



stephens college
HARBINGER



*a person or
thing*

that comes before

*to announce or
give an indication*

of what follows

Harbinger
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Welcome to the 2006 edition of Harbinger! For over 50 years, the students of Stephens College have been involved in making a journal of literature and art. Our voices as women, writers, artists, and students have again created something we are proud to present. We add to the range of colorful and unique voices represented in our usual offerings of fiction, creative non-fiction, painting, photography, and drawing, by introducing two performance pieces. We are also pleased to include an interview with and art and poetry by Gladys Swan, whose talent and creativity have been an inspiration to us. Many pieces in this edition focus on the memory of home and childhood, while others concentrate on relationships and friendships. In all of the pieces, the specific details of individually lived moments, overlooked elements of the everyday, speak to us all. When I look at our staff this year, at the many different interests, personalities, backgrounds, and writing styles, the photograph used for the cover seems like a representation of us. Different colors, textures, and tastes creating something cohesive and whole. Thank you to the staff for all their hard work this year.

Emily Sharp
Editor-in-Chief

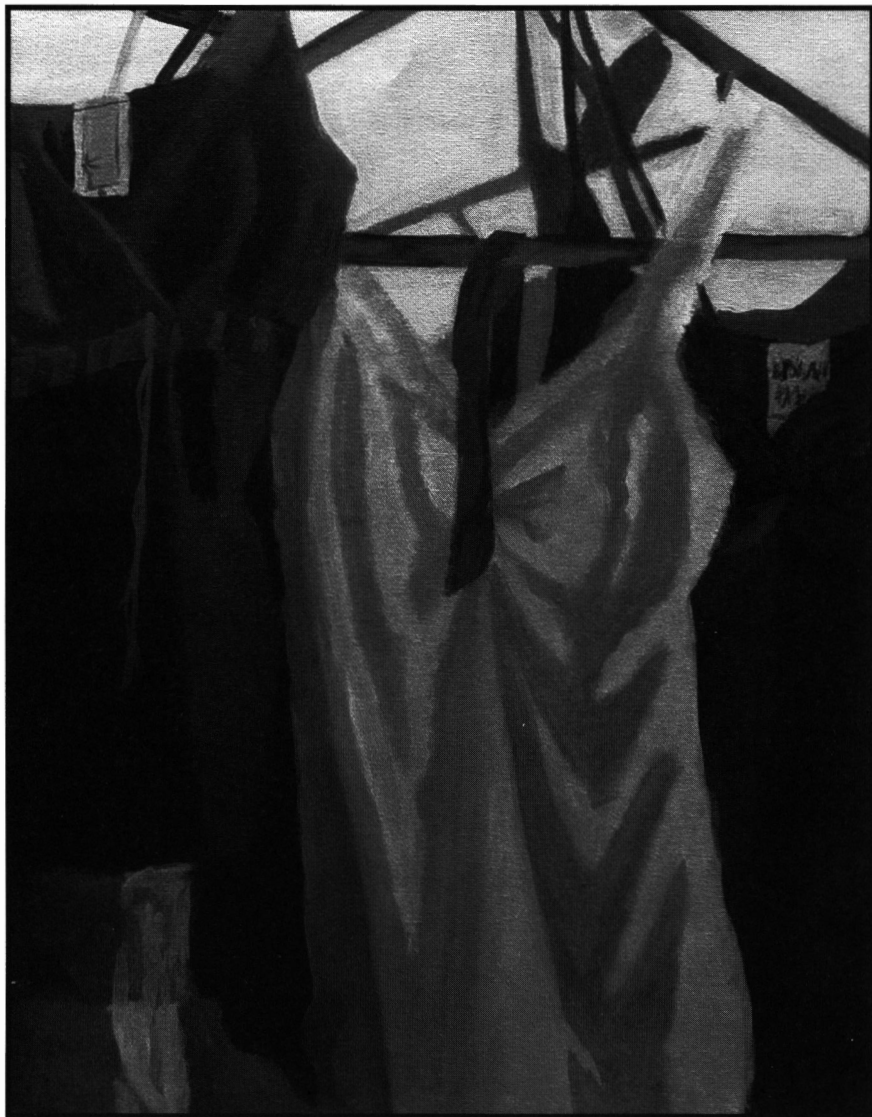
Lois Lane waits for Superman

after he flies from their bed
of tousled covers, shifted sheets.
She worries when he will return.

Her feet slide onto the cold marble terrace.
Looking up into the cloudless sky,
she studies the underside of birds
or planes?

She isn't afraid of heights or heroes,
but she fears the night he may not return
to save her from the vastness of an empty bed.

She is no medal, no fight fought well,
but she looks good from the sky
and believes she is worth coming home to.



She Must Be Naked

Art Contest Winner

Charleston, 2001

We wake up on the pull-out sofa with the metal bar
that pokes me in the back.

The yellow living room
glows in afternoon light.

He packs a bag full of beach towels,
and I search for my shoes
under the kitchen table.

We stop at a roadside café
and sit barefoot on an old wooden deck.
The waitress carries out oysters on a bed of ice.
We slather them with horseradish and lemon
then suck them from thick, hard shells.

The road
out of Folly Beach
is long and narrow.
The wind,
like a lover,
runs through our hair.

Pulling ourselves onto barstools
at a cheap Mexican restaurant,
we eat burritos and fantasize
about drinking beer in better places,
never imagining
this is the better place.



Chairs Ahoy
Photo Contest Winner

December 26th, Last Year

I wish I could be that girl in the café for you.
Drink coffee with you for hours,
smoke endless cigarettes,
make you
wonder what might be under
those white knickers of mine.
I could bring doubt to your foggy head,
make you dream about me when I leave,
make you taste coffee and cigarettes every time
you wish we were kissing.

Bland

They said all those poems I wrote
were too cliché to be good.

All the I love you's,
you are's,
never stood a chance.

It's not because I love you and you are,
it's the fake blandness I put to the
music of this thing we've
become.

And it's not because I love you and you are,
because I don't and
you're not.



Watercolor

C.T. Buddy Martin

I take the stairs two at a time, because I am big enough to do that.

Hop. "Grape."

Hop. "Lemon."

Hop. "Grape."

Hop. "Orange."

I reach the bottom. "Orange."

I clutch two quarters in my sweaty hand and walk further back to the Very Back where carpenters saw and carts rest (which you are NOT supposed to push sisters in) and workers in coffee-stained vests sit on stools that are too tall.

I can sneak by because they have papers in front of their faces (for 15 minutes ONLY please) and they like cigarettes much better than talking to kids. I can't sneak past C.T. Buddy Martin the Mail Man. He sees everything that goes on in the Very Back, away from cash registers and OPEN signs, where shipping trucks back up bringing potting soil. I can't sneak past him, because he has the oldest eyes here. His skin is the color of dusty corner shadows with wrinkles that turn dark skin even darker. He always carries a blue-grey bag worn down by time and mail and calloused hands.

He talks to me every time I walk through the back to the
Coke machine,
but most of the time I can't understand him because
most of his teeth are gone and
his pink tongue slips right past where his teeth should be.
It doesn't matter what you ask him.

He chuckles to himself and answers as always,
"Fine, thank you."

One time I asked my dad, who sits upstairs behind his desk,
why he talks funny.

He said, "because
that's how mailmen talk."

So it's hard to talk to C.T. Buddy Martin unless
you know how to speak mailman.

I get my orange soda (which you are NOT supposed to hop
up stairs with) and
try to talk mailman back to him.

I don't think it comes out quite right, but
C.T. Buddy Martin doesn't seem to care.

He smiles and laughs and grabs his blue-grey mail bag
then says, "Fine, thank you."

What I've Learned at Reverchon

I don't know much about it being "America's pastime," but I spend most of my time at the baseball field and learn a lot from the stuff that goes on here. By the end of the day I'll smell like sweat and pine tar just like my dad, my knees stained brownish-red from the dirt. In the summer, there are at least a couple games a week, and double-headers are the best, though my mom wonders why I want to hang out with those boys all day. Reverchon Ballpark is next to downtown and during night games, if I climb the main stand's splintery wooden seats, I can see the Dallas skyline over the tops of the outfield trees and scoreboard.

My dad sits on an empty white plastic paint bucket turned upside down. I say hi, and he sticks two fingers through the chain-link fence and wiggles mine. This is how ballplayers shake hands through fences. There are two more coaches just like him, each with his own bucket. The coaches sit in a row, their backs to the fence, waiting to shout orders. One of my dad's players, on the Mustangs, misses a pop up to short center. I hate it when that happens. It means he didn't hustle hard enough.

"Come on now! Catch the ball! Hustle a little bit out there!" my dad yells.

When our team's up to bat, the players have to sit in the dugout that smells like an armpit, where boys spit sunflower seeds and the brown juicy gum they are chewing. I sit with them when my dad says it's okay and blow big pink bubbles and toss pieces of dirt.

"Watch out for foul balls," Dad always says, because sometimes they shoot from the bat straight toward the dugout, and even the tough players shrink away from fast flying fouls. I always sit next to number 22, named Richie, who is ten years older than me, but I have a crush on him. He's the best at getting splinters from the stands out of fingers, and his hands are rough and calloused under batting gloves. I like his dark brown hair and skin and that he is strong enough to hit home runs. He tells me he's going to wait

for me to get a little older, and then we're getting married. My dad says Richie can date me when he can date Richie's mom, the pretty blonde who sits behind the dugout with short shorts, fanning herself with a program. This makes Richie joke like he's going to hit my dad with a bat. I think he likes me.

My friend Monique's dad coaches a different team and our favorite games are the ones where they compete. Monique's deep black hair always looks better than mine, which is a blonde mess pulled back in a ponytail. She says her mom fixes all those braids, tying each end with a different colored plastic clip. Sometimes she takes down a few and braids my hair and ties the ends with clips in the shapes of horses or birds.

Under the bleachers on the third base side, we swing from the rusted metal poles with chipped paint, like monkey bars on a playground, seeing who can hang the longest. She's smaller, so she usually wins. We like to play house under the stands and bring our dolls to the game. Sometimes playing dolls is more fun than watching baseball or sitting in the dugout that smells like an armpit or seeing who can spit sunflower seeds the furthest. We pretend we're waiting for our husbands to get done playing ball, to come home and see the kids, smelling like sweat and pine tar just like our dads.

We know we'll end up with ballplayers. They might curse and spit too much and sometimes get in fights, but they're all we've ever known, besides the boys at our school, who still hit the girls they like. I never let the ballplayers see my dolls though; instead, I stuff them in my backpack when the game's over. We are the only ones who know about our secret crushes. She likes Marco, who plays on her dad's team, the Renegades. He is a tall, skinny pitcher with short hair, and sometimes we talk to him when he's warming up in the bullpen.

I like it when Monique's there because the bullies, under the main stand where the snack bar is, don't try to take my money. They are kids from the neighborhood with buzzed dark hair and barely-there mustaches who laugh at us because they're big and we are not. They hide in the shadows by the chain-link fence and wait to scare kids as they walk by. Monique told her older brother one time

that the bullies stole a piece of our strawberry bubble gum, and because he is a really big, big kid, he got it back plus an extra piece of grape.

The jiggly-armed lady in a floral-printed muumuu, who runs the concession stand, never notices the bullies. She is too busy watching telenovelas on the tiny TV, gasping and sometimes blotting her eyes with a tissue, then applying and reapplying candy apple red lipstick that makes her look like a sad clown. One time I asked her what she was watching, and she said in a deep voice, "You're too young to understand, kid. It's about love and romance and things that people don't get in real life." I tell her my fiancé is playing right now and I do know what love is and I have to go now because he's up to bat soon. She laughs a loud, sad clown laugh and tells me to invite her to the wedding. I wonder if Reverchon has ever had a wedding on the field; Monique would have to be my maid of honor.

It's the worst when my little sister has to come to the games. She's only three years younger than me, but I have to baby sit the whole time and she cries a lot. The players sometimes hit foul balls into the stands, which makes the fans cover their heads with their hands, or the parking lot, where we make bets on which car is going to get nailed, extra points if it busts a window. All the kids race for the balls, because the announcer gives us a quarter for each one. I can run faster than most of the kids and the bullies think they're too cool to shag baseballs, so I can sometimes make a dollar or two during a game.

This makes my little sister crazy because I use my quarters to buy bubble gum, and I don't share with her. She runs crying to my dad and makes a scene so the other coaches feel sorry for her, and they all give her a quarter. They really like me better, because I'm old enough to earn the money myself, and I don't cry anymore. Even if I let my sister get one of the fouls first, she would never turn it in because she's scared of the announcer.

Everybody calls him Sport, and he scares my sister because he's mostly deaf, so he has to yell in a gruff voice when he talks. His greasy gray hair, thinning in all the wrong places, goes in twenty different directions, and he always tugs and chews on his goatee.

After my sister read "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," her fear of Sport got worse, because she swore he was like the troll in the story. I like Sport and sometimes sit next to him while he announces the game.

"Hey kid," he says, in a perfect troll voice, then smiles at my sister who runs crying to my dad. I heard my dad say that Sport lived in the concession stand for a while, making his bed next to peanut shells and boxed nachos. I ask him if this is true. "I'm here all the time anyway, what's the difference?" he asks. I wonder if the jiggly-armed lady is in love with Sport, and she's sad because the concession stand isn't big enough for both of them. Instead, she sits alone and watches her telenovelas about love and romance and things that people don't get in real life, with the main stand between the two of them. I think I better not ask him, because love sometimes upsets people.

Sport taps his skinny, pale legs in short coaching shorts against the splintery wood and we watch the game through the green net that separates us from the field. Sport plugs his coffee maker into the electrical outlet at the scorer's table. His favorite mug never leaves his side, any time of day, even when the temperature rises above 100 degrees. He slurps and sips all day long, and tap-taps his foot on the splintery wood.

My dad says don't leave the fenced-in park unless you're shagging balls or have to go to the bathroom, which is worse than the bullies. You have to walk around the fence to the little concrete hut with slivers for windows, next to the last part of the field. The girl's bathroom doesn't even have doors on the stalls or seats on the metal toilets, and the mirrors are as reflective as a cookie sheet. I'm always careful to watch out for the broken glass bottles if I'm wearing flip-flops.

The bathroom hut is outside the ballpark so the people further away playing basketball or lounging next to picnic tables with low-riding trucks playing dancing music can use them too. It's best not to go in if someone else is in there, even though the stalls without doors are separate. When the night games run late, the lady with messy bleached hair, who stands next to the bullpen in short, tight skirts, talks to the players who ignore her.

One time, I saw her in the bathroom. She was a brave lady, to give herself a shot in her arm, in one of the stalls all by herself, without a doctor or anything. I don't think she saw me peeping around the corner of the entrance, so I just went back to the stands and held it for the rest of the game. I wish the guys in the bullpen would be nicer to her and not ignore her all the time. She says she wants to take them out, just like Monique wants to go on a date with Marco. Maybe if the guys were nicer and gave her the things that people don't get in real life, she wouldn't look so sad and sick all the time, wobbling in high heels over brownish-red baseball dirt, skin grayish with dark eye-circles and scratched up arms.

When the game ends, Monique, my sister, and I can go on the field to run the bases and, if we're wearing jeans, slide into home. My dad and the players pack up the equipment, and I tell Richie good game. He hit a home run to bring two runners in and win the game. He hits a lot of home runs. Everyone carries stuff out to the parking lot, where it's loaded up and people sit in lawn chairs and truck beds and tailgate, which means drink beer. I tried my dad's beer once when he asked me to hold it for a second. It tasted like old, rotten iced tea and the players laughed and so did my dad. Since then, I've never tried to sneak sips, even if Richie offers me some.

Sometimes there are fights, especially if the people lounging on the picnic tables come over from the outfield. They don't like ballplayers because they say it was their park first. That's usually as much as I hear because my dad makes us leave. Tonight seems pretty peaceful, no smashed bottles or windows broken by foul balls.

All the guys sit around and spit their brown juicy gum and talk about the game; I kick pebbles next to my sneakers caked with infield dirt. A sporty car pulls up and parks down the row from where we're tailgating. Out comes a lady with her hair pulled up in a ponytail, wearing an old baseball shirt with the number 22 on the front. Some of the players know her and say hi, and she walks behind Richie and hugs him.

"You ready, sweetie?" The players give him a hard time because he's being taken home by this girl, and I can feel my face get

hot like when I fall down chasing a foul ball and don't want to cry in front of the boys.

"Later, kiddo," he says to me, and his lawn chair is soon empty, sporty car speeding away past the scorer's table and the bathroom huts and the guys with basketballs and dancing truck music.

The jiggly-armed lady is wrong. I do understand about love and romance and things that people don't get in real life, and I don't have to watch the telenovelas to find out. It's even here at the ballpark, where mushy things like love aren't supposed to exist, just sweat and pine tar and spit-out sunflower seeds.



Missing Files

The Barn

The ruined barn stares at the road,
which doesn't even notice.
The road is too busy
carrying the weight of travelers
elevated by hills
and brought back down.
They hurry past the splintered wood
subtracting itself from a once sturdy frame.
Sun streams through its gaping holes,
like a moth-eaten rag hung out to dry.
It leaves slender shadows.

A turtle's shell, cracked asymmetrically, lies
on the grassy side of the yellow line,
life unexpectedly shaken from it,
insides carried away by a hungry animal.
It saw the road too closely,
could pick out different colors of individual pebbles,
feel the hot asphalt under it's tough, leathery skin,
but missed the big, bright cars approaching.

Grass surrounds the barn
and spring will bring weeds
that little girls think
are flowers to lace into chains
to wear as crowns
or scatter as wishes with sharp breaths,
seeds spreading like whispers across a playground.

The barn to the child feels like a secret,
like crawling under
the deep, dark porch
where notes and treasures are hidden
or into the ancient attic
to dress up in dust-covered hats.
The child cannot see from her barn
the turtle's shell split to pieces.
The grass and beautiful flowers
grow too high.



The Butter Melts Out of Habit

CARLA'S COFFEE

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM—SATURDAY, EARLY MORNING

Sunlight streams through the window. A woman's arm protrudes from ruffled flowered comforter on queen-size bed. One side of bed is empty. Two medium-size DOGS sleep at foot of the bed. 4 year-old TRENTON in Spiderman pajamas runs into room, climbs on bed, and jumps up and down on empty side.

TRENTON

Wake up, Nana! Nana! Nana! Get up!

CARLA, 50ish, rolls over, pulls comforter over her head. Trenton falls on top of her, tugs at comforter.

TRENTON

Nana? You in d'ere?

CARLA

No.

Trenton giggles. Carla throws comforter aside and grabs him in a bear hug. Trenton squeals.

TRENTON

Nana!

Carla nuzzles her face in Trenton's neck. He squirms to get loose.

CARLA

Trentie, did Poppie make coffee?

TRENTON

Poppie make panny-cakes—

CARLA

I can smell that—

TRENTON

...and bacon. C'mon Nana, get up!

Carla groans, sits up.

CARLA

Nana needs coffee—

Trenton grabs Carla's hand. Carla stands. Dogs jump off bed, run in circles, bark.

CARLA

You guys wannna go out? Hang on....

Trenton jumps off bed, runs in circles with dogs.

CARLA

C'mon, Trentie. Let's go wash your face and hands. They're sticky.

Trenton runs from room. Carla grabs sweat pants off dresser, pulls them on under her nightshirt.

CARLA

Don't touch anything, Trenton...and tell Poppie, Nana wants coffee!

INT. KITCHEN — DAY

ALEXIS, 12, TRAVIS, 9, TIFFANY, 7, and MAKAYLA, 6, sit around breakfast nook, eating. Trenton kneels on bar stool in front of sink, water faucet runs full-force. He plays with soap bubbles. Carla

shuffles in, dogs at her heels.

CARLA

Trentie, get down from there. Where's Poppie?

MAKAYLA

Nana! You're up!

Carla shuts off water, pulls paper towel from hanging roll, hands it to Trenton. Dogs bark at back door.

CARLA

Will someone let the dogs out, please?

Carla swings Trenton from stool, pushes stool aside with foot, grabs coffee mug, lifts coffee pot. She swirls the liquid and coffee grounds barely covering bottom of pot.

CARLA

Great...

Dogs bark at back door. Carla sets coffee pot on counter, turns toward kids.

Didn't anyone hear me?

Carla opens sliding glass door, dogs run out.

Where's dad?

ALEXIS

I dunno.

TRAVIS

Outside.

TIFFANY

Nuh uh. He's in the bathroom.

CARLA

Carla fills coffee pot with water, reaches for coffee can, it's empty.
Shit.

Carla searches cabinets for coffee, finds none.

Travis, run outside and ask Dad if he'll go to the store—

TRAVIS

I'm eatin'—

TIFFANY

He's in the bathroom.

Carla walks over to breakfast nook, snatches piece of bacon, brushes crumbs off bar stool, sits. Dogs scratch at door. Carla gets up, lets them in, sits again.

MAKAYLA

Nana? Can I have more pancakes?

CARLA

Finish what's on your plate first—

MAKAYLA

Poppie said—

CARLA

Where's your Daddy, Makayla?

Trenton climbs on Carla's lap, reaches for bacon, knocks over glass of milk. Carla uprights glass, throws napkins over spill. Dogs lap at milk puddling on floor.

MAKAYLA

Daddy's outside with Poppie—

TIFFANY

Mom! Look—

TRAVIS

Gross, there's milk in her syrup—

TIFFANY

That's it, I'm not eatin'.

Trenton slides off Carla's lap, runs to sliding glass doors, tugs at door handle.

TRENTON

I go outside with Daddy—

CARLA

You get dressed first, Trentie—

Trenton slides door open, runs outside.

ALEXIS

I'll get him, Mom.

Alexis stands.

TRAVIS

No, I'll get him.

Travis runs towards door. Alexis grabs his shirt, pulls him back, walks out open door. Travis follows. Rest of children follow.

CARLA

Get back in here and clean up your mess!

Carla sighs, stares at coffee pot then down at dogs, grabs piece of bacon, feeds dogs. Grabs another piece of bacon, dips it into syrup on plate, eats. Carla turns to dogs.

This would taste better with coffee, don't ya think?

Karen Heywood

DAVE, late 20's, Carla's oldest son, enters.

DAVE

Talkin' to yourself, Mom?

CARLA

Talkin' to whoever will listen—

Dave saunters over to coffee pot. Pours water into coffee maker.

DAVE

Forget what you were doin', Mom?

CARLA

No, we're out of coffee. Will you run to the store for me?

DAVE

Can't, gotta run. Work.

CARLA

It's Saturday—

DAVE

Yeah, overtime. I need it, Mom.

CARLA

And I need a cup of coffee! Where's Dad?

DAVE

I dunno, said he was comin' in. Maybe he's takin' a dump.

Dave kisses top of Carla's head.

Will you make sure Trenton gets dressed sometime today?

CARLA

Yeah...sure....

Dave exits. BOB, 50ish, Carla's husband, enters holding newspaper.

BOB

Would you look at this?

Bob tosses newspaper in front of Carla.

CARLA

What? Mother goes berserk after being denied morning coffee?

BOB

No, damn BushCo is at it again. Look at that smug bastard—

CARLA

Maybe he hasn't had his morning coffee.

BOB

Carla, this is serious. The whole country is going to hell and—

CARLA

Would you mind going to the store?

BOB

What for?

Carla sighs, runs fingers through hair.

CARLA

We're out of coffee—

Karen Heywood

BOB

No we're not, there's another can—

CARLA

No, there's not. I looked.

Bob reaches up in cabinet, pulls out can of coffee, sets it in front of Carla.

BOB

Here ya go.

Carla stands, throws her arms around Bob.

CARLA

My hero!

Carla kisses Bob. Alexis enters with Trenton in arms.

ALEXIS

Eeewwww, that's gross.

Alexis plops Trenton on stool.

Don't move.

BOB

I'm going to finish the gutters.

Bob exits kitchen. Carla opens can of coffee, breathes deep.

CARLA

Aaahhh, coffee—

Alexis holds up Trenton's bare foot.

ALEXIS

Smell this!

Alexis wiggles Trenton's foot.

TRENTON

Poop!

ALEXIS

He stepped in dog poop, Mom, and I'm not cleaning it—

CARLA

Carla slams coffee can on counter.

Will you finish makin' the coffee then while I clean him up?
Four scoops, the water is already in there—

ALEXIS

Can't you do it, Mom? I gotta call—

CARLA

Coffee or poop, take your pick.

TRENTON

Poop, Nana!

Alexis drops Trenton's foot, marches over to counter.

CARLA

Wash your hands first—

ALEXIS

Whatever....

Carla scoops up Trenton, exits kitchen. Alexis scoops coffee into maker, exits kitchen.

INT. BATHROOM—DAY

Carla rinses Trenton's foot off in tub, starts shower.

CARLA

We might as well clean all of you up, Trentie—

TRENTON

Nooooo! No shower, Nana!

CARLA

Yes, shower.

Carla yanks Trenton's pajama top over his head.

CARLA

Go pee, first—

TRENTON

No pee, Nana—

Trenton runs for bathroom door, Carla grabs back of his pajama bottoms, slides them down.

CARLA

Go pee now!

TRENTON

Okay, okay.

INT. KITCHEN—DAY

Carla enters with armful of dirty clothes. A clean and dressed Trenton runs past her, yanks sliding door open.

CARLA

Wait! Shoes—

TRENTON

Trenton stops.

Okay, Nana.

CARLA

Carla throws clothes in laundry room off kitchen, grabs Trenton's shoes.

Here, put these on. And watch out for poop.

Trenton sits on kitchen floor by open back door. Carla drops shoes in front of him.

TRENTON

You help, Nana?

CARLA

You're a big boy. You do it, Trentie.

Carla steps over Trenton, glares at red light on coffee maker.

CARLA

Carla grumbles then yells.

Son—of—a—

Alexis!

Carla flips switch on coffee maker, green light comes on. Liquid gurgles through coffee pot. Alexis enters kitchen with phone to ear.

ALEXIS

Mom, can you drive me over—

CARLA

I'm not going anywhere until I've had my coffee, which, by the way, I would already have if you had turned—

ALEXIS

No, Mom, just listen, Amy says—

CARLA

No, you listen.

Carla points to coffee pot.

I am not doing anything else until I sit down and drink a cup of that coffee.

ALEXIS

Alexis stomps towards back door.

Ugh! I'll just ask Dad...

Alexis trips over Trenton, drops phone. It bounces off Trenton's head and slides across floor. Trenton screams.

CARLA

Trentie! Are you okay?

ALEXIS

Amy! Hold on...

Alexis crawls across floor toward phone. Trenton cries. Carla steps over Alexis, picks up Trenton, runs her hand over the top of his head.

CARLA

You okay, Trentie?

Carla sits with Trenton, wipes his tears with her hand.

TRENTON

He sniffles.

I okay, Nana.

Carla hugs Trenton, sighs.

You okay, Nana?

Carla kisses Trenton's cheek.

CARLA

I'm okay, Trentie.

Carla ties Trenton's shoes, kisses his cheek again.

You go play...and be careful, stay away from poop—

TRENTON

Okay, Nana. Bye, Nana! Wuv you!

CARLA

Love you too, Trentie...love you too.

Trenton runs out the door. Carla pours coffee into mug, raises it to lips.

FADE OUT

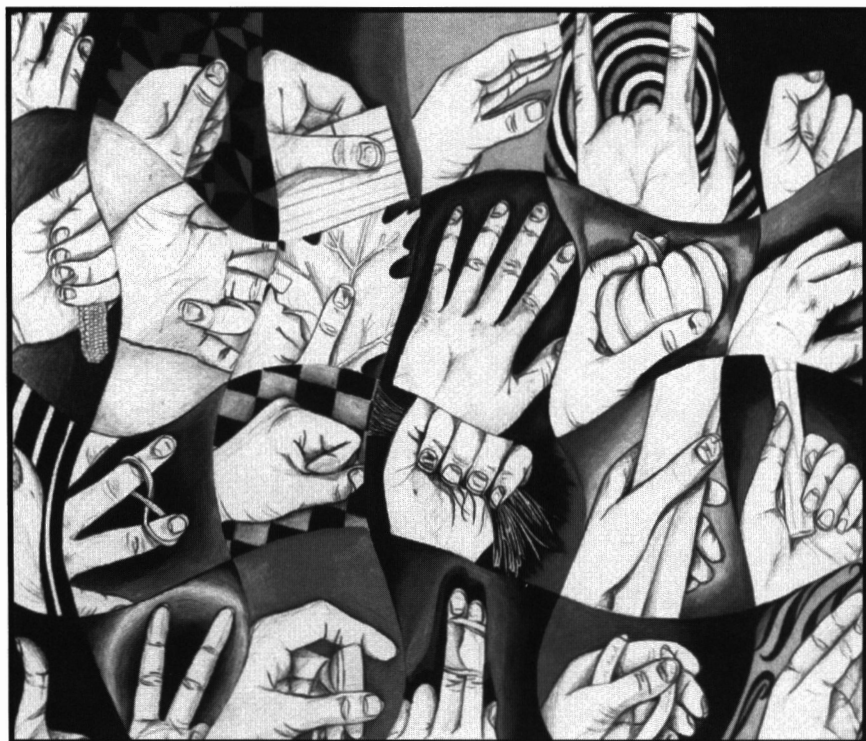
The Secrets She Kept

The other houses on our block beckon
with porch lights and Jack-O-Lantern smiles.
Street lights come on as Mom and I,
armed with flashlights and a plastic container of candy corn,
sit like sentinels on the still warm concrete
of our front porch steps.

Two pirates pause at the end of our driveway.
Mom's flashlight coaxes their small steps up the rutted path.
Laughter rushes across the street
and joins the pirates' whispers.
A confident cowboy asks why our house is so dark.
I squirm and stare
at boots too big for his feet.

"It's Halloween!" Mom says.
"It's our Trick, here's your Treat."
She drops a handful of candy corns
into each open sack and winks at me,
then shines her flashlight along the rutted
path through the knee-high grass,
until laughter reaches
the fine-trimmed lawn next door.
I watch the cowboy ring the doorbell,
I hear the chimes,
and I know.

They have paid their electric bill.



Exploring Sense

An Interview with Gladys Swan

Gladys Swan is a visual artist and author of two novels, *Carnival for the Gods* and *Ghost Dance: A Play of Voices*, and five collections of short fiction, *On the Edge of the Desert*, *Of Memory and Desire*, *Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca?*, *A Visit to Strangers*, *News from the Volcano*. Over tea on Valentines Day, Ashley Prewitt and Alexis Weber discover Gladys Swan has also traveled the world, touched the lives of many artists and writers, run away with the circus, and remained humble throughout all her successes in life. While her advice is to “do it while you are young,” Gladys Swan is an example of what surprises life can offer at any age.

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Alexis Weber: The last time you sat down with the students of Stephens College was last year in October for the opening of your Davis Art Gallery exhibit “Expressions: Painting, Poetry, and Pottery,” which also coincided with your 70th birthday. What has your 70th year been like? How do you feel as an artist and woman in this stage of your life?

Gladys Swan: The exhibit and the literary festival were a wonderful experience for me. It seemed like it preceded a kind of blossoming, really. It just sort of set things in motion, and it's been a very good year for me in that regard. It was wonderful, with Judith Clark, Robert Freedman, all the people at Stephens, and the students who helped out. It was just an extraordinary occasion for me, a high point. I greatly appreciate it.

Weber: It was a great time. I was reading an interview you gave with Kay Bonetti in which you said you experienced quite a culture shock at the age of 10, when you moved from Delaware to the mountains of New Mexico with your family,

and that the memory of this experience, combined with your interest in mythology and folk tales, led you away from “realistic” fiction and toward fiction that contends with more spiritual realities. How has this shaped the way you approach art?

Swan: Well, I think it was such a strong impression that New Mexico really became my imaginative territory. I left at twenty, and I did come back and teach in my twenties for a couple of years in the Northern part of the state. But the early experience made such an impact on me, the landscape, the people, that even though I didn't live there for many years, I kept coming back to it, and it became part of my subject matter. The novels that I have written were certainly influenced by it, and a couple of them are actually set in New Mexico. I keep going back there for one reason or another, and each time I feel it seems to uncover a new layer of something. At first, I was kind of afraid to go back because I had been away for so long and I thought that maybe the new reality of it would interfere with what I was doing as far as my writing was concerned. But the moment I hit the place, it just seemed to connect again with everything that had come in the past and it served to enrich it more. So, I've kept going back, and I find a lot when I do go.

Ashley Prewitt: Do you travel a lot?

Swan: As much as possible. I spent many years in the Maine woods, and that has had a strong influence on my writing. I wrote a few stories that were set in Maine, and it has certainly been a subject for my poetry.

Weber: What brought you here?

Swan: My job at the University of Missouri. My husband and I spent a good many years in Indiana, teaching at a small lib-

## ***An Interview with Gladys Swan***

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eral arts school and then, after my first novel was published, I was offered the job at Mizzou.

Weber: How has teaching affected your life? I read an article about a previous student of yours, Julianna Baggot, author of a volume of poetry and three novels, the most recent being *The Miss America Family* (2003). In the article she says, "I'm much more hands-on and have my students watch me as I go through their work. Gladys Swan, one of my teachers, did that for me. She would say the language isn't tight enough and would go through it taking out words. Watching someone go through my work like that was so informative for me." How do you feel about touching the lives of so many students and being such a role model for so many aspiring artists?

Swan: I was in the Vermont College MFA Program for about fifteen years, and that was a really close connection, because we worked one-on-one. It was also a great learning experience for me. Because I worked for many years in isolation, I developed a sense that my particular problems as a writer must have been unique to me, and so when I started working very closely with people, I began to recognize certain stages that I'd been through that they were also going through. It was almost a kind of laboratory for me, because when I started to recognize the points where they were, I could say, "Well, here's where you are, you might try this and this." It was a great immersion into the whole creative process, and I think I learned as much as my students did in terms of the process and trying to discover the basic laws of one's own creative process and how that works. It was a really interesting time for me, and I hope my students gained from it, but it was really a mutual exchange.

Weber: Do you know when to stop in your own creative process? I mean, do you get to a point in your work when you feel it is complete, or do you feel the need to constantly go back to a piece?

Swan: Sometimes I don't know. I will think it is complete, but then I will get some distance from it and realize that it is not, and I go back into the revision process, which I like very much. I really like revising, because it seems like the first drafts are a kind of mixture; some of it is at the level you might call a "secondary imagination." It really doesn't get to the full potential of the material, and when you go back into it, I think you discover things you didn't see. A novella of mine that was finally published, I had really worked on for years before I got it to the point where I knew it was finished. Then I thought, "This is the last time I'm going to go through this." I thought I had done the job, but each time I went through it, I realized something else about the material, and since it did have a good deal to do with my own experience, I think the more it became an act of imagination, rather than a literal-minded approach to the material, the better it got. So yes, sometimes I just don't know when something is finished.

Weber: Terry Song told me you joined the circus. Was this for a novel?

Swan: My first novel was *Carnival for the Gods*, and I've always had an interest in circuses and carnivals. I was whining to a friend of mine that I never had time to run off and be part of a circus or carnival and I really wanted to write this novel. So, she said, "Well, why don't you invent one?" I thought, well, I could do that, and the book came about mostly from invention and reading. That came out in '86 and I thought I was done with it, but about '94, I was suddenly writing notes for



**Figure**

First Published in *Ellipsis: Literature and Art*

three other books. I wrote two of them. The first had in it a giant and a midget; the second is about a midget. The third novel takes up with another character, who, in the first book, is called "The Kid." I wrote the next two largely from imagination also, and when I got to the last one, I said to myself, "I've been writing all this time really about the circus and I've never been with one first-hand." So, I called up the producer of the Circus Flora in St. Louis, and I told him what I wanted to do. I told him I didn't want to be just a spectator, could he give me something to do. So, he had me come down and meet him, and for their stints that year, I pulled the back curtain for all their performances.

Weber: How exciting!

Swan: Yes, and I met all the people there, like the Flying Walendas, the jugglers, and the Cossak riders. That was a great experience, and they also invited me to go with them to Arizona for their stint out there, so I did that. Their elephant, Flora, for whom the circus is named, was retiring that year after eighteen years. She was given to them as an orphan after her mother was killed by poachers. So, there was a kind of humorous narrative about the story of her life, which was the motif of the circus called "Journey for Flora." There was this spoof of those objecting to animals being in circuses; three people dressed in masks would run in with signs that said "Don't talk to the animals," etc. and I got to be one of those people. So, at each performance, I would run in with my sign and wave it in front of the crowd. Up until that point I had been sort of on the edge of the whole thing, but after that it seemed like I became one of them, because I was part of the show in my own small way. It was very funny, too, because I was standing at the entrance of the tent at one point between those times when we ran in, and I had my mask lifted and my face exposed, and

## ***An Interview with Gladys Swan***

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this little kid about five years old came by, looked at me, and said “Oh, you’re one of the bad people too, aw shucks.”

(lots of laughter).

But the material that I got was really very influential on the book I wrote. None of these have been published. It’s now what I would call the “Carnival Four,” and it really is my major work. It has in it everything I know, so I don’t know what will happen to it, but at any rate, it is written. Also, I had written some poetry way back in the 70s, which didn’t seem to be my particular genre. However, in the late 90s I got out the folder of it and looked at some of the ones I had written and thought, “Well, these aren’t too bad.” So, I sent three poems to the *Sewanee Review*, which published two of them, and that seemed an encouragement to start writing poetry again. I wrote a poem about the circus, which is called “The Dream of Circus,” for which, to my astonishment, they gave me the Tate Prize for Poetry. So, that’s my circus experience.

Prewitt: You said you did this before you wrote the third book in the series. Could you tell a difference in perspective from this book and the others?

Swan: Yes, because, though I wrote a lot about the circus, I really didn’t understand the relationships between people, and the Circus Flora, unlike some circuses, is a real family. The people in there really do seem to care for each other, and there is a lot of interaction among them, partly because a number of them worked together for a period of years. Also, I don’t think I was aware of the kind of dedication circus performers have, and I watched that very closely. They are real artists. Some of them, like the Wallendas, have six or seven generations in their family. At one point, there were one-hun-

dred Wallendas around the world that were engaged in some aspect of circus performance. It is a culture all its own, and I don't think I could have known that, really, without having been a part of it.

Prewitt: So, did you relate to them artistically?

Swan: Yes, I really appreciated that, and I think they genuinely appreciated me as a writer. I gave the poem to the producer's wife, and she really appreciated it. I think there was a mutual appreciation.

Prewitt: I would never think of the circus as an inspiration.

Swan: Sometimes you come across something that speaks to you on a number of levels.

Weber: It's a wonderful feeling to be inspired by something surprising, like a place.

Prewitt: I can't wait to travel.

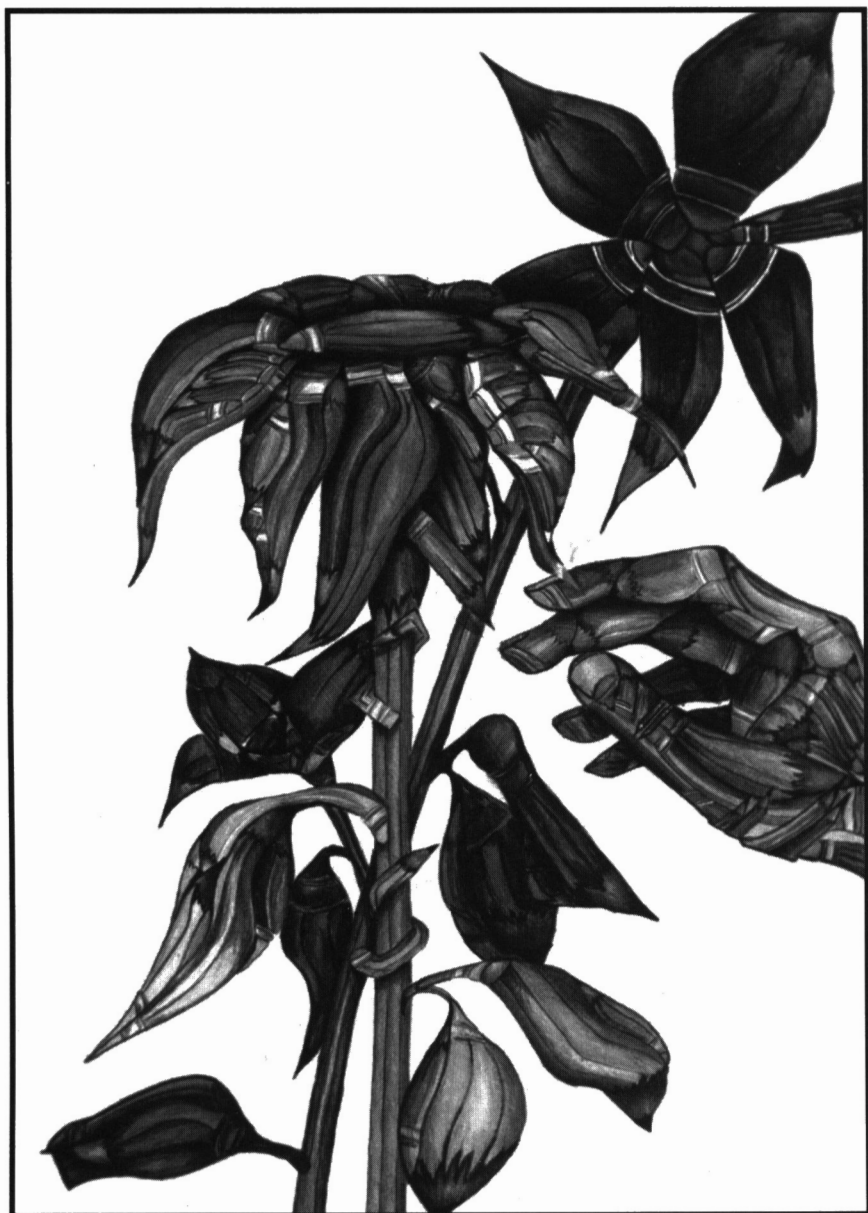
Swan: Do it while you're young, do it all while you are young.

## **Learning to Draw**

“You’ll never see the world again with the same eyes.” So he said—  
shock of white hair, mustache, firm lip—  
standing straight as the rod he used  
to point up the qualities of a drawing:  
(The kids called him Captain Value)  
“The best drawings,” he said, “work  
upon the point of time.”

And who knew what that meant  
in the struggle to take in the swarming facts  
of even the simplest pose  
in the eros of the connected eye?  
A split when I took my eye away  
to the blank sheet. Down she went  
into the funnel of memory,  
into the agony of translation  
between the pupil and the awakened hand.

So there he left me, my hand extended  
as though to reach beyond that sheet,  
take the world into my seeing—reach  
as though through a broken window  
to unlock a door. As if never to take  
the eye away, but to stand  
in an incandescence that flows  
to the fingers, bearing an image,  
beyond both eye and hand.



**Pencil Drawing**

## **The Cat-Knapper**

I did time,  
*hard* time.

Five hours in the big one  
for cat-knapping my ex's  
Siamese.

I hid her away so he could never find her.  
She loves me more  
anyway.

I cat stalk.

I admit.

I peruse every neighborhood,  
neck cranked,  
eyes sharp  
for anything feline.

Got a collar?

Doesn't matter to me.

## **Caterpillar, My Sage**

“I don’t think he tells me the truth.”  
I meet with Wooly Bear by Stephens Lake.  
She crawls over my fingertips,  
waving her little legs,  
“Hello,”  
her kiss  
left by tiny feet.

Wooly pauses,  
searches me with black eyes.  
I pet her head.  
“My boyfriend – What should I do about him?”

Instantly, she faints,  
curls her body  
into an “O.”

“Are you all right?” I ask,  
but she’s a fur ball.

“Oh. You don’t approve either.” I poke.  
“You’re right.”

Like magic,  
she unrolls.  
My caterpillar, my sage.  
Over a four-leaf clover  
she recovers  
in the palm of my hand.  
I agree with her happy munching.  
“Yes, I’ll leave him alone.”

## **Old Friend**

Characters:

Mark – 23 year old male

Vet – 35 year old male

Wolfy – 17 year old Labrador Retriever

Setting:

The scene is in an apartment that is small but well-furnished and comfortable. There is plenty of room behind and around the couch. Characters are dressed casually, even the veterinarian. The vet wears a stethoscope about his neck. He has a black bag with syringe and a bottle of blue liquid. Mark and Vet are at Mark's apartment preparing to put Mark's dog, Wolfy, to sleep.

(LIGHTS up in the living room.)

**MARK**

(MARK turns to VET with hands on hips. He wipes his hands on his thighs. Crosses his arms over his chest and creeps forward to WOLFY, who lies on the floor.)

Hey, Wolfy.

(MARK rubs the ruff on the dog's neck.)

How are you doing, huh, boy?

**VET**

(Squeezes MARK'S shoulder.)

Anytime you're ready, Mark. Take a moment if you need to.

MARK

(MARK wipes tears from cheek and mouth.)

I wish this were easier, buddy.

(Stooping, MARK presses his face against WOLFY'S)

I...

(Gasps and coughs. Muffled voice.)

I love you, Wolfy.

(Scoops WOLFY into his arms and holds him, pacing the floor.)

VET

Are you ready, Mark?

(MARK sobs and cries out, but nods frequently and widely exaggerated.)

The first shot will make him sleepy. The second shot will actually put Wolfy to sleep. Are you okay with this? Do you need me to go over anything we talked about?

(MARK shakes his head, face pale. Gulps.)

Would you like to sit?

(MARK holds WOLFY in his arms. VET administers first shot and prepares the second syringe.)

MARK

(Jerking WOLFY away and shouting.)

Wait! NO! Oh, my God. What did you do? Undo it! Undo it!

VET

(Outstretches hands.)

Calm down, Mark. It's time-

MARK

Undo it, now! Undo it!

VET

It's time to let Wolfy go, Mark. He lived a wonderful life. He knew how much you liked him, Mark. Let him go.

MARK

He's just sleeping, right?

VET

Mark, it's time—

MARK

No, no! Please!

VET

Wolfy has had enough. He can't suffer like this anymore.

MARK

Let's just do this some other time, okay? I promise I'll let him go some other time. I just don't feel right about this. Please?

VET

We've been through this. Wolfy can barely swallow his food. He's dying and he's in pain. You know he's not happy....

MARK

Please, just give me some more time. I'm not ready yet.

VET

(VET takes a broad step toward MARK.)

You've been a great owner, really. There comes a time when we have to let our pets go, despite what we want. Wolfy would be so grateful—

MARK

(MARK backs up.)

Don't. I'm serious. Let's do this tomorrow. I'll be ready—

VET

Today Mark, not tomorrow.

(VET lunges unexpectedly towards MARK. MARK jumps back and runs with WOLFY in his arms. VET runs after him, around and around the couch five times as they shout at each other. VET runs with syringe in hand.)

MARK

He's sleeping! Why can't we just let him wake up and we'll...I can still feed him myself...I don't mind feeding him by hand—

VET

Put the damn dog down!

MARK

NO!

(VET tackles MARK and they both fall down on top of WOLFY who lets out a "R-r-r-f.")

WOLFY!

(VET fumbles with syringe but MARK knocks it out of VET'S hand. Syringe rolls across floor. VET tries to pull MARK off WOLFY.)

VET

Damn it, Mark!

## **Heather Mulikey**

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MARK

(MARK elbows VET and flies after syringe. MARK holds syringe to his own neck.)

I'll do it!

VET

(Sits back on the floor, panting.)

Calm down, Mark.

MARK

(Shaking head.)

Back off!

VET

(VET holds hands up, palms out. He shakes his head.)

You don't want to do this. Hand me the syringe.

MARK

(MARK refuses, shaking head.)

Get away from Wolfy.

VET

(Shakes his head.)

I can't do that.

MARK

(Mark grips syringe. Aims it closer to neck.)

I'll do it!

VET

No, you won't, Mark. You're just really upset. It's okay to be upset.

MARK

All I want is another day.

VET

Okay, fine. Have as much time as you need. Give me the syringe.

MARK

I need more time. Wolfy needs more time.

(MARK looks at WOLFY.)

I can still feed him. I can still help him—

VET

(Nods.)

I'll give you the time you need, just don't do this.

MARK

(Looks at VET.)

He just needs some more time. We'll do it later, okay?

(Looks at WOLFY, still sleeping.)

Okay, Wolfy? We just need some more time.

VET

You got it. Just give me the syringe.

MARK

(Nods. Lowers syringe.)

I'm sorry, Doctor. Here.

(MARK laughs – wipes eyes. Hands syringe to VET.)

Thanks, Doctor. I just...whew. This is really hard.

VET

I know it is, Mark.

(VET takes the syringe.)

MARK

Thanks. I'm so sorry about this. I thought I was ready—

VET

(Turns to WOLFY with syringe.)

I understand.

MARK

Thanks, a lot.

VET

(Makes sudden move toward WOLFY with syringe.)

It's time, Wolfy.

MARK

Stop! I said no!

(MARK jerks forward, outstretching his arm. He lands on top of WOLFY. The syringe needle sticks him in the arm. VET stares at MARK with his mouth wide open.)

VET

Mark.

(MARK rises up onto his knees, wobbles and then falls onto his side. WOLFY exhales and twitches. MARK trembles, locks up, and then dies. MARK'S eyes are wide open.)

Mark?

(VET stares, then puts syringe aside. VET removes a bottle of blue liquid from his bag. VET fills syringe

and looks at WOLFY. He sighs and shrugs.)

I tried to tell him, Wolfy.

(Pets WOLFY'S fur.)

He just didn't understand your pain, but, I do. He's not going to keep you in pain any longer. I'm here now.

(VET rubs and kisses WOLFY.)

I promised you I wouldn't let it happen. He didn't even think about you.

(Sits. Pulls WOLFY onto his lap. Pets him. Says to MARK'S dead body.)

What's Wolfy want, Mark? To be spoon fed? Would you like to be spoon fed, huh?

(Shakes his head and looks at WOLFY.)

It's time to give you peace.

(Gives second shot.)

Goodbye, old friend.

(WOLFY dies. VET places all his stuff back into his bag. He rises, carrying WOLFY. VET goes to the door and opens it. Pauses to look back at MARK.)

I'm not leaving without my patient.

(VET locks door behind him and leaves.)

THE END

## **Imbalance**

I am inconsistent.

I look for love in places that are not My Beloved.

The mistakes I have made could unravel yarn from a spool for days and then find the energy to keep going.

One day I hope to say a word  
and then,  
on the day after,  
say the same word  
and it won't contradict  
the day before.

I want something to remain constant,  
the color of the sky,  
or, maybe,  
the temperature of the water each morning I shower.  
Or a person.  
That would be even better.

## **With a Capital “H”**

My Spanish teacher once corrected me when I said people in our town spoke Panamanian. In Panama, Oklahoma we speak Tote-A-Poke: named after the largest standing landmark, the local gas station. I'm driving down I-540 with my eyes centered on my rearview mirror at the barren fading acres. I can still see the I.G.A. and Tote-A-Poke. I imagine them crying out for me to turn around and come back. No way, I laugh, turn up the radio, and press the accelerator. No more chicken houses on windy afternoons. No more loose cows after a storm roughing up our yard with hoof prints and cow patties.

I grew up in a singlewide tan trailer on a thirteen acre strip. Before childhood ended, it was Home with a capital “H.” Home smelled like biscuits and gravy, puppies, dry dog food, and sweet oats. Home was where Dad called me “Little Booger,” and Jerimy threatened to lock me outside after dark if I told Mom he drove her El Camino into the ditch. (Everyone knows grizzly bears stalked our trailer, drooling for tattle-tale little sisters). Home was where Mom taught us to train German Shepherd puppies to be guard dogs, to ride horses twice our height, and to be happy with what we had.

I remember yelling at the TV, “I want that!” whether it was a commercial for steak knives or remote control cars. I never got a remote control car or a set of steak knives, but I did get my nickname “Ashley Kay Want-Want Emmert.” Back then, I could occupy myself for hours while Mom worked at the school cafeteria. She never really noticed, until her boss mentioned that when I quietly colored at the end of a lunch table or played make-believe by myself, it was the sign of a happy child, and that made her proud.

One summer, Jerimy and I built a tree house in the backyard with wood steps that were too tall for me and a floor big enough for three people to sit on. Jerimy, or “Kermit,” so called because of his imitations of the frog puppet and the way he climbed trees, must have been adopted from a family of monkeys. He could swing down branches, perform a somersault back-flip, and artfully land

on his feet while black pea-pods showered around him like roses from adoring fans. He was also “The Human Garbage Disposal,” because he ate everyone else’s leftovers. Once, I even caught him eating a bologna sandwich in his sleep.

Sometimes we had a hard time getting to school. Buck Creek Road flooded yearly, so the bus had to take the route through Bokoshe to pick up everyone on my street, causing us to miss first and part of second hour. We also lived in tornado alley. Fortunately, Great-grandma Mimi’s house had a storm cellar next door. We couldn’t hear the sirens so far out of town. When Channel 40/29 posted a tornado warning rolling into LeFlore County, we all congregated with a radio, blankets, flashlights, emergency snacks, and the family pets down in the dank dark. I imagined the leathery skin of snakes slithering around my ankles and the squeak of ravenous rats staring at me with red eyes. Eventually, the tornado would pass without touching down, and we could go back to the light.

But our valley has changed since then. What was once a vast forest is now a field for cattle and a barren railroad track. Jeremy and I would take our friends and the dogs exploring this area and then end the day eating bologna sandwiches or roasting hot dogs by the creek. We declared the funny seashell bend our special spot for spying on rabbits and storing large animal bones we joked were human. The woods seemed endless and often impassable.

One afternoon, I got stuck in a wall of bramble bushes while the German Shepherds sat on their haunches laughing at me. Another time, while avoiding a similar prickly situation, I slipped between the twine of an old barbwire fence, hung with a half-rusted “No Trespassing” sign and discovered a little cottage with a tree swing and an old Ford, but no road leading to it. I knew there weren’t any children from my school there. I wondered why someone would have a tree swing without any children. I imagined a little girl with red freckles who must have been homeschooled. At the end of the day, Mom lodged her fingers between her lips and released a whip-lash whistle. The dogs raced back through the woods ahead of me. Their barks told Mom we were coming Home.

Adventuring wasn’t always safe. One year, a mountain lion hiding in the woods across the street kept me inside for days. It

had wandered down from the mountain, its healthy roars much too close. This made the shortest or quickest errand too risky, so I would sit with my forehead glued to the front window looking for an ear or tail of this mysterious creature. I kept imagining the fur, teeth, and claws crashing through the window to snag me. Some time after that, a bull escaped his owner and took up residence in our little neck of the woods. Rumor was, a boy happened upon the bull and was either killed or badly maimed. As far as Mom knew, for two years we never went into the woods until the owner retrieved the bull.

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Driving home for the Holidays is an exhausting, freeing experience. It's just under eight hours, about six if I haul ass. Hotwire needs to last me until I pay off my student loans, so on this trip I set a goal of not surpassing 75. Okay, maybe 85? I have a few choice papers to work on over break, but that's it. No 0600 brain washing seminars with the U.S. Government, no drowning at swim practice, and no 3 a.m. large pepperoni pizza pig-a-thons over the latest 10-15 page research paper. Daydreaming helps me cope with driving long distances, and I can't help thinking about my life in Missouri.

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I'm walking back to my dorm, and it's starting to freeze again in Missouri. I don't like it. Sure, I enjoy bundling up with some hot cocoa, but it doesn't just get cold in Missouri, it gets below 30 without snowing, and it's bipolar. One minute it is bright and perky, then the wind is beating Hotwire in the flanks and lightning fury is raining down. Some damage is done, and then it's all kiss and make up. By comparison, Oklahoma weather is slow and lazy, and I feel when a storm is coming. Storms rarely visit Panama. Once a month, one glides in, stays a few days then waves goodbye. In the summer, everything is washed in a golden pixie-dust shimmer. My skin, with its olive undertone, feels and smells like golden sunshine.

I stop at the last rest area for another 39 miles and punch the Dr. Pepper button on the soda machine. Even after long breaks, it's difficult not to sit straight up in bed and go right into body builders at 0530, because of some Physical Training flashback.

It's bright and early on a Tuesday morning; actually, the sun still hasn't come up. A hundred faceless men and women stand in perfect rows. The males have the same buzzed haircut and the females the same swooped bun. The black hole of individuality is the Physical Training Uniforms. Matching gray sweats were made by penitentiary inmates serving at least one life sentence. Each one of this vast legion looks like they were hauled by their shirts out of bed in the middle of the night. Their eyes are vacantly dull, but there isn't a single stray hair or unshaven face. They stare blankly ahead as the twilight blinks above the darkened field lights. The weekly ritual begins.

"At my command!" echoes far beyond Stankowski Field. "Left Haze!" Colony turns left. "At double-arm interval, dress right, dress!" and 244 arms go up, fingers touching with heads popped at a 45-degree angle to the right.

The Wing is dressed. After stretching our limbs, the commands become more difficult. The leanest and meanest soak his/her PTUs in sweat. No one utters a word, nothing more than "Permission to recover," and some recovery seems necessary for those throwing up in the grass or grabbing their knees to catch some air. I lean against the fence with one hand and take short drinks from a blue Air Force water bottle with the other. The fact that we do this at 0600, when it's still dark and my body should still be sleeping, is the only reason it works. The commands just don't register as my body mechanically performs them. I imagine prostitutes and suicide cults experience similar fidelity.

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After my first semester, I learned very quickly that yes, I still want out of Oklahoma. It's still rejuvenating to go home for a backward glance now and then. Panama is an ideal place to be from or maybe retire to, but I think I might try Ireland instead. It's my third

year, and I know I'm benefiting from both worlds. The crazy, hectic life of a college student is character-building and all that jazz, but Home is simple. Home is where people work all day then go home and grill, tossing the hotdogs that fell in the charcoal to the neighbor's dogs.

After a visit to the place Panama has turned into, I take another look in my rearview mirror. Most of the trees are gone now, replaced by chicken houses, pig farms, or unused cattle pastures. The tree branches form a cathedral overhead as I swing Hotwire around the three miles of twists and turns that make up Buck Creek. Glass-stained murals of fall yellow, orange, red, and brown shelter me. Oklahoma is still a simple quartz crystal in my coal-bedded, hectic life. When I drive through Columbia, the mix of city and woodland keeps me centered. A little bit of Home for a little bit of success. Home keeps me going, even as I keep driving away from it.



Cowgirl Alter-Ego

Redneck Hero

He'll apologize for his truck breaking down
while he's parked on your flower bed,
picking up that heap of crap he swears
he'll turn into a motorcycle
someday soon.

But he'll never apologize for who he is.
He'll remember to take off that ratty old hat,
when he walks into your grandma's kitchen
to say howdy over a strong cup of coffee
before fixing her water heater.

But don't expect him to cut the hair
that falls out from underneath.

He'll sit in a tree stand when it's fifteen below
and take perfect aim at a twelve point trophy buck.
He'll miss the shot on purpose when his little girl whispers,
"Look, it's Bambi's Daddy."

But he won't miss if he's protecting his family.
He'll wear a stiff black suit and uncomfortable silk tie
to the fancy restaurant his mother-in-law wanted to see.
He might even eat the tiny portions of fish bait
he paid a week's wages for with a smile,
because his wife's happy.

But no way can they serve anything
that holds a candle to his barbeque.

They told him he was going to die and he said,
"Yeah, right."

They told him he wasn't going to walk and he said,
"Watch me."

We danced barefoot in the kitchen last night and he said,
"I love you."

That's my red neck hero.

Ride

It's supposed to be a warning,
this bright yellow sign with twin serpentine curves,
eleven miles of treacherous road
down the east grade of Palomar Mountain.
But it tells me heaven is only 4.2 miles ahead.

My shoulders bend into the steady current of wind,
leather clad hands clutch tight on grips,
and I feel the smooth hum of the road drawn up through her
tires,
like eager lips on virgin flesh.
3.6 miles to ecstasy.

A surge of speed into the long sweeping right,
stroking hallowed ground with my knee.
Boots bite into pegs, thighs wrapping steel loins,
and the world holds its breath.
2.3 miles from rapture.

We pitch left into the hairpin curve,
sunlight flashes across my tinted visor,
and I lay on the throttle.
That's trust, desire.
.8 miles from euphoria.

Pulling free of sheltering oaks we scream into the open,
machine—rider—moment: one beautiful union.

Catfish Bait

He swung his arm in a perfect arc.
The treble hook, caked with catfish bait,
met the back of my head
instead of the lake.
His arm was still casting the line.

The day before, I confronted him.
His words, tossed out carelessly, hurt me,
made me feel worthless.
He always told me to be honest.
I was.
His words of denial made me ashamed.
They were not the words I wanted.
He couldn't say, "I'm sorry."

The line pulled on my hair,
snagged my scalp.
Rushing over, he looked at the hook.
Gently,
he pulled the tangled mass apart,
checking for blood.
I was not hurt.
He kept saying, "I'm sorry."



Boats

Gutting

Wooden fingers, numb from hours grasping the rod,
find brief familiarity in my father's own
aching hands as he clasps them over mine.
Dirt creates a barrier between the pink and white
of our fingernails, like smiles
grinning out from under blackened gums.

The cold carves into my joints as I hold the wrangling mass
of scales and fins and lidless marble eyes.
My knife in its gut cuts a jagged mouth,
breathing in air to replace
whatever it is that gave this thing life.
Goosebumps and dead fish flesh vanish in the abrasive
caress of
blood slipping down my palm, wrist, brushing my sleeve.
Plunk, plunk, plunk on the boat's white-washed boards,
it's mine, and the fish's, cooling against clammy flesh
and rigid morning breath
wrapping like river reed.

If I grasp the edge of the little boat,
smearing the day's only warmth along the splintered
wood smelling of stale lake water, frigid rain drops
and coppery fish guts,
silt from the bank, coating boots that stood in placid shallows
as we pushed off;
if I tip myself over, breath in the murk, unfathomable,
the algae waltzing star shine in obscure shafts of sunlight,
human consciousness would slip away,
fleeting, water across my slick silver sides.

My other half languishes at the bucket's bottom,
as I treat where the knife slipped.
Using stiff, living fingers that feel so much like Death,
my father cleans the knife, before reaching for his rod.



Graves

Cesky Detstvi

Memories of Childhood

I have this vivid memory of a horse chestnut in my hand, a maroon red, shiny and hard against my thumb, slick when wet after the autumn rains. They littered the ground below the largest tree in my backyard, some hundred and eighty years old and still growing knobbed fingers toward the cloudy Czech sky. In the back of the three story house covered in white plaster was an acre of land. It seemed so much larger then, when, as a ten-year-old, I lingered among the weed-choked grasses.

It was a real backyard, with a wooden fence running between large, white posts. On them, my brother and I climbed up and over the fence, or balanced atop them in childish acrobatic feats, or scooped snow off their flat tops, or sat and waited, listening for the ice cream truck, every Sunday in the summer. From the posts we leapt, pockets of change jingling, chasing him down the street, calling in a strange tongue for him to stop. That was what the posts were for. These guardians were meant to keep us in but in truth were the gates that let us out.

They surrounded this yard, filled with wonder. Choked with what some might consider weeds, bushes overgrown, scraggily trees, and unkempt flowerbeds, it was nature grown wild and all the more beautiful for it. There were pear trees, pine trees, walnuts, and foliage that bloomed little yellow flowers, like delicate ballerinas, and poisoned crimson berries, smearing scarlet and green between unsuspecting children's hands.

Peppermint ringed the old gazebo, shaded under the pines. And for all my mother's insistence we brunch there on Sundays, the bees and spider webs always drove us away. The place had a wet, musty smell, and the shadows flickering with hornets across the beams were more than enough to discourage its use as a clubhouse. The dusty husks of insects littered the tiled floor, and the prickly bushes reached between the rail to scratch and scrape.

Growing up, I had many nightmares of that shaded gazebo, and the two wooden storage houses located just behind. From there, the fence gave way to chicken wire where our yard brushed

up against our neighbor's. If that was not enough to discourage further exploration, stories of ticks falling from the trees and landing in your hair or down your shirt were enough to send both myself and my little brother running.

The pear trees to the southeast and the walnut to the southwest, cornerstones of our yard as much as the posts, provided a strange bounty. We shared the harvest with the bees and crawling insects alike; and rarely did pears boast perfectly preserved meat. They tended to bruise or split open when they hit the ground and walnuts not gathered rotted with the leaves. It was always a quiet joy to see strangers walking by pick from the limbs hanging over the fence. So much fruit was there, we left most of it to the feathered neighbors who roosted in the park just down the road from our home.

But for all the other landmarks in this place, it was the horse chestnut tree that remains the center of both yard and memories. Seeds almost inedible and dangerous to an unsuspecting bare foot, the horse chestnut tree should have been of only vague interest. The tree stood at the back of the house, shaded our rooms come noon sun, and proved a challenge to climb. I don't recall either my brother or I ever succeeding. We might have once hung a swing in its great branches, an old wooden board suspended by thick ropes, not chains. But it wasn't so much the tree that interested us. Rather, it was the chestnuts, the large seeds encased in green, spiked shells, falling towards the end of summer. They captivated us, these shiny, smooth "reds" as we called them.

We gathered them as the season started to shift, raked the leaves, shook the branches, just to gather as many as possible. Nimble fingers reached between the protective spikes and pulled the casing apart, revealing a strangely heart-shaped seed within. One side was smooth, with traces of ebony entwined with maroon. The other rose like hills and valleys, with a strange eye staring at us from where the seed rested in our cupped hands.

And these reds, we hoarded them, for no reason either of us could determine. Even now, I have no answer to why the chestnuts called to us as they did. Perhaps it seemed to us as though they should have been of some value, those beautiful, smooth nuts of

rusted red, as though they were the currency used by fairies, or nature's own coin. We gathered them by the hundreds each autumn, running them through our hands, in wonder at their touch against our skin.

We stuffed the reds in holes. We hid them in clandestine places in the yard, as though someone might threaten our secret stash. We filled large coolers in the garage or cardboard boxes and dragged them inside. It was a game, I guess, trying to see how many we could collect. And the two of us giggled, thinking we had in our possession some treasure, its real worth known only to my brother and I. Filling our pockets, we snuck the reds inside; we hid them in drawers, cabinets, buckets, and baskets throughout the house. We were squirrels, burying our nuts and forgetting their location the next day. Doubtless, the housekeeper and our mother eventually discovered them and removed each rotting pile of reds to the compost pile. Perhaps, had our obsession been for the walnuts, we might have eaten our hoarded gold. But horse chestnuts must be grilled, and even then they are tough and tasteless.

No, our delight was the strange-looking reds, solidified blood encased in barbs and calling in great numbers to children, who before this had known only potting soil, planted grass and sweet-smelling pines. This was, in so short a glance, childhood, the brief lives we live before we become burdened with so much that as kids we see as tedious and dull. Sometimes, these years of fated freedom are not quite so innocent or simple as we may have wished. But they are always remembered with a strange clairvoyance of moments and objects, rather than events or the passing of time. They are the moments that shape us, that we cling to, whether for their beauty or their terror.

That horse chestnut tree with its peculiar seeds, represented for us the new and unusual world in which we had found ourselves. And we hoarded those reds much like we gathered and cherished each new memory, each new experience, as all children do. How strange, this place with so much more to learn and discover. Such wonder there was, on that land in that beautiful country. I tucked away each memory, safe somewhere within. And occasionally, I take them out and run my hands over their smooth surfaces,

remembering that tree, the yard, the posts, that time, reveling in the touch against my palm, those autumn mornings and others like them.



Memories: I stood in a village square. The Austrian mountains rose up on all sides, a dark forest green in the arid afternoon sun. My bare feet were warm in the red dust and gravel underfoot, but my hands were like ice, as the water rushed over them, through my fingers. Tiny rivulets ran down my wrists, my arms, trailing gooseflesh. I remember thinking only that the water was cold, sweet, and glorious.

How to describe such a place as this? The wooden houses, built hundreds of years ago of cedar and oak. The railings draped in lilac and Black-eyed Susans and daisies, and long ribbons of blue and pink, as though they were some festive summer maypole. The wood piles, stacked by the door, the homespun sheets, and goose-feathered pillows. Awakened by the sound of cows coming down from the hills before the sun had risen, their bells clanging together on their way to the barn. Milkmaids in their aprons and the nuns in their wimples, and there, just round the bend, the centuries old stone church, its garden of herbs and weeds lovingly tended. Bright, blinding sunlight baked the clay as the children ran from the bakery to lessons.

All of this faded into the background. The sound of mothers calling and children laughing, of the animals in the fields. Even the birds' song was but a low murmur. There was just the gurgling of the water. It rushed out of the iron pipe, cascaded over my hands before diving into the chest-high stone fountain, where horses came to drink in the summer heat. The water from the pipe was pure and sweet and so very cold it hurt to drink. How icy it was, despite the warmth of the sun, and how far it had traveled, down the mountain in a great river, down from the snow that still covered the summits. Cupping my hands under the fall, I filled them again and again, even though my fingertips had gone numb. Raising the water to my lips I slurped, trying to catch every last drop, tasting so very, very

cold, with bits of sand that crunched between my teeth.

A clear memory of cold water from mountain peaks; and the stone fountain, sides slimy yet rough; and the bright heat of the day, with the smell of animal and dust floating on the air.



“*Ryba! Koupiti ryba!*” The men called to the passers-by, hollering with good-natured insults as they struggled with the massive carp in the tanks. “Fish!” they yelled in Czech as people gathered around the fisherman, faces eager and filled with cheer lacking in their eyes most of the year. “Fish for sale! A fish for your table this holiday season!”

The Old Town Square was crowded this day, as cold winter winds snuck through the corridors and streets of Prague. They entwined and turned until one reached the square, an open, cobblestone plaza in which great iron statues of past heroes retain their pious stature. The pigeons alighted on their cast-iron heads and watched for bread crumbs that escaped the vendor’s careful vigilance. Ringed by white, yellow and pink plaster apartments, this is the center of the historic district. Here stands the old gothic church, the green and gold Catholic cathedral, and the infamous Astronomical Clock of Prague.

It is said the beauty of the clock is such that, upon its completion in the 15th century, the officials who had commissioned its building had the eyes of the designer carved out, so never again could he create something to rival the clock’s beauty and mathematical architecture. Whether this is true or not, nothing like it has ever been seen again. Its many faces tell the phases of the moon, the sun, the zodiac, and the modern months. Constructed in the old gothic style, it includes the statues of the four fates of man: greed, vanity, lust, and death, the latter represented by a skeleton that pulls a rope every hour, supposedly sounding the bells. Just above the faces, before the clock gives way to the stone tower, two doors open and the twelve apostles march across the balcony, ingenious mechanics for the 15th century.

“Can we watch the clock strike?”

“In a few minutes, sweetie. It’s not quite time yet.” My mother resisted my tugging her hand.

“I want to see the skeleton sound the bells!” I exclaimed, already heading for the clock across the square. But there was still a quarter-hour left before the skeleton struck the hour and the apostles wandered the balconies, so I wandered back to my mother and the fisherman selling the large carp from the Valtava River.

As a child, there was something wonderful about the clock, about watching that skeleton ring the bells, even if it was just gears and wires. Any trip downtown required a detour to the Town Square, to be there when the hour passed. In the silence of the square that day, the sounding of the bells echoed against the stone walls, matching my heartbeat, like it was inside *me*.

“Ryba!” A fisherman called, as we gathered around the massive tanks at the corner of the square. They were about chest high, and two meters across, filled to the brim with water and wriggling, flapping fish. “Carp! Carp for your table!”

“How much?” An old woman asked, back bent and hands shaking in the cold, but eyes alight.

“A fair price for you, babushka. Do you want it alive?” Sometimes, they gave the fish to the customers in plastic bags filled with water, so as to keep the carp alive. They took it home and filled their bathtubs, where the fish resided, fattened on a diet of good corn and bread, till Christmas morning. Then the fish was killed and baked, stuffed with all means of vegetables and placed upon the table for the most bountiful and succulent meal of the year.

The customers chose a fish from all the wriggling masses in the tank, then the fisherman grabbed them by the tails and hauled them to the cleaving table. The fish put up a fight, and it took two men to hold it down. The rise and fall of the hammer left tail and head intact, so the wife could cook it whole. The blood and guts were washed off the table and into the gutter with great buckets of water.

As brutal as it sounds, there was something simple and easy about this community ritual, something reassuring. We never bought a carp to take home and cook during the holiday season. The annual appearance of the fisherman in the square was enough

of a tradition for us, as welcome as the skeleton striking the hour or the freezing of the Valtava in winter.



Once, during the first weeks of spring, we went to stay the weekend with a family in the countryside. They lived in a thatch-roofed cottage in a tiny local village. Sleeping in the loft, my brother and I woke in the morning to the sunlight pouring in through the white lace curtains and the bells on the mailman's bicycle. He rode out from the nearest town, several miles away, to deliver the mail to our hosts and the three other cottages in the village.

It was safe in the country. But we never wandered far. Where was there to go? We were surrounded by grazing fields and vineyards. The horizon offered hills, dotted with trees, for as far as a child's curious eye could see.

The village offered the amusement of standing at the vine-covered wooden fence, staring at the great stone crosses in the cemetery. We gaped, whispering to each other in wonder at the dates on the graves. Could people truly have lived all those years ago? The village bell, copper burnished a sickly green after so many years, leaned against the fence like a weary soldier, tired after so many years of keeping watch, its molding rope hanging forlorn in eerie silence. The cottages, bursting with roses and honeysuckles, sat complacently round an old well, run dry.

In the evenings, we sat round the kitchen table, away from the blazing earthen oven, our backs to the cool tile walls painted blue and white, like china. We ate ham and cheese and hot buns, smeared in honey. The hostess went out in the falling dusk of evening and gathered greens and onions and turnips and carrots from her garden, like the farmer's wife in Rapunzel. Washing them in the sink, cleaning the dirt clinging to the roots, she placed them in a wooden bowl and brought them to the table, laughing. Owning only so many forks and spoons, they served with their hands, filling our plates with fresh vegetables. We ate them in the gathering darkness, enjoying the fresh food, good wine, and fine company.

"To health!" They raised their glasses, laughing.

“Can I have some wine, too?”

“Sure. Give Jamie a glass. Just a little. Okay, sweetie?”

“Yep, I got it.” I held the cup carefully and raised it with the others, grinning, feeling all grown up.

“To health,” we said, reaching across the table to softly tap our glasses together, then drank.

My brother and I were too young to understand when the adults said this was the good life. But we laughed when they laughed and toasted when they toasted and left them hours later for bed. My parents and their friends sat in the living room, bundled in well-worn blankets around a fire, drinking cider and brandy till even the embers closed their burning eyes.

We knelt in the garden, the afternoon sun warm on our backs. Hands immersed in cool, wet soil, digging out the tiny roots to make good teas and soups. Plants we had thought only weeds, like the ones that grew in our backyard.

There was an old woman, riddled with arthritis and symptoms of old age, who used to come to our home. She was a babushka, a respected grandmother of the community, whom I knew as a child. Our backyard grew wild flowers and herbs below the pear trees and along the fence posts. She had seen them as she climbed our hill to the grocery store and, upon encountering my mother, asked kindly through a mixture of Czech and hand signs if she might be allowed to pick them for her tea.

She can only be described as such: a woman suffering from age, but clinging to life with a childlike joy, missing in our own elderly. Her hair was naught but blond wisps underneath a paling handkerchief tied round her sagging face. Her hands and face were thin and her skin taut against bone, sallow and yellowed with age spots. I remember her hands shook often, but her eyes were a clear, bright blue that always startled me with how alive they were. She wore long dresses and shawls, as was the state of dress during the wars. Her name escapes me, but not her smile.

She was kind and gentle, simple words to describe her simple, pleasant nature. My mother sent me out to pick herbs with her, as her back was bent, knees weak, fingers knotted. She tried to teach me Czech, to explain the purpose behind each flower and

stalk. Looking back, I wish I had spent more time with this woman, learning the language, learning of herbs and the sweet-smelling earth, and of her story. These things, seemingly so simple and yet so beautiful, were her gift. But at fourteen, I was young and impatient. I helped her to pick the flowers, nodded at her lessons, and listened with only half an ear.

“Vysluni,” she said, pointing to the sun.

“Vysluni,” I replied, before bending down for another flower.

“Okvetni listek, dite.” The petals only, child. Leave the rest to grow again.

“Ano, babushka.”

I still think of her and the garden at the cottage, from time to time, when I use the same herbs to make tea. There's a jar sitting in one of my mother's cabinets, filled with the leaves and flowers of one of the babushka's herbs, labeled *Bailinki Caî*. A tea for colds, coughs and sore throats, with a bitter taste sweetened with honey. I drink it and think of little old women who lost their husbands to war, of gardens and village squares, of childhood and sunny days in a field of flowers.

I have but these memories to cling to, nothing more now than the smell of autumn leaves on a chill day or the pitter-patter of rain on tin. They bring back fleeting moments of childhood in a strange land. And there are moments when deep in thought I pause to run my thumb over the smooth, slick side of a red, my hand empty, but the longing giving the memories shape. I can't help but grin, knowing somewhere within that old house or on those grounds, a pile of reds still lies tucked away, undiscovered, forgotten. They're dried out now, their sleek sides cracked and blackened, drying up, turning to dust. But my memories aren't like that.

They grow, as though I planted a red within me before I left. And the water from the fountain provides for it, the stories told by the Czech people nourish it. Within me grows a mighty tree. It may not live so long as the one from which it fell, but that doesn't matter. It isn't about living forever, it's about living in the moments we are given, and cherishing the best of them.

Ano, babushka. I will not forget.

I Settle Now For Memories

i.

We share a single
bowl of soup.
My fever
will not break.
You eat the bits of vegetables
I can not swallow
and feed me the broth.
Your steady breaths cool
each spoonful you bring
to my lips. In between helpings
you wipe my runny nose
with your thick
flannel sleeve.

ii.

I am twelve, on the other end of a long-
distance call.
You put a revolver
to your temple and pull
the trigger sometime before noon.
I tear down my picture of you, spit
on your memory.
No matter what that note said,
I do not forgive you.
I will not make it that easy
for you to leave.

iii.

I put both feet into one
of your tall work boots.

The slick rubber
extends to my hips.

A camera clicks,
the flash, blinding.

I shut my eyes
and fall hard.

My head hits the edge
of the antique end table.

It is because you laugh so loudly
that I do not cry.



Baldwin Abyss

C Contributors' Notes

Janeka Ausmus is a sophomore majoring in creative writing from Centralia, MO. She has been published in three anthologies of poetry and the *Harbinger*, 2005. Her hobbies are photography, poetry, and traveling. She hopes to one day publish chapbooks of her poetry and work for a literary magazine.

Elisa Cash is majoring in fashion design. Her true passion is art in all forms. As a senior fashion design major, she has been able to express her artistic ability through her designs.

Jamie L. Dea is a junior majoring in creative writing. Though a U.S. citizen, she was raised overseas in Prague and Taiwan. Her life there has greatly influenced her writing, through which she hopes to share her cultural experiences with others. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and spends her free time helping out in the English office at Stephens or participating in on- and off-campus activities.

Bethany Dean is a senior majoring in liberal arts studies from Dallas, TX. Since high school, she has written in numerous styles, including fiction, poetry, and journalism, and has won several UIL awards and a Dallas Stars Journalism contest.

Crystal DeShazo is a junior majoring in interior design from Ashland, MO. Painting is something that takes her somewhere else. When she's there, she feels she can do anything.

Ashley Kay Emmert is a junior majoring in creative writing from the small southern town of Panama, OK. She is now paying her own way through a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree while participating as a member of the swim team, Air Force ROTC, Wood Hall, and Sigma Tau Delta.

Hannah Vonder Haar is a junior majoring in elementary education from Wooldridge, MO. She went to a very small school with only thirteen kids in her graduating class. She has played piano for about twelve years, participated for five years in the Lyceum Theatre in Arrow Rock, and sung at Carnegie Hall with Stephens College Velvetones. She also worked as a student service director at Woodcrest Chapel and at Clovers Natural Market.

Karen Heywood is a junior majoring in creative writing from Sturgeon, MO. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and has presented her work at the national conference. She is the mother of six, nana of three, and enjoys writing poems and screenplays. Her articles have appeared in *Inside Columbia*.

Krysten Hill is a sophomore majoring in creative writing from Kansas City, Missouri. She is a new Sigma Tau Delta member and a two-time poetry slam winner at the Cherry Street Artisan.

Patricia Jones is a junior majoring in creative writing from San Diego, CA. She is a mother of three, intending to pursue graduate studies in English literature. She enjoys active participation in Sigma Tau Delta and presents her writing at conferences across the U.S. She has had work published in *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, and *Motorcycle Daily*. She was also nominated for a poetry award with AWP.

Ivy E. Lynch is a junior from Rocheport, MO majoring in fashion communications with an emphasis in filming. She spent two years at Webster University studying film before returning to Columbia to study fashion. She loves photography and filming as a way to pass the time. She also loves Stephens, spending time with friends, and kite flying.

Heather Mulikey is a senior majoring in creative writing from St. Louis, MO. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and loves writing about people and their problems, lives, love, and quirky behavior.

Ashley Prewitt is a senior majoring in creative writing from Columbia, MO. She will travel the vast spaces of the world. You will only be able to find her in her work.

Emily Sharp is a senior double majoring in art and creative writing from Dallas, TX. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, and this is her fourth year contributing or working for *Harbinger*. She can't wait until May when she will retire to her little island off of Honduras, with more art and writing to come.

Gladys Swan's new collection of short fiction, *A Garden Amid Fires*, will be published this Fall by BkMk Press. In 2007, she will be a Guest Writer at the Vermont Studio Center, where she has also received fellowships for residencies in painting.

Annalee Tomsicek is a freshman majoring in human child development.

Alexis Weber is a creative writing major, poetry co-editor of *Harbinger*, and a member of Sigma Tau Delta. She dedicates her work in this publication to her home on the Chesapeake Bay and a small city on the coast of South Carolina.

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