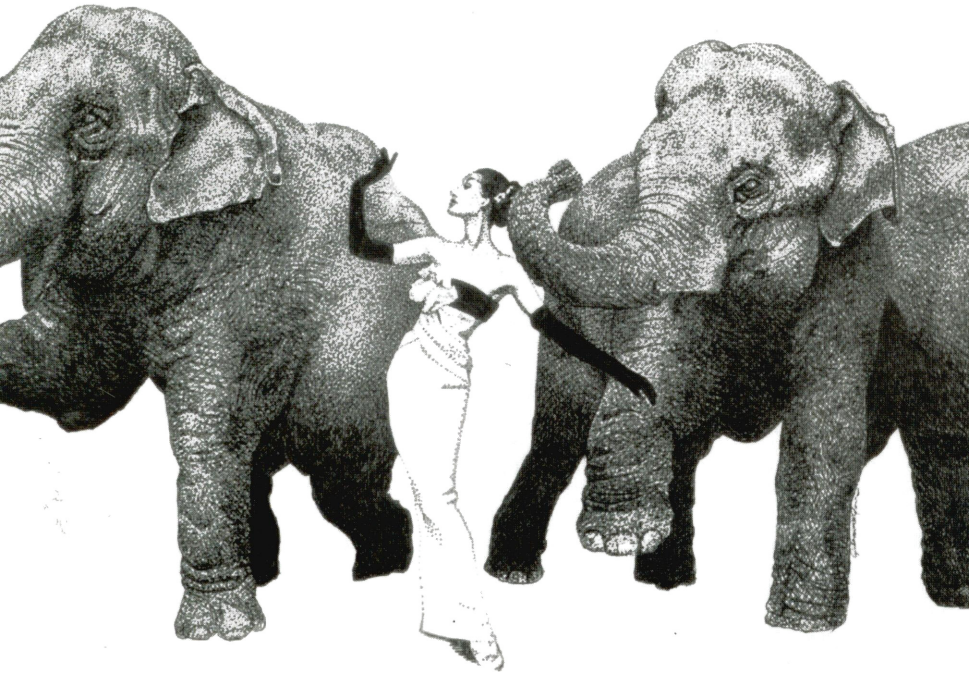


2004



HARBINGER

Stephens College

*a person or
thing*

that comes before

*to announce or
give an indication*

of what follows

Harbinger
2004

Published by the students of Stephens College

Harbinger 2004

Editor-in-Chief

Holly Herlinger

Poetry Editors

Emily Davis-Fletcher

Keturah Prescott

Associate Poetry Editors

Karmen Bennett

Willow Ruth

Emily Sharp

Prose Editor

Emily Coleman

Associate Prose Editors

Lauren Beaver

Lindsay O'Day

Jacklyn Wolfe

Graphic Design Editor

Jillianne Jons

Advisor

Terry Song

Cover Art:

by Jillianne Jons

Harbinger is a student-edited and designed magazine published each spring since 1980. Correspondence should be addressed to:

Harbinger,

Box 2034, Stephens

College, Columbia,

Missouri 65215.

Copyright 2004 by
Harbinger, a
publication of Stephens
College.

- 9 On Listening to Femininity *Erica Parker*
- 10 Upon Hearing Leslie
Adrienne Miller Read *Shaen Pogue*
- 11 The Philosopher and the Artist *Emily Sharp*
- 13 Please Stop Haunting
My Dreams . . . *Candra Kennedy*
- 14 In Houston *Holly Herlinger*
- 16 Reflections After Genesis:
Adam's Apple *Shaen Pogue*
- 17 On Halloween Night *Willow Ruth*
- 18 Cami *Emily Sharp*
- 19 Sister *Emily Davis-Fletcher*
- 20 I'll Jump *Krysta Rowe*
- 21 Dissimilar Reflection *Jacklyn Wolfe*
- 29 Sexy Lady *Jessica Derr*
- 30 Digested Image *Emily Coleman*
- 32 The Best Kind of S *Candra Kennedy*
- 33 Money for the Cootchie *Holly Herlinger*
- 34 Pirate Boy *Candra Kennedy*
- 35 Smile *Lindsey Lischka*
- 36 Elementary Education *Ashley Honeysett*
- 44 Bridge Club *Leslie Adrienne Miller*
- 46 Angel Jewell *Alice Friman*
- 47 Snow *Alice Friman*
- 48 the catalpa trees *Keturah Prescott*
- 50 Forlorn *Lindsey Lischka*
- 51 Mortality *Shaen Pogue*
- 52 The Danger of Classic *Emily Coleman*
- 54 Untitled *Heather Koonse*
- 55 Ringing Up *Lindsay O'Day*
- 63 Goodnight *Emily Sharp*
- 64 sex is *Keturah Prescott*
- 66 Disembodiment *Erica Parker*
- 68 African *Ruby Tapp*
- 69 Not on my watch *Erica Parker*
- 73 Waiting for Kind Words
and Cigarettes *Candra Kennedy*

Acknowledgements

English and Creative Writing Faculty:

Judith Clark
Tina Parke-Sutherland
Kris Somerville
Terry Song

We also extend special thanks to:

Sharon Van Deren
Dr. James Terry
Mary Cruise and
General Printing Services

*whose time and talents were immeasurably
important to the completion
of this issue.*

From the Editor

This year's inaugural edition of *Harbinger* not only celebrates the written word but the arrival of a new president. Under the guidance of President Wendy Libby, Stephens College heads in a new, hopeful direction. In turn, this year's *Harbinger* embraces the past, present, and future of the College and the women who learn here.

Representing our past is the poet Leslie Adrienne Miller, Stephens alum and former faculty, who gave the magazine her poem, "Bridge Club." From the present, we have two poems, "Snow" and "Angel Jewell," by one of this year's visiting writers, Alice Friman. Representing the future are the student writers, poets, and photographers in this year's inaugural edition. We, the student artists of Stephens, truly are harbingers. Our art speaks of the women we are becoming.

Harbinger joins with President Libby and the rest of the Stephens community to celebrate a vision of our college touching women's lives for another 171 years.

Enjoy *Harbinger* 2004.

Holly Herlinger

On Listening to Femininity

I will face my vulnerability,
I think, as I sink
my thumbnail deep
into moist skin, begin
peeling, ripping, tearing off the outer layer,
squeezing, sliding into orange flesh,
the pulp : : exploding bombs
juice : : thin blood
rushing into my hands, leaving them sticky.

I dig for the seed, forefinger wiggling toward thumb,
or else I enter the entire section
into my mouth,
slowly kissing the seed out from its minefield, into the hunger.
Saliva glands eager, tongue elated
with electric taste. Wild animals
swallow the seeds of fruit, fertilizing new life,
but I am in bed letting the stripped pores
of the orange peel fall
onto my bare chest,
spitting the seeds down onto my nakedness.

Exposed, I can hear her.
She tells me:
I am trying to forgive
my own warfare.

Upon Hearing Leslie Adrienne Miller Read

A scorpion is trapped in your poem, you say,
bound in spider web,
suspended from tail like glowing rosary beads.

Those beads laminate into moons for me,
reflect the starkness of floor tile, the uneven
half-circles of pale flesh on my palms,
the windows covered with slices of white blinds.

You make me want to write, draw rhythm
from your lines. I want to breathe in your words like
steam, secondhand smoke from your red
scorpion burning.

You make me want to tell
of the scarlet jailed one
who has crept onto this page,
speak of this delicate sting
we call
envy and
awe.

The Philosopher and the Artist

The moon hides behind twisted branches while
American, Irish, and German rock
compete through apartment doorframes.
We all sit in the bed of the pickup:
the high school drop-out, eyes half-open,
the balding gay man who just lost his lover,
three abandoned brothers,
the nurse who tells new mothers their babies are dead.

The Philosopher sits on the tailgate.
He does not merely speak,
he asserts.
The ethereal lines of sound
fall from his mouth
between exhaled cigarette smoke
to the gravel backyard.
It doesn't matter what is said.
This is *his* voice.

The Artist is silent.
No matter how he speaks,
it will not be the same language.
Instead, he lays a hand on the lover-less
and turns his head toward
authenticity: yards away,
scattered paint
cans and tubes
next to the puddle for rinsing brushes.
This is *his* voice.

Miniature red and blue chairs,
stolen from a grade school,
hold drying artwork.
Beside un-stretched canvas and
empty market crates,

a cockroach races across the brick wall and
disappears beneath the Artist's door,
leading to house and gallery.

His only furniture,
a bed and stacks of books for shelves.
Art needs space and
covers every inch of wall and ceiling.
Life is created here,
scattered here,
in the same reckless abandon
that seeds are spilled before planned,
one fashioned from nothing.
Paint drips to canvas.
Finally, Life-created stares back.

Still the Philosopher
drones on about books
they all should have read.
His body is covered in tattoos that
he insists have some deep meaning,
so deep only permanent ink could express,
impress upon the passengers of this
lonely red pickup.
Its driver is passed out below the bed,
overalls rising and falling,
restless snoring,
apnea waiting to strike.



"Please Stop Haunting My Dreams.
I Miss You Enough When I'm Awake"

In Houston

Only a few planets shine in the black-blue sky,
most stars being too small,
too far away to penetrate thick city nights.
Sometimes I can spot
Big Dipper,
Orion's Belt,
but the Seven Sisters retreat
behind the glazed glass of pollution.

On overcast nights,
the glaring maze of Houston's
streets, parking lots, skyscrapers
tint the drooping clouds
yellow-orange, blue, bright white.
Low-flying helicopters,
strobes and *tock, tock, tock*
of Life Flight (who got shot tonight?) bounce back
to earth brighter, louder than usual.
Ambulance lights flash in windows,
sirens echo off buildings.
Who are they saving? Who's already dead?

Sometimes the heat is unbearable.
I drive through slum neighborhoods
where AC is too expensive and whole families gather
on front porches, on rusted green
furniture bought from the Salvation Army
or dragged from the dumpster 'round back.
A knock on a neighbor's door is more than courtesy.
It's to check that the elderly have not
gone to Heaven in the heat.

On the corner of Westheimer and Fondren,
a dirty vagrant at my car window:
Will work for food.
I'm patriotic and penniless.
I'm a quadriplegic veteran.

Saw him walking to Chick-Fil-A
two days later, sporting a new cardboard sign
around his neck, nearly asked him,
Did you call the Vatican to report your miracle?

Outside Crossroads,
the “gay coffee bar slash bookstore,”
party-goers cruise past, heading to the Richmond Strip
to dance, drink, drive, then play with guns.
They hoot and holler out windows
at the well-dressed “fags” and “dykes”
at outdoor café tables.
On the sidewalk, all have a book
about lesbianism,
world peace,
and a finger ready to shoot the bird . . .
I imagine coffee never tasted so deviant.

Constant road construction forces me to detour
between warehouses on the edge of downtown.
Shady men in leather jackets stalk alone,
hustling, hoping to be hustled.
They’ve got the bucks, the dope.

Each night, the sliver moon coughs.
Pollution’s so thick it’s hard to tell
if the heavens exist.
Next time I see the “quadriplegic,” I’ll ask him
what he did to deserve a miracle
and would he kindly pray for us all?

Reflections After Genesis: Adam's Apple

Eve's bite slid down easily,
sugar-coated by a seraph with blue
diamonds down its spine who stood
upright and looked her in the eye.

But Adam! Adam choked on his, felt
the tentative sliver of white flesh in
his throat grow larger, more cumbersome,
more human every breath.

He tried to cry *zebra*, whisper
antelope, the way he had been taught,
but the words suspended
from his tonsils like a tiny partial moon.

That's where Knowledge damned up,
a pool of saliva breaking down
that first bite, bit by bit,
as the creature slid away,
satisfied and rhombus-backed in the dirt.

That's when Adam caught his breath,
called out *serpent*.

On Halloween Night

the Psychedelic Suicidal Doll
sits in the corner
smoking Camels
despite her slit wrists.

She cries a single
blood
tear.

Slutty Cops, Nurses, and French Maids
wearing no more than thongs, bubble wrap,
gun belts, Dominatrix whips,
and pushed-up tits,

pass off flesh as costume.

Beneath metallic blue eyelashes,
the Doll wishes
the ratio reversed:

five Pimps to
every
one
Ho.



"Cami"

Sister

You compromise happiness
lying with a warm body in a flooded basement,
spoilng our plans:
a new bedroom every night
in a castle
with a moat of clouds
shaped like alligators chasing
their tails
on fire.

Alone together, we reveal our sex by
fanning the black feathers of our eyelashes,
exert self-control with fishing line
we strung from the ceiling to every joint.

Romans beg for us
with roses for tongues,
thorns planted in their throats.
We frown triumphantly, two arches over
heartless
romantics.

Our life is the furthest point
from love
because the point of life
is to stay alive
and lovers are gorgeous killers
and you,
Sister, have a weakness

for perfect
murderers.

I'll Jump

How would you feel
if I fell,
just went soaring
face-first onto
the cold pavement
and lay there,
wet ground seeping into me
until I was swollen
with water, unable to move,
nothing between my back
and the clouds
but your shadow
splayed across me
as you look up,
your shirt flapping in the wind.
It's a long way down.

Dissimilar Reflection

“Okay, it’s your turn,” I say, hastily wiping my hair from my eyes. Ribbons of chlorinated water roll from the crown of my head to my brow. The dribbles continue to the tip of my nose where they dangle momentarily before plopping back into the vastness of the swimming pool. Tonya has no droplets of water on her face. When emerging from the water, she simultaneously blows delicate bubbles from her nose and tilts her head back so that her hair washes away from her face. Then she uses her hands like windshield wipers on her eyes and forehead to thwart the lingering beads of water.

“No, you go again. I can’t ever think of anything funny to say,” she pleads, and I’m forced by her flattery to quickly think of some repartee before immersing my head again.

Under the water, I open my eyes and her hair, a light brown she calls “honey-kissed chestnut,” is a floating frame for her elfish face.

“Josh Smith is a big butt hole.” The words escape my mouth in large bubbles that rocket to the surface of the water, and Josh Smith’s status as a butt hole is ingeniously hilarious in my eleven-year-old mind.

“What? WHAT?” she gargles, and I start to laugh, a precarious feat when submerged in the deep end. Tonya laughs, too. We lock hands and vigorously kick our way to the surface, gasping for air and laughing hysterically as we struggle to seize the slippery blue tile bordering the pool.

“I can’t pay attention to what you’re saying because I keep laughing at the faces you make,” she says as she inches her way to the ladder, giggling as she climbs out of the crystalline water. I extend my arms over my head and arch into a full back dive, forcing air from my nose throughout the entire revolution. When I return to the surface, Tonya is standing poolside above me, wringing the water from her hair. The excess dribbles and splashes around me. “Let’s lay out for awhile.”

I agree, and we head across the sweltering concrete to our towels. I park myself on the ground, face first into *Flowers in the Attic*. Tonya’s protocol for tanning requires supplementary efforts. She begins by straightening her towel on the lounge chair beside me. She tosses her head forward as she bends at the waist, allowing all of her hair to dangle toward the ground, and then begins a series of twists and tucks

of her tresses. When she returns to an upright position, her honey-kissed hair is a crown upon her head.

She lowers herself onto the chair in a deliberate position that allows for optimum sun exposure. She begins carefully slathering her legs and waist with her special tanning concoction, taking extraordinary care to avoid getting any gunk on her ruffled yellow bikini. According to her, the potion—a mixture of baby oil and iodine—must be periodically recapped and vigorously shaken to break up and redistribute the floating blobs. This entire process takes several minutes, and when she is finally finished, I tell her that I'm ready to get back in the water. She ignores me, realizing that I'm just trying to spite her, and reclines in the chair where she closes her eyes.

I have suspended my reading to observe this process in disgust. I toss my partially waterlogged book at my feet and roll my eyes. I think to myself as I rest my head on the warm terry cloth beneath me, *She is always like this.*



Tonya was my best friend before I knew the meaning of the term. We were both charges in the care of Mrs. Dorothy George. Tonya was always the first to get to Dorothy's house. When I arrived at Dorothy's, Tonya was always snoozing serenely on the couch, entwined in her pink thermal blanket with the satin trim which rarely strayed far from her in those days.

It seemed to me that Tonya was Dorothy's favorite. My title at Dorothy's was Most Often in Trouble. In her kitchen, Dorothy kept a 1950s high chair that had long ago lost its tray. This chair was where misbehaving children were sent to do time for indiscretions. I logged a number of hours in the "bad chair" over the years. Tonya never sat in the bad chair.

"Jacklyn!" Dorothy's voice bellowed from the bathroom, and I jumped, startled from my daydream. I was doing time in the bad chair when she yelled, so I knew that I couldn't have done anything wrong. I leapt from my seat and ran to the bathroom, hoping that perhaps she needed my assistance in some important task.

When I pushed open the door, I saw Dorothy standing there, a handful of soaked washcloths in her grasp. I looked at her, not knowing what to say.

"You are a trouble maker, Jackee Marceau. I'm calling your mom."

"What did I do?" I really didn't know this time.

“Don’t play that game with me, Miss Priss. Go back to the chair and sit there until I say you can get down.” She began arranging the washcloths on the shower curtain rod to facilitate their drying. I turned, speechless, and headed back to my holding cell atop the wooden chair.

“What did you do this time?” Tonya asked. She was loitering near the bad chair, eyes wide with expectation. One arm was resting on the seat of the chair, and the other was positioned smartly on her hip.

“I didn’t do anything. Really, I promise,” I said as I brushed past her and climbed up onto the seat. She looked at me, closed her eyes, and softly shook her head back and forth, casting her seven-year-old judgement.

“You say that every time.” She turned on her heel and pranced from the kitchen. I slumped in the bad chair and fought off the urge to cry.

• • •

Despite our lack of similarities, Tonya and I managed to remain close. As we grew, we developed separate interests and friends. In Tonya’s spare time, she went to modeling clinics and learned how to walk, pose, turn, pose and then walk again. In my spare time, I went to coffee houses and learned how to roll joints and be generally angst-ridden. Nevertheless, somehow, she was always around. Neither one of us did anything to foster or develop our friendship; it just existed on its own—a living creature that neither of us could control or exterminate.

One weekend during my sophomore year of high school, my mom and my sister went out of town for the weekend. Tonya was on her way to my house to bunk with me for the duration. She arrived dragging her two duffle bags and a garment bag so tightly packed that the zipper was bursting open. She looked expectantly at me as I answered the door.

“Dude, they’re only going to be gone for three days. What’s all this shit?” I asked, but she pushed her way past me.

“I thought we could put on different outfits and take pictures of ourselves. I brought the camera.” She immediately dropped her bags and began rummaging through them, looking for the camera.

I considered this. Three days of playing dress-up and documenting the entire pursuit on film. “I thought we could have a party and get drunk,” I finally said.

Without hesitation she retorted, “You mean we could have a party

and *you* can get drunk. Okay. But tonight, just us. I need some more pictures of myself to send in with pageant entry forms. I even have the black and white film." She plucked the Nikon from her bag and held it up, smiling.

"Okay," I said, "but if you show anyone any pictures of me, ever, I'll kick your ass."

"Deal."

A few hours later, I found myself bedecked in a hot pink silk shirt with mesh sleeves and a black skirt, looking like a fly girl from *In Living Color*. In the same ensemble Tonya had appeared comfortable and carefree while I took her picture. She leaned back, carefully balancing herself on the stool we placed in front of my fireplace. She kicked her left leg out in front of her and smiled. I clicked the shutter.

The outfit gave me none of this confidence. My typical high school accoutrement consisted of flannel, T-shirts featuring *The Clash* or *The Ramones*, jeans that frayed at the waist and legs, and Dr. Martens lace-ups. I stood before the fireplace backdrop, shoulders hunched forward, not smiling.

"Don't look so sullen," Tonya huffed. "You listen to *The Doors* too much."

Because I had agreed to humiliate myself in such a way, I thought that Tonya owed me due compensation. Therefore, I invited everyone I knew to the party the following night, including my latest potential love interest, a brawny Italian boy named Vinny. Vinny was a vegetarian, an aspiring musician, and a self-proclaimed male feminist. Tonya would hate him, and the prospect of the two of them arguing over the objectification of women in beauty pageants was enough to incite my eagerness.

"Is that him?" Tonya asked. She wore the same attire I photographed her wearing the night before. I had returned to my customary clothing, jeans and an *Alf* shirt I purchased in the little boys section of the Salvation Army. The party had been getting pretty rowdy in the last hour. James Kennedy had jumped from my couch and landed on my mother's marble coffee table, cracking two of the smoky gray tiles.

"Yeah, that's him. Don't you think he's cute?" I said as I picked up dusty broken marble from the floor and chucked it into a brown paper bag.

"He *is* cute. Wow, who would've thought you'd go out with a guy like that?" she said. I rolled my eyes and told her to shut up.

Vinny crossed the room and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. "You look really pretty. Is this your friend?"

"My oldest friend. This is Tonya. Tonya, this is Vinny."

She grabbed his hand and shook it gently. "Jackee didn't tell me you were so hot." She tossed her tresses over her shoulder and tilted her head to the side, smiling. Every one of her porcelain-veneered teeth was visible. My face grew hot with aggravation. Vinny smiled and chuckled, seeming indifferent to her. He slid his arm across the small of my back and tucked the tips of his fingers into the waistband of my pants.

"Maybe she doesn't think I'm hot," he retorted, and I laughed uncomfortably. I opened my mouth to try to smooth the awkwardness of the situation but was interrupted by Aaron Slusher, a friend from my acting class with a penchant for spectacle.

"Jackee, you've got to do something. Brian Neil just poured his beer over Laurie Shapiro's head. Now she's looking for a butcher knife to cut off his dick."

"I'll be right back," I told them, feeling guilty about leaving Tonya to fend for herself with Vinny. I didn't believe he would attack her outright, but if a socio-political debate did ensue, she would be annihilated and embarrassed in front of all of these people. I didn't agree with almost anything she said, but I still didn't want her to be humiliated.

After playing referee to the attempted castration in the kitchen and nursemaid to the freshman who was vomiting on my mother's oriental rug in the foyer, I set out to find Tonya and Vinny, hoping that they had not killed one another. I was heading down the rear hallway; a few people had retreated to my back deck to play quarters. Andrea Whiteley stopped me before I could reach the end of the hall.

"Jackee, do you have a T-shirt I can borrow?" she implored, looking distraught. "Stephanie just spilled some green crap all over me, and I smell like a drunken Jolly Rancher."

"Jesus," I snapped and quickly apologized. "Sorry, it's not you. Everyone just sucks right now." I turned back toward my bedroom and opened the door, planning to select the first clean shirt I could recover from the clothing graveyard on my bedroom floor. I clicked on the light to find Tonya and Vinny, partially dressed, about to digest one another.

"Fuck," he said and quickly leapt from my bed to his feet, and then

stopped and stared at me, dumbfounded. Andrea was still standing behind me. I looked at her, and she started to back away, no longer concerned with the intoxication level of her shirt. I looked at Vinny and opened the door wider to allow his exit. He stopped in the doorway and began to fumble an apology. I looked away and told him to leave. He did.

Tonya was still attempting to collect herself.

"Jackee . . . I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean . . ." I clicked off the light and shut the door, leaving her alone in the dark.

When I'd finally eliminated the last guest and collected all of the cans and bottles, I went outside and found Tonya sitting in one of the patio chairs, curled up in a blanket.

"Do you hate me?" she asked.

There was a long pause. "No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because, I can't fucking hate you. If I didn't have you around, who would I make fun of?" She smiled.

"I really am sorry. I don't know why I did that."

"It doesn't matter," I said, though I wasn't sure that I meant it. "He's stupid anyway." I squashed the hatred that was brewing inside. I hated that I would never be as pretty as Tonya, as righteous as Tonya, as endearing as Tonya. But as much as I wanted to, I couldn't hate Tonya.

There was a frozen silence. I leaned over to fish around in the flower box, my secret hiding place, for a plastic sandwich bag containing half a pack of Marlboro Lights and a Bic. Tonya spoke as I lit the cigarette and drew on it until the ember glowed. I slipped into the patio chair next to her.

"Do you remember that time you got in trouble for soaking all of Dorothy's washcloths?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I didn't do that, you know."

"I know. I did it," she confessed.

"WHAT?" I was stunned. It was impossible. Tonya never did anything wrong, especially not at Dorothy's.

She continued with her confession. "I filled one of her mouth rinse cups with water and tucked it in with the towels, so when she grabbed one from the shelf the water would spill all over."

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I don't know. I thought it would be funny."

"You bitch," I said. "You're calling her tomorrow and telling her."

Tonya began to laugh. "Are you serious? She doesn't even remember that."

I laughed. "I don't give a fuck. I remember it. You are going to fucking call her. God, why didn't you say anything while I was sitting in the bad chair?"

"I didn't want to get in trouble."

She looked at me, a sheepish smile stretching across her face.

We laughed and opened the last beer that was wading in the melted ice of the Styrofoam cooler.

• • •

My junior year of high school, I was an officer in Student Council. That was the same year that Tonya won the Miss Teen Missouri Pageant and was preparing for the national competition.

Connie Collins, the Student Council advisor, addressed the officers in a special meeting. "Tonya Bolinger is headed to the national Miss Teen America Pageant, and she's asked if the Student Council wants to donate any money for her expenses."

"NO. I hate her," said Kelly Howard. She tossed her reddish-brown locks behind her shoulder and sneered.

"Yeah, tell her we'll throw pennies at her. She can keep all the change she can catch," Kristy Jones added.

More malicious and snide comments followed. "Pretentious bitch. Snob. Whore."

I sat quietly, not knowing how to react. They were right. Yet, a righteous indignation began to brew and boil over inside me. Sure, Tonya was a pretentious bitch, but she was MY pretentious bitch. She was a snob. She wasn't exactly a whore, but if she were, she'd have been MY whore.

"Shut up," I yelled. "You guys are so transparent. Just because you've never done anything nearly as big as this, doesn't mean you have to be so obviously jealous. I say we give her the money. At least she's not sitting around here every weekend, looking for the next townie to screw."

The group quieted and unanimously voted in favor of donating funds to Tonya's pageant expenses. Word got back to Tonya about the outburst. After school, she threw her backpack into the backseat of my car and slid into the passenger seat. Her cheeks were streaked with

mascara highways that ended at her jaw line. I didn't ask, but I imagined that she'd spent the last hour in the girls' bathroom. She must have heard what the other girls said about her.

"Thanks," she said.

"Wanna cigarette?" I asked.

"Oh, that's disgusting. Your lungs probably look like asphalt."



She didn't win the national competition, but she still won a full scholarship to college and graduated with a degree in computer information systems. We talk annually, more or less, and keep in touch through e-mails.

"Cassius is finally getting over his allergies, so we're happy about that." She relays this information, as if I'd asked. "He even kind of smiled in the Christmas picture."

I stretch out on my bed and tuck a pillow under my head. I've been on the phone with Tonya nearly an hour and have successfully avoided this subject until now. I'm disappointed in myself for not achieving a Cassius-free conversation.

"Tonya, you do realize he is a dog?" I ask as I hold my hands up to study the rings on my fingers.

"He's not just a dog, he's my baby." The pitch of her voice raises several octaves, and she is no longer talking to me but the hideous mutt she adopted. "Aren't you my baby boy? Yes, you are, you stinky little baby."

I catch my reflection in the mirror hanging over the dresser across the room. I look at myself knowingly and roll my eyes. *We'll always be like this*, and I smile.



"Sexy Lady"

Digested Image

May a goat eat your underwear.

May he begin chewing
at the H
nibble to the A
gnaw through the N
choke on the E
and belch up the S.

May the goat that ate your underwear
finish off your socks,
root to the pink stripe
where your manicured toes rested
moments before
your toes went commando
in fashionable stilettos.

May the goat that ate your underwear
and finished off your socks
floss with your thongs,
brightly colored
stringed torture devices
that separate what you call
"Sugar and Spice."
Even the white one
you wore on Prom Night,
when the condom broke.

May the goat that ate your underwear
and finished off your socks
and flossed with your thongs
devour everything in your top drawer.
Every article
traced in lace
padded and stretched
silky and soft
cotton and leather
beige

red
black
and white
every ankle sock
push-up bra
boy-cut panty
knee high
and tank,
even that Polaroid,
the one you think I don't know about,
with you and your boyfriend
on his birthday.

May the goat that ate your underwear
and finished off your socks
and flossed with your thongs
and devoured everything in your top drawer
leave behind an article,
the one you fear, resent, hate
the most—
the dreaded granny panty.

May that spared poly-cotton blend
with the full seat
and waistband cinched above your navel
remind you that one day
your boobs will sag
your butt will wrinkle
your toes will mold
and that you were

are

more than just your underwear.



"The Best Kind of S"

Money for the Cootchie

All that cash tossed away on
Equate tampons
no-name pads
pantiliners with barely-there adhesive
and now off-brand Monistat,
because seventeen dollars has got to last.
When I came down with the
itch
the burn
the fucking yeasties,
I fantasized about Diflucan,
the Wonder Pill at fifteen bucks a swallow.
Then I remembered that plane ticket home
my tuition bill
my birth control and
that last trip down the food aisle.
All that interest blooming
in the Visa computers
like the *Candida albicans*
in my vagina.

So here I am at the pharmacy counter
with a box of Equate yeast medication
under my arm and a package of
Ramen noodles in hand.
I pull out the Platinum plastic again,
my vagina burning and itching
for a scratch.
All this money for the cootchie . . .
upkeep is expensive.

Pirate Boy

There's this pirate next door.
He never tells us where he's sailing next.
We imagine that it's the Poconos,
Tripoli,
or some place that sounds like an exotic parrot.
He once walked by with a dagger in his teeth
and a look in his beetle-black eyes,
a hint of his dangerous past,
and his love for the sea, fine ale and fine women.
Really he just makes tacos
and cleans grills at the local Chipotle.
But they are good tacos
and that's something.



"Smile"

Elementary Education

“When you say you’re gonna be working in a southern school, I picture all these little kids running around in overalls with no shoes on.”

“Thanks, Emily. You’re a real pal.”

Sedgefield Intermediate School is in Goose Creek, South Carolina. It receives extra federal funding because of its high percentage of students whose families live at or below the poverty level. I knew nothing about working in a school—poor, southern, or otherwise—and this speculation about southern schools from my friend Emily, an elementary education major, was not reassuring.

I was pleased to find that Sedgefield was clean and well-cared for by a committed janitorial staff, and all of the students wore shoes. Poverty was subtle—several of my students wore the same shabby outfit more than once a week.

My AmeriCorps team had been sent to Sedgefield as additional government support. During our ten-month term of service, we worked on many different types of projects in different states. At Sedgefield, we tutored students in grades three through five. I had thirteen kids. I took each one out of class for twenty minutes every day. Most of them were smart, challenging, or charming, so it was easy to overlook Matthew, who didn’t seem to be any of the three.

On the first day, he shuffled out of Mr. Levesque’s fifth-grade classroom with his head down, only flicking his eyes up at me a few times. His shoulders slumped inside his T-shirt, the sleeves of which hung past his elbows. He wore great, drooping sweatpants and his thick blond hair stuck out in all directions. He was always pink-faced and damp when I saw him because we met right after recess.

“So Miss Josie tells me you guys have been reading a book called *Soccer Halfback*,” I said to him on the second day, when our getting-to-know-you session was over. Our mutual discomfort still ping-ponged between us. Josie had been his tutor from the previous team, which had moved on to a new service project. She had told me that the book was too advanced for him. She had chosen it because she wanted to

challenge him but thought he might be happier if we read something else.

"Yeah."

"Do you want to keep reading that, or do you want to read something else?"

He perked up for the first time. "Something else!"

"I'll let you pick then."

We lurched around the library for fifteen minutes. He picked up several books, regarded each one foggily, and then returned it to the shelf. I was irritated, convinced he was stalling. Finally I said, "Why don't I pick a book and bring it in to read tomorrow?"

"Okay!" he said eagerly.

When I brought in *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, he said, "We read this in class."

"Oh," I said, defeated. "I'm sorry. I'll pick out something else."

"No, no! I like it! It's funny."

I had chosen it because I hoped it would be a treat for him. I guessed he wasn't an eager reader. "Do you wanna take turns reading? We could each read every other page."

"Okay."

He read in that robotic tone typical of children, the one that makes me wonder whether they understand what they're reading or are just naming the words they see in a kind of vocabulary roll call. We read aloud every day, and then on Friday we played checkers.

"I'm the best checkers player in the school!" he told me with a shark-like grin when we finished setting up the board.

"Maybe you *were* the best checkers player in the school," I told him, "but I'm here now."

He put me in my place that day and every subsequent Friday, all of which were official "fun days" unless the kids misbehaved during the week. Being defeated at checkers once a week by a ten-year-old was about as much as I could take, so after one game we usually switched to hangman. The sentence he made me guess that first Friday was "Miss Ashley is cool just like me."



Matthew fixed his eyes on me and leaned forward slightly. His

expression and posture told me he was about to ask for something.

With his most charming smile, he asked, "Can we read outside today?"

The first warm, sunny day of spring was calling through the window at the end of the hall. I hesitated. Tutors weren't ever supposed to be alone with the kids.

Matthew saw my hesitation. "Please?" he asked, his smile widening. I sighed. "Okay."

Matt and I sat down on the sidewalk just outside the door. I placed my dark green plastic tool box on the ground beside me. Each tutor kept his or her supplies in a tool box like this. As I opened it to take out our book, he told me, "I need to lose some weight."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, turning to look at him. It was hard to tell under his baggy clothes, but it looked like he was at a healthy weight.

He raised his T-shirt and grabbed the baby fat around his middle.

"I have rolls!" he exclaimed. "I have to lose weight to impress this girl."

"Oooooooh, a girl," I teased. "Does she know you like her?"

"I asked her out," he said.

"What did she say?"

"She said she'll only go out with me if I can ask her in German."

"German?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh?"

"I can help you with that," I said.

"You speak German?"

"A little."

On a scrap of paper I wrote phonetically, *Wilst du meine Freundin sein?* I wished I'd paid more attention in German class. I wasn't sure about the grammar. Then I realized I was being silly. This little girl wouldn't have any idea what Matt was saying, anyway.

I forgot about it until the next week.

"Hey, did you ever ask that girl out?" I asked him.

"Yeah."

"Did it work?"

"Yeah, but then she dumped me for another guy."

I hid my smile behind my hand, remembering what fifth-grade romances were like.

• • •

"Matthew is so great!" Anita said. "Don't you just love him?"

My team had chaperoned an Earth Day field trip, and Matthew had been in her group.

"Yes," I said, as proud as if she were praising my son. Matthew and I had been working together for a month, and he had begun to read with feeling, altering the tone of his voice to match what the characters were saying.

"Does he have a dad?" she asked.

I paused, surprised. "I don't know," I admitted. "Why?"

"He kept saying Mr. Levesque is his dad, because they look alike and both their last names start with 'L.' "

I frowned. "Weird. He's never said anything about it to me."

A few days later, I passed Matthew in the hall on my way to pick up my first student of the day. He was leaning on the wall outside the office and his face was very pale.

"Hey, Matt!" I called.

He looked at me with puffy eyes and didn't reply.

My kids were always getting into trouble. I decided to ask him about it later, since at the moment I was late picking up Brianna.

He came up behind me later, when I was sitting in the library with my second student of the day. He gave me a hug.

"Miss Ashley, I have to go away for a little while," he said.

"Oh, are you going to be in tutoring this afternoon?"

He shook his head. "I gotta go."

When I left the library a few minutes later, he was standing in the hallway right outside with another boy who looked like him, but younger, and a smiling woman in her mid-thirties who was talking to the principal.

"What's going on, Matt?" I asked him.

In a low mumble he told me, "My brother and I have to go into foster care until my mom can get things straightened out at home."

"Oh." *Oh.*

"You can write to me," I said lamely. "If you send a letter to the school, they'll give it to me."

"Okay," he said. "Bye, Miss Ashley."

I had one more student and then a twenty-minute break. I waited to cry until I could hide out in the empty classroom we used as a break room. My teammates came in a few at a time, and all of them saw me weeping in a child-sized desk.

Anita knelt on the floor beside me. "What happened?" she asked.

It took longer than it should have to answer her, because I couldn't inhale. "Matthew got put into foster care."

She sat down at another desk and stared at me, tears in her eyes.

I was embarrassed, crying while everyone watched, so I went to the faculty bathroom down the hall. Now that I'd started crying, I couldn't stop even for the short walk, so I hurried and hoped no one would see me. I locked myself in and sat on the floor by the toilet until I had to pick up my next student.



After school I sat down in a chair facing Mr. Levesque's desk.

"What's going on with Matthew?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm as surprised as you are. Something must have happened over the weekend. I don't know what, but it had to have been a big deal for them to pull him out of his home all of a sudden."

"Do you know where he went?"

"He and his brother are staying with a family in another district. In that respect it's nice for him, because it's a better school than this is.

"Maybe it's best for him anyway," he said. "I only met the mother once, at the beginning of the year. There was something shady about her. I have an interview with social services, and I'm going to tell them about Matt coming in here some mornings looking . . . not dirty or anything, just . . . uncared for." He was quiet a moment, looking over my shoulder, his eyebrows slightly knitted.

"Do you know where he is?" I asked. "If I wanted to still go and tutor him, maybe on weekends or in the evenings, could you ask them if that would be okay?"

"Yeah," he said, "I could sure do that. I was thinking about heading over there myself on the weekends to throw a football or something.

"I'm going to have the class write letters to Matt tomorrow," he said. "If you want to write one too, and get it to me sometime this week, I'll send it to him with the others. And I'll ask about you coming by his house."

"Great," I said, relieved to have some control over the world again. Nevermind that we would be gone in a month. We had two more projects in Tennessee and Alabama, and then the year would end and I'd have to leave the South for good. I used to like that about AmeriCorps—a new project every few weeks. Sedgefield, a nine-week project, was our longest by far. We got a tour of the South, and we dropped in and out of people's lives before they had a chance to drop out of ours.

That night, I spent four hours making a card for Matt with glitter and construction paper. Then I called Emily, the ed major, and I could hear her nodding sagely through the telephone.

"I've seen it so many times," she said. "As bad as it sounds, you almost get immune to it after a while."

That bitch.



For the next few days, I looked at all of my students differently. I'd thought kids who came from troubled homes were supposed to be sullen problem-children, not friendly normal people. The sweeter the student, the more I wondered, *What kind of place does she go home to at night?*

That week, we were invited to attend a staff meeting in the library after school. Dozens of teachers ate cake at the little tables.

"I wanted to remind y'all about the Million Dollar Duck Race coming up," said the principal, holding up a flyer. Participants who donated five dollars were assigned a rubber duck, which was sent floating toward the finish line with all the other participants' ducks. Prizes ranging from food coupons to vacation cruises were awarded to the owners of the winning ducks.

"Proceeds will benefit a halfway house for children who must be removed from their homes before a foster family is available to take them. I hope you will all consider sponsoring a duck. This home provides an important service to our community, and many of our own students have stayed there."

I was my team's 49er, which meant I was responsible for seeking out new projects for future teams. I sent an AmeriCorps brochure to the P.O. box listed on the duck race flyer.

• • •

"Miss Ashley!" His new haircut made him almost unrecognizable, even though he'd only been gone a few days.

"Hey!"

He ran up to me, and I knelt down and hugged him, although our supervisor had recommended against hugging students.

"Mom got everything straightened out at home," he said, beaming.

"Does that mean I'll see you in tutoring this afternoon?" I asked, grinning.

"Yup!"

I don't know why Matthew had to leave his home or why he came back so soon. I knew better than to ask him, and he never told me.

During our tutoring session that afternoon, I gave him the card I'd made. I'd expected only a polite thank-you, but his face lit up when he took it.

• • •

"Guess what!" he said one day the next week.

"What?"

"I got a new cat!"

"Really? That's great!"

"I saved it from some other boys," he said. "They were throwing rocks at it by the baseball field."

"That's terrible! What did you do?"

"I got my friend and we went up to them and told them to stop."

"And they did?"

"They beat us up."

"What?"

"But then I took the cat home with me, and Mom said I could keep it!"

I grinned. "That's awesome, Matt."

• • •

My team worked for the last two weeks on maintenance projects

around the school, so on our last day of tutoring we weren't really leaving yet. I'd brought stickers and candy for everyone, and I let Matthew hang out with my team and me in the tutoring room far longer than his allotted time, playing UNO with us and our other kids. It would have been a nice farewell, but of course on the day we left, I went back to Mr. Levesque's room to tell Matt goodbye again. He came out into the hallway.

"I came to say bye," I said. "We're leaving now."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Bye," he said. He didn't meet my eyes.

We were discouraged from giving them our personal information. It was better, for our protection, to send all correspondence through the school.

"Okay, then." I shrugged. "Good luck, Matt."

He waved, turned away and walked back into his classroom, a tiny figure whose clothes threatened to swallow him. I shut the door between us and joined my teammates in the van.

Bridge Club

It comes back to me as a tangled after-dark cackle,
female, roughed up by cigarettes and scotch,
wakes me into the possibility that something
is being missed. A fleet of card tables set up

across three rooms, an armada of liquor bottles
lining the kitchen, mother cooking the "company"
dish out of a book. My sister and I, bathed
and in our jammies, are handled, smeared with scent

and coo by the women, teased and pinched by the men.
My father presides over vodka, gin, rusty Manhattan mix,
a shaker with cartoons of busty ladies toasting mirth.
After *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Gunsmoke* I'm put down

in my bunk which shares a wall with the party,
so I wake at 9 and 10, 11 and 12, each hour hearing
the laughter change, fill with silliness and edge:
tatters of gossip shushed and drowned in the toilet's

incessant flush. In the deep ignorance of my childhood,
I listen and steal bits of story, dream of my play,
bringing home lizards and mud, digging graves
for my pets and naming my plastic horses. Smoke and whisper,

booze and great pans of my mother's mushroom chicken
in wine disappearing in riffs of gossip and flashes of flesh
in among Jeannie's sequins and veils. The mocking snicker
and purr of *Oh Master* merged with the same sound

from one of my mother's friends. But which one?
My mother is Miss Kitty following the drunks
with her sponge, lifting out stains of sauce and ash.
Horse tails, trolls, and the satin settee in Jeannie's bottle

all melt into the laughter of one stalled woman,
flirty, high and tight, forced out in little bursts
of derailed wit, the bitter snigger of a woman
who must have felt judged by a mother like mine.

And now that laughter is another mother, the only
one who had a body. I hold onto that single
wrong note and know it's a gift. She had a good husband
on whom she would cheat, and who also would die young,

so her eldest girl would hold the loss against her mother forever.
But me, I remember the plush bundle of her breasts
bathed in perfume, the zeros of smoke that issued
from her slickered lips, her raw blonde mane,

her *honey* and blood talk, she who educated
the whole neighborhood about sex and power.
She who knew the world we were headed for
in no way resembled the one we were promised.

Angel Jewell

*I give you the end of a golden string
Only wind it in a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate
Built in Jerusalem's wall.*

Blake

Was it the fatal perfection of her name
that sent her among us, so thin
the veins showed in her finger tips?
Skin drawn tight as cellophane
was window on a painting we couldn't bear to see.
Her eyes were blue, too large. Her hair
a cirrus cloud. She lived on air.

What had she to do with what we were—
jostling our corn-fed shoulders, hefting
our packs, our books, our good red laughs?
And of the attentive earth—
the slant barn roof,
the Holstein's swaying bag,
the worm-churned dirt that works the seed,
wraps the root and pushes out the food—
what had she to do with that?
From the beginning she was heaven's freight.

We must have known before she left.
Why didn't we gather then
to press in her pocket as she passed
or in her hand, a note on onionskin
or other weightless thing—the way they stuff
the cracks in Jerusalem's ancient wall
with wailing or a plea?

*First published in *Poetry*.

Snow

Let us speak of love and weather
subtracting nothing.

Let us put your mother and mine
away for a while. Your dying father,
my dead one.

Let us watch
from our bedroom window how a slow
falling snow crowns all nakedness in ermine.
Do not look at me yet. Your face is flushed,
your eyes too love-soaked, too blue.
Outside is white on black
and still. The sky, deaf with stillness.

Don't let it frighten you.

Hush. There's time enough for that.

Be content for now to watch the maples
fill with snow, how they spread themselves,
each naked limb making itself accessible.

*First published in the *Georgia Review*.

the catalpa trees

black asphalt grew sticky
from the juices of catalpa beans
in my grandfather's driveway.
their shells were like dark, flat
bananas, falling from high branches,
trees, thick twisting and ringed with life—
old women reaching for the sky
with long wrinkled fingers.

when fall broke,
the leaves
became mountains
of my favorite sound,
crisp crumbling
buried rotting catalpa beans
in pale muted greens and browns,
soft whispers of color
in the black white gray world.

my grandfather's blue eyes
replaced the sky
and the horizon stretched
like the wide pea green stripes
across the sides
of his fading seventy-eight
Silverado. I can still hear
the thick metal door clap,
see the distance grow
as he walks away.

between visits, I forgot the snapping
of dark catalpa beans,
but my grandfather kept me close enough
not to lose my southern drawl.
sometimes still I catch myself
in the lazy roll of merging sounds.

and so I learned to memorize
his smile, the way his hands
felt when my own were locked tight inside
and the colors,
the colors of my grandfather's house
as they faded,
rich vivid memories
to dry antique leaves,
burnt red brick.

his blue
 eyes strained to see the bloom
of a little girl becoming
a woman. my body,
its limbs like gray branches,
stretched toward brilliant skies.

the catalpa beans are static details,
still smooth as I step down
with bare feet, rooted

beneath a Tennessee sun.



"Forlorn"

1st Place Photo Winner

Mortality

The Second Dying came
unexpectedly. In my dreams I envisioned
the Oak Grandfather mute as a pinched
candle in his box, heard his late wife's
slippered feet shush on blue-feathered
tile a floor above. I imagined her steps
descending—*one* and *two*—polite and vague
as water, though this never occurs.
The absent leave little
 but memory.

Only now do I realize the mirror
is changing my face daily.
One day I will wake to speckled hair
and furrows at the
corner of each eye,
and wonder when it happened—
each transformation holding memories,
too many to name or
even want to.

A friend says she doesn't believe
in the hereafter, isn't bothered by
the thought of non-existence.
In the sky, the stars wink
like the tip of a pin.
I don't tell her I can't believe in humans being X-ed.
Mostly I avoid the surrounding black
 space.

The Danger of Classic

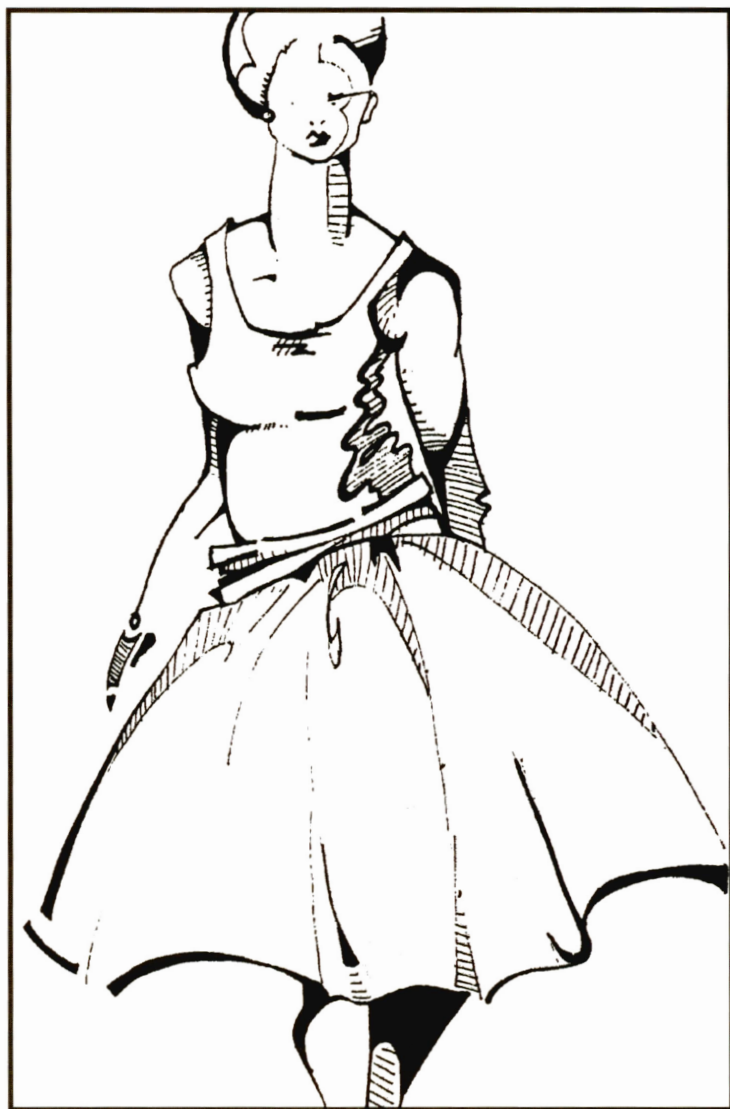
I love to sit with you here
on this couch, wrapped
in the down comforter from your bed,
watching old movies on TCM, commenting
on how they further the stereotype about women.
"She really should have kicked him in the balls."

It's always the same story
of the ugly duckling who goes to the ball, transformed
into a swan at a moment's notice
for Prince Charming,
with whom she falls madly in love and lives happily ever after,
without once entertaining the notion
that he is a complete baboon.

You stop me here
because you know I might never quit, and you've been waiting
for a commercial to kiss me.
Our bodies match the beat of basketballs pounding in rhythm
with squeaky sneakers and grunts
on the new Nike commercial.

I wonder if she ever sat like this
on the couch with you, and if she were right now,
would your hand be moving from her knee,
up her thigh,
as it moves up mine.
Did the balls of her feet ever strain against the armrest
in this very same way,
two bodies reaching some conclusion
about the best way to transition
from couch to bedroom without losing grip.
Did she lead down this narrow hallway
or did you, to this room
where I know the things you did together
but won't do with me.
I see our discarded clothes balled up on the floor
and wonder where the black lace thong came from.

I try not to think about it,
but I can't quell the image of the two of you in bed.
Did she grapple you tight against her body
at that crucial moment, did you hold her
for a long time after, as your breaths fell
into this syncopated rhythm. Is she
the one in the bed with you right now,
and should I kick you in the balls over this?



"Untitled"

Ringin' Up

The early morning sunrise that filtered through the curtains was blinding, and the telephone rang once before the answerphone picked up. Ainsley lurched awake at the intrusion of her own voice.

"I'm out now. If this is Mum, yes, I'll see you in church this week. If this is Daddy, hello! Kent, my dear brother, if you're ringing me up for some unimportant reason, I'll beat the bloody hell out of you. Anyone else? Leave your name and I'll give you a ring. Ta!"

The lone buzz rang out before the machine clicked over. Silence. She pushed herself up from the mattress with a curse and squinted at the answerphone near the bed. Another damn call-and-run, the third one this week. Ainsley plumped up her layer of pillows, wrestled one away from the sleeping man beside her, and collapsed onto them again with a sigh. After a late night of drinking, it was far too early to be awake.

She glanced over at the man snoring beside her. The liquor from the night before clouded her memory, and she realized she had no idea who inhabited the other half of her bed. Lips pursed, she carefully sat up, leaning over to catch a glimpse of his face. Sleep had smoothed out his features, made them seem surreal and waxy despite his striking appearance. His forehead hid under a feathery piece of dark brown hair. *Of course. Ben.*

She smiled and stretched; her abrupt awakening ruined any thought of further sleep. She felt peculiar, like a shadow, the remainder of herself stretched and smothered. Moving furtively, Ainsley pulled the heavy indigo duvet back from her bare legs and swung her feet to the smooth wooden floor below. She picked up Ben's rumpled shirt, pulling it on for the time being. After instincts led her to the WC, she went about with her morning routine. She splashed cold water over her face to rinse away the remnants of soap and ran a brush through the untamed dirty-blond locks, tousled horribly from last night's activity.

The cracked grey marble countertop was cluttered with junk: crumbles of old eye shadow, makeup brushes, perfume, pill bottles housing various relief from moods and illness. Towels littered the floor. The sapphire shower curtain formed a skin around the tub. The harsh overhead lighting made her flesh transparent. Ainsley squinted

cornflower eyes at the thin girl in the mirror and stuck a toothbrush into her mouth.

Silence echoed through the flat. The stillness of the morning suffocated her, but it seemed a sacrilege to be making noise at this hour. Part of her wanted to wake Ben. Better to leave him sleeping for a while, though; she didn't want to chance his disposition by rousing him before eight.

Ainsley padded barefoot to the kitchen, fumbling around for the switch before shedding severe light on the appliances. She kept the curtains drawn. The sun only made the preferred nippy atmosphere warm up. She pulled open the icebox, eyes scanning the shelves for juice.

"Bollocks."

It would be a coffee morning, then. After hunting down the tin, she turned on the coffee maker and waited until the soothing bubbling noise filled the kitchen before checking the breadbox. *No bagels, no muffins—condemned to dry toast this morning.*

After spreading the brittle piece with butter and pouring herself a cup saturated with cream and honey, she sank down at the table. The sounds of her chewing filled up the void where conversation should have been. Her eyes traveled to the door of the bedroom longingly, and she wondered why the ringing hadn't jarred him as well. To combat the quiet, she tried to summon memories of the night before. Not much came at first, just the vision of a warm smile devouring her mouth. A prickly sensation rippled under her skin. Would he mind if she went to wake him?

She was glad it had been Ben last night; intense loneliness had forced her to dial the first number that she could remember. Ben had taken her to dinner at a quaint pub down the street and remedied her with conversation, flirtations, and liquor. After she had been filled with porter and vodka, they returned to her flat and spent a mind-blowing night together. Ben had always been a lover of the highest caliber, exactly what she had needed to unwind. Norman was skilled but too self-serving. Daniel, captivating as he was, had to be in exactly the right mood to enjoy the afterglow. And James? Her darling James was spending the weekend with his wretched Irish wife in Cork. But Ben was more than suited to step in for him.

Rhythmic snores floated from the back bedroom. She mechanically rinsed off her cup and plate under the faucet, setting them onto a faded navy towel. The phone was ringing again, and the cordless wasn't in its cradle in the kitchen. Ainsley moved hastily towards her bedroom door again, but the answerphone picked up before she could reach it. She glanced toward Ben's stirring frame and flinched again at the voice on the machine. *I hope I don't sound like that in person*, she mused as she waited for the message.

A dynamic tenor voice sounded through the bedroom. Kent.

"Hey, Ains—just calling to say hallo. I tried earlier, but I guess you're passed out on someone's floor somewhere." Her brother sniggered.

"Anyway, just calling to let you know that I'll be out today, so don't bother trying to bring back my DVD player until after 6:00. I've got an early practice today, and then I'm meeting up with James for lunch. Turns out he didn't stay as long with Bonnie's parents as he was planning. Take care of yourself, kid. Love you."

She snorted softly to herself. *Kid*. At a young thirty-three, Kent was only ten years her senior. Ainsley certainly didn't feel like a child most of the time, only at her parents' house, but that was due to constant pampering from her father.

She'd have to thank him for the ringing later, because Ben shifted and sat up against the pillows, sheet draped temptingly over his slender hips. He offered her a sleepy smile as she slid down next to him on the bed, distracted.

"Morning, Ains. I hope you haven't been waiting long." He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her down for a gentle kiss; his alcohol-tinged breath forced her to bite back a grimace.

"No, not at all."

This was a lie, of course, but that didn't matter. She smoothed a piece of hair from his face and brushed her lips over his forehead. His affectionate manner didn't last when he smelled the coffee, and Ainsley watched him tug on a pair of boxer shorts before stumbling groggily towards the kitchen.

She watched him go, remembering her brother's message. Pressing the button, she listened to the familiar voice once more, a small smile curling on her lips when she heard the words again.

"Turns out he didn't stay as long with Bonnie's parents as he was planning," she confirmed, a gleeful grin surveying her from the silvery mirror on the wall. Ainsley pulled her hair away from her face, rubbing at a fading bite mark from the night before. As soon as Ben left for work, she'd have her own business to attend to. She seized the phone eagerly, pulling her legs up to sit Indian-style on the double bed, but only got halfway through the number before replacing it on the cradle.

She would call James after lunch.



The night air hung like a tapestry over Lord's Park. After talking to James for an hour on the phone, Ainsley had tidied her flat and spent the afternoon in preparation. She had taken a long, languorous bath and kept an ice cube on her neck until the bruise disappeared. Now she rested on a wrought iron park bench, looking vaguely respectable and twitching in anticipation of spending time with James.

She had been seeing him for nearly four years now, an on-and-off diversion from his comfortable marriage. Ainsley met him through Kent, who was a close friend of James from school and rugby. She knew if her brother had realized what was to come between the two, he wouldn't have dared to introduce them. But there was no real danger in it. Even with the tenderness between them, he would never leave his family. He had two young children and another on the way. James seemed content with his life of husband, father, and lover, and Ainsley never tried to convince him to be otherwise.

He had sounded pleased to hear her voice again. She could imagine him through the receiver, see the charming smile shining through his grey eyes, the long searching fingers reaching up to smooth the shock of messy black hair, his confident posture and lanky body leaning against the wall of his kitchen. The simple thought of him coaxed a smile out of her.

Ainsley's eyes flashed toward the clock tower as she stretched her legs out, smoothing her fluid black skirt over her thighs. A lorry rumbled by on the street, carting the evening news to late-night readers. James was only six minutes late, nothing to worry about.

Her fingers went to her mouth, not caring when some of the gloss came off. She tugged at her lower lip, heels bouncing briskly against the cobblestone walkway. A soft patter reverberated through the empty

park, but it could have easily been her imagination. The cool breeze was unseasonably bitter, able to pierce clothes and flesh in tandem.

"Ainsley?"

The unexpected voice made her jump. She vaulted off of the bench and turned rapidly. James stood there, hands in the pockets of a russet corduroy jacket, a peculiar half-smile on his familiar mouth.

Once her heart stopped racing, she beamed at her lover and went into his arms, smiling against his chest.

"God, you scared me," she murmured, breathing in the scent of sandalwood and laundry detergent from his jacket. She felt his chin settle against the top of her head. After a moment of silence, he spoke again, a quiet note to his voice.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Ains. I had to ring up someone and lost track of the time. You look amazing." He nuzzled the side of her head apologetically.

"I know." She grinned teasingly, enjoying their banter. After a moment more of embracing, she let herself step back from him. Ainsley paused to review the details of his face, examining how the bones of his shoulders were prominent even under the bulk of clothes. She remembered how delicate and birdlike he felt when they were so close, regardless of the power he held over her. His slenderness was a parallel of her slight frame, but his poised and cool nature was so much more solid than hers.

Despite the cold, despite the dark, she felt the magnetic pull drawing them together again. His mouth smothered hers in a swift, warm kiss before pulling away with a breathless chuckle. Ainsley took his hand, leading him toward the park exit. There was little resistance.

"I'm glad you got back okay, Jamie. You were missed." She hesitated, glancing up at him. "How is your family?"

His footsteps resonated a split second after hers, his body a fragment behind.

"Hm? Oh . . . they're fine, Ains, just fine. Bonnie's still at her parents, though, with the girls. She's going to be back in town next week."

She blinked quietly, trying to keep a jubilant smile off of her face. "Really? Well, we'll have to take advantage of her vacation, won't we? I barely get to see you when she's home."

James nodded silently, his fingers intertwining with hers. She could feel the outline of his wedding ring, and a chronic ache passed through her stomach. *After so many years, I should be used to this.* She moved closer to him once they reached her flat, mounting the steps quietly.

The lights of her hallway seemed dimmer than usual. Ainsley paid them no mind aside from casting an irritable look at one flickering bulb. She would call the administrator in the morning. Inside the flat, all was well. Ainsley felt as though she was stepping into a cave of blue, a comforting nest to harbor their tryst. She stepped out of her shoes as soon as they were inside, turning to bolt the door. It took her a moment to realize that James hadn't taken his jacket off. She moved to help him, frowning as he raised a hand to hinder her.

"What . . . ?" There was a beseeching note to her voice. She examined him as he removed his spare hand from his pocket, reaching up to smooth his flyaway hair. The wedding ring glinted mockingly in the lamp's glow.

"Listen, Ainsley. You know how I feel about you, don't you? You know I love you?"

She nodded. His words sounded more like a statement than a question. His gaze darted to the bedroom briefly. Ainsley could swear that there was a touch of yearning in the grey of his eyes.

He pressed on. "I care very much about you. I always have, you know that."

"But?"

Her voice sounded diminutive next to his comforting baritone. James sighed, pulling his glasses from his face to massage the bridge of his nose.

"But I can't do this anymore."

From that crushing statement on, Ainsley could only vaguely listen to him. She heard his words without understanding. The weight of the room, of his words, smothered her.

"I can't. It isn't fair to anyone that we're doing this; you know that. I've got a family that I have to support. I can't keep deceiving them like this. It isn't your fault, though, you have to understand that," he said, pausing heavily. Then, with a note of pleading in his voice, he continued.

"Bonnie had the baby when we were there. She'll be back next week. It was a boy—we named him Marc . . ."

Ainsley stepped numbly back, willing the shock to break and roll off of her. She sunk down onto the navy-coloured settee and stared up at him, trying to understand his words. Ainsley saw James wince; she knew she looked like a puppy that had been kicked.

"Ains, I'm sorry. I love you. But we can't keep doing this. I can't be with you when I've got them, and I hope you can see why," James said, sinking down next to her on the couch. He picked up her limp hand. "You're one of my closest friends."

She stiffened and nodded, fixing her eyes on the blue vase on the coffee table. The daisies from earlier in the week had wilted. James tried to put an arm around her; she shrugged him off. The silence between them was tangible.

"Please go." Her own voice shocked her; no longer her blithe, friendly female voice but a choked, guttural mumble.

James looked stung but dipped his head in agreement. His hand rested briefly on her shoulder; her eyes burned for a moment at the compassion in this action. She sensed him standing next to her, the sound of a throat quietly clearing, and then uncomfortable silence. He was waiting for her to speak.

Ainsley cast a fleeting look at him, her chin quavering slightly. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. There were no words to pass between them now. James closed his eyes for a moment before stepping toward the door unwillingly.

She watched vacantly as his hand turned the dead bolt and opened the door.

"I'm so sorry."

His haunting apology was met with a sullen nod. The latch caught quietly as the door shut. Ainsley felt herself sinking wretchedly into the couch, the sights and sounds of her flat coming from a very far-off place now. Her head was spinning, her throat was raw, and a burning pulse throbbed behind her eyes.

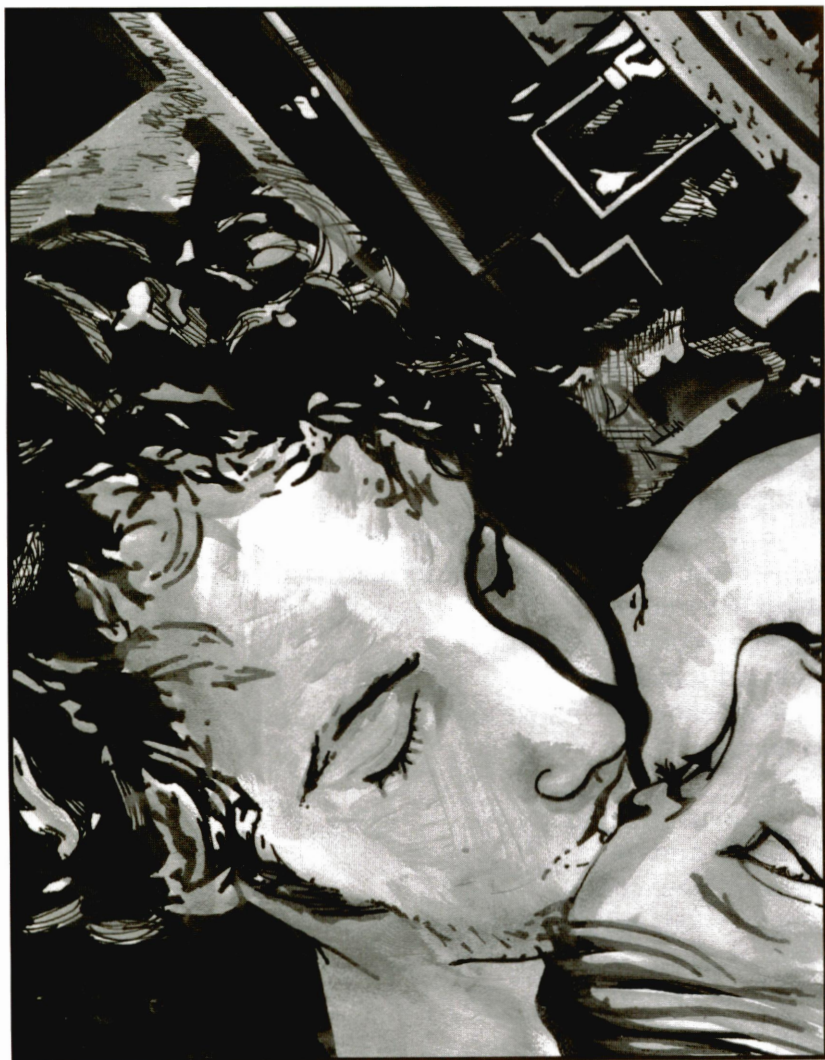
An unyielding object dug into her side as she slumped into the padding. Her thoughts went to the missing cordless phone from earlier, desperate for a diversion from the nauseating evening. She curled

her fingers around the smooth sapphire plastic and raised herself up a fraction to pull it from between the cushions. Her watery red eyes examined the numbers as she coerced herself into a sitting position.

Sitting there weakly, phone lying on her exposed knees, she rubbed both hands over her face. Ainsley let her eyes go out of focus as she breathed in. After a moment of calm, she picked up the phone and switched it on. The hum of the dial tone resonated in her ears. She sat a moment before her fingers conjured a number.

Ainsley pursed her lips, waiting to be answered. Her thoughts drifted to her half-empty bottle of merlot. After several rings, a tired male voice greeted her. She crumpled against the settee and let her eyelids fall. Her voice was deceitfully composed.

“Hey, it’s Ainsley. Can you come over . . .?”



"Goodnight"

sex is

the woman in the red dress.
no one knows her name
but we've memorized
the way vivid color wraps itself
around her.
our mouths water

and we cannot stop
listening to the sssss sliding
off the tip of her tongue, colliding
with the x in sex, flung
from her lips like a fist. we imagine
how she tastes,
see her, eyes closed,
head thrown back as though she has ripped
open her chest, spilling ecstatic secrets
that twist like strands
of cigarette smoke into our noses.
secondhand something
we cannot define, but we know
she is human.

she is a revolution of sex.
the hisssss of a snake
luring us with her curves,
flipping the room upside down.
the siren
that sends us squirming.
she sits legs crossed,
left knee pointing up.
the spike of her stilettos slices through
everything physical.

revolution lives between the legs
of a woman unafraid to spread
her arms around the right man
woman moment
 that makes her
want to crawl out of her skin, leaves her melting
beneath cotton sheets to marinate
in possibility.

she has been driven
—by a revolution of the body—
through passion and shredded red silk
into what is left when everything, even sex
is ripped away.

Disembodiment

- I.
Framed by a store window, a mannequin woman poses.
Long legs support her bust, a thin waist,
hourglass shape.
Nubs of raised plastic define shoulders,
space where arms should be.
The headless form models the latest fashion:
a dress cut low against hard perked breasts,
raised high across sculpted legs.
- II.
Mannequin woman framed.
A window display
for all the hungry eyes.
A bust of shape, an explosion of form
that left the sex intact without
a brain
a mouth
or arms to break her cell of glass.
- III.
Last night at the club
some guy tried to get in my groove.
Watched me dance, like the design of my legs
was for him. All those nights masturbating
under his covers, anticipating spread legs.
He comes
up behind me, wraps one arm around my waist,
slips the other into the space below my arm
between dress and skin. He feels around
to see if the mounds of flesh twist off.
I turn to face him. He is speechless to hear a voice with eyes,
shocked to be slapped
by a creature dreamt armless.

IV.
Walking home, I pass
two middle-aged black men. They step off the sidewalk,
keep their eyes down, respect the vulnerability
of a woman alone at night.
I say hello. Both men look up sharply,
surprised mouths spread into warm smiles.
I remember newscasts, WANTED posters, episodes of *Cops*,
faces of dangerous black men.
I, who am not a mannequin, see their surprise
that I am not afraid,
and I wonder,

when will we see each other whole?



"African"
1st Place Art Winner

“Not on my watch,”

said the night man to the clerk.

“I would never allow something like that to happen.”

Not on my watch,
 meaning:
 I am doing what I can.
 I wish
 I could do more.

If I were an angel,

the way I think angels might be,
I would cradle the head of people as they die,
lean them into my frame like a chair,
learn to speak every language so that I can whisper
Paul McCartney’s words of wisdom into their ear: “Let it
be.”

If I were an angel, I would want to understand the forgiveness
that waits in fear.

I would visit the living.

I would go to the Rasta crowded in his Florida jail cell,
touch his temples,
slowly circle them,
aid his visions of dread-talk responsibility. Every word
manifests its own kind of destiny.

I would go to the pale man, in his pinstripe suit:
prison bars he does not see,
hold his hand, show him the Rasta’s vision.

It asks him if one man really knows how to judge another. Does he
remember the cocoa man with dreadlocks he put away years ago?

I would drift into the eye of an infant as it absorbs color for the first time,
carry the information into the hand of a painter.

Sit for long periods on the mountains of a father's fingers
as they race across his grand piano.

Learn from an African mother how to
carry water on my head for long distances,
sing her songs—the ones that keep one foot in front of the other.

Lick the tears off the cheek of an eight-year-old American boy
as he is told not to cry, lick them up so when he is a grandfather
I can mail him a letter about his life.

Stroke a damp cloth gently across the President's cheek
as he thrashes, twisting sweaty covers,
skin worn raw by the expensive sheets he bought for their soft touch.
He has nightmares, his heart bangs, ba-bang, bangs, refuses to dream
about the Iraqi mother praying, covered in cloth.
His heart, ba-BOOM, ba-BANG, BANG, thuds out her name for god,
her word for home. Ba-boom, ba-bang, bang: oil pump pounding.

Sit in the cancer ward with the grandmother who knits,
beside the bald cowboy who talks peaches with the nurse.
"I had a good peach from Alabama once, but I'm telling you . . ."
He likes to tell stories about his orchard in Georgia.

Toss flour at the woman baking in Mexico.
She is wise enough to know that an angel teases her.
She makes the best tortillas of all her sisters,
which is why she is the cook tonight.
Her stained apron protects the flashing colors of her celebration
dress. Tonight they are marking a new child's conception. I toss flour
so that she will brush at her skin, shake laughter into the recipe.

Run alongside the man in red shorts in his moment of endurance. He
focuses on the sound of shoes against track, staggered breath. Fire
inside pushes him into the plastic tape, sweating, raising his arms up to
the sky. "YES . . . YES . . . YEEESSSSSS!"

Lie naked with new lovers, crisscrossed, playing tic-tac-toe with every body part.

Spread my body upon the hot sand to give a Ghanian boy a break from blistered feet. In exchange, he will teach me how to be grateful for one meal every other day.
He will teach me how to talk to seashells,
and what it means to live a shoeless life.

Dance in the moonlight with sisters waltzing across a wooden dock, laughing, tripping over plastic chairs, kicking off high heels.
One shoe plops into the lake and the twirling of women's shadows paint the ripples.

Spin on the ceiling fan in a corporate office as an associate presents his new location numbers: extra earnings for the boss, who smiles, pats him on the back. He rushes home, new necklace for the wife.
I am with him in his breast pocket, reaching around, embracing him, transporting to him images of local workers, jobless now that the company is moving.
I show him the swollen eyes
of the young man who will work in the new sweatshop,
trying to feed a village
with a dollar a day.
I will continue my embrace as he watches his wife hang her necklace among the dozens she cannot choose from.

Crawl into the dirt under the fingernails of the farmer.

Dive with the scientist as she swims
into the underwater cave, looking for the space
where saltwater meets freshwater. She studies the kind of life
that can survive constant change.

Go to the woman in India,
crying bitterly because her baby has been born a girl.
Then I will understand what it means to be a woman
squatting naked over dirt floor, knuckles clenched in fists of blood,

dripping womb signs a dowry to a husband and
no bread for an old woman's table.

Bait the line for a Colorado fisherman standing along the river bank,
his breath caught by the sunrise.

Kiss a mother goodbye with the lips of a boy strapped in explosives,
a suicide bomber who knows unending hunger,
decades of lost brothers, a dying hope for cultural salvation.
A desperate action that expresses all he has been taught of courage.
I would take his hand. I would go with him.

Kiss a mother goodbye with the lips of a boy dressed in uniform,
U.S. Army. A soldier who knows a country that tries for freedom,
a homeland that makes promises.
Will he be prepared to confront the desperate poverty of his enemies?
He leaves a mother. A desperate action
that expresses all he has been taught of honor.
I would take his hand. I would go with him.

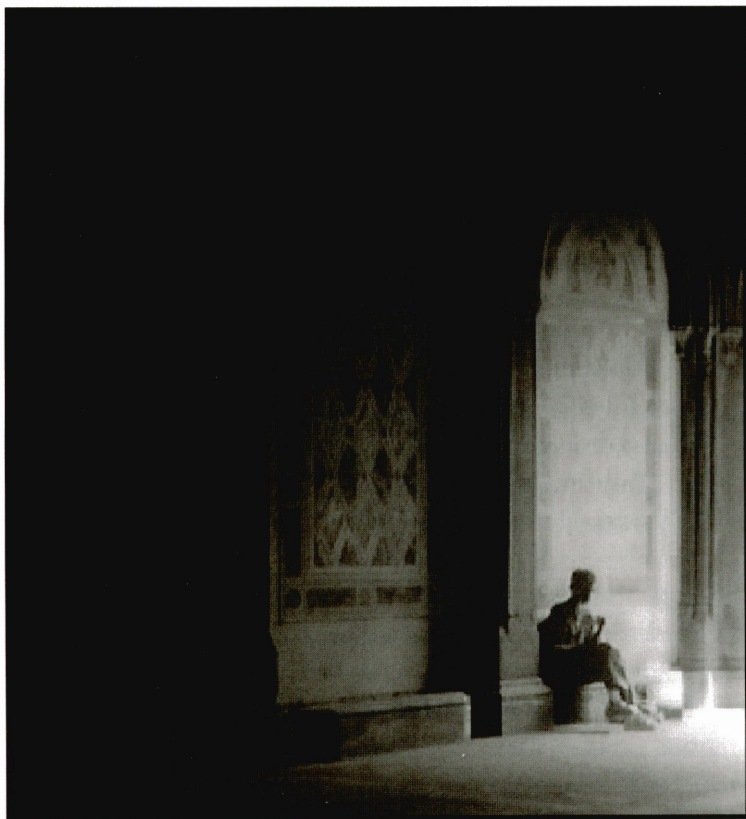
Rest inside a Native sweat lodge.
Listen to prayers of earth, water, fire turned to steam,
every element present in the center of this elders' ring
of bowed heads.

I would stir the coffee of the night watchman, sitting in the
New York Tower lobby, the man who
wears the faded brass-buttoned uniform and remembers the names
of everyone in his building, all those who come and go
on their way to me.

If I were an angel, I would understand forgiveness.

I would sit on the other side of fear with
the knowledge of oneness folded
into a soft blue weave draped across my shoulder: padding
for the head of the next member of my family.

—September 11, 2003



“Waiting for Kind Words and Cigarettes”

Contributors' Notes

Emily Coleman is currently a junior Creative Writing major and originally hails from Edmond, Oklahoma. Her passion for writing developed at an early age, and she has always considered herself a fiction writer. She finds it ironic that she should have two poems (instead of fiction) included in this year's magazine but is very pleased all the same. She would like to thank her mother, who is a constant source of inspiration and the strongest person she knows.

Emily Davis-Fletcher is a junior at Stephens College. Her short-term goal is to act as her own four-leaf clover, rather than black cat. Her long-term goal is to enjoy the success of her short-term goal and its effects, particularly a B.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Jessica Derr is currently a student at Stephens College working toward a B.F.A. in Fashion Design with an emphasis on Costume Design. She thoroughly enjoys her chosen field of study, while actively participating in other organizations. She knows nothing would be possible without God's backing, and her parents' unending support!

Alice Friman has new work in *Shenandoah*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southern Review*, *Boulevard*, and others. Her latest book, *Zoo* (University of Arkansas Press, 1999), won the Ezra Pound Poetry Award from Truman State University and the Sheila Motton Prize from the New England Poetry Club. She visited Stephens College in September 2003 where she met with students, gave a reading, and enjoyed herself immensely! She lives in Milledgeville, Georgia.

Holly Herlinger is a native Texan graduating this

May with a B.F.A. in Creative Writing. To her astonishment, she's published in *Harbinger* twice before, has been asked to read her work at two Sigma Tau Delta national conventions, and is president of Sigma Tau Delta. She likes grilled cheese sandwiches.

Ashley Honeysett is a Creative Writing major from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She hopes to graduate in May 2005. This is her first year at Stephens and her first publication in *Harbinger*.

Jillianne Jons is a senior working toward a B.F.A. in Graphic Design. She is from Flagstaff, Arizona and has won two Golden Addy's from the Missouri Ad Federation.

Candra Kennedy is a junior Theatre major from Paducah, Kentucky. She has a flair for photography and a passion for cyber pirates and poetry. She would like to thank her friend, Aisha, for having no inhibitions and her mom for a great nine months in the womb.

Heather Koonse, a Fashion Design and Product Development major, is an award recipient of Fashion Group International's Betsey Johnson essay contest and is working on a feature film, *Bottle-neck*, with K.D. Productions. She is a gypsy artist through and through and lives for creative expression through illustration, design, and the assembly of beautiful things.

Lindsey Lischka is majoring in Fashion Marketing and Management and minoring in Art History and Psychology. Her hometown is Norman, Oklahoma. (Go Sooners!) She enjoys taking photographs while

on vacations. The photo, "Forlorn," was taken in an old monk's sanctuary in Italy, and "Smile" was shot roadside in Jamaica. She's a huge fan of *Lord of the Rings* and loves to eat chocolate donuts from Wal-Mart.

Leslie Adrienne Miller (Stephens alumna) recently published *Eat Quite Everything You See* (Graywolf Press, 2002), her fourth full-length collection of poems. Her previous collections include *Yesterday Had a Man In It* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1998), *Ungodliness* (CMU, 1994), and *Staying Up For Love* (CMU, 1990). The Stephens College English and Creative Writing Department has named their annual reading marathon after her. In the fall of 2002, she visited Stephens and read her work to an appreciative audience.

Lindsay O'Day is a junior English major, a hopeless Anglophile, and the Vice President of Sigma Tau Delta. She has previously published with *Speak Up Press* and *Blabbermouth*. Lindsay thanks her friends, family, and a string of bad boys for providing inspiration for her story.

Erica Parker was raised along the base of the Colorado Rockies. This is the second year her works appear in *Harbinger*, and she is thrilled. Erica graduated from Stephens in December 2003 with a B.F.A. in Theatre and a B.A. in English. In her final semester, she published the poetry chapbook, *Lotus*. She would like to dedicate the poems in this year's magazine to all the empowered women at Stephens College who taught her so much. She says, "Thank you, Stephens ladies! Thank you, sisters."

Shaen Pogue is a December 2003 graduate of

Stephens College with a B.F.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish Language and Culture. In the fall of 2003, Stephens College published her chapbook, *The Nature Of*. Shaen is currently serving as a second-semester intern at *The Missouri Review* literary magazine.

Keturah Prescott is a junior at Stephens working toward a B.F.A. in Creative Writing who smokes too many cigarettes and is currently plotting a creative revolution. She plans to attend graduate school in the desert, cut back on smoking, and someday write a memoir that will make her parents proud.

Krysta Rowe is a sophomore from an itty-bitty town in Missouri—Bonne Terre. She likes candle-lit dinners and long walks on the beach . . . wait. What?

Willow Ruth is a Creative Writing major at Stephens College. She loves telling stories, kicking back with her friends, and treating herself well.

Emily Sharp is a sophomore from Dallas, Texas. She is majoring in English and minoring in Art. The end.

Ruby Tapp, a sophomore Fashion Design major with an Art minor, is from Osage Beach, Missouri. She loves Stephens College and doing artwork! After graduation, she wants to attend grad school in California.

Jacklyn Wolfe is a junior at Stephens College working on her B.F.A. in Creative Writing. Her celebrity boyfriends include Johnny Depp, Benicio Del Toro, Treat Williams, and David Sedaris.

Harbinger Back Issue Order Form

Name _____ Phone # _____

Mailing Address _____

City/State _____ Zip Code _____

YEAR COST QTY YEAR COST QTY

1980	\$2		1992	\$2	
1981	\$2		1993	\$2	
1982	\$2		1994	\$2	
1983	\$2		1995	\$2	
1984	\$2		1996	\$2	
1985	\$2		1997	\$2	
1986	\$2		1998	\$2	
1987	\$2		1999	\$2	
1988	\$2		2000	\$2	
1989	\$2		2001	\$2	
1990	\$2		2002	\$4	
1991	\$2		2003	\$4	

= \$ _____

Make checks payable to Stephens College

+ Additional \$2 =
for shipping \$ _____

+ \$.50 per extra book if more than
one are ordered.

= TOTAL \$ _____

ADDRESS TO: Stephens College
Campus Box 2034
Columbia, MO 65215

Emily Coleman
Emily Davis-Fletcher
Jessica Derr
Alice Friman
Holly Herlinger
Ashley Honeysett
Jillianne Jons
Candra Kennedy
Heather Koonse
Lindsey Lischka
Leslie Adrienne Miller
Lindsay O'Day
Erica Parker
Shaen Pogue
Krysta Rowe
Willow Ruth
Emily Sharp
Ruby Tapp
Jacklyn Wolfe



© J. L. P. 2000