize I hadn't anticipated having to dig. Rich failed to mention digging. I should have known.

Up the road we cross over cattle guards that make the tires groan. Lilly giggles and asks me to drive over them again. I stop, back up, and drive over the steel rungs a few times. Lilly laughs harder with each heavy rumble. A couple miles later we pull up to a heavy stain on the side of the road where a pile of dirt clearly used to sit. "Well, shoot," Rich says, "This is a real chicken-or-the-egg situation." I'm about to tell him that missing dirt has nothing to do with the chicken or the egg question, but I leave it alone. It's for the better. "I guess we'll just have to drive a little further and see if we can't find ourselves another dirt mound," he says.

I know how this short-circuited idea ends before it even starts. "Rich, if you don't know where we're going, I'm driving home. We aren't going to search for a pile of dirt and hope that whoever owns it doesn't come around the corner while we're loading it up."

"I know a place then," he says.

"I'll give you ten minutes," I tell him.

Half an hour later I park in the middle of a giant frozen field in front of something resembling a shack. Or maybe it's a trailer. Or it was at some point. Whatever it is, it's thoroughly alone. Not a neighbor for miles. Dull aluminum trailer siding shows sparsely, hidden underneath dilapidating sheets of plywood tacked along the sides. The little shelter sits right beneath an enormous grandfather of a tree that's been dropping leaves on the shack's roof for what looks like years. No dirt hill anywhere.

"Rich, are you serious?"

He says it will take him just a few minutes.

For the first time today he honors his word. When he returns from the shack, he keeps his arms wrapped around his chest. A small lump bulges under his jacket. God only knows what he's got. I don't even ask. He says nothing after pulling the truck door closed. We sit in silence for a few seconds before I ask what we're doing.

"Head back towards town. I've only got one more stop along the way." I don't really believe this, but it sounds better than anything Rich has said all morning.

After we pull away from the shack and drive down the road a ways, the bulge in Rich's jacket starts to bother me. He still hasn't unwrapped his arms. Every few seconds, when he doesn't think I'm looking, he sneaks a glance towards the lump. I'm about to ask what the hell he brought into my truck when a small whine begins. Ah, this old truck. Surely we'll have to pull over. I haven't checked the engine in awhile, but the last time I did I figured I'd have to replace the belts soon. The muffled squeal starts and stops intermittently. Listening to this the whole way home will be a real chore. As it gets louder it sounds more desperate. Damn. I pull over. Lilly asks what I'm doing. I'm sure we'll break down before we get home. Doesn't this always happen during the freezing cold or horizontal rain? Rich stares through the windshield like everything was too normal. Before I open the door I turn the engine off, but the whining continues. Rich coughs into his fist loudly, keeping his face away from mine, looking innocent in a guilty kind of way.

"Alright. What's in the jacket?"

Rich turns his head in question, as if what I asked him was the furthest thought from his mind. He's formulating the next few seconds in his head. "Me?" he'll ask. Before he can, I say, "Yeah you. Let me see what you've got in the jacket." For a second I'm a little worried. If it's anything like what he's snuck around with before, I'm not sure I want Lilly seeing it. After a theatrical sigh he unzips his jacket and reveals a little red puppy with long ears, a black nose, and hazelnut eyes. Lilly begins screeching immediately.

"A puppy!" she says. Her excitement nearly shatters the windows. She nuzzles her face against the little dog whose shock looks newborn. I don't even know where to start. Before I can the dog howls a weak, prepubescent puppy-howl.

"What does this have to do with dirt piles or motocross tracks?"

"Well when we didn't find the dirt, I figured I knew this guy not too far away with a new litter of Redbones. So here we are," Rich says, tussling the dog's ears.

"Again, what does this have to do with dirt piles or motocross?"

Rich explains how he plans to build a kennel where he'll breed coonhounds. I ask him one more time what dogs have to do with anything.

"Well, it's Plan B. We couldn't find any dirt, so what's the next logical step?"

"Dogs apparently," I say.

"Of course," he says, as if it were obvious. "What does everyone

like, especially kids? Puppies. And how can any child-loving parent see a sweet little kid-face snuggled up against sweet little dog-face and deny their kid a puppy?" He's nodding towards Lilly and the dog. She's trying to hold it like a baby, but the little thing keeps pulling some jerky alligator death-roll maneuver and escaping from her arms. Lilly is unbothered by the dog's evasiveness. She must have got her persistence from Rich. "It's exactly what I was talking about earlier. I don't know how I didn't figure it out before. Perfect business adventure."

"Venture. Business venture," I say.

Then the inevitable happens. "Can we keep him Daddy?" And for once Rich pulls through. I don't have to be the cause of volcanic disappointment.

"I'm sorry sweetheart," Rich says, "But this doggy is mine. I'm going to breed her with other doggies, and when I do, if your dad will let you," he says winking, "you've got the first pick. Your choice. Whichever one you want."

Surprisingly, Lilly isn't that let down. Must be the power of an uncle. Or maybe she's too preoccupied by the squirming contortionist slipping from her grasp. When Rich's words finally register, Lilly cocks her head in my direction, the same way she does whenever we pass Dairy Queen or the toy aisle at the store. "Daddy?" she asks. I tell her I'll think about it whenever Rich's dog has puppies.

On our way back to town Rich enlightens the truck with his Plan B scheme and how it really won't be that much different from Plan A. He says that pretty much everything he bought earlier today at the hardware store can be used for kennel building and upkeep just as well as it could have been used to build and maintain a motocross track. I almost forgot about his jumble of stuff in the back of the truck. Now that I think of it, I have no idea how he paid for it all. Classic Rich. "Plus," he says, "We can just return some of that shit when we get back to town." I give him another hard glance and nod towards Lilly. "Sorry," he says. She didn't even notice. She's trying to distract the dog from the loose tail of the seatbelt that's halfway down its little throat. Rich laughs and points out his dog's comedic talent. Thank God he's the one taking that thing home.

Somehow Rich convinces me to stop at the hardware store to let him return some of what he bought earlier. Although this on top of everything else agitates me, it's better that he get rid of the junk now, because he'll never do it on his own. His credit report will thank him

later. He leaves the puppy in the car with me and Lilly. The clouds that were festering the last time we were here have moved on, and there's enough blue in the sky to consider the day bright. Whenever we get some blue sky and sunlight in the cold months I'm reminded of how cold and gray the entire winter is, has been, and will be. I stare up through the windshield, thinking of what it would be like to live in a place that wasn't a gray ice-hole for six months of the year when the dog starts hacking. Half of the ravaged candy bar Rich bought Lilly sticks out of the dog's mouth. It's coughing and heaving, and before I can get it out the door clumps of undigested caramel and nougat spread over the truck floor. When it has finished gagging, the little terror starts licking up its mess. Lilly pinches her nose and crawls into my lap.

Rich and his kind gestures.

While I clean the dog-disaster I think of what I've got to face later in the day. Even with her puppy-vomit prompting I could never abandon Lilly. I've never grown a child for nine months and lost it, but I still don't think that could make me leave my healthy baby. But Kristy is like that. Inexplicable. When Lilly is older I'll try to explain her mother to her, as best I can. I've told her how families come in all shapes and sizes. She seems content with that explanation. I haven't told her about the little sister she'll never have, how her mom couldn't look at me afterwards. She blamed it on herself. But somehow she blamed it on me. Either way, she left. She had to work things out. I understood that part. But it's been two years. Lilly has become a thinking, speaking person since then. That part I won't understand.

When I pick Lilly up out of the back of the truck, with the dog in her tiny arms, I hug her and peck her on the cheek. In the cab the dog finds a deep smell worth investigating and crams its head all the way up to its shoulders in between the backrest and the seat cushion. The little demon never quits.

Rich appears at the passenger window, distressed.

"The bastards will only take half of the stuff." He apologizes before I can reprimand him. "But what they don't know is that I don't need them. I can get rid of this on my own." Rich says he's got a buddy that would pay a pretty penny for his brand new equipment. It's two thirty. I figure we've been screwing around all day, might as well get rid of Rich's crap before it takes permanent residence in the back of my truck.

"Alright Rich. But we've got to be at gymnastics a little before four." He says it won't even take five minutes.

We're on the highway again.  
"Don't you know anyone who lives in town?" I ask. He says he does.

Stony, snow-dusted mountains rip into the horizon as we weave our way round their road-carved underbellies. Rich directs me into an empty campground. In the back corner, between two squat pine groves, a rusted brown van converted into an RV sits parked. Beside it a stained canvas tent.

"I'll make this quick," Rich says. He hops out of the truck and sneaks up to the tent. I don't really hear what he's saying. He's straining like he's trying to keep his voice low. Eventually a hand pulls back the tent door and Rich crouches in. Lilly still has the dog to play with. She's pulling its long ears back into a ponytail and calling the thing Suzie. The dog seems to understand that it's a game and only feigns biting at Lilly's hands. I'm afraid they've created a bond.

Laughter bellows from the tent. A few seconds later the RV door crashes open and the angriest woman I've ever seen stands in the doorway. Her hair is wound tight in pink curlers even though it's three in the afternoon. She must know Rich.

"Damn it, Ted. You get that dumb-ass Rich out of here and stuff whatever notion you two have hashed up. I'm tired of you guys ruining everything you touch."

Rich hustles out of the tent and into the truck without so much as a glance towards the woman. He tells me to drive. As we back up, a haggard, bearded man steps out of the tent looking whipped. I don't hear what they say to each other, but the woman points so hard she could punch holes through the guy's forehead. He just stands there. Takes it.

When we're far enough away I ask Rich what that was all about. He says it's a long story, but he and that guy have dug themselves under the doghouse with the curler lady. "Sure looks like it," I say. The dog has rolled itself into a ball in Lilly's lap and finally fallen asleep. She pets it delicately and every few minutes or so kisses the top of its head. She tells me she needs to potty.

I pull off the road and lead her behind a bush. When I ask her if she needs help, she says she wants to be on her own. I walk the few steps back to the truck. Rich holds the dog up under its front legs so that they're staring at each other face to face, the dog's bottom half dangling in the air. He's babbling nonsense to it as if it were a baby. I can't believe what I'm about to ask.

"So by now I'm sure you've noticed that Lilly has taken a liking to your little monster." Rich blankly nods in agreement. "So depending on how things go today with Kristy, what would you say about letting me

buy it off of you? I'll even drive you back to get another one."

Rich shrugs his whole body. "I would," he says, "But the thing about it is, I've got to get this dog to a lady across town, and the guy I got it from doesn't have any more. I've got a kind of barter thing going with this lady." His moronic smile and pumping eyebrows tell me I don't want further details. Typical Rich. I want to remind him of everything we've done today, everything he's said. The motocross track. The kennel. Driving him all over the place. Bringing Lilly along. Even if I could explain to him what the dog would mean to my daughter despite what it would mean to me, it wouldn't go anywhere. I wonder what it would feel like to pick his big idiot teeth out of my knuckles. It wouldn't be worth having to hear about how I ruined his face for rest of my life. Rich is like a Chinese finger trap, you have to put him out of your mind for awhile before you can stand another look at him. But when I do look at him again he's rocking the dog in his arms, attempting his idea of a maternal posture.

Rich and his wholesale deceits.

When Lilly emerges from behind the bush I pick her up and set her in the middle of the seat. Rich keeps quiet, stares out the window. It's time to go.

At about three thirty we pull in front of Rich's apartment building. He takes ten minutes to remove his junk. In a pile on the sidewalk he stacks a six-foot aluminum ladder, twelve two-by-fours, a circular saw, a ball-peen and a claw hammer, a few bags of cement, two sprinklers, a different birdhouse from before, two cans of coffee that he couldn't have bought at the hardware store, and numerous boxes of nails and screws among the other expensive stuff that he'll never use. I don't have anything to say to him. Whether he's being genuine or just trying to look apologetic, it makes no difference. He tells me to take care, says we should go hunting on my next day off, then kisses Lilly on the forehead and zips the puppy into his jacket.

"Bye Uncle Richie," Lilly says. Rich closes the passenger door and waves.

"He's not your uncle," I say.

I get Lilly to the Little Gym five minutes to four. Lilly calls her instructor Miss April. I can't help but laugh a little whenever I hear it. April is younger than me, but not by much. When Lilly first started at the Little Gym I thought April was interested in me. Eventually I realized that she's just the touchy, smiling type. All the parents love her. So



does Lilly. I wouldn't want to compromise that.

Usually I sit behind the huge window in the waiting area, watching Lilly bounce around on the colorful pads and trampolines. It takes awhile to drag myself out the door. Deep sighs don't really prepare me for what's coming next. I haven't seen Kristy in two years. We've talked sparingly. My watch says five past four. Kristy's always late. Somehow she's even worse in the cold.

The café smells warm, gives you that feeling you get next to a cabin fireplace during the winter. College students sit behind glowing screens, illuminated and enveloped by caffeine and the internet. A slender gray cat paces on the front windowsill, arches its back then stretches prone. I order a coffee after I find a two person table close to the door.

Fifteen minutes later I'm still alone. Kristy isn't going to show, but I wait it out anyway. This isn't the first time. She drives a Chevy, but I've gotten to the point where I don't get worked up when a green SUV passes in front of the window. When the hour's spent I pay for the coffee and head across the street. Lilly runs out from the padded area smiling and excited. She jumps into my arms and gives me her best sweaty little girl kiss on the cheek. I ask her how it went. "Great," she says. After we tie her shoes we smile and wave to April and tell her we'll see her on Thursday. April smiles and cocks her head, her high ponytail swinging over her shoulder as she waves to Lilly.

In the truck something's missing. Lilly sits in the middle even though it's just the two of us. "Are you ready to go to Grandma's house?" I ask her. She nods, her thoughts elsewhere. I wish Rich would have let me buy that dog off of him. Lilly looks at me and hesitates, like she wants to ask a question that's hard to articulate.

Finally she asks, "Will Aunt Kathy be at Grandma's?" I tell her she will. "And Uncle Richie?" I tell her probably not, but you never know. She takes a breath that I know will lead to a harder question, one I'm not prepared to answer, but then she exhales and rubs her palm across the seat next to her, streaking a thin sweaty residue across the fake leather. "Think he'll bring the puppy, Dad?"

"I don't know, honey."

I hope he does. I hope Rich forgets whatever ridiculous agreement he had with the woman who wanted the dog. Lilly needs it. She needs that dog. I'm willing to do all the work. I'm willing live with it and not even like it. With all the cold and gray and anger of winter, Lilly needs that dog. And if Rich actually gets rid of it, I'll find another one, because sometimes you just have to make it work.



The bumpy cement floor of my bedroom is littered with my belongings: old tennis shoes, Chaco sandals faded from dark blue to a dull bluish-gray by two months of constant travel and a thin film of reddish dust, six plain colored t-shirts and a pair of mud-stained khaki pants heaped in a disheveled mound near my backpack, an industrial sized Ziploc bulging with medicine bottles with long names and unknown uses, fingernail clippers, a headlamp, and a toothbrush. I glance up from the rubble to find Mama Faraji observing silently in the doorway. The mutually gloomy looks on our usually cheerful faces delineate the impending conclusion of my wholly enjoyable and wonderfully strange stay in her house, which is home to herself, her husband and his aging father, ten orphaned girls and boys from 6 to 18-years-old, and, for the past month, me. After a moment of somber reflection at the door she decides seriously: “Tomorrow you leave us. Tonight, we drink beer.”

I abandon my packing without hesitation (it can wait until morning) and follow her down an unlit aqua-blue hall into the small living/dining room. A moment later, Felix struggles in through the heavy brown door, carrying something bulky and awkward in his scrawny arms. His dark, round, acne-spotted face is noticeably strained, though he attempts a smile. The crate he heaves onto the wobbly coffee table in front of me is filled to capacity with the best of Tanzania: *Safari Lager, Tusker, Kilimanjaro, Serengeti Premium, The Kick*.

Mama Faraji grins and gently gestures, “Help yourself.” Her glance sweeps fine particles of memory, collected over the past month, into my eyes, nose, and ears: Sitting daily in this living room, on this little couch, eating my meals, goofing around with new-found friends, and observing the strange new world around me. The first bottle opens with a swishing pop.

“You will eat *ugali*?”

I chuckled. *Sure, sounds great.*

I had just finished setting up what was to be my room for the coming weeks (i.e. set my bag in the corner and briefly considered unpacking it), and, unsure of my next move, decided to follow my stomach to the kitchen. Jesca, the house’s gracious and often-giddy twenty-year-old chef, lifted a cabbage-covered hand to her reddening

cheeks, searching for words and giggling. She turned to the three older boys in the kitchen as they eagerly plopped dinner onto their plates and asked them to translate her giggly *Kiswahili* for me.

“She says our *ugali* is not clean like the *ugali* that you know.”

I wondered whether or not I should inform them that my knowledge about the thick, white corn-flour mush was, in fact, rather limited. *Oh, no really, it will be fine!* I convinced myself and threw a confident two thumbs-up. Jesca shrugged, scooped a rather generous spoonful onto my plastic dish, and showed me to the little wooden couch in the living room, where fruit and tea were already set out for me.

Four days and eight straight meals of *ugali* and cabbage later, I received a special surprise. Alongside the tasteless mush and greens at lunch, Jesca proudly placed two rank, scaly little fish. Her smile was too heartfelt for me to protest. I quickly returned a compulsory grin and simultaneously threw a silent curse at the squishy, glossed brown eyes staring up from my plate.

I forced down the oily little things, picking clumsily around each tiny bone as I went. Eating the stinky little fish, apparently (obviously), meant that I loved them; Jesca served me at least two fish a day for the rest of my month long stay.

A stroke of luck befell me, though, some days later, when Ceiling Cat (the most fitting name, in my mind, for the sleek black and white feline that chased rats in the ceiling until ungodly hours of the morning) slinked her way into dinner: lucky cat. She scarfed down five fish without hesitation. The great savior, Ceiling Cat.

That night, however, the savior turned martyr. Slowed, no doubt, after eating her body weight in shit-fish, she was heretically mauled to death by the neighborhood street dogs.

Finishing a third *Safari Lager*, I listen for those dogs. They’re never too far from these metal-grate windows, noisily rummaging through bushes for scraps or lounging in dust and mud, lazily shaking flies away from their scabby ears. I try to imagine my two floppy, longhaired golden-retrievers at home snarling viciously at each other over a raw cowhide or walking around nonchalantly with an open puncture wound from God knows what; it doesn’t work. I know they’re curled up, comfy and smug, on our living room couch without a fly or animal carcass in sight. Victims of comfort.

The kids who live in Mama Faraji's house sense revelry and join us in the living room. I feed the older girls shillings to run for Cokes at the lean-to corner store a block from our compound. The wooden couches lining the walls of the room, with their blue and gold jungle-floral patterns, are quickly filling with curious neighbors: Maria and her baby Erik, the older ladies who sell vegetables at a stand just outside, a few guys who are building a house nearby—nothing out of the ordinary. Mama Faraji asks to see the pictures on my camera, and I happily oblige, which quickly draws everyone in the room around me to get a peek. They cheer boisterously for the subject of each picture.

Jonas, my faithful eight-year-old sidekick, can't handle the excitement; he crashes on the spongy, overstuffed cushions to my left, wrapped tightly in a thin gold-weave blanket. Empty glass bottles are packed on the shaky coffee table. I've finished with the slideshow now, and conversations in *Kiswahili* bounce merrily around the room. I understand few words, but it doesn't really matter; my mind is elsewhere, concentrated on the memories bubbling forward as I watch Jonas sleeping calmly in the midst of growing commotion.

Jonas poked his head through the big wooden door behind me, and Mama Faraji ushered him in. I turned to watch him slide across the floor in floppy, over-sized socks and plop down on the couch next to Jesca and Emmanuel, who had been rambling jovially. I put down my plastic plateful of *ugali* and what I think was goat stew and turned to listen as Jonas began eagerly recounting his day, though I only caught a few words. He seemed to be wrapping up the story when everyone suddenly burst into a maniacal fit of laughter. When the dust finally settled I looked dazedly at Mama Faraji for some clarification and, with tears streaming around her reddened, puffy cheeks, and her chest still heaving with laughter, she explained in English: "Today at school, Jonas was fat!"

*Uh?*

I did a quick double take of my young friend's belly and wondered how much his loose green Brazil Soccer t-shirt could be hiding. Fat? Really?

But that was it. As mysterious today as it ever was. July 13, 2009: Jonas was fat.

The next week, I sat cross-legged on the cold, painted, concrete living room floor, my morning cup of *chai bora* in hand. Steady rain slapped the tin roof above; a consistent rumbling that had become a

familiar and soothing sound over the previous few rainy weeks. I slid my index finger across the plastic poster featuring a toddler with each body part labeled in English, lying beside me on the floor. “This,” I commanded indifferently.

Jonas responded with a half-question: “Stuh-much.” He glanced at me for approval. I almost didn’t correct him—I liked his version better. His eyes whipped upward toward me, returning the challenge: “In Kiswahili!”

“Tumbo!” I retorted proudly with my preschool-knowledge of the language. He giggled against the couch, bearing a brilliant white smile of just-grown-in adult teeth.

It’s getting late and now I’m smiling ecstatically, giggling like Jonas. The older kids bounce around the room, dancing cheerfully and singing Swahili songs. I glance at Mama Faraji, who’s watching me with soft, motherly eyes. The air has cooled off and it will probably rain in the morning. I’ll have to finish packing and get a taxi into town. Two days of cramped, rickety buses and spotless clean airplane seats will return me to the Midwest, to my own living room, and I’ll sit in front of the TV eating cheesy pasta, or ice cream, or maybe a sandwich, and drink cold beer from an aluminum can. Downing a last gulp of Kilimanjaro Lager, I sink warmly into the familiar cushions and wonder if anyone has ever been this content in my living room.

The letter finally came last week, crisp and important with ink script addresses, not the smeary pen kind. My name was on the front, looking significant like it never had before. Adele Edwards, 42 Birch Street, Ashland, KS 67831. I've lived in Ashland since I was five. A few years back the town committee made a website claiming that Ashland is the treasure at the end of Dorothy's rainbow. But they're lying. Ashland is more like Oz—where Dorothy sure as hell did not want to get stranded, by the way—but with fewer crystal palaces, and Protestants and cows instead of witches and munchkins. And the only place my red stilettos ever got me is four blocks down to The Cove where I bartended five nights a week for the last four years, trying to save up some money for art school. All my life I felt chained to Ashland, but I guess I just never had a reason to leave before. Now I have this envelope, buckled up and riding shotgun in my pickup. Inside is the letter and that little blue button I plucked off Rick's shirt the night he fell asleep drunk on the bar stool, quiet snores escaping from those chapped, smoky lips of his.

In the window of The Cove, there's a neon sign of a mermaid, which I always thought was pretty stupid since the only mermaids who would ever want to come to Kansas are obviously suicidal. The Cove is one of those dim-lit, second-rate bars that serve second-rate food. Hearts and profanities etched with pocketknives adorn the dark, lacquered wood of the bar table, and the walls' greasy bricks are covered in dried beer splashes, full of cigarette smoke. A few of my napkin sketches of old alcoholics, along with the typical beer and sports posters, cover mortar cracks in the wall. Most of the customers are faithful regulars—the old, carousing rancher types that live right outside Ashland—or people just passing through town. Tuesday nights are usually pretty slow, and it was one of those slow Tuesdays in June three months ago when Rick came in. I'd never seen him in The Cove before, so I assumed I'd never see him again. He was just another displaced fifty-something straggler with a pickup and nowhere to be. I guessed The Cove was as good a place as any.

He grabbed the bar stool with a tan, lean arm and pulled it to him. “You don't look like a god-damned mermaid,” he said with a half-smirk, his rain-gray eyes glinting through narrowed lids.

I don't have time for this, I thought. “Can I get you a beer?” I asked him. He didn't need one.

I smelled the faint sweat and loneliness; he smelled like all the rest of them. Seeing them makes something squeeze my heart. Uncomfortable, but not so much that I black out from the pain. Not so much that I don't understand. They walk in, have too much to drink, and walk out, leaving that unfading, sad-man imprint on your brain. On some occasions they spank you, if they've got enough beer in their blood. Some share fragments of their stories, but they never complete them. I didn't think Rick would be any different.

He remembered me when he came back a couple weeks later. I informed him that my name was in fact Adele, not "Mermaid." He informed me that his name was Rick Makela and that he was from Wyoming. He'd been staying at a motel here in Ashland, and I figured he'd spent the past few weeks sampling every one of the local bars. When I asked him about it later though, he wouldn't admit it. I guess he thought I'd think he was a traitor to The Cove. We talked for over an hour that night. It was a Friday; they're not as slow as Tuesdays. Pam was managing that night, working on inventory, and she told me to quit flirting with the customers and do my damned job. I listened to Rick instead.

"Ever been to the ocean?" he asked me after a moment of silence. His eyes grew hazy as he stared at the glowing mermaid swimming in her window glass cage.

"No. God, I wish! We're right in the middle of the whole damned country, Rick."

"I know. But I'd a' guessed you would have anyway. You swear like a sailor." The corners of his mouth turned up, revealing dimples under his silver whiskers. His teeth glittered in the bar light. "I've been there," he went on. "Me and Gabe went in Oregon a few summers ago. We saw the biggest damned jellyfish washed up on the sand. We poked it with a stick, and then I licked the goddamned thing! Gabe dared me to. Haven't turned down a dare in my life, and I wasn't about to in front of Gabe."

"Who's Gabe?" I asked him.

"Don't ask so many questions, Mermaid." He smiled at me again, but his eyes didn't.

I couldn't sleep that night, so I sat down at my canvas and painted the ocean. Or at least what I thought the ocean should look like. Sabrina stumbled into our apartment at three in the morning.

"Del, guess who I just slept with! It was Derek!" Apparently she couldn't wait for me to guess. I didn't know who I was going to pick

anyway. Sabrina's gorgeous—she's got quite the selection.

I laughed, "Do you think you got pregnant this time?" Sabrina goes through phases. The past month had been all about Lolita. She made us read it together. This month it was babies.

"I don't know, but I'm crossing my fingers. Our baby would be so freaking cute!" She pulled back her long blonde hair and noticed the canvas I was working on. "Hey, that one's really pretty Del! I like that surreal color of the water. But I've been to the ocean before; it's never that color in real life." Everyone's been to the ocean but me.

Two nights later, I saw Rick again. He staggered into The Cove, and the smell of alcohol greeted me before he did. He looked like he hadn't showered in a day or two; his thick, blonde hair was uncombed and grease stains spotted his ratty tee shirt. He straddled the bar stool and lit a cigarette. Slowly, deliberately he formed his lips into a circle and blew the smoke in my face. Without flinching, I breathed the slow-swirling cloud into my lungs. When he had sucked the cigarette down to a stub he pressed its orange ember end into the bar table, burning a black cinder circle into the middle of an, I love Sammy. He lifted his eyes to mine, and his voice finally filled the silence.

"Get me a beer."

I looked into those icy eyes. Purple circle shadows hung beneath them. I paused for a minute, thinking. "On one condition," I told him.

"Oh yeah, and what's that?"

"You promise to tell me your story."

He looked at me for a few seconds. "My story?" he asked. "Jesus Christ, I don't have a god damned story." I didn't believe him. I waited. "Fine," he finally said and then paused. "Mermaid, don't you got a boyfriend or something?"

I smiled. "I don't need one, Rick. Not when I've got all these lovely old alcoholics to choose from." I gestured around the bar. A solitary man sat in a table in the corner; he picked his nose and rubbed it on his dirty jeans. Then, noticing our gaze upon him, he snorted, slurred the words, "What're you lookin' at?" and took a swig from his bottle.

"Suit yourself," Rick said. "Now beer me." He cracked his first smile of the night. Probably the first of the whole damn day.

Rick continued his stops at The Cove, coming a few nights each week. He kept his promise, and each night he fed me his memories. I was ravenous. I thrived on those bits of him, strung piece by tattered piece through the dingy bar nights. On slow nights when Rick

had the jukebox to himself he would always play Johnny Cash. I learned every last word to “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” and not by choice. One night when I was closing Rick made me sing it with him. His deep, drunken baritone resonated through the little bar. When he was telling his stories he always told me to keep the beers coming; I guess they helped the words slip out easier.

Rick was born in Wyoming. I guess that’s all he meant when he’d told me he was “from Wyoming” because he had spent most of his life in no place in particular. A lot of his first stories started with, “Mermaid, you ever been to...” Nine times out of ten I hadn’t.

“Mermaid, you ever been to Yellowstone?” he asked me one night. “When I was eleven I jumped clear across a hot pot! Burnt the god damned rubber right off my shoes!” Sometimes I think he just made the stories up. He’d always look at me with the crease of a smile creeping along those thin, dark cheeks, waiting for a laugh. I never could tell.

Most of his stories were like that for a while, but when he thought I’d forgotten about the mysterious Gabe, or maybe that I just didn’t care, he let the name slip a few times. But I hadn’t forgotten.

At first, Rick told me all those little, insignificant bits in a life, those frozen picture memories. I laughed at the pieces, told with those enthusiastic eyes in a way only Rick could tell them. It’s too damn bad eyes can’t always look like that, like Rick’s did when he was telling a story. I guess in the end all those bits add up to something bigger, but who the hell knows what: the swimming pool in Texas where he tried all summer long to do a double back flip off the diving board; his first pickup, a red ‘65 Chevy, where he lost his virginity to Cynthia Smith in the front seat; the cheap, old restaurant in Korea he and his friends ate at everyday for a year while he was in the army.

I’d never painted so much in my life. I could smell the chlorine of that Texas pool, hear Cynthia panting in that old red pickup, touch the crumbling walls of the run-down Korean restaurant. Every night I had something to frame, and Rick’s stories took up their places among my previous works; they grew to cover an entire wall of my bedroom. Every story Rick told gave me another picture.

On days when Sabrina and I had nothing to do I’d retell her Rick’s stories. I guess she kept me sane this summer by listening to all my secondhand stories and making all those stupid jokes of hers. I sort of hoped the stories would give her something to obsess about too, besides babies.



“What’d the old drunk tell you today, Del?” She asked with a red lip-gloss smile as I worked on Rick’s most recent memory. Sabrina had seen him in The Cove one night when she’d stopped by to say hi on her way back to the apartment. Ever since, she’d been calling him ‘the old drunk’ or ‘Humbert Humbert,’ “The post-pedophilia Humbert I mean, after he sees Lolita pregnant and happy without him,” she’d told me. “That’s what I think he looks like.” I don’t give that girl enough credit.

Some nights Sabrina would look at my canvas or sketchbook and give me her own ridiculous rendition of Rick’s story before I told her the real one. I think she always liked her versions better.

I finished telling her about the restaurant story, and she let out a tiny sigh as she stared at the picture a minute longer. Finally, she said, “I’m going to bed Del. I’m exhausted.” She started towards her room then stopped. “Oh yeah, did you get the letter yet?” She asked me with wide, eager eyes, tapping her long polished finger on the doorframe.

“Not yet,” I told her. “Night, Sabrina.” I had been trying not to think about the letter.

The next night the Gabe stories began to bubble up from some hidden spot inside of Rick, and they didn’t stop. I’d always ask, and for those first few stories I’d always get the same answer: “Don’t ask so many questions, Mermaid.” It drove me nuts hearing all about the faceless, ageless Gabe and still not knowing who he was. Then one night Rick finally told me. I guess he had to tell someone. Some secrets are just too bitter; they burn their way out of you.

“Mermaid, did I ever tell you about the time me and Gabe rode them roller-coasters up in Coney Island?” He asked me. He looked down at his beer and let out a laugh as he shook his head. “God, I ‘bout shit my pants, but I’ve never seen Gabe smile so big in my whole damn life.”

“Jesus, Rick,” I said with an impatient edge. “Who’s Gabe?”

He looked at me with his gray, glazy alcohol eyes for a minute then back down at his beer bottle, like he was expecting it to answer for him. Finally his lips parted. His eyes found mine, and he said faintly, in that raspy cigarette voice of his, “Gabe was my son.”

During the next couple of weeks, Rick pieced together the rest of his story, slowly, so I could understand. He didn’t have a secret to keep anymore, at least not one that mattered. Four summers ago, when they learned Gabe was sick, Rick took him on a cross-country road trip. They started in Wyoming, where Rick was born, and went

“everywhere you want to go when you’re a kid.” Knowing who Gabe was gave Rick’s stories more meaning; I finally understood the quiver in his voice he’d get sometimes behind that magnetic smile, the obscure frozen hardness you saw every once in a while in those eyes that had watched a child die.

“See this shirt Mermaid?” he asked me one night. “I got it in Montana. Gabe picked it out, said it made me look like a cowboy.” He smiled. The shirt was two shades of blue with shiny buttons down the front, and it did make him look like a cowboy. He took his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small picture with soft, worn-white edges. Gabe. He had a shirt on like Rick’s, only smaller and red, and he was wearing a cowboy hat and a big, transcendental child’s grin. When you grow up you forget how to smile like that.

“God, he looks like you Rick,” I told him.

An hour later it was closing time; I tore the top button off that cowboy shirt and slipped it in my front pocket. “Wake up Rick,” I murmured as I gently shook his shoulder.

I saw Rick again the next night. He’d ran into a city council member earlier in the day and heard all about Ashland being the treasure at the end of Dorothy’s rainbow. We both had to laugh about it. I told Rick I’d never get over how stupid that slogan is.

“You never know though, Mermaid,” he told me. “You can find those rainbows in the damndest places.” He set his beer down and looked past the mermaid sign in the smudgy window at a group of teenagers smoking cigarettes and laughing under a street lamp. Then Rick told his last story. “The beach in Oregon was the last stop on our trip. Gabe was starting to get weaker, and I figured we should take a rest. We went back to my mom’s place in Wyoming. The morning Gabe died it was raining like hell and there was the biggest damn rainbow outside Mermaid, a full half a circle with all the colors. Never seen one like that in my whole life, and I’ve been to rainier places than Wyoming. I think it might a’ been the last damn thing the boy saw.”

I kissed Rick that night, just because I felt like I should. My tongue slipped between his dry lips, and I tasted his acidic, smoky mouth, wet with a film of alcohol. He didn’t taste like the boys I usually kiss. His mouth was rougher, smarter. Afterwards he just looked at me, laughing a little and shaking his head.

“Night, Mermaid,” he said and walked out of The Cove.

Rick never came back. The story of Gabe’s rainbow was the last one, and I never asked what he’d been doing for the past three years because I already knew. And I knew he wouldn’t stay forever, he had too many other nowheres to be. But I like to think that if some other young bartender kisses him somewhere down the line, he’ll think of me. He’ll think of Ashland and The Cove, and he won’t kiss her back.

A week later the letter came. I walked through the door of the apartment, and Sabrina was sitting on the couch watching TV. The letter was lying opened on the coffee table next to her. She looked over at me, grabbed it, and stretched her hand toward me.

“It came, Del!” she said smiling. “I opened it because I couldn’t wait for you to get home, but I was careful. I even used that letter opening thingy.”

I took the letter from her and carefully, reluctantly unfolded it. My eyes quickly skimmed over the top of the paper.

“Dear Adele Edwards, we are delighted to inform you that you have been accepted into The Seattle Art Academy...”

I didn’t need to read the rest. I looked at Sabrina and smiled.

“Congrats, Del,” she squealed as she wrapped her long arms around my neck. “You made it!”

As I pass through Garden City, I turn on the CD player in my pickup and swivel the volume knob up until Johnny Cash drowns out the Kansas wind. I rest my right hand on that buckled-up envelope next to me and my fingers find that little round cowboy button tucked safely inside next to my letter. I think it’s just the right shade of indigo.

# INTERIOR DECORATING

After her second divorce, my mother began a crusade to redecorate our home. She cooed over designer rooms in catalogues, IKEA and Crate and Barrel, perfect rooms that no one lived in. Danish Modern, Contemporary Chic, Sophisticated Casual—she tore out pages with these titles and organized them in an accordion folder, the glossy photos rarely materializing in our home. But she still visualized our tiny 50's ranch with its cheap carpet and yellow pine cabinets transformed into something modern and elegant—low set furniture, vintage accessories, a new deck outside with French doors leading to it, an airy glass-topped dining table. She wanted to switch out the chubby upholstery for something hard and beige, the end tables that had been painted and repainted for sleek cherry ones. I was fifteen and angsty, unaware that maybe her reason was about more than having nice things, that maybe the paint swatches and carpet samples were a sign of something else.

It's a cold January day. The sky spits sleet and the wind cuts rivulets and cliffs in the snow, but inside the stereo belts a blues tune, my mother's deep, mellow voice fumbling along. She wears paint-splattered jeans, dirt ground into the knees, a baggy t-shirt, her hair pulled back, and she tips her head and hips together, cranes her body to reach that note, swings almost in rhythm to the music, closes her eyes. The stew in the Crockpot fills the house with savory fumes that mingle with those of paint and wood shavings. She breaks and offers me a beer, pouring it into a tall, fluted glass, and I sip it, cool and rich and bitter.

This is our routine on Saturdays—she paints the bathroom or saws shapelier legs on the coffee table, all the while swaying to her sad music with the sad weather swirling around the house, and I'm sunk into the couch reading some novel I don't remember anymore, sinking deeper, embarrassed by her awkward dancing even though we're alone. She smiles, then purses her lips and narrows her eyes on me, and asks me to slow dance with her. I say no, but she seizes me and leads me around the room anyway; my feet clunk along the wood floor, our silhouette a lanky, crook-armed animal.

It's a school night. She and I recline on opposite ends of the couch. The TV flickers in the dim room. She scoots over and lays her head on my shoulder, wraps her arms around me.

“Mom,” I whine, “I don’t like to be touched.”

Her voice cracks and tears form in her eyes.

“Why can’t we be friends?” she asks. “I want us to be like my mom and me. I liked my mom. Why?”

“Because I’m not you,” I reply. “And you’re not her.”

When I was sixteen, she looked old to me for the first time. Her skin seemed pale and lax behind her smooth, tan complexion, her eyes weary, her smile only a tight smirk. She began dating a man I didn’t like. I became her confidant. We sat up until the early morning hours, and she talked about everything. About her father and his alcoholism, his abuse. About my father—how he acted distant, failed to appreciate her, never told her he loved her. About our small town—how it suffocated her; how it offered a boring job, and no true friends. About how she wasn’t cut out to be a mother. About my grandmother—the only person who ever helped or cared. The more she confessed, the more I began to see it as more plea than catharsis—don’t blame me; it’s not my fault; I’m broken. I, in turn, would comfort her, agree with her. I couldn’t do anything else. My young, beautiful, independent mother was disintegrating before my eyes, the awkward grace of her dancing, the mellow pitch of her voice, turned to slumped shoulders and strained words.

The fight happened on a Saturday. It was night, late. I had gotten home from a friend’s house and was relaxing in front of the TV with a bowl of cereal. She traipsed in, bubbly from too many beers and tried to hug me. I tensed, and she moved from me slowly, lightly placing herself in the armchair, her shoulders held higher than usual. She said, her voice accusatory, sad but not tearful, “I’m a bad mother. You think I’m a bad mother.” I’d heard this before. She drank frequently, tripping in the door in the early morning hours, and would cry to me, sometimes to my brother too, her mood morphing from cheery to weepy to angry. The questions were all a version of the same one—why did we hate her? she asked. We didn’t, we replied. But her eyes would still glaze over with tears and she stumbled to her room where we heard her weeping.

At first I didn’t think it was serious. She was an adult. She was just having some fun. I told my brother this after she came home slurring and stumbling the first few times. He was only fourteen, he didn’t understand why adults drink. He was being too judgmental, too worried, I said. She wouldn’t keep doing this.

But she did, and so I found myself that Saturday night pinned to the

floor, her eyes bleary and red and narrowed. She slapped me.

“You spoiled brat,” she said. “you don’t know how good you have it.”

The next morning she apologized. I said I forgave her. And in a way that was true. I didn’t feel hate or resentment or fear, but I distanced myself from her, barely speaking to her over the next year. When she sang I heard a different note. She would refurbish our chairs and comment that they still weren’t good enough. Someday, she said, she’d get rid of all this old junk and get something nice. She’d get something for herself and have it the way she wanted it.

Two weeks after the funeral I went home to pack my mother’s things into boxes and set up the rest for the garage sale. I went through her clothes first, tried on jackets too mature for me and high heels I knew I wouldn’t wear. I tottered around in a pair made of grey patent leather, my ankles weak, and collapsed on her satin bedspread, my tears clotting dark in the stitches.

Eager garage-salers circled the house like sharks the next morning, waiting for eight o’clock, ready to strike. They swarmed the house, bodies everywhere, money shoved at me, and within an hour her lamps, candles, dishes, rugs, most of the furniture were loaded in cars, off to new homes, my house barren and echoey, and not my home any longer. The only things left were some family pieces and the new couch and shag rug she bought only months before. She called me when she got them, saying how nice they looked, how they were exactly what the room needed, exactly what she wanted.

I’m home from college a month before she died, summer’s beginning. She and I spend the whole week together taking walks by Spring Creek, talking, watching movies, cooking and drinking wine. I don’t even visit my high school friends. Mom smiles now. She’s taking a jewelry making class. She has new girlfriends. She takes long bike rides out of town and goes on road trips alone. She has the new furniture, the French doors. She has me, whom she talks to every week, sometimes for hours. And I miss her. Maybe because she figured her life out. Maybe because I’ve grown up, but I’m happy. I’m home.

Now the couch and rug sit in my rented apartment. The couch is supple, brown and curvy and looks out of place against the yellowing walls and splitting wood floors. But it’s perfect. When the day is right, some grey, sleet-soaked day, I’ll curl up there. I’ll rest my head and sing along softly to the blues.

# THE BEST POLICY

My fifteenth birthday happens near the start of our last twenty days in the wild. It is June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1996. I have been in treatment for about four months. I wake early in the arid dust of the C. M. Russell Wildlife Refuge, before the sun has broken the canyon, but after the dawn has spilled purple light across the huge bat-cave cottonwoods we camped under. I unzip the mosquito net over my sleeping bag and wonder if it is 5:19; the exact time that I was born, the official start of the celebration of me. As I am born from my bedding it surprises me that, even though I spent my last birthday in the Missoula County Jail, I have never felt so alone or unloved. My family and friends are hundreds of miles away, and I trust no one. And it very well could be all my fault. It depends on who you talk to.

Montana Youth Alternatives is a program similar to Outward Bound with one major difference: staff members are the only willing participants. The State of Montana Youth Justice Department decides who is eligible and no one's parents can just send them there by agreeing to foot the bill. It is a new form of treatment for juvenile delinquents with high potential for rehabilitation. Groups of eight or nine youths are sent out into the wilderness of Montana with (in the first twenty days) rudimentary supplies; a blue tarp and nylon string magically become a backpack with the addition of a length of seat belt strap. Eight staff members work with us for sixty days. Thirty to sixty days of orientation precede the wilderness "experience," followed by sixty days of residential treatment.

We are the tenth group dropped out in the wilderness surrounding Helena and, later, northeastern Montana. There are seven boys and one other girl besides myself and our ages range from fourteen to nineteen. Each day we must drink two to four quarts of water that we capture from creeks and ponds and treat with aerobic oxygen to kill microbes. We will hike over two hundred miles in two months. We eat grains, lentils, potato flakes, ramen, canned tomatoes, and only on Wednesdays when the staff changes, meat. We are allowed to gather food as long as we share. We kill a rattlesnake with a rock by the Missouri River Breaks, and we all agree that, on the poultry scale, it tastes like grouse or pheasant but definitely not chicken. We will be subjected to countless trust-building exercises that, if anything, highlight our distrust, with the exception that the group trusts me to evenly distribute the week's ration of brown sugar. I ration it fairly because I eat the chunks that I can't break apart. If one person

breaks a rule, everyone is held accountable. The herd mentality descends; I become part of a “we” and it is not pleasant.

The staff and the others are sleeping, breathing and farting peacefully for the only part of the day. My bladder hears the river in the distance. I weigh the need to pee against the likelihood of getting caught missing if the staff awakes, combined with the probability of rattlesnakes, given my lack of footwear. They take our boots before we go to bed at night and one staff member sleeps with them in his or her pup-tent so we are less likely to escape. My bowels loosen and make up my mind: I’m going. Snakes and bare feet be damned. I quickly walk fifty big steps south of camp and dig a hole in the chalky dirt with my hands. When I can fit my arm in the hole to my elbow I commence my business. My guts twist and squirm. I may have contracted a parasite from the water as I’ve been sick for days, but I’m starting to feel better. I lower my head to my knees, crying and choking on the oily infected waste smell. I try to tell myself that being in this place is a consequence of my actions, but I wonder, is it really? I have forgotten my allotment of toilet paper and wonder what I could do to be less stupid and more prepared.

I return unseen to a still camp and quietly break my area for the day. In order to eat and move on for the day, we are all required to journal at least a paragraph in half-sized notebooks each morning. The staff initial and date each entry; they are supposed to read them, but I doubt they do. I test this theory by peppering my entries with swears and haven’t been punished. I also write how I really feel, but I get the sense that the truth doesn’t matter. I write about the sunrise and birthdays and being so fucking lonely. Before I can finish the entry, my ass cheeks clench and I wish a counselor were awake so I could ask permission to get the shovel. I don’t wish hard enough to wake one though; this stillness is the best birthday present.

On the Wednesday after my birthday the staff exchange brings surprises. For the group: kielbasa rings that shine with fat and Hershey bars for each of us. For me: a gigantic crème-filled birthday doughnut, big as a cake and covered in chocolate frosting, accompanied by a cup to provide a stool sample. I have to share the pastry and the microbe count of my digestive system. I also receive two gifts that I do not have to share. A counselor named Nancy gives me a box of instant cocoa packets and a bookmark with painted wild roses because they are the flower of June. I thank her and get permission to go to the bathroom. I don’t have to go, but it’s the only



way to obtain a private moment. The notion of the bookmark reminds me of my mother, but I know that I am homesick for a home that is idealized by this time and place. I dig a hole in case the staff comes to check on me and I sit next to it and cry quietly.

Almost three months later it is August. I graduate the program and return to Missoula, Montana to live at the Talbot Center group home. They can't say when I will be able to go home, just that I have to be honest and work the program and we'll see. Up to nine other kids live at the Talbot: five girls and five boys maximum. We are placed on different levels of the house according to sex; girls have rooms upstairs and boys on the lower level with living room, kitchen, and staff office on the main floor. At least two counselors are at work during the active hours of the day. I am expected to do chores, be hygienic, and attend school in addition to group, family, and personal counseling. I must eat all meals served in the home and do three cardiovascular exercises each week. My performance in these areas determines such things as my bedtime, phone privileges, free time, family visitation, and ultimately my freedom.

For weeks I ask for permission to do anything outside of the staff's line of sight. I ask to go to the bathroom or to get a drink of water and they laugh. They laugh and tell me that I only have to ask to go outside. I am humiliated by this, but it frees me from the herd mentality. I do not appreciate it. I feel like kindling split from a new log: independent and fragile, as if too much desire for warmth will use me up.

I must choose a staff member to be my lead counselor, so I pick the only counselor I know from before I was incarcerated. Her name is Melissa and we have known each other since my first removal from my home at age twelve. I can trust her because I don't have to summarize my past and she has never doubted my word. Melissa is my friend and that is a precious comfort in this new wilderness where I must own the problems alone. I tell her all the things I would tell my mother if my mother *wasn't* my mother.

I have problems resuming school. MYA isn't accredited yet, so the credits I had made up in residential don't apply to my transcript. Hiking two hundred miles makes up for freshman P. E. so I start out my sophomore year as a freshman taking tenth grade P. E. and doubling everything else. School seems hopeless, so I skip classes and smoke pot. I am on parole when I just want to make out with my girlfriend and read books while I smoke cigarettes. I

want to know when I can go home and that I am not doomed to the life of a criminal. I don't know how to achieve these goals. I can

barely express them to the required people.

In October, I find out from an article in the *Missoulian* that my father has been arrested for an incident involving the sexual abuse of a retarded woman. All day long at school my teachers and friends ask odd questions about some Froehlich guy in the paper and look at me with pity. When I see my shrink after school he tells me not to read the paper. I find the Talbot copy of the paper as soon as I arrive "home" that afternoon. The article is about his trial and the guilty verdict. He is going back to prison and I am glad that my mother divorced him. However, I wonder what his behavior says about me and I hate the pitiful expressions that follow me around for days at school. I fail two pee tests and my parole officer removes his Stetson to tell me that one more positive earns me a trip to Texas Girls Prison where they fuck little blond hippy girls with curling irons that are plugged in and hot. Same if I'm caught truant. His troubled doe eyes say that he's for real on this. He talks around a wad of Skoal and spits in the trashcan next to his desk as if to illustrate the point that it's that simple. Simple as gravity.

Mostly out of fear, I manage to compose a dull pulse of progress to all outward perception. The pee tests are clean and I make the honor roll at Hellgate for the first half of the year. The only manifestation of my discontent that I can't hide is consistent and escalating insomnia. When the staff notices, I placate them by admitting to Melissa that I am terrified of the dark and it would help if she would maybe read to me before bed on the nights that she worked. It is a half-truth that leads to a half-solution. I can only sleep sometimes and when I do it's four or five hours and I wake up panicking for reasons I can't articulate. I dream black nightmares where I live out the events I am afraid to talk about.

I fake the happy face so well that I earn a two night home pass for Christmas. I have made it clear to anyone who asks that the only thing I want for Christmas is an acoustic guitar with steel strings. This wish comes with a guarantee of not wanting any presents for my sixteenth birthday. Even though I don't say it in so many words, a guitar is my one true desire. It is the reward I envision for all the hoop-jumping of the past year. I can barely admit it to myself, but I secretly imagine that it is the key to finding all the right words.

A guitar shaped package wrapped in black paper printed with planets and comets appears under my family's tree the weekend visit before Christmas. My younger brother and sister are prize pupils in my school of concealed gift identification and they can't understand why I won't play the game with that particular package. They think it is hilarious and they both know what is really under the wrapping. My brother Zach pretends to examine the gift and concludes that it is a guitar case full of macaroni. He rolls around on the carpet, clutching his stomach with laughter. My sister Jasmine agrees that it is in fact a guitar case, but it is full of rocks or coal. They both choke on the giggles that result. I tell them that they are both wrong; it is a bass shaped bag full of giraffe poop. I do my best to change the subject by presenting the Snickers eggs I brought them. Normally, I would have shown them how to know that it was really a guitar with a series of shakes, taps, and listenings. It wouldn't have been hard. Their jokes were just too close to what I expected for opening up my big mouth and letting the truth out; a big fat slap in the face to show me what I got wrong in calculating what I deserved.

On Christmas morning the valley wakes to three feet of snow that dumped down overnight. I get up before dawn and the dead yellow grass of Christmas Eve has been erased by pure sparkling blue-whiteness. I sneak out on the roof for a smoke. I can't tell where my breath starts and the smoke stops. This is the physical truth and the emotional truth and it depresses me for a bit but the suddenness and the purity of the snow are almost enough to make me believe in miracles. When I go back in, it is time to find our stockings because my siblings heard the slight sounds of my wakefulness and woke our mother. I dodge confrontation by retreating to the kitchen where I start the coffee and hurry to brush my teeth before my mom can smell cigarettes on me.

We kids dissect our stockings and open our presents, stopping only to say thank you. I save the guitar shaped package for last; not just my last, but the last of all the presents. As if it is an important letter that I want someone else to open and read for me. My mother asks me why I haven't opened the biggest of all the presents. She smiles and asks me if I don't know that it's for me. I want to ask her if she thinks I'm retarded or something, but I ask her what happens if it's not a guitar. Tears grease my eyes when the only answer is her laughter.

It is the day before spring break starts. I haven't slept for six nights in a row. Upon my request, Melissa reads me my favorite

kid's book, *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine*. The moral of the story is to not lie. I want to tell her that I can't go on like this, not sleeping. I want to tell her that I only shaved my legs today so I could have a good excuse to pry a blade off of the LadyBic Twin that is kept in the staff office. But I don't know how to do it without extending my already indefinite confinement. She is my friend and I know that to omit the truth is a kind of lie. My thoughts are verbally reduced to sentences a child could compose. She finishes the story and says goodnight. "I am afraid," is all I can say. She pats my head and says that everything will be okay. She shuts off the lamp by my bed and leaves. For a few minutes I believe that everything *will* be okay.

I retrieve the slim razor blade from between my mattress and box spring. It looks harmless, tiny and angled to fit on a pink plastic handle, but it has already sliced into the callused parts of the fingers I use to hold it. I open the journal on my nightstand and use the pen that came with it to write: *I obviously don't care, so why should you. Sleep well.* I don't sign my name or date it. I leave the journal open on my nightstand and take a deep breath, not knowing that this will be far easier than I could ever imagine.

I sit on the edge of my bed by the closed door and slit my wrists both the wrong way and the right; horizontal and vertical. Because I'm right handed, I make the mistake of starting on the left. My left hand is numb and slippery when I start on the right wrist and it is hard to keep a grip on the small blade. I mangle the delicate skin with several clumsy cuts that I assume are superficial and end up doing much more damage than is necessary. The blade is deceptively keen and at first the wounds are merely whiter partings of flesh. Red dots appear inside the slashes and swell into a stream of blood. I watch as the fish-belly white of my forearms is overtaken by crimson. I am dumbfounded by the sheer volume of blood pulsing out of me. My lips tingle and a drop of spit falls from my open mouth onto my right forearm momentarily revealing the whitish skin like the blink of an eye.

I wrap my arms around my belly and lay back on the piled blankets. Every sense is extra sharp and in focus. Not only the smeary roughness of the ceiling or the sound of bugs bumping against my window screen or the wet smell of spring, but also the fact that I *am* afraid. I find the truth for a moment but when I try to get up to write it down, I collapse onto the full laundry basket at the foot of my bed. This is happening way too fast and I'm not sure anymore that death is what I really want.

I move my arms away from my body trying to get up. Blood has bloomed up to my breasts on the white t-shirt I sleep in. A broad red cummerbund covers the lower half of my shirt and the waistband of my jammie-pants. My stomach and ribs are sticky. Redness is invested in the creases of my inner elbows and the wrinkles of my palms and fingerprints. The blood on my thumbnails is starting to dry in a series of rusty overlapping crescents. The extreme contrast of red-brown on the bluing nail beds brings a new sense of urgency. I want to live.

It is a long hard shuffle to the living room where I can hear the staff scratching their nightly progress reports. I lean against the wall and sort of float down the stairs leaving a trail of bloody smears on the wall behind me and droplets on the carpet. Everything here is beige and I feel worse for the mess. Melissa is writing in a progress file. Her long body is draped over the tan recliner that faces the stairs. She is thinking hard. I reel like a teenaged drunk and my right wrist burns where I nicked the tendon, but the pain is a far off echo tethered to the body I am starting to leave behind. I am exhausted by the time I reach the bottom step. I stop and listen to my pulse pound between my ears; it is the sound of a river in full runoff.

I let my head fall against the wall and it thumps softly, but loud enough to rupture Melissa's concentration. Her blue eyes are wide to begin with but they grow in confusion and then again in bewilderment. It seems like they will spill right out of her face if they get any larger. I turn my palms outward at my sides, like the painting of dead Jesus after the crucifixion in my children's picture bible. All at once Melissa is inches from my face, hands on my shoulders asking, "Oh Bry! Oh what have you done?" My lips buzz and I grope at the numb recess of my mind for a passable answer.

The other counselor, Dan, is an EMT. Without being told he glides from the office with two rolls of thick gauze. They resemble furry rolls of toilet paper and he uses them to bind tourniquet dressings on my wrists while we wait for the ambulance that he called. I still search for an answer. I want to tell them that I am so tired and so scared and so lonesome and I made a horrible mistake and I want help. I want help so badly and I wish I could ask for it but all this hurts more than any wound. My heart aches like an abscessed molar and I can't tell them because they might confirm that it is ALL MY FAULT. It probably is. These thoughts surface and submerge in disjointed waves. I hear a thin siren wailing. Splashes of red and white light cast odd shadows into the living room. I manage to whisper, "don't leave" to

Melissa. And she doesn't, until they tell her she has to.

If you are a teen or adult who fails at suicide in Missoula County, you usually end up in the Providence Center. The Prov is also the way station to Montana's State Mental Hospital at Warm Springs, so there is a vast variety of crazy there at any given time. Everyone I know knows someone who's been in the Prov. I have a few good friends who've been in and out. The teens are separated from the adults by rules and different wings. In addition, there is an intensive care unit for suicidal people who need twenty-four-hour supervision. That is my destination. I arrive from the emergency room of St. Patrick Hospital and instantly I hate it. I get the sense that I would have arrived in handcuffs if I hadn't just gotten sutures in both wrists even though the nurses are sickeningly polite. They lock me in a room with clear Plexiglas walls and a hospital bed. I am stung with a needle and I fall asleep for a long time.

For a few days at the Prov, I decide that I must be crazy since I'm at the nut hatch. Then I read Catch 22 and decide that I am clearly not crazy if I am capable of thinking that I am. I try to make it clear to the head doctor and nurses that I really do want to live. The basic response is, "be honest and follow the rules." The rules include, but are not by any means limited to, bearing my soul to adults I barely know and taking medication for a bipolar diagnosis. I am tired of turning myself inside out for the scrutinization of constantly shifting groups of authority figures. I refuse all medication except the sleep meds because I do not have what women's magazines still sometimes call manic-depression. I have post traumatic stress disorder and could prove it if the head doctor would just allow my shrink to come and sort it out. I point out to the head doctor that the bipolar diagnosis originated from an evaluation he himself had conducted in early 1995 and I reveal that I was tripping on some heavy black crow LSD during that interview and should be re-evaluated on that basis. This argumentative approach does not earn me a visit from my shrink or a re-evaluation, but rather a round of chemical dependency treatment, a stronger campaign to medicate me, and an extended stay at the Prov. The only trust I earn concerns unlimited access to the juice dispenser and I spitefully drink gallons of cranberry juice just in case they are slipping meds into my food.

They want to know why I tried to kill myself. I tell them over and over that I hadn't slept for six nights. They tell me it's not that

simple, dig deeper. In frustration I laugh and ask if that is a reference to death. They hold their position and I hold mine. After getting angry and shouting a few times I switch tactics and laugh at them. I don't know who is making the argument more circular, but I feel like I'm winning since there is only one of me and enough of them to fill a baseball roster. I also feel like the world is utterly against me. And not in the casual teen angst way common to my peers.

I will be at the Talbot Center until August 1997. Before I am discharged, I claw my way up from a post-suicide attempt level 0 to level 4, the next to highest level. Then, days after I earn this ranking, I get barred back to level 1 for a scandal involving a female house mate. I rejected most of her juvenile advances, but the one time I gave in for a kiss was enough to make her vindictive when I refused her in the future. Staff found out about our affair and I got punished for not telling them about it. The incident gets mentioned repeatedly at my graduation, as though I have pulled a fast one and really am not ready for real life, but they don't want to come right out and say it. And it's true, I'm not ready. I will return to a turbulent home life. I will be institutionalized two more times and arrested a few dozen times before I reach adulthood. I will be on probation and parole again. I will not graduate high school. It will be over a decade before I recognize the relationship between trust, the truth, and honesty, but even then I won't fully understand the syntax of that equation.

If I had trusted any of them I would have given them the key to finding the truth in my flippant attitude. I would have told them that the best jokes have honest hearts of darkness and therefore laughter is the best policy. I would tell them that I am almost sixteen and I have lived in the company of counselors and broken children for fifteen months and the easiest way for me to be honest is to make jokes. And I would tell them that I am just now finding the words to express how truth is a variable dependent upon who is listening.



*Will*

I don't want to be driving to the city on a Saturday. I want to sleep and watch TV. But we all have to go because school is going to start soon and me and DD need clothes and Mom doesn't want to drag our butts all the way to the city again right after just taking Grandma for her new ears. Even Dad is going because he's Dad and he can go anywhere he wants to, especially if the truck is involved and it is. My dad has a nose that's like a bowl. There's no dent from his forehead and it curves out and gets bigger and I think my mom doesn't like it because she's always glaring at it. Perry is coming too because he likes to go everywhere Dad goes. We had to bring the dog. Mom was worried that with nobody home she would get out through the tear in the screen door that Dad was supposed to have fixed three months ago, damn it, and then go through the garden, under the fence, and get into the neighbors' gardens and everybody would hate us and then we would be the only family on our block that doesn't get invited to barbeques. Our dog's name is Stacey and she's a springer spaniel. She doesn't really have a tail, just a little stubby thing. Her hair is really long and the hair on her tail hangs down off it like a horse's tail. Stacey is short for Anastasia Penelope. She was really cute when she was a puppy but now nobody gives her baths or anything and she gets dirty and gets burs in her fur and smells bad.

DD won't stop kicking me and the dog. Stacey is lying down under my feet so I keep holding my legs up a little because I don't want to hurt her, but she keeps wiggling around because of DD and so I keep having to lift my legs higher and higher. Now my feet aren't even really touching her, they are just hovering above her. I can't stand it anymore.

"DD! Stop kicking the dog." Of course she just giggles and pokes me in the side. "Stop it." I grab her finger and hold it. When she starts crying Mom glares at me through the mirror.

"Leave your sister alone."

"But she started it!" DD gets away with everything and I don't want her to this time.

"I don't care who started it, but I'll finish it," she says and then turns her eyes back to the road. Mom is so scary. Her hair is bigger than me, it could swallow my whole body and there would just be a little lump in it, like when a snake swallows an egg. I'm not letting



go of DD's finger because she's crying and saying it hurts. I want to hurt her. I'm letting go because I am scared of Mom's hair. I wish she would bug Perry instead of me and Stacey. He is sitting on her other side, looking out the window. There's nothing good out there though, just grass and hills and some trees. In the front seat they have the armrest pushed up so Grandma can sit in the middle. She mostly just sleeps and snores loudly. Sometimes she wakes up and coughs so long you'd think she's dying. I guess you aren't supposed to push the armrest up and let someone sit in the middle like that, because Perry's friend Bobby has a car with only a front and no back and they won't ever let me go anywhere with them. But Grandma is so short nobody can see her sitting up there anyway. Besides, if you aren't supposed to do that why is our truck built that way?

*Howard*

Imagine someone as old as my mother wanting to get her ears done. This is what comes of too much time sitting around. You grow old and get batty. She saw some star on TV getting something or other unnatural done to her face and now that Dad's dead she's going to do it too. For Christ's sake, what does an 83-year-old woman need shorter earlobes for? It doesn't bother me, I'm open-minded. Just like Perry spending all his time in his room with that Bobby boy doesn't bother me. It's good to have close friends. Goddamn my wife can drive. Most women can't drive, but my woman can. She drives the truck like a caress. The truck is her lover. That I can understand. A woman and a truck. A man and a truck. My son and a man.

*Linda*

He's looking at me. I hate it when he just sits and stares at me, his eyes open like he can't blink. Snakes can't blink. My husband is a snake. If it weren't for the children I would smother Howard with his toupee in his sleep. But the children need things, so many things, and he has a job at least, if nothing else. But now his mother, Margaret. What couple our age has to live with their crazy 80-year-old mother? If Walter hadn't kicked it the two of them could have lived in their own little world of oldness forever and never come into ours. But she did come into ours, and now she wants new ears. Her skin hangs off her skeleton like a loose dress and it's her earlobes she wants fixed. But good. Maybe someone handsome and charming man will fall deeply in love with her new earlobes and sweep her off her feet and out of my house. They can go explore the Amazon and meet pink river dolphins. They can walk the river and measure exactly how

long it is in units of the tiny feet of a blue-haired, four-foot-five, small earlobed woman. Then Margaret and her dashing lover will soar off to Europe, where they will tour the continent and invite a string of exotic men and women into their relationship. They will travel to the Antarctic and lie on glaciers above ancient ecosystems of bacteria trapped in ice, and whisper to each other about their own ancient ecosystems. "My father taught my brother and my husband the good way to smoke pigs, a recipe he made himself." Her brother died at thirty though, run over by his own tractor under suspicious circumstances (his wife was rumored to be sleeping with the same women that he was), and her husband never passed the recipe onto Howard, believing that it was this that made him special, and that he would live forever. For years Margaret and her lover will travel everywhere, until finally they will die, beautifully and tragically, mauled by a tiger in a Sundarbans mangrove swamp or crushed by an ancient Grecian urn while exploring the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. And I will be able to mourn her because she will be far away and not living with us.

I hate this truck. I am too close to Howard. His mother does not provide an effective shield she's so little, shrunk down to the size of a cricket by time. Her legs dangle around the gearshift, and every time we hit a bump they swing up. If Howard were sitting in the middle his legs would envelop the gearshift. But if I changed gears too fast and too hard I could hit him with the shift right on the pecker. If I did it hard enough maybe I could make it so we wouldn't have any more children. Thirteen years until DD is old enough to go off on her own. Then I can leave him.

*Perry*

If I don't think about it it didn't happen. But did it? No. No. Dad would have screamed at me if he had really found us. He would have hit me. He would have threatened to chop off Billy's dick with an axe. He wouldn't have just walked out of my room, leaving me and Billy shivering, scared and naked. It was just a nightmare. That was the wet spot on the sheets. I wet the bed in fear, Billy was never even there that day. I never touched Billy. I don't even know that he has tan, nearly hairless skin. I don't know about the muscles that stretch his body into a triangle of shoulders and hips and then down, down into long legs. Legs that he uses to run the mile in under six minutes, to drive to my house and pick me up so we can go places where other people can't see us, legs that gather beaded sweat while we dance wildly to songs we don't understand the lyrics of. I don't

know the impossible beauty of Billy's body, I have never kissed the curve of his upper lip and wished that I could curl myself into it and live there forever. His body, his face, his black hair; they aren't mine to touch.

*Stacey*

I love it. I love driving. It's warm and rocking. I feel safe and excited. I want to howl. I want to jump on people and lick them, taste their salty skin. Even though the boy has his feet on my side and the girl is nudging me with her toe, every part of my body is alive and happy. Even though I can't get to Howard from back here I am happy. He's right there, I can see him. I can see his hands, where they rest on his thighs. Hands that stroke me, that love me. I love him. I love him more than anyone else I have ever met. I belong to him, and when I am with him everything is right. When he's gone I think I could die. But he comes back. How? It's like magic, he disappears. But he comes back, always, and when he does he make my entire tail, my entire body, move more than I can control. I'm so excited that I could howl. And he's there right now. So close. I can see him, and smell him, and his hands where they rest on his thighs and, and I'm happy and I'm his.

*Will*

"Shut up Stacey," Mom's voice is scary. I press my foot into Stacey's warm firm side. I want her to be quiet so that Mom won't yell. Stupid DD, if she would stop kicking people, Stacey would be asleep and Mom wouldn't be annoyed. But she's only five. That's what people say. Like that's a good excuse. She's only been getting more annoying the older she gets. When she's Grandma's age she'll be so bad. I hope everyone who says "She's only five," is still around to see that it was a horrible excuse and that she has always just been evil. But Grandpa died so I guess people aren't always around. I miss him, even though he was mean sometimes. He used to hit me on the back and say nice things. He told me I was a good kid. We used to visit them a lot, and sometimes they would visit us. Living with Grandma is not as fun as visiting them was, even though you'd think it would be even better. Plus she took Perry's room so he had to move in with me and DD. Now he gets to kick us out whenever he wants to study or anything, and that's always. But I love Grandma, and she is still nice. She gives us candy, even though sometimes the candy is just cough drops. I don't think she needs new ears, even though she says it's so she can get a new man.

*DD*

Grandma is going to be a pretty princess. Mom told me. A doctor is going to make her one. Then she can be like me, and we can wear crowns together and walk through forests and meadows holding hands. I will be the princess who sings with animals and she will be the princess who kisses frogs. We will be enchanted by witches and saved by princes. Mom and Dad and Will and Perry will be our servants. Mom will weave flowers into our hair, Dad will buy us dresses with ribbons and lace, Perry will put our shoes on for us. Will can be our food taster in case of poisoned apples.

*Linda*

Margaret doesn't like the air conditioning, so we can't have that on. Never mind that it's 80° in here and some of us are pretty sure we're going through menopause. I can't handle this, I'm opening a window.

"Linda, close the window, it's so chilly, we don't want anybody to get sick. I'm 83, one bad chill could be it for me." Batty old woman. Don't laugh like that, it's not funny. I wouldn't be happy if she died from complications of earlobe surgery, I wouldn't. I might not mourn her for years, but I wouldn't dance on her grave or anything. Maybe I can convince Howard to get some of his gut sucked too. Maybe they would both die during their surgeries. So tragic, people would feel so bad for me. "Lost her husband and her mother-in-law on the same day, poor thing." But the money... I wonder how long it would take to get some life insurance out on them.

*Margaret*

My husband used to love my ears. My earlobes are so long, I never understood why. But there were many, many things I loved about him that maybe nobody else would understand either. I'm glad he died, it was his time and he died as happy as a man who thinks he's invincible can. Just a heart attack. Nothing unusual at our age. We know so many people who have died; in wars, in accidents, at rest. They stay with us; we're wrapped in their laughter. It's best to die when you're happy. My Walter was happy.

*Linda*

"Pit stop, everybody out." Howard likes stopping at rest stops, but I like stopping at gas stations. I like the smell of gasoline. I always stop at rest stops though, because that's where Howard likes to stop. I can't tell him I want to stop at a gas station because I like the smell of gasoline. Even if everybody in the world likes the smell of

gasoline, nobody says it.

Howard is doing push-ups on the grass, and Perry is laughing and counting for him. Exuberant. They are exuberant, and when Howard stands up from his push-ups and claps his hand on Perry's back, his eyes are luminous, all the love a father can have for his son is in his eyes. Howard looks at me and for a moment our eyes share that light. We know what it is to love.

"Back in the car guys," he says, and we are in the truck and it's his turn to drive and the rest stop is just a memory of light. A yelp and Howard slams on the brakes. Everybody in the truck is exactly two inches from where they were settled, Margaret nearly fell out of her seat. Oh God. The dog.

"Stacey," screams Will, panicking.

Howard's eyes look glassy, he's muttering "I don't think I felt anything, we would have felt it if I hit her. I don't think I hit her." But he's not moving. He's afraid to look. I will. I will look. For a few minutes I want to protect him, in exchange for the light he has given me.

"Stay here everybody, I'll go look." Nobody but Howard listens and they all race out of the truck behind me. I can see Stacey's body, under the truck, next to the tire. "Stacey. Stacey girl, are you okay? Here girl." For a few minutes she doesn't move, but now I can see her side, and it's lifting with hot breaths of air. Suddenly she jumps up and runs to us and we all yell "Stacey!" in unified disbelief and joy. She wiggles against us and we wiggle against her and we are all puppies just happy to be alive and to be with each other. We let her into the truck, Will gingerly climbs in and puts his feet next to her, leaning over to pet her, we are all shaking and laughing.

"Everybody in?" I ask. Howard is grinning and laughing too now.

"Yes, everybody's here," says Perry.

I look at Howard, over Margaret's thin blue hair. "Not a scratch on her," I say, and we drive away, toward the city and a new pair of ears.



visual

art





SEAN LEARY

# STAGECOACH

5 5



5 6

JAYSEN TINKER  
UNTITLED



MATTHEW S. RILEY

# PARKING LOT NIGHTLIGHT

5 7



5 8

MATTHEW S RILEY

# BLACK SPIKES



Kevin Wright

# SOFIA

5 9





6 0

*KAITLIN PERRODIN*  
**TO LOVE  
AN ARTIST**



AMANDA OPTIZ

# FEELING SMALL

6 1



6 2

KAITLIN PERRODIN  
BA SADI





KYLIE CAMPBELL

# FELIX'S KITE STORE

6 3



6 4

CHARNAY MURPHY  
EASTER ISLAND



AMANDA OPTIZ

# COMMUNE BY THE ROAD

6 5



6 6

KYLIE CAMPBELL

# LUTION MONSTERS





JENNY GESSAMAN

# MADDOCK'S MERMAID

6 7





Rooter





# ALGEBRA APPLIED



I've proved myself a solver of problems,  
an employer of high school algebra.  
Presented problem: capsule minus shell,  
equals orange candy beads.  
Add mortar, reduce by pestle,  
and yield blooming, vermilion flour.  
Add inhale, divide by neurons...

*What is your final value?*

A non-violent abuser,  
with a synthetic span of attention.

I suspect myself a bringer of problems,  
an accident born of internet-bred, self read,  
self-diagnostic specialists.  
Dilemma: distinguished dealer – long white coat,  
insured hands – condemns addicts,  
failing to recognize his own work.

Disorder equals potential addiction.

You tell them that you want to jump.  
They will reply,

“At least do a flip.”

She outlawed the Polaroid picture  
Because she was scared of the truth it wouldn't hide,  
And she invented digital to leave her failings fewer.

Her first rolls of film were taken when her hands were newer  
The subjects, her mother and her father, blurry and ready to collide,  
So she outlawed the Polaroid picture.

The taste her parents' yelling left, seeped inside her head had no cure  
And through the lens she noticed their smiles start to slide.  
She invented digital to leave her failings fewer.

Her fingers ran along the pockmarked walls, empty except for the mirror,  
Smashed glass and scissors surrounded mother after father took a ride.  
She outlawed the Polaroid picture.

Her mother's definition of the word "taboo" centered around the fixture  
That was her father's face, so the way she felt she knew she couldn't confide.  
She invented digital to leave her failings fewer.

Her loss came sharply into focus, discarding reminders the only cure.  
She cropped her father out in Photoshop, and, just like her mother, lied.  
So, she outlawed the Polaroid picture  
And she invented digital to leave her failings fewer.

# OCTOBER



october was the time for lonely walks in yellow light,  
dusty galoshes, and other traditions of country living.

strange feeling to be so single and wooden  
inside myself  
and to sense the chilled openness  
of the coming winter.

piles of I.I. bean catalogues  
lazed on the stairs of my father's studio  
like neglected dogs –  
clothing for the rosy-cheeked sort  
and fine young men of accidental fashion.

something about those flannel shirts my father wore  
made autumn a right of manhood,  
but I loved the tricks of the season  
right along with him.

he was there in those leaves  
the colors of flannel –  
falling so proudly and in such fine style.

7 4

KEVIN SHEETZ

# TOLERANCE

Empty noose  
    swinging in the stillness  
of some forgotten afternoon  
perfect in shadow  
    not dusty or frayed  
bloodworn   teardrops  
    like petals  
    spreading  
what do men see  
    when they look at one another?  
how many are still proud?

KEVIN SHEETZ

# SANDCASTLES



The two soldiers  
bent at the knees  
look out past the horizon  
and wait  
for their shadows  
to fade

# IT IS ALWAYS RAINING IN PARIS

It is always raining in Paris  
and men are so easily lost  
in the wet and melancholy streets  
    women lifting their skirts  
the Seine drifts along every corridor  
    slow and dirty  
tall buildings unknown  
    leaves like reptiles  
        blinking slowly  
to the girl lifting her white hand  
    to stifle a cough  
to the men alone  
    turning the corner  
    and gone out of sight  
Paris offers a love letter  
    stained by a muddy footprint  
I remember Paris in this way  
    and it will never change  
memories are all the same  
    especially if you look upon today  
as having already past  
it is always raining in Paris  
    and these lost men  
        have no destination  
no conclusion can be drawn  
    from a man's life  
depthless emotion and  
    loftiest thought  
    spent energy  
he is a vanished eternity  
and the tears he weeps  
    are naught but rain.

RACHEL SMITH

# ODOMETER



gloss waved every strand  
hourly illumination was  
a lucid glow  
undiluted

askew  
a clot of curls  
cacophony of reckless eclipse  
croaking  
wind rakes it on the bank  
a cold cylix truncating

heat dappled  
saucer-soft  
dewy  
and the blush slid

flesh flees  
skin skunked  
from kindling-bones  
a greedy straw  
for the bolus  
stench sucks unfledged  
the last waking

# ALWAYS TREAT ROBOTS WITH RESPECT

Gleaming steel curving left  
reflecting white freezing sun.  
Dry grasses caress a fading Coke can  
as the train rumbles past

reflecting white freezing sun.  
Decaying buildings beg for love  
as the train rumbles past  
moving too fast to notice

decaying buildings begging for love  
remember the days of people  
moving too fast to notice  
the impending doom.

Remember the days of people?  
Planning and plotting  
the impending doom  
of their far off kin, inadvertently

planning and plotting  
each time they tried to better  
their far off kin, inadvertently  
stripping them of cultural distinction

each time they tried to better  
themselves. Someone was killed,  
stripped of cultural distinction  
while the enemy applauded



themselves. Someone was killed,  
and the golden arches multiplied.  
While the enemy applauded  
their change to the world

as the golden arches multiplied  
tubby little boys, staring at screens,  
their change to the world.  
Paler than white faces that can only read pixels,

tubby little boys, staring at screens  
engineer robot servants to bring them their Coke.  
Paler than white faces that can only read pixels  
sell to armies for technological aids,

engineered robot servants to bring them their Coke.  
Computerized minds being trained for war  
sold to armies for technological aids  
wield more deadly weapons than bad ideas

computerized minds trained for war  
outmatch human warriors  
wielding more deadly weapons than bad ideas.  
Victorious battlefields painted red

outmatch human warriors.  
Each person lying dead on  
victorious battlefields painted red  
neglected as robot servants moved on.

Each person lying dead on  
dry grasses that caress a fading Coke can  
neglected as robot servants move on  
gleaming steel curving left.

# EXCERPT FROM “A DAILY CONSCIOUSNESS”

The Gila thaws, playing regal.  
A rock among rocks in the blaring Sun.  
Risk the spine says the Sun, searching  
for a gladiator. But he speaks  
through the air, finding nothing  
but sandstone and cactus skin,  
he continues his glare.

Says the Gila: I've a sore throat and  
I don't know how to cook.  
My stomach is bare, and my hole  
freezes in the night. Every morning I  
take longer to reanimate, my cold  
blood phases from blue to red and some  
days I want to stay underground  
and let the torpor prove its right.

A diamondback slides near  
and smiles hungry.

The Gila off balance: I'll  
have to bite you,  
even you without ears.

The Sun lusters a few degrees sharper  
in a white stare.

The snake: neither of us have ears,  
friend.

# THE TOWN AND ITS RELIGION

I ask God for some peanuts and he gives me salted air.

Between lovers, there is no hesitation  
and I wish for once there was.

Later, I find God in a Pepsi can or crushed  
Pepsi can outside the Asian grocer's  
sliding door. On Tuesdays, I buy trinkets  
for my sister, who's got a cakey  
"epidermal layer," some lime-  
colored, yet mild form of  
leprosy. All that means is  
her skin's like litmus. It wicks  
just a little—if any. And we have no father.  
It doesn't dry completely. She croaks instead of  
crying. She's younger.

I buy paddy bracelets for her,  
and green kimono fans.  
If that's what you call them.

If we assume she's a virgin  
then she's simply at the mall  
or school. And we also have no mother.  
Small as they are, someone must keep track of these things.  
Other mornings, I ask God for the bald  
truth as it stands apart from our brine-white  
elbows, as it travels mile upon mile  
away from this hilly, funereal  
town. Sunrise here

is the only thing we have.  
Clotheslines cross the gravel which is the color  
of fennel. God formally tickles the inside  
of my ear with tobacco sounds; I ask Jimmy Blaine for a ride  
to work, but he's rubbing my newest girlfriend's hand. Late-

morning and we're all still looking  
 for Jane's friend's car, a paisley-stained Honda,  
 a Civic I believe, with one rim defected  
 into the shape of a furry mollusk or cigar. The church choir  
 is performing a few selections by the bridge  
 for Easter this afternoon. And my sister's excited.  
 She won't shrug. Rightly so.  
 We can't all. Just yesterday

I donated five dollars to some cause in South America.

When no one's watching, I tune the radio  
 on. I enjoy a pear and take part in the world,

and if you ask me how I feel, I'd say I feel alright,  
 then good about a certain few physical laws. Around nine

PM I ask God for a new job and he points me to the shower  
 which is running. I watch my sister sleeping  
 from a ream of peeling carpet in the hall.  
 After a minute I'd say I feel like puking,  
 but not anything large or important because

the halls of my life are low and,  
 like an eyelid, or fingernail, green. I am knock-kneed.

I don't want to wake her. My sister. Some days

I go downstairs just to throw an extra penny against  
 the small coffee table which is a dinner tray  
 until it bounds eventually into some ashtray  
 full of peanut shells from a few nights ago.

I ask God for directions and the clanking sounds quiet down.

Some time passes then.

ALYSSA TERRY

# COCHLEA

8 3

beat, beat, beat of the drum  
making muscles hum, pump and blood pound  
an ambience surrounding sound  
into the small chamber down the spiral  
swaying, rocking tap, tap, tap and  
tap with the lyric of the clear pure tones  
musically swinging on the cells  
flooding out the quiet, rock the sound  
wind up, up to the top of the domed composition  
and rocket back down in a crash, and splash  
across the pavement, of the basement  
listening, swish, swishing infectious  
grasping on the edges crazed  
dart across the papered melody  
blackened holes that wish to define the varnished  
REVERBERATION

Kneading the mattress-bare,  
an upstairs cat screams for petrified fish,  
yowling at a crusted Tupperware,  
lidless and empty, then sprawls to sleep again.

Thin, whipped lot trees,  
young and scrabbling sideways  
at the wind which stashes  
trash to trunk then again  
it steals away.

And the meter grins wide—  
a chronic metal root canal  
tabbing quiet clicks toward close.  
The patient extends an angry tongue  
As the windshield secures instruction for care—  
acid yellow and bright.

Lady in the lot shrugs her collar surer,  
flicking Cat's calls from her hair  
and fingering the envelope which will postpone his lunch.

# ORIGINALITY CALLS

In your mail, the rsvp  
“I’ve got yoga on Tuesdays. Regrets.”

She shows up late.  
Drunk in rumpled streetclothes  
and now wrinkles are in.  
Everyone is gone but  
she doesn’t want to talk.

You tell her the bits you’ve been keeping  
what you twine together with spit and gin.  
“Whoever really likes gin?” she asks  
on hands and knees  
in front of your liquor cabinet.

She perches on the mantle,  
garments dusting your coals.  
Now a skirt, now a dress, now too-tights,  
she pours herself one  
in a cup left behind  
as you tell her the time  
you felt you were *vast*.  
And she decides  
she thinks *she* likes gin.  
You drink and she smokes  
from her stockings’ edges,  
grey upward curls and she sniffs then dismisses.  
“You can teach a two-man fish...”  
She begins, but if you give a muse a cookie,  
she’s going to want yours, too.  
So you hold a party napkin, twisted,  
up to her hair, and light  
her Menthol light.  
She smokes  
but only because she’s drinking.  
“Write about sadness

# 8 6

Write about love—

When you had it and when you didn't.

Write about how different you are.

Write a story where you pour me another gin.”

Smoke laughs through her veneers,

Which will remind you

of your father

and so you say

“my father liked gin”

To which she replies

“I doubt it,”

as she exits by the flue.



# ASPEN

It happens  
now and then.  
I'll be working  
in the garden,  
numb with the calm  
the vegetables bring,  
entranced by the still  
of morning—and  
I'll hear the sound  
of water falling down  
upon rocks below.  
My ears lead my eyes  
to the Aspen's glow—  
shimmering, quaking  
in the first diurnal  
thermal to rise  
the mountain side.  
A chipmunk climbs  
the fence post to find  
the first warm rays  
as my gaze finds  
thousands of leaves  
dancing in the morning sun  
like muffled applause  
for the day has begun  
and once again  
the Aspen  
has fooled me.  
Once again  
no water flows,  
it's a stream  
of air which runs  
as my smile grows  
and I return to the rows  
my hands black  
with earth.

**SULLIVAN COUNTY**

When I die  
I want to be buried  
Face down in the mud of Sullivan County.

But I will not bury him.  
Rather I will till him into the earth,  
Turn him over in the black coyote soil.  
He will be lined in earthy rows  
Under the rough blade of a plough,  
And between the tires of a red rusted tractor.

And from the silent seeds and darkness  
He will be drawn up in leafy green shoots  
Bursting from rooted chambers in verdant victory  
The kindly rains will wash his leafy arms clean  
And he will sit, brooding  
In moist dirt, in dignified rows.

He rises-  
Out of June's flooded gardens  
In pillars of summer's green sunbeams  
Foraging halls with their strapping stalks  
And lush leaves that gather rain in hand-like cups.  
That blaze golden in autumn  
And whip like paper banners  
In Missouri's incessant winds

And subtle deer  
Disappear and appear  
Nipping at the cornstalks  
And when they run  
Or ghost their way  
Through blond corridors of cornfields

I see my father in the chest of deer.

TROY SMITH

# GOD BLESS THE DIESEL ENGINE



God bless the diesel engine  
And save the double bitted axe  
Throw  
Dirt over your shoulders  
Squatting boots in the red shod

The sex of full grain leather.

(Do not come here)  
Here.  
Is the tongue of the Wind  
That rasps the heel of the day,  
Laps up the sun's fire  
Out of the open spaces and dark valley corners.

Here is the last place  
The last recess in the  
Body of Cancer.  
Bandaged with barbed wire  
A drumming diesel heart  
Moaning in the wilderness.

Come (here)  
Into this dead land  
Into this land of rusted monsters  
Their cold cardiacs that creak  
In mountain air  
Their steel vertebrae;  
Iron scapulas planted  
Into the landscape  
Pitched from the sky,  
By some great industrial hand.

God bless the diesel engine  
And those pious who drink,

That red nectar, Guzzle  
From the open veins of the earth, its  
Sweet hot blood.

“Do not come here”  
Is the voices under the rocks  
that flutter over grass tops  
You only  
Handle your mornings with soft  
Quiet hands  
This undigested  
Sprawl of dead grass  
And dead rocks.  
Slow are the piles of red  
Scrap and Waste

KEVIN M. SHEETZ // is originally from Barrington, IL, just outside Chicago. He is a freshman at UM with a major in philosophy. He has been writing plays and essays most of life and started writing poetry a couple of years ago.

CLAIRE MIKESON // is originally from Stanford, Montana. She is a freshman at UM, a member of the Davidson Honors College, and an English major with double-emphasis in Creative Writing and Literature. She has previously served on the Great Falls Tribune teen panel for two years, where she wrote published articles for the “Class Acts” page and met monthly with other panelists to discuss “Class Acts” page content.

AMANDA OPITZ // is a fifth-year photo-journalism major originally from Helena, MT. She spent her first two years of college at Gonzaga University but transferred back to Montana to focus her journalism degree in photography. Her work has been published in the *Gonzaga Bulletin*, *Reflections Magazine*, *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, and [montanagrizzlies.com](http://montanagrizzlies.com). Additionally she’s shot freelance commercial work for Headwaters Dance Co., the University of Montana Dance program, the Open Field Artists, and The Green Light organic clothing store.

# contributors

KATI PERRODIN // is originally from Havre, Montana. She is a junior majoring in Photojournalism and Creative Writing and started taking photos in fall 2009.

KYLIE CAMPBELL // is originally from the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. She is a freshman at UM with an undecided major at this time. She has had art exhibited in Hamilton High School, the “Love Without Fear” calendar, and various businesses in Hamilton. Most recently, she has also had art displayed in the University Center on the UM campus. When she’s not painting or playing piano she can be found (or not found) immersing herself in the wilderness that surrounds Missoula. She’s particularly fond of irony, good grammar, and smoothies. Her ultimate goal in life is to rescue and rehabilitate animals.

RYAN LANDOLFI // currently attends the University of Montana and will graduate in the spring of 2010 with a degree in English. He grew up in Missoula with his mother, Mary, and his sister, Kara. Ryan has been previously published in *The Oval*.

CHLOE HAAGEN // is originally from Lakewood, Washington. She majors in acting as a freshman at UM, and plans to graduate with a BFA in acting. Some of her favorite roles have been Lucy in the musical *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, *Bananas in The House of Blue Leaves*, and Alice in *You Can’t Take it with You*. She has been writing poetry for many years as a way to express herself and as a personal release. *The Oval* will be her first publication.

KRISTI GILLEON // is originally from Cascade, Montana. She is a junior with a major in archaeology. She has taken creative writing classes since high school and was recently named a semi-finalist in the Norman Mailer Writing Award for a creative nonfiction piece she wrote in Amy Ratto-Parks' Advanced Composition class.

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DAN DROUGHTON // lives over the river and through the woods on a ridge up the Rattlesnake where he enjoys writing when he gets a break from beekeeping, gardening, chicken raising, and working with the Forest Service. He is a UM junior who majors in Resource Conservation with a minor in chasing the elusive Wapiti.

JOSHUA KIESER // is originally from Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is a UM junior, studying History, International Development, and African American Studies. Most of his writing has been historical or social in nature, with limited experience in creative non-fiction. *The Oval* will be his first publication in a literary magazine.

SALLY FINNERAN // is originally from a small town in Oregon called Crescent. She is a sophomore, majoring in Photojournalism, but she has also taken poetry classes with Greg Pape and Lisa Schmaier, which she really enjoyed. "Always Treat Robots With Respect" will be her first published poem.

KEVIN WRIGHT // is currently a graduate student at the University of Montana in the School of Fine Arts pursuing a M.A. in Art History and a B.A. in Spanish. He was born in Oak Ridge, Tennessee where his mural projects are on display at the Boys Club of Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge Art Center, and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. He attended the University of Virginia at Charlottesville and received a B.A. in



Architectural History in 2001. As a student at UVA, he illustrated a daily comic strip for the Cavalier Daily from 1996-1998. In 1997, he illustrated a travel guide for On Your Own Publications titled *Out and About in Washington D.C.*

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