

2002



# HARBINGER

Stephens College

## Harbinger 2002

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## From the Editor

Welcome to the 2002 edition of *Harbinger*, the literary magazine of Stephens College. This magazine has been produced for over fifty years, titled *Portfolio* in the 1960s, changing to *Narcissus* in the 70s. For the last 20 years the magazine has been created under the title of *Harbinger*, an announcement of what is to come, and the student staff has worked hard to gather together the voices of emerging writers. We have taken a large step forward in the magazine's development this year, thanks to an energetic student staff and a phenomenal selection of manuscript submissions and photographs. Excitement continues to build as the magazine matures, preparing to meet a broader community audience.

We decided to open this issue with the voice of Shaen Pogue in *Ars Poetica*. This piece personifies the writer's struggle to create art, evoking the tension between the love and loathing that is at times involved in the effort.

The writer's motive is sometimes introspection and distillation of memory, as in the childhood memories of *Fancy Feathers* and *Carrie, will you carry me?* The writer may strike a humorous tone, as in *Clara Undone*, or go for shock value as *Human Platter* does in an effort to draw attention to an injustice. Whatever the motive, tone or diction, the works all examine the various shades of our human existence.

We close this issue with a return to the internal focus, with Whitney Beers' *to my Heart*, a recognition of personal struggle, but ultimately a celebration of voice, a *Harbinger*.

"I will take our words,  
dark stones,  
And pass them out as loaves."

Whitney Beers

We hope you enjoy *Harbinger* 2002.  
Andrea Leigh Youngman



## Ars Poetica

We hold on to the page like an awkward life preserver,  
bobbing in seas of saltwater ideas.  
We can't drink,  
yet thirst consumes us and we try,  
choking and spitting black ink on a blue-lined sheet.  
We ache to shred the preserver into strips of trash can bait  
(we do not need it for survival),  
admit our longing to drown and find  
peace at the bottom of the ocean.  
We cannot even inflict our misery,  
are not *allowed* to,  
because our hands are frozen with grief,  
the pain is in our heads,  
we cannot stop fighting.  
Though dark ice covers the water  
and our fingers and faces chap and burn,  
*it will not snow.*  
Not even to cover the art we were once enamored with  
and now  
detest.

## Erasure

My mother slips  
erasers into my art box.  
I blacken them,  
scratching wishes for a sibling on the backs.  
Ten weeks into fall,  
seventy days into term,  
a smell is brought into the house.  
Antiseptic diluted by air  
clings to hair and clothes like an invisible child.  
My mother's cheeks glow pink.  
Twenty weeks  
and the doctor confines her to bed.  
The child kicks her sides like my erasers kick  
the walls of my art box.  
Twenty-five weeks.  
The house is empty except for the insipid odor of medicine.  
The hospital gift shop  
provides gumdrops and crossword puzzles  
to be taken to my new lair of  
sticky, orange chairs.  
Monday when we go back home,  
the rooms are still,  
silent.  
We don't speak.  
We only think about how it feels like Sunday  
while we eat our cold fried chicken and coleslaw.  
The book of puzzles still confuses me.  
I reach for an eraser to cleanse the pages,  
seeing the words scribbled on the back too late.  
I blacken the remaining pink  
with my licorice-scented marker.  
Forget the silver sister necklace.  
Forget the baby-soft mouth and shrimp-colored fingers.  
Stop thinking about the  
pink-painted, blue-tainted room down the hall,  
and the unseen child  
christened and buried  
by the smell of antiseptic.

## Koto Concert, 2001

She leaves her straw shoes  
on the concrete  
and kneels in respect for *koto*  
the dragon,  
gold kimono fluttering demurely against the floor.  
Pulled back with tortoise-shell,  
her dark hair lowers,  
modestly declining her role in the art.

She steadies the mouth  
and brushes the scales, *ji*,  
with her fingertips  
as though it were a docile lion.

Gently snapping the strings  
and pushing to alter pitch,  
striking with *tsume*  
bone picks.

She coaxes the animal  
to dream and forget its teeth,  
wake in a trance and disregard fire.

Her subtle magic gives breath to music  
of nature  
fire, water, wind, flower  
hushed with an unseen intensity  
and honeyed.

Silk strings respond  
and paulownia wood body resonates  
as *ryubi*, the dragon's tail,  
coils in ashy notes.

The music ceases and fades  
and the small face tilts down once more  
to gaze at the tame creature.

Beast and maiden  
elegant and terrible  
join strength and purity  
in one being.



“Torso”

## **Portrait of my Left Breast**

My left breast is beautiful. My left breast is a plump Caucasian woman who enjoys swimming, purple silk sheets, and Celtic music. After a long day, my left breast likes to unwind, get out of that god awful harness, and return to her natural freedom. Nudity. She loves warm bubbles and soft sponges. She prefers to air-dry.

My left breast has a tendency towards claustrophobia. Some call her anti-social, but they don't understand that it's not the people, it's the space they take up. When she's pressed up next to her neighbor on the right, she can't breathe and starts to panic. In a room filled with breasts, you can be sure to find her next to a window, looking out at the trees and wishing she was in one, being caressed by the leaves.

I have a friend whose left breast is smaller than her right and therefore has developed a neurotic jealousy of her right-winged sister. My left breast does not get jealous. My left breast is wise enough to understand that without her neighbor, she would get rather lonely. However, a certain degree of solitude is a necessity. When on her back, she likes to lean as far left as possible, away from her sister, so she has time to think.

My left breast dreams of ocean waves, naked sunsets, and hot cucumber oil massages. She could spend all day in a bookstore, a museum, or underwater. She likes to appear completely satisfied by herself, but in fact, she longs for companionship. Of course, she would never admit it.

## *Whitney Beers*

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When she was sixteen, my left breast refused to go swimming. She would hide under crossed arms and bulky clothing and never come out. She tried to escape her birthday pool party. When the candles were blown out, her grandmother said, "I think you have the biggest breasts in the whole family!" My left breast wore a T-shirt over her swimsuit.

Now my left breast is not sixteen. She has learned a lot over the years. My left breast knows that she does not like to be touched by strange men or by uncles. She does not like rose or lavender scented bath gel. She admires other breasts her own size who do not hide under crossed arms or bulky clothing. And she loves to dance.

My left breast is not yours. She will not take commands, perform, or conform to your standards. She will make her own decisions. My left breast loves me. My left breast is beautiful.

## goodnight, princess

i can't go to bed because i'm scared. mommy says don't be silly, go to bed. daddy says i'm bigger than they are, and they're more scared of me than i am of them. i tell mommy i'm scared anyway, but mommy just laughs. mommy says to stay really really still. mommy says that if i stay still, and hardly breathe, they won't be able to find me. i will be safe. safe.

i stand in front of my bedroom door, waiting. i look very carefully at the doorknob and the wood patterns, to see if there's anything moving. nothing. i take a deep breath, turn the doorknob, push it wide open, and jump back. nothing. very slowly, very very slowly, i slip my hand into the dark room, reaching for the light switch. i close my eyes. i don't want to see them, even if they are there. my fingers find the switch and i flip it on. i hold my breath. nothing. i hear nothing. i give them a few minutes to hide. finally, i open my eyes. first the right one, then the left. nothing. deep breath. if i start with a running jump, i can make it to my bed without touching the floor. one. .two. .three. .jump! safe on my bed. i stand up straight on the mattress, shake out my sheet and blanket. nothing. check under my pillow. nothing. safe.

every night i try to make myself smaller than the night before. i slide under the covers, tucking the blanket around my body as tight as i can, so nothing can get in. i curl up with my knees to my chest, my head tucked down, my fists under my chin.

mommy comes to the door and laughs. *don't suffocate under there*, she says. she turns out the light. no, mommy, please leave the light on. *don't be silly*. i'm not silly, i want the light on. *why do you need the light on?* i'm scared. *only babies are scared of the dark, you're not a baby are you?* i'm not scared of the dark, i'm scared of the...*oh for goodness sake, don't be a baby.*

*they're only cockroaches.*  
she shuts the door.

i hold my breath and listen. listen. nothing. i try not to breathe at all, until just at that moment when my head is about to explode, and then i take a deep breath. that's when i hear it. a rustling, scratching noise. where was it? in the walls? floor? . . .bed? i hold my breath again, ignoring the ache in my chest and my head until i can't stand it any more, and i take a gasping breath. i hear it again. close. and i know. . .they're in the room with me.

i put my hands over my chest. two little lumps have just started growing there. when i go to grandma's house, she comes over and pokes me and says *are those boobies? when i was your age, i didn't have boobies.* i'm not sure if these things are good or bad, but i don't want anyone to poke them and i'm scared that if i don't hide them, the roaches in my room will crawl under my blanket and eat them up. those little shiny black crawling roaches. eating my boobies.

or maybe it would be better if they ate them. then grandma wouldn't poke me anymore and mommy wouldn't make me eat less food at dinner and daddy would still come to my room at night and tickle my back. he tickles my brother's back. but not mine anymore. and all i can figure is, it's because of these boobies. i don't want them anymore.

i take a deep breath and fling off the blanket, sprawling out on the bed, spreading my arms and my legs and stretching as long as i can. i wait. listen. come and get me. you can have my boobies, so i can have the rest of my body back, safe.

i'm waiting. lying here in the dark, waiting for you to come and get me.

i feel a tiny scratching on my right ankle. i scream, kick my legs wildly. i pull the blankets over me again, curling up on my side. . .shaking. no. i was lying. i want my boobies. please don't eat me.

i hear someone open the door. i peek out of the blanket.

daddy is framed in the doorway. he reaches in and turns on the light. our eyes meet for a second, and then i hide my head under the blanket again. i lie there, listening to him breathe.

and i think. . .please save me, daddy. don't let them eat me.

*goodnight, princess.*

he leaves the light on.

## **Just like me**

She was my favorite Barbie.  
I cut her synthetic hair,  
dressed her in layer after layer  
of clothing  
for extra padding,  
hiding under the shapeless brown sock dress  
Mother insisted she wear.  
She stayed home Saturday nights,  
just like me,  
teetering on her plastic balcony  
watching the normal dolls drive away  
in their pink Cadillacs.

# Imagine

one day receiving an apple,  
(from what appears to be a kind old woman)  
that turns out to be poison.  
I personally try to avoid  
apples  
red meat  
eggs  
fashion magazines  
people who wear belts  
weather reports  
and any seven men who seem overly eager  
to take me into their home.  
These are good ways not to  
be poisoned  
develop a fatty heart  
have high cholesterol  
hate your body  
meet people who are uptight  
think it is going to be warm when it isn't  
or be buried in a glass coffin.

## Miss Wilson

turned the heat off even  
on the coldest winter mornings  
because it encouraged us to be less lazy  
and get the right answers.  
She would pound on her old oak desk and demand,  
“If  $x^3 - x^2 + x - 2 = 25$  what is  $x$ ?”  
But what if  $x$  has a hysterectomy,  
is replaced by a woman we call Smokey  
because it's tattooed on her forearm,  
what if we like her better and then  
 $x$  returns changed, timid, scared and we spend  
the rest of the semester eating jelly beans  
that stick in our throats, listening to  $x$   
talk about her husband.

1<sup>st</sup> Place Photo Contest Winner



“Fall”

## Fancy Feathers

I don't remember who named him,  
me        mom        dad.  
We all lived together then.  
White Leghorn rooster,  
bright red comb and wattle,  
maize-colored legs, and  
two long, elegant tail feathers  
twisted and arched over his back.

Oh, how I hated that Fancy Feathers  
with his half-inch long spurs.  
It was some feud we had,  
me always hiding, spying  
to catch him  
              unaware,  
                          him luring me away  
from the protection of the house,  
              the mulberry tree,  
                          my source of ammunition:  
water  
              hoses, guns, buckets,  
even pink plastic Tupperware glasses  
would do in a pinch.  
See, the only thing funnier  
than a wet cat  
was a wet rooster.

Surrounded by his hens  
scratching and pecking,  
clucking, crowing.

I could tell when he was  
going to.

Beak pointed to the heavens,  
eyes wide and staring,  
wings beating faster  
and faster like the smithy's billows,  
then the feathers on his neck  
would stick straight out.

That's when he was committed to the crow. He couldn't stop  
no matter what.

Water pistol in hand,  
I ran outside to nail that  
damn chicken, peeking  
around the corner of the house.  
Timing was everything.  
Eyes closed, singing his praises  
or maybe his lament  
to the Chicken God,  
I caught him in mid-  
cock-a-doodle-do,  
pelting him, soaking him  
in a hail of water bullets,  
humiliating him. Hens cackling  
You gonna take that?

He saw heard charged  
me,  
feathers ruffled,  
eyes blazing, spurs  
slicing the air  
as he jumped, spun  
and shrieked after me,  
fancy feathers whipping wildly  
as he ran. I ran  
to the house, slammed the door  
in his face just in time.

Cross-legged on the rag rug  
behind that door,  
eye to eye,  
I laughed in his face  
and squirted him unmercifully  
with my pistol  
as he hung by his spurs,  
stuck in the screen door,

instead of my legs

that later bore  
the marks of the belt.

## **The Goin' Up Just Ain't Worth The Comin' Down Anymore**

All it took  
was that dappled grey mare  
crow-hopping  
four  
or five times,  
the resounding thud  
of my ass  
hitting concrete hard  
packed dirt  
and the crunch  
of my tailbone breaking  
to make me realize  
I'm still  
Not  
the cowboy  
I never was.

## Afterglow

As we lie  
together  
in love,  
when the early summer breeze,  
scented sweetly  
by the gold-tipped  
fuschia-petalled  
peonies growing under  
our bedroom window,  
blows gently and slowly  
across our bodies,  
cooling our skin,  
ruffling our hair,  
I wish we had some long,  
white gauze curtains  
to dance.

## Lot's Daughters

Back when people was first poor and daddy couldn't stand it no more he chosed to lay down and slice his veins open and he didn't die cause he called him a prayer on the telephone. They telled him everything would turn good. He just gotta stop his bleedin' for things to turn right up, so he hollered "Lilith" (that's our mama) and she come runnin' and stopped his blood cause she's a woman and they know stuff like that.

Daddy said we had to pray and everything be good and ever since then he got the "touch." Everything he do turn to green-gold-clickety-cash. He got him good work and gamble lucky and make all kind o' money. And he don't drink no more like he did when we was way little so he can save every dime and we still ain't got nothin'. We all beg and cry and bat our eyelashes till the cows come home an here we is, daddy's girls, and we can't get that bastard wrapped around our fingers no more for nothin'. He save it all for them church people who prayed him the touch. He don't do no banks. He keep his green at home, savin' it up special and he don't give us nothin'. Mama got no perm and she got no earrings and I ain't got no shiny shoes in red like I been wantin'. He givin' all his touch to the church.

So they finally come, you know, as word was gettin' out 'bout him wanting to donate church-wise cause I know daddy he called 'em. He was piling his green up in the closet and then the basement and then he filled our room up so we sleeping on the couch, me and Leezy, and we keep our piggy banks underneath so he don't church that up too.

When them church folks come, all them neighbors come too. They ain't got nothing just like we ain't. They wantin' food and clothes and some o' that green daddy don't share. Some o' that green he gonna give all to the church and still we all poor and hungry. They get to bangin' on the door cause they mad and they want in but these church folks is already here an won't let 'em in and the neighbors get to hollering about wantin' money and me and Leezy we get scared for our own and grab it out from under

the couch and hold tight. Daddy seed us and took my bank and Leezy's too and he throwed it out and hollered for the people to take our money. Me and Leezy's. And that's all we got.

People gettin' awful loud outside and them church folks tell us we got to git. We got to be safe cause daddy got the touch. They keep his money just fine they tell us. We got to go. Our cousins don't wanna go. They think daddy done flipped his gourd, and they right, but us and mama gotta go. Mama don't really want to. We get about half way gone and she turn right around home and daddy say "if you leave, woman, you dead to me. You like the salt sweat dripped off me and all dried up," so mama says "fine," and she goes to where she can live and kick her heels up a little. We stuck with ol' fruit-loop.

Daddy say church will take care o' everything. We just got to lay low, so we get us a motel room up in Boaar county and daddy just sit around all day playin' with the rabbit ears on the TV and it ain't never even on. We got nothin', me and Leezy, nothin' to do and we hungry and we alone 'cept ol' fruit-loop and he's just starin' at the blank box like he waitin' for the church to beam his sorry self up. We ain't never gonna get nothin' from him. Leezy thinks maybe we shoulda listen for the church voices, like daddy. Maybe we get the touch. I tell her "sure thing, and what the church people do with daddy's money?" So we be back to thinking we never gonna have nothing. Daddy ain't nothing but a drool bucket anymore nohow.

We thinking we got to learn ourselves the touch and get some green, if we ever gonna get us some things. I remembered Leezy about what happened to daddy way back and we get us a paper clip from out o' the carpet, cause it's all we can find, and I poke it in daddy's arm then mine until I make us some holes and they bleedin' and I say "amen to the 700 Club" and I run outside and check the soda machine and it got change in the bottom. I bought us a soda and me and Leezy gonna drink it and cut some more. She gonna check the pay-phone, see if she can get her some touch, too. I ain't gonna tell no church people and we gonna cut and cut til we make us a bunch o' money, til I get me them new red shoes.

## Clara Undone

Clara teetered out the back door, splashing gin on her chipped toenail polish. She squatted at the edge of the cistern, peeking down between the worn wood slats, pressing her eye against an opening. "I'm gonna fall in this damn thing head first." She snorted and toppled backwards, as she tried to stand up. She walked over to the giant oak and looked up at its branches. "You ever feel like you're just comin' undone?" She slapped its trunk. "You and me both."

She grabbed her lawn chair and dragged it back under the tree. Plopping down in it, she propped her feet up against the bark.

"Hope you don't mind if we talk. We both seen a few things." She pulled her chair closer and flicked an ant off of her leg.

"Kaitly and Tom gonna be out tomorrow. They're putting a concrete cover on that cistern. You think she's afraid her old mom'll fall in some day, end up in the bottom? Bottom's not but two feet down any more. I been filling the thing with trash for years."

She leaned her head back and looked up, watching one dead branch caught among the living, waiting for a wind, waiting to untangle and fall.

"Ain't gonna have to worry about falling in any more, so then I'll just sit out here and talk to you like I'm waitin' for a branch to fall on my head, crack it open, split like a melon." Clara imagined the huge knot in her head coming undone, her secret blowing out into the open, like leaves waving in the breeze for everyone to see.

"I'm Clara, by the way. Don't think I ever formally introduced myself. Clara Lynn Peasel. That's my maiden name. Took it back after the divorce. Don't 'spect you knew that. But you been standing there watching since I bought this house, haven't you?" She twisted a piece of hair around her finger. "Maybe you'll understand."

"Ever had a gin and tonic? Kind o' loosens the laces. Maybe

I'll get two more, one for me, one for you. "She laughed as she walked back in the house.

She set her glass on the counter and walked into the bathroom. Sitting down on the toilet, she leaned back and thought about her old house. The back addition was tacked on a long time ago, when plumbing came into fashion. Cook, mix a drink, pee, mix another drink, bathe, do laundry and pee again all in one neat little triangle. Not a bad arrangement. Not bad at all. She stood up and examined herself in the mirror, plucking a stray hair from her chin. She stared at her own reflection and wondered if people could tell she'd done something bad, just from looking. She had always wondered. The phone rang as she walked out of the bathroom. She didn't move to answer it, just leaned against the doorway and listened.

"Hey, mom. We'll be out about ten tomorrow. Tom's bringing a load of sand for fill. He's gonna build the forms. We'll just pick up some pre-mix. Kids are coming, if you don't mind. I'll bring dogs and chips. Don't worry about fixing a thing. Love you."

Clara leaned out the kitchen window, trying to peer far enough left to see the cistern. She opened the cupboard and grabbed another glass, filling that one and her own with ice and a splash of gin. Slice of lime, more gin, leaving an inch or so at the tops for tonic. She headed back out to the oak, lifting both drinks, "one for you, one for me." She snuggled each one into a smooth grassy spot on either side of her chair.

"I ever tell you much about Kaitly's dad? My ex? God, he was a winner. Met him when I was 17. Told me I had exceptional hooters. That must be what made me think I loved him. Cause I don't have exceptional hooters. They're pretty dinky, in fact. But he said I held 'em up so proud, and they seemed to be so sensitive. Told me 'all tits have the same amount of pleasurable nerve ends, and on ones like yours all them nerve endings are concentrated in a smaller spot and those girls with great big tits are actually on the sorry end.' Well, how could I help but love him. Turned out he was full of shit and probably told that story to every girl he dated until one believed him. He was stuck, when I ended up

getting pregnant. Wonder if that's the same story he told, when I found him fuckin' the socks off Brenda Keppling on my lunch break. Son of a bitch even took his socks off and *removed* his underwear. I swear to God. All he ever did for me was hike that elastic down below his balls. And she got 'em all the way off. But that's been a lot of years ago. Just strikes me as odd, though, that the first time I ever saw 'em swingin', you know, not all nestled with elastic, well, it wasn't for me.

"I don't know why I told you that. I can't help it.

"Think I'm avoidin' things. You know where I gotta go. It just won't come right out. I'm not crazy, you know. I just have to tell somebody. I'll just stick it out there, and what you do with it's your business. Least it's outta me. I know what you seen. Got your roots wound all under me."

Clara got up, searching her pocket for a bent cigarette. One more thing she lacked the willpower to stop. She turned to the oak and hooted with laughter.

"What was Kaitly then, sixteen? Smart-mouthed, too, wasn't she?

"Jeff used to stop in, just every once in awhile. Always said he was here to see Kaitly. No job, no woman more like it. Thought he might get some free food and fuck every so often. Treated Kaitly like she wasn't even there."

Clara knew that the only reason she had tolerated his occasional visits were not for Kaitly's benefit, but due to her extreme moments of horniness. She reached down for her drink and tried to empty it, followed by a belch that could have frightened the wildlife away.

"Think I'll have your drink too, if you don't mind.

"She walked in on me and Jeff once, Kaitly did, after the divorce. Guess we thought she was sleeping. Here I spent all my time talking about what an asshole her dad was and she sees me buck naked on all fours in the middle of the coffee table." Clara doubled up with laughter.

"I got to pee. Wait here." She made a beeline for the bathroom.

“Much better,” Clara announced as she came back outside. “Have a seat. I’m gonna.” She leaned her head back over her chair and tried to picture all of the things Kaitly had seen her dad do. She had walked in on him busy with other women several times, before the divorce. Kaitly knew he would boink anything that held still long enough.

Every time he had left, Clara promised herself she wouldn’t do that again, and every time he came back, she did. As many times and ways as possible. She knew he was a horse’s ass, and that sex was the only reason he stopped in. She never had been able to control her addictions. She inhaled three packs of cigarettes a day, drank like a fish, and had to steer very clear of pretzels and chocolate. She used to eat potato chips until she puked (irritating her mother) and could not, absolutely could not say no to sex with the man she despised.

“Last time he called, said he was coming, Kaitly didn’t wanna stay at all. She planned on staying at her friend’s house all weekend. I told her she really ought to stay and at least say hello to her dad, butt that he was. Let me see if I can remember how she said it exactly. ‘You’ll do just fine on your own, mom. Drink a few, then why don’t you go ahead and pull your pants down and bend over, wait for him.’ I just stood there, probably with my mouth hanging open. There I was, smoke in one hand, drink in the other, and happy as all hell because I was gonna get some, grossed out by who I was gonna get it from. You ever have something just slap you upside the head? Kaitly walked out that door and told me I couldn’t stop anything. Seemed she might be right at the time. I got myself another drink and took my cigarettes outside, so I could sit on the back step for awhile.

“When I had time to think on it, I figured I could handle it. I can stop some things, if I put my mind to it.

“I had a little time, so I ran in town and picked up some Wild Turkey, thinking I needed a little something a little stronger to build my nerve. My JUST SAY NO nerve.

“When he finally got there and I told him Kaitly was gone for the weekend, I could tell he didn’t care one little bit. He just

stood there talking about the weather, telling me all about his new bike that I couldn't give a rat's ass about, stickin' his hand between my legs the whole time, acting like he didn't even know it was there.

"I told him I was busy and had things to do. But that he could have a drink before he left if he wanted.

"There he was, standing in the kitchen with a drink giving me that sexy lopsided grin of his, and right then Kaitly's idea of droppin' my drawers and saying hello didn't sound too bad. And that made me mad, thinking Kaitly knew me better than I did. So I marched right in the bathroom and took me a Valium. Then I thought it might be a good idea to calm his little old pecker down cause I don't know how I can be expected to say no when he's got that thing around. I told him to go kick back in the living room and relax, and I ground up the rest of that Valium and poured some in a little glass and covered it with Wild Turkey and took it in to him and said 'shoot this, baby' and he did. And it didn't make a damn bit o' difference. I figured I would keep on pouring Turkey and Valium down him until he couldn't get it up if he tried, then I wouldn't have to worry about saying no. Probably embarrass him so much he'd never come back. He had himself nearly a half a bottle to drink, and half of my Valium, and when I walked in the room with one more drink, he looked a little weary, but when he unzipped his jeans, pop went the weasel.

"Well, I'll be damned" was all I could think to say, I remember. I handed him the last drink and he kinda grinned all stupid while he laid back on the couch. I figured what the hell. Kaitly just didn't know yet what it was like to be alone and horny as hell, when you start thinking you might impale yourself on a door knob. I climbed right on.

"Thought I was doing a pretty good job, considering I don't like to be on top and all, but after awhile I realized he wasn't moving. Weird thing was his pecker was still sticking straight up. I'm serious! Stone cold passed out and he still had a hard on. I sat there and thought on it awhile, and it seemed to me (and it still does) that if I had passed out in the middle, he'd keep right

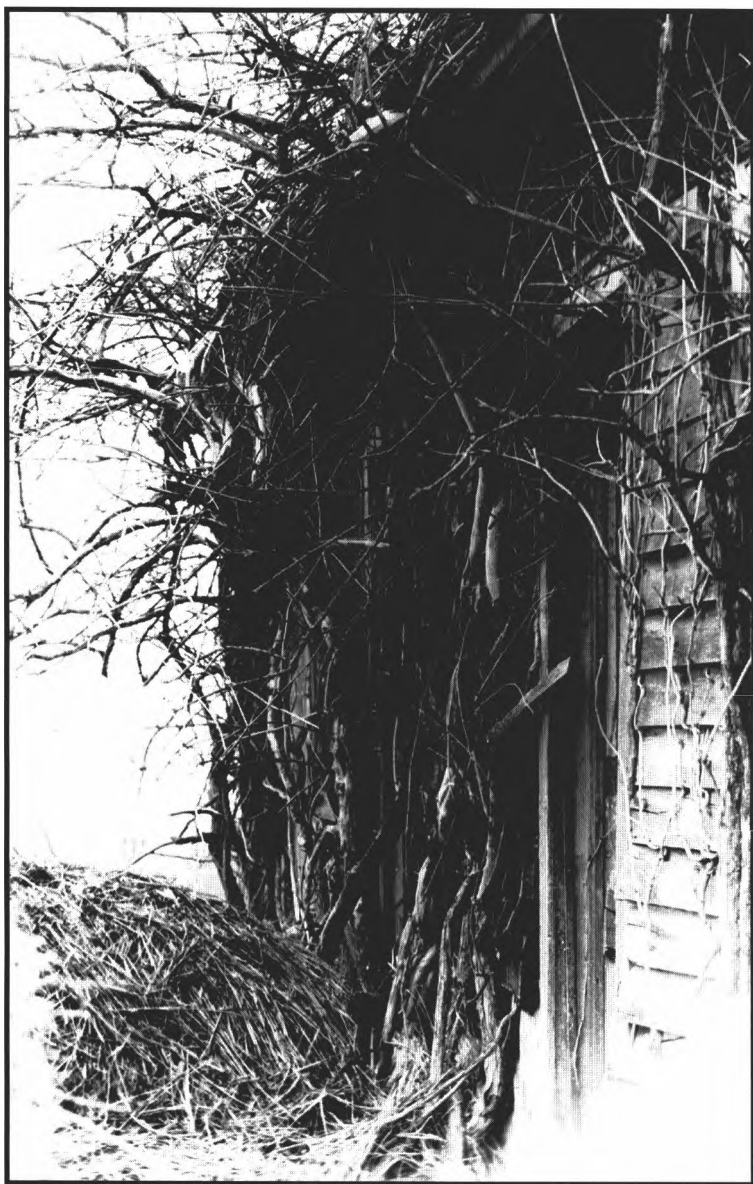
on going until he was done. So I just finished my business, which wasn't so easy, cause things started to get a little soft after awhile.

"After that I sat over in the rocking chair for awhile and just sat there getting the willies. I never wanted to have sex with Jeff, just wanted to have sex, and he was the only one that was available, and that was only once in a blue moon. And I just hated that he knew every time he came here, he would get some. Course, every time he came here, I got some. And I didn't have to live with the asshole. I hauled my drunken ass (I had a bit of the Turkey, too) out of the chair and went over to tell him directly that he was an asshole, cause he was passed out and wouldn't know shit anyway, but it seemed to me that he wasn't breathing, so I leaned down and listened, and I didn't hear or feel any air. I didn't feel any at all. I just panicked. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't call the police, with me drunk, and him full of my Valium. I couldn't do that. He couldn't stay there, 'look Kaitly, I killed your dad. I fucked him to death.' Jesus. That's when I hauled him out here. Dumped him in the cistern. What the hell else was I going to do? I never meant for him to die. I didn't ever mean to kill nobody."

Clara stretched her legs out of the chair and walked over to the cistern. "Kaitly never has asked about her dad. Wonder if she knows she's gonna cover him in concrete." She wandered back to the tree, lost inside her own head for awhile.

"Well, you know now. You know everything that happened. I try not to think about it.

"I never, never meant for that to happen. You wanna know what really eats at me? You already know, don't you. Wakes me up sometimes. When I was pushing him the rest of the way over the cistern's edge, did you hear? He grunted right before he hit the water. I know you heard it. Son of a bitch wasn't dead."



“Harpo’s Hairy Barn”

## And I didn't know

Pungent musk lingered  
in the air while  
the accent of Jamaica  
was brought to my lips.

I tasted salt,  
strawberry lip-gloss,  
mint toothpaste,  
dark melted chocolate  
sticking to my body.

Oldies played  
in the foreign living room,  
your little girl stared at me  
from a picture frame,  
a Bob Marley towel hung over the  
closed door, and  
those gold rings ALWAYS came off.

As if you were my pimp.

I loved the aroma of denial  
and the way it smelled on my  
Stephens College sweatpants.  
A reminder of the women's school  
I belonged to.

Those free, independent,  
innocent girls  
will swim in your cologne  
over and over again.

Like I did.

And I didn't know.

## Flowers

I'm so mad at him right now I could spit crossways, and that means I must be fired up 'cause girls ain't supposed to spit nohow. I'm fumin', let me tell you, 'cause when I went outside this mornin', I found Daddy had been in my little garden. I don't know what he thinks he's doing, just pickin' my flowers like no tomorrow. It's the same thing every Saturday evenin'. He brushes out his Sunday suit—the one he's got to wear the very next day—and jams a daisy, one of my daisies, in the handkerchief pocket, like it makes him look all fine and dandy and not like a horse's tail end, and then he shines up his shoes like they're gonna hold up the moon when he steps out. He don't got no idea how silly and fool-like he looks with that puny daisy meltin' in his coat pocket like that. He just looks plumb ridiculous. He don't know how I worked so hard and so long on that little scrap of dirt, so I near thought my back was gonna break, and you know, girls ain't supposed to break their backs in the dirt neither. It ain't no ladylike way to go.

Mama's the one who started the whole garden thing, before she suspected Daddy of stealin' her flowers to give to another lady he was more partial to. Sometimes I picture that other lady with curves of coconut hair and lips like rose bits. I bet she had bracelets on her ankles that glinted when she moved. I got a hard time picturin' her with wings though, and the only thing she could have to outbest my Mama would be angel wings. She had to of had *somethin'*, if she could go take Daddy away from Mama like that. Anyway, before the other lady, Mama used to salt slugs that was creepin' too mighty close to her precious blooms. Since she ran off to her brother Andy's, after Daddy had been pickin' those flowers for about nigh near a year, I got to salt the world now and remember my Mama, and I pretend it's her pourin' out on the earth.

Daddy don't seem to remember Mama as much as Ellie and I do. He just steps out every Saturday evenin' polished as a new doorknob and meets his lady of the week for coffee at Rosie's.

He's always real gentleman-like and buys a bit of blackberry pie to go with their coffee. He says it's real funny how different ladies doctor up their coffee different ways. Daddy drinks his coffee however the lady gets it, with cream, maybe a little milk or sugar, sometimes black.

Yep, Daddy sure has had a fine time steppin' out every Saturday in his good suit with a daisy in the front pocket. What he never counted on was all his lady friends runnin' into each other sometime. Considerin' the puny size of the town and Rosie's bein' the only diner, I don't really get why it didn't never come to his mind. Anyways, all these nice, proper ladies got talkin' about their Saturday nights, and come to find out, they all been goin' out on the town with a slightly similar fella. He's always wearin' his brushed up blue suit, like it was Sunday mornin', and always givin' 'em some kinda sap-drained flower, all the while spoutin' nonsense about summer days and rosy-toesies and jingle-jangles. It took 'em quite a bit to realize that the slightly similar fellas they all been goin' out with is really one similar fella—my Daddy. Those ladies that drink coffee at Rosie's is a bit daft. As soon as that little mix-up was cleared, they all come chargin' out to our house seekin' some justice.

At first, they tap on the door all sweet and beguillin', callin' out in that voice they use for sick cats, and when that don't work, they pound a little harder and call a little louder, and when *that* don't work, they just go and smash up the window glass, and we see all these right proper ladies actin' not so right and proper, just wriggling in like caterpillars, their pretty skirts goin' every which way and their lipsticked mouths just yellin' and yellin'. Ellie jumps up right quick and starts screamin' for Daddy. He runs in, lookin' all confused at first and then panicky. He darts around all frantic and grabs a newspaper (like he can't find nothing better) and kinda swats the air like they was bugs or puppies or somethin'. Sometimes I think he's tetched in the head. He grabs Ellie and holds her right smack dab in front of him, so if those ladies are gonna go through him, they got to go through baby Ellie first. I think it's awful mean of him to do that to her, so

I let out a mighty yell that puts all the screamin' ladies to shame and run headlong into him, trying to make him loose his grip. That don't make the situation better, though, 'cause he grabs on to me next and we're all three sandwiched together like bread and jam. Daddy must be the jam 'cause he's the one that's in trouble.

And then the unsuspectin' thing happens. Daddy starts quotin' poetry. All those ladies stop and shake their heads like they're in a daze, and I'm thinkin' surely they're not fallin' for the weakest load of charm in the lot, but it near seems that's the case. They turn downright civil, like they don't never find out Daddy hadn't just been two-timin', he'd been seven-timin' and eight-timin' them. Daddy opens up the door and acts real polite, makin' sure none of the ladies step on broken glass, and he goes out to my flower patch and plucks up some scraggly stemmed things and gives 'em to the ladies for no hard feelin's. You would of thought they were made outta rubies and diamonds the way those ladies took on. Ellie and me just stare in pure amazement. We're the only ones who see those ladies walkin' up the street with my Daddy, laughin' and takin' on, plucking the petals one by one off their flowers, sayin' "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me..."

## Some Kinda Spark

I hope you hear me when I say church songs should start developin' some kinda spark when they sung. They might maybe look all noble and upright on the page, marchin' out time in measures and rhythms, but you just wait till that chorus hits your vocal chords and blood. You just wait for it to start yankin' up your eyelashes and the hair on your neck. If a song's sung proper, you ain't never gonna recover from it.

Now the truth of the thing is, all songs ain't sung proper. Sometimes the singers get sleepy and dulled all blunt from the week, and they arms go limp holdin' the hymn books, and they forget you have to open your eyes and lift up your head to praise right. They think it's an act a vacuum cleaner could do, just sucking up air with no feelin'.

But let me say! When the people stop thinking about their hungry stomachs and the chores they got to do at home and how their feet hurt like they ain't never hurt before, that's when the music starts. You live in a real song. You breathe in a real song. You smack a peach and find the pit in a real song. You discover the old hymn that was so dry now turns slow and grave-like, so you can taste the dark moss on your teeth, bitter like unsalted greens. You can smell the iron from Christ's blood and tree wood rottin' down into the hill it was carried to.

It's never like you think it's gonna be, with ivory rose angels and gold dust and sin washed away like dish suds. It's more than that. It doesn't lift you up from the earth, send you papersnowflake-soarin' into the clouds or anything. No, it's nothin' like that. It just gives you some good solid dirt in your hands, so you can feel God earth-breathin'. It lets you smell sour hay from that perfect damp manger. It tears you all apart and stitches you back with no explainin' at all.

If you ain't heard a song sung the right way, all the rememberin's of your life have been nothin' more than twinges you sorta felt but ignored. Everything's just fringed at the outside. Your gut's what's missin'. In a song done proper, everybody's

singin' and the organ's slammin' them notes out like it's gonna explode any minute and rain stars of noise, and the kids are just jibberin' and yellin' out the few words of the song they think they know, and you feel it all build up in you something wild and fierce, and you think you're gonna start rainin' stars too, if you don't shake your hair or clap your hands or praise the angels for liftin' you a little closer to God. It just all stacks up like cakes in your soul, until you can't take it no more and you gotta do something. Your feet are twitchin' like mad. Your heart's beatin' in your ears. You give a mighty whoop and throw yourself outta the pew and down the green aisle carpet, just somersaultin' showin' off, givin' no mind to anybody. And you know what? It makes you feel *proud* and I dare anyone to say that *that* kinda pride's a sin 'cause it's the same pride people get in their mamas and their daddies and the sun just for risin' on 'em. I dare anyone to say *that* pride's a sin 'cause it's of love and it's of God and let me tell you, it's some kinda spark.



“Contemplating Dickinson”

## **Garden Karma**

I've been uprooted and replanted  
too many times.

I'm sod, not seed.

Like a nomad, I'm accustomed  
to rolling myself up.

How long will I inhabit

this lot of land? Will I

have to grow roots,

deep into the soil

of a lawn that is not my home?

If only I had been a poppy instead,

throwing out anchors across the world,

wind depositing my treasures

in far-flung places,

granting my wish, naturally.

My kingdom could have rooted itself,

bloomed without sprinklers or compost.

On rocky terrain I would have reigned,

a queen adorned in scarlet silk

and onyx headdress.

I would have scorned the name "wildflower."

## **In the orchard**

he held a severed Granny Smith arm,  
twisting branch between  
Swiss army knife and thumb,  
marking a circle in the dark green bark.  
He slid skin off the detached limb  
revealing a ring of light-green flesh  
native to its forgotten body.

With my watercolor brush and sealant  
he painted a slit in the tree's torso.  
After each coating, he paused  
and dabbed the area,  
waiting for brown glue  
to form rubber.

*Can it work?* I asked,  
*How can one branch grow apples,  
and the rest of the tree pears?*

If the mother tree accepts  
the adopted arm.

Sure, it'll work, he said,  
cradling the branch  
like a sprained ankle or broken wrist,  
inserting the alien arm  
into an open, oozing wound.

He wrapped the new elbow  
with a bandage of breathable tape,  
wound it over branch, onto tree,  
over branch, again and again,  
listening to the pathways,  
encouraging circulation,  
willing it to produce a pulse.

*When do we remove the bandaid?*

Won't have to.

It'll fall away on its own.

*Like stitches in your mouth?*

He nodded and tied a loop for a sling  
from the tree to Granny's solitary,  
American arm.

I stood in that orchard,  
wishing this tree, and all the others  
were my own, not rented,  
that I was not the orphaned limb,  
strapped to the trunk  
of a Jordanian tree.

The wound sealed  
with time, and  
every vein of that new body  
revived me,  
fed me with desert soil,  
nursed my broken shoulder,  
healing it with new bark,  
until the dressing fell away  
to reveal a solid graft.

## **Carrie, will you carry me?**

### The Mysterious Woman

I am a mysterious woman. I walk around wearing my funny tights with all the holes, my big black cape, and a black mask. Nobody knows who I am, but everybody wants to know. I get more candy than all the other kids. My Halloween bag with the hollowed pumpkin's face is so heavy that the handles break. Daddy has to carry it around for me. I love being a mysterious woman. My dance teacher said it was a very good idea. I want to wear my Mysterious Woman costume all the time, but Momma won't let me. She says it'll get dirty. I wouldn't care if it got dirty, though. I just want to be a mysterious woman.

### Six

I like it when grown ups ask me how old I am. I like it because I have to use two hands. I hold up all the fingers on one hand and just the pointer finger on the other. Six is my favorite number. It's so much bigger than five. Crystal sits across from me at my table in school. She saw me making bubbles with my mouth. She said, "Carrie, are you five?" I said, "No." I guess only five year olds make big spit bubbles. But then she did it too! Crystal can't even make spit bubbles right. She must be five. I am six.

### Sisters

Sometimes Cherami makes me so mad! She looks into my face when I am mad and laughs like I am supposed to do a trick but forgot how. She pulled my pants down today. We had just eaten lunch. I ate a lot too, because Momma made us macaroni and cheese for the third day in a row. That's my favorite. We went outside to play. Cherami went next door to ask if Stephanie could come outside. I collected sticks from our yard, so we could build a fort or a castle. I only chose the best ones, the ones that were smooth and sturdy. Stephanie came out, and they sat down on her curb, by where the numbers are painted. Cherami and

Stephanie started talking about playing hide-and-go-seek with all the other big kids on the block. I didn't feel like building a fort anymore, or even a great castle like the ones in fairy tale books. I wanted to play hide-and-go-seek with all the big kids, if they would let me. I ran over to the curb and tugged on Cherami's shoulder.

"CheramiCheramiCherami!"

"Stop it, Carrie!"

"CheramiCherami. . ."

"What do you want?"

"I want to play hide-and-go-seek too!"

"You're too little. Stop being so annoying and mind your own beeswax."

"Well, I'll tell Momma."

"Tell her what?"

"I'll tell her you wouldn't let me play!"

"I'll pull down your pants if you do."

"No, no you won't."

"Yes I will. I'll pull them down right here."

"YOU WILL NOT!!!"

But she did. I was so mad I ran inside and told Momma. She told us to apologize to each other. I said I was sorry, but I didn't mean it. I think that sisters are stupid.

### Olive Fingers

I love it when Momma makes tacos for dinner. She always opens up a can of olives. Cherami and I love to eat the olives. We stick our fingers through the holes and wave our hands around with the black knobs on them. Our hands look like monster hands from the cartoons or like from Dad's *Star Trek* show. Cherami and I hate it when Dad watches *Star Trek*. It's stupid, and he gets really mad when he can't find his tapes. We always eat the ends off our *Star Trek* monster hands. The juice is warm and the olives shrink after you suck on them. But I like the way it feels the most before the olives shrink up. I like it when they turn around and around in your mouth, like a shiny ball.

### Tiffany

Tiffany is in my class. She is always bugging me to come to her house some day after school. I don't want to come to her house after school. I would rather watch after-school cartoons on Momma's bed. Everyone on our street is grown up now. I am in the first grade this year. Sometimes I see Cherami across the playground with the fifth grade class. The first graders can't go past the Big Toy in the center of the playground. The fifth graders are on the other side. Tiffany is annoying. She always asks me why I don't like her house. I say I like my own. I can't help it.

### A Sixth Grader

Cherami is a sixth grader now. She went to her first day of middle school today. I went with Momma to pick her up from school. We waited for her to come out after the bell rang. It was loud, and I bet we still could have heard it all the way at my house. Soon all the big kids came out the doors. There were so many of them. They all looked important. I finally saw Cherami. I ran and gave her a huge bear hug. She patted me kind of soft on the back. All of her new friends laughed, but not too loudly. She looked down at me. Her eyes got really wide and big. I just wanted to give her a hug.

### Picture Day

Today was Picture Day. Momma filled out a form and put it in an envelope with some money. She told me to keep it in my yellow folder and not to take it out until it was time to take our school pictures. I said, "Okay," and then I nodded. Picture Day only comes once a year. It's a very big deal. You have to remember to dress nicely, and you cannot forget to tell your mom about it, because she'll want to get some pictures to give to your grandparents. This year I wore a lavender dress. It used to be Cherami's. Some kids hate hand-me-downs, but I don't mind them. It's a pretty dress. Mrs. Miller told me I looked just like Cherami in it. Now that Cherami isn't in elementary anymore, everyone thinks that I am her. They get us mixed up. They all say we could be

twins. That's funny though, because she's a whole four years older.

### The Left Side of the Playground

I remember when I was in the first grade. All the first graders had to stick to the right side of the playground. All they can really do on that side is swing. There aren't any slides and no parallel bars. In first grade I used to swing during all of recess. That's the year I first learned to talk with myself inside of my head. Nobody can hear. I swang and talked and listened and thought. I think a lot. I am nine. The other fourth graders walk together in clumps. All the girls watch the boys play soccer, but I think that's really boring. Sometimes I try to follow the other girls, but I can never quite catch up. I just sit on top of the Big Toy and think, not on the left side or the right side. Just kind of in the middle.

### The Arts School

Cherami is going to an arts high school. Mom and Dad have to pay for her to go there. She had to audition and everything. She's going to be a dancer. Everyone loves to watch Cherami dance. I used to dance, but I quit because I didn't like it. I also quit Girl Scouts and piano lessons. Everyone is always asking me why I don't dance like Cherami. Mamoo asks me when I will take dance lessons again. I say I won't, and she looks disappointed. All anyone ever talks about is Cherami and her dancing. Cherami is beautiful. I got a pimple on my chin today.

### Shaky

I am the girl who shakes. I shake all the time. I shake in the lunch line, at recess, and any time someone looks at me. "Why are you shaking?" People ask it like I'm weird or strange. Momma got me a Barbie doll last Christmas. When I pressed my trembly fingers against the plastic casing on her box and slid her out, I saw that one of her feet was all twisted and bent up. Her bright pink high heels would not fit onto that mangled foot. We took the

messed up Barbie back to the toy store to trade her in for a better one. The man behind the counter picked up a thick black marker and wrote the word defective across the plastic, across her face. I think I am defective. No one wants to play with me either. I wish I wouldn't shake.

### Warm Milk and Anne

I never can sleep. Momma gets very frustrated with me, because I can't ever sleep. Dad gives me glasses of warm milk to drink when I get up late at night. It feels weird to swish it around in my mouth. Milk isn't supposed to be warm. Momma stays up with me for hours reading me *Anne of Green Gables* books. We are on *Anne of Avonlea* now. We have seen all the movies. We can't wait till Anne and Gilbert get married and have kids, because that is where the movies left off. But I still can't sleep. I hate it when Momma reaches for the bookmark and turns the knob on my desk lamp. The clock will say a time that I am not used to seeing with the sky dark. She kisses me. The next morning she will ask me when I finally got to sleep. I never feel tired. I just feel lost and stuck at the same time.

### Gliding

Sometimes I ride my bike farther than Mom tells me I can. She doesn't know. I peddle past the first stop sign, and then after that it's as though I'm not in charge anymore. I am gliding. The sky changes from blue, to pink, to almost black. Every house mirrors the pattern of the one before it, and I forget which street I am on. When the dark surrounds me completely, I get a little scared.

### Acting

Mom put me in an acting class. I wish I could have fun like everyone else. I can't talk to anyone. I just sit and stare. Everyone else is loud and they make jokes, and all I can really do is sit. They tell me to relax. They ask me why I am so nervous. I shrug. I feel like they are all big and I am still little. I suppose I am not

really all that little anymore. I know I can't act. The other kids are always fighting for attention. I can't even say my name.

### Cool

I'm finally catching up. I am about to be in the sixth grade. I have been waiting so long for this. I get to take elective classes in middle school. It's nothing like elementary. You get to choose between band, choir, or theatre arts and visual arts. Cherami took theatre, so I don't really want to do that. But I am horrible at music things, so I guess I'll have to do theatre. I am going to the same middle school Cherami went to. I hope nobody thinks that I am her and not me. I get to shop for school clothes at Contempo Casuals instead of the big department stores this year. Contempo is so neat. They have music videos playing on all of the TV screens, and all the clothes are so colorful. I just like to touch the fabrics. I am twelve now, nearly a teenager. I want to be cool, kind of like Cherami, but not really.

### Waiting

I wait a lot. In the morning I wait for the school bus to pick me up. I wait for all of my classes to start. I wait for them to end. I wait for the final bell to ring. I come home and do my homework and watch TV. I wait the longest for my mom to come home from picking up Cherami at her arts school downtown. Mom tells me I can come with her to pick up Cherami. I will only have to wait in the car and wait for her rehearsal to finish, which will feel like forever. I hate waiting. I hate dance. Cherami is always at rehearsal. I hate to go and watch Cherami dance. It is the same thing over and over again. The relatives all come, just to see Cherami dance. Mother always buys the same stupid flowers to give her. Dad takes off of work to come see her, and I am always forced to come along. Nobody ever sees much of me. I would rather stare at the walls in my room than go downstairs. I always feel angry, like something inside is screwed too tightly. The wind up toys that are wound too tight just break.

### Not a Diary but a Journal

I have started to keep journals. They are journals, not diaries. The word diary is just silly, like the color pink. I don't like pink. Besides, journal sounds so old and so mature. I have two spirals completely filled up so far. Mom is very impressed. She said that lots of people wouldn't even write that much in their entire life. It feels good to write, as though someone somewhere may decide to listen to what I have to say. I feel good. Writing is not waiting, it's doing. It's filling every page till the end with something important.

### Horror Movie

My name is like the horror movie that I am still not allowed to see. *Carrie*. One day I will see it. I have always pestered Mom to let me rent it at the video store. She says no. I used to hate my name, but I am beginning to like it now. It's also like the verb. "Carrie, will you carry my books?" Not many other people have my name. I can never find it when I see all the pencils and little license plates with names on them. Nobody else spells their name like I do, either. Maybe my name is special to me.

### Boys

I like this boy at school. I am not sure what to do. I suppose Cherami might be able to help me. She is older, after all. I only see her at night, always tired and busy with her dancing. I went into her room very late, just to see if she might still be awake. I asked her if she would mind if we talked a little. I heard fatigue in her voice, but she told me to sit down anyway. I sat on her desk across the room and started to tell her about this boy. Then she said, "Come over here by me, so I can hear you." I pulled myself to her through the dark. She took my hand. I sat by her and we talked and talked and talked. It feels good to talk to my sister, my friend.

## Undone

Cautiously sipping,  
tongue recoiled in anticipation  
of the burning first taste.  
I resign myself  
to coffee in solace.

A year ago we traded aprons  
brewed fast food coffee  
together  
at Starbucks.  
Our pores absorbed  
the deep pungent smell  
of arabica beans,  
mingling our lives together.

Green aprons  
curled up in a pile  
strewn at random  
into my car  
or yours?  
We shared.  
I always knew who wore it last.  
Stiff with stains,  
crackled like an old fall leaf  
was you.  
Rumpled and soft with wear,  
clinging to a worker's  
frame with the obedience  
of a child's blanket  
was me.

I removed my apron  
for the last time,  
my fingers grazing mocha stains

and stiffness.  
It was swathed  
with our familiar smell.  
The way the apron  
refused the comfort  
of clinging to my frame  
told me I had worn yours.

Ties of a comfortable apron  
strapped us together.  
Distance undid them,  
uprooted me from Starbucks  
and you.

I watched helplessly  
while you undid the ties yourself  
and handed my apron back,

not knowing  
you handed me yours.



“Linear Beauty—Solemn Strength”

## **Twenty Cents Apiece**

I could buy a stack of old postcards and lie  
about the places I've been. A dusty  
bundle of forgotten lines,  
twenty cents apiece.

Someone else's forgettable memories  
become my own bought and paid for sentiments,  
newfound proof

that people cared enough to write,  
to drop me a little line from St. Louie,  
Hannibal,

Nashua, Themopolis, Chattanooga,  
and the Golden Dolphin Motel.

With twenty cents I become timeless.

If I just hold my thumb over the "to" and smile  
at the thoughtfulness of "from."

## **Human Platter**

They say  
it's gaining popularity  
in the U.S.  
Another way women use  
their bodies making money.  
Forget exotic dancing.  
Street walking.  
Nude posing.  
Porn flicks.  
These women have  
up-scale,  
fashionable  
taste.

Give them their bikini wax.  
Rub and scrub down.  
Douche bag.  
Show them where to lie.  
How to position their bodies.  
Make them stay like that for hours.  
Who cares if it hurts?

The chefs' jobs:  
magnolia over the crotch, rose  
petals on the body,  
sashimi aesthetically arranged.

Twelve hundred bucks a pop,  
so businessmen can eat their meals  
off women's bodies with chopsticks.

Wouldn't matter if she's dead,  
so long as she stays still.

## Slide

Elaine stood in the kitchen, still in her tattered black suit, her long, dark hair falling out of its neat bun. She'd just gotten off work from an especially difficult day at Bruester, Bruster, and Brewster Attorneys at Law. The men had taken a big case on very short notice and expected her to have everything filed for it by the end of the day. She'd typed five memos, answered calls, and sorted and mailed envelopes all day long. Her usual work had been put on the back burner, and she'd have to make up for that lost time tomorrow. Instead of relaxing when she got home, she started making dinner. She diligently diced the celery, cutting the cubes for that night's soup.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

Elaine could hear the man in the next apartment humming a Top 40 hit. "How You Remind Me," by Nickleback. The beat was familiar, and it put Elaine into a daze. Her chopping fell into time with the music.

*Chop, chop, pause, chop, slide. Chop, slide.*

The celery slid around in her hands. Each time she added a handful of cubes to the pot, a few stragglers would slide out onto the floor, only to be mashed into pulp by her dark high heels.

She looked across the kitchen. In one corner of the room crouched Zoë, her calico cat. In the other corner of the room sat a fat mouse, probably the same mouse that kept getting into her cupboards and eating her food. Her favorite crackers. Her Oreo cookies. Her sesame breadsticks.

A shadow fell between the animals.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

She hated the smell of celery. It reminded her of when her father forced her to finish the snack her grandmother had made her—celery and cream cheese. It tasted awful. And she vomited it up when she got to the toilet.

Elaine considered the mouse in the corner. It had a glossy coat from feeding so well on her food. As she pulled out a box of barley, the little brown grains littered the cupboard and counter,

spilling from a mouse-bitten hole. She wished she'd remembered to buy mousetraps at the supermarket on her last trip.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

The celery veins bled clear juice as she sliced them open.

No humane live traps for this mouse. They required too many tools and too much time. She wasn't going to go outside with a pair of gloves and some vegetable oil to set the little intruder free. She wanted to see that mouse get what it deserved—hours between the *snap* of the trap and death, eyes dangling out of their sockets.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

She chopped slowly, deep in thought. At this rate, dinner would take another two hours to prepare. Oh well. Richard wouldn't be home for that long, anyway.

She decided to name the mouse Harold, after her father.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

She moved from celery to carrots.

She'd asked her husband, Richard, to take care of the rodent problem a month ago. She'd actually expected him to do it. But of course, he'd never gotten around to it. Why would he? He was always at work, or drinking, or sleeping, or hungry, or horny. He did everything in the bedroom (where he could also watch TV), except work (where he would have watched TV if he could have). He never spent enough time in the kitchen to think of the mice.

Elaine saw Zoë begin to stalk Harold, moving slowly out of the light and into the shadow between them.

Elaine considered catching the mouse, chopping it up, and placing its guts under Richard's pillow. He slept face up, as though he were practicing for an open casket viewing, so he'd never notice the mouse until it began to smell.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

Back to the carrots. She was slicing them so thinly she hadn't even finished her first carrot stick. She had another to go. And then two tomatoes.

Why was she even cooking for the bastard? Cooking something with celery in it, no less? She'd spent the day at work, just like he had. Richard was rarely home when it came time to pre-

pare dinner. He had “business drinks” most nights after work. How the hell do you have nightly business drinks when you bag groceries at the local “Mad Butcher?” How far was Richard expecting to move up? How drunk did he need to be to get there? He explained that he and Steve, who sometimes picked up chicks with the assistant manager, had “big plans.”

She’d listened as long as she could. Never corner a man in the bedroom to ask him why he can’t come home to help out around the place. The second he finished his not-so-convincing explanation, he grabbed her breast and tried to shove his tongue down her throat.

“Big plans,” he repeated salaciously, his hand moving to unbutton his pants.

“Big plans to aspirate your own vomit,” Elaine had replied as she stalked off, leaving Richard, alone and exposed, to entertain himself.

Next door, the man began to hum another Top 40 tune. It took her a minute to place it. That Eve song with Gwen Stephani. “Let Me Blow Ya Mind.”

*Slide, chop, chop, chop. Slide, chop, slide.*

It made her hips move side to side and in little circles. She chopped to the rhythm.

She wondered if the man next door could screw as well as he could hum. It would be a big step up if he at least turned the TV off. If he was willing to catch a mouse, she might more than introduce herself.

She felt like the damn thing was watching her. She hated Harold, hated mice in general. He had already eaten half the pasta she’d wanted to cook. She was hoping to pull off some sort of pasta and barley combination in the soup to make up for the missing portions from each box. Elaine had never been much of a cook.

*Chop, chop, slide.*

“I wonder if Richard would like mouse soup for dinner?” Hell, I might eat it too. Damn mouse. As a cloud moved across the setting sun, light filtered through the curtains and moved over

the mouse's beady eyes. Zoë's body remained hidden in the darkness, but Elaine could sense her creeping along the wall.

A storm was coming, and the shadows were shifting more and more.

*Chop, chop.*

She watched the light move over the mouse and *slide* further to the right.

Just then, Zoë leapt out of the shadows, and Elaine's gaze caught the calico's sleek body in an illuminated arc as it descended onto its unsuspecting prey. Its lines were like a Picasso she'd once recreated in the Pikestown High Art Appreciation Contest.

*Chop, chop, slice.*

*Slide* the blood across the cutting board as it began to transform the celery into little brown bricks. She didn't even notice she'd cut her finger as she left the kitchen, creeping along after Zoë, who dragged the mouse into the bedroom and onto Richard's pillow, where she happily feasted. She left the bones and some of the entrails on the sheets and began to wash her paws of the blood.

Elaine thought about Zoë as she bandaged her own wound, the way she had waited in the shadows and acted before Harold knew what hit him. Elaine wanted to fly through the air that way. To catch and kill her mouse. To feast.

The celery juice and blood were gelling on the counter. The soup was boiling over. Elaine scooped up Zoë, her purse, packed her car with fresh underwear, her mother's jewelry box, and a few other things she considered essential, and hit the road.

She left no note. Harold's rotting remains would be enough. As her car slid onto the open road, Zoë content in the car seat beside her, Elaine's grip on the steering wheel brought the blood to the surface of the bandage. The stain made her smile.

## Locust Tree

In the cool spring rain, the earth  
bubbles over with water. I sink  
my feet into it, enjoying the squirm  
of thick mud between each toe.  
My body flickers with lightning  
and I move without the need of sight.  
I run through the falling rain,  
pull each drop into my skin and  
consume it.

Branches litter the ground  
under a white-blossomed locust tree.  
The ripped ligaments spike up,  
piercing the raindrops.  
Pale flesh of the bark wound shines  
in the night like split bones.  
Broken by lightning or the heaviness of rain,  
they lie here, cut off  
from the supportive mother trunk.

But the flowers are still alive  
and blooming, full white petals  
drinking in the fresh taste of rain.

I walk slowly into the  
arms of the fallen branches.  
The air still tingles  
with the heavy perfume of spring.  
I crouch down, bury my face

in the blossoms, breathe in  
the smell of this fresh separation,  
this stolen moment where  
the white-blossomed branches  
hold onto life for a few hours longer.

Tomorrow I will come here  
to this spot of earth,  
pick up the fallen leaves and breathe  
word-kisses into them. I will  
walk through roads, houses, gardens, rubble,  
with bare feet and open face,  
no different from  
the hushed breathing shuffle of skin  
against earth,  
no more and no less than  
the wind that weaves through trees  
and leaves them naked,  
luminous,  
alive in the giving rain.

## **to my Heart**

I know you have spent the night  
in silence, arms open,  
fingers spread, reaching  
always reaching.

I know your cold private hours.

I know you have tied whispers  
to tails of invisible stars  
and sent them sailing  
into the night.

I know your secret  
because it is mine.

We did not ask for God,  
we asked for a mother.

We know no other prayer.

My orphaned heart,  
I know your voice  
pleading—  
but I have not listened,  
because I did not know  
what words to speak to you.

My angry darling,  
my sweet dark sister curled on the cold floor,  
you have breathed silence  
until it choked you.

I felt you hiding,  
betrayed in my body,  
your stolen tomb,  
covering our pain with a thick shroud  
of fear.

That wall of wordlessness  
kept us apart, made me hate you,  
your passion, your anger,  
your love.  
It almost killed us, that love.

The weight of unspoken words  
swallowed like stones, black and heavy,  
fills me to the top,  
and I know you must have more,  
so much more, to say.

I will not abandon you.

Tonight I am tearing down the wall of fear.  
And you, my heart,  
my sister in solitude,  
you will be my guest of honor  
as I celebrate our voice,  
our courage,  
our love.

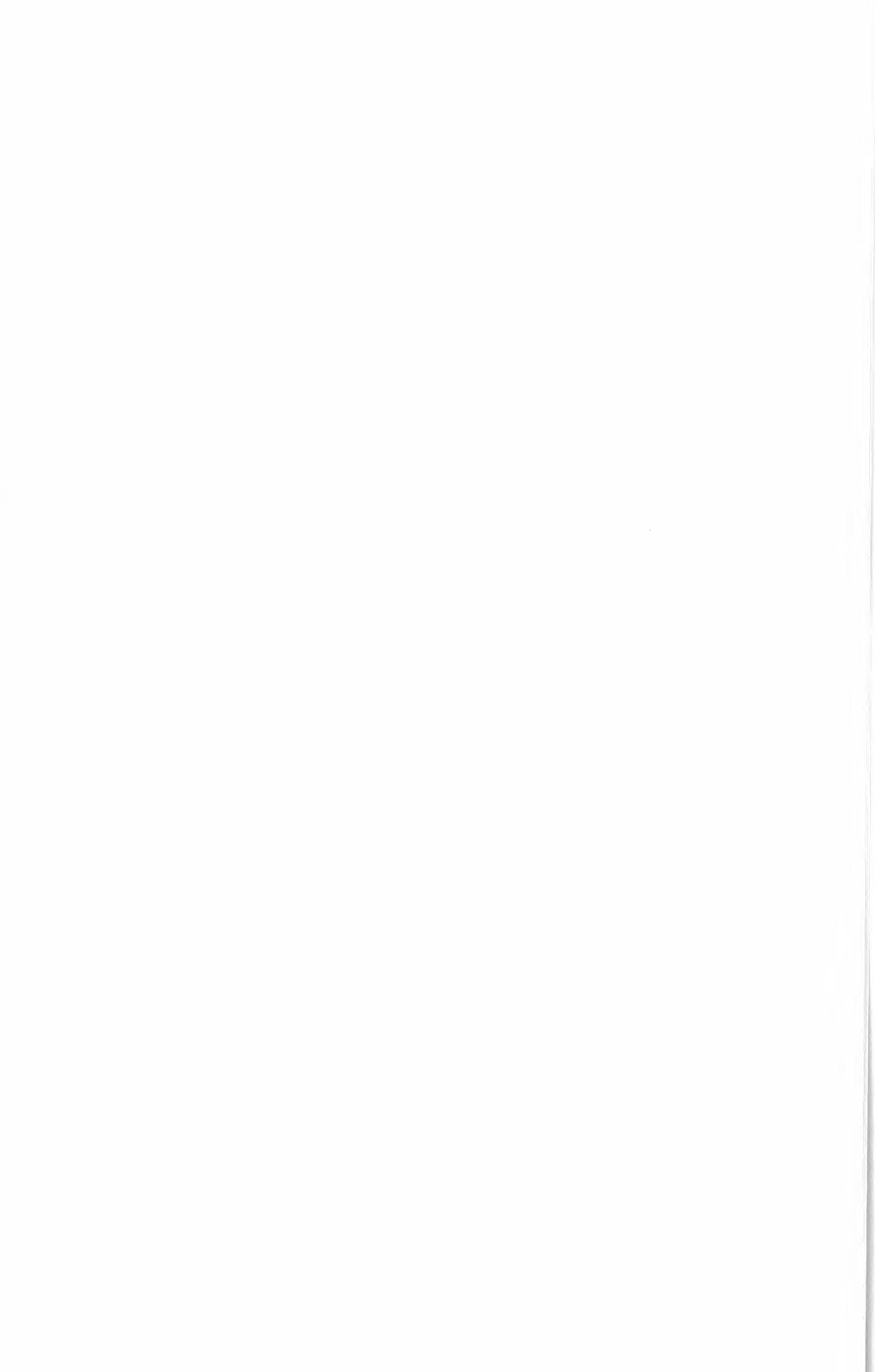
I will take our words,  
dark stones,  
and pass them out as loaves.  
Through the sharing  
we will cease to be victims.

Taking you inside me  
we will remember our pain,  
our victory,  
and hold each other again.

Then,  
reunited with my heart,  
my beloved,  
I will raise my eyes to the silver  
curve of moon, the mother's hand  
open, luminous. She will reach for me,  
cradle my body in light,  
fill my empty spaces  
with the sweet comfort of the adored.



"Self Portrait"



**Whitney Beers** is a junior from Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is working on a BFA in Creative Writing and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, an international English honor society.

**Angela Burke** is a junior working toward a BFA in Creative Writing. She is a Dallas, Texas native and is vice president of the Stephens Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She is currently the English and Creative Writing student/faculty liaison, a member of Christian Outreach Fellowship, and a third-year member of the academic honor society, Alpha Lambda Delta.

**Carrie Conley** is a sophomore Creative Writing major from a boring suburb. She is also a new Sigma Tau Delta member.

**Neeley Current** holds a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and German, University of Missouri. She photo-documented the 2001 Lake Placid Film Festival and co-curated and exhibited in the 'Women's Work' photography exhibit at the Davis Art Gallery 2001. She is currently on staff at Hugh Stephens Library and enrolled in the dance department.

**Janice Derr** is a senior creative writing student and president of the Stephens Sigma Tau Delta chapter.

**Annie Dubrouillet** graduated this December with a degree in Business Administration and now lives in Bellevue, Washington.

**Toni Henzler-Kuntz** is a native Missourian. An avid hunter and outdoorswoman, her devotion to nature and family is not only reflected in her 2 poetry chapbooks, but also in the music she writes, sings and records. Toni currently lives and loves on a small farm in Central Missouri with 5 horses, 3 dogs, 2 cats and 1 husband.

**Jennifer Hicks** is a senior, majoring in Fashion Marketing with a minor in Art History and Humanities. She comes from a long line of female artists. This piece is for her mother, grandmother, and Aunt Bedy, with love.

**Amanda Jones** is a junior, majoring in Law, Philosophy and Rhetoric. She is from the small town of Macon, Missouri. She enjoys amateur photography and a passion for old barns, homes, and other forgotten treasures.

**Amber Pijor** is a junior from Batesville, Arkansas. She is working toward a BFA in Creative Writing and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta.

**Shaen Pogue** is a sophomore at Stephens College, majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Spanish Language and Culture. She was chosen to present her short fiction piece, "Some Kinda Spark," at the national Sigma Tau Delta Conference in Boise, Idaho this spring. She is very excited to be a part of the *Harbinger* staff this year and looks forward to her future years at Stephens.

**Renée Reed-Miller** is a second-semester junior working on a BA in English and an Art minor. She was raised in Amman, Jordan and currently resides in Columbia, Missouri, with her husband of six years. She has served as student/faculty liaison to the English and Creative Writing Department and is an active member of the honor society Sigma Tau Delta. Renée recently won an award for her work at the society's Midwest Regional Conference in Decorah, Iowa. She continues to present her work at the society's regional and national forums. In 2002, one of her poems appears in *The Comstock Review*, Volume 16.

**Emily Reid** is a junior from Little Rock, Arkansas. She is a Psychology major with a Biology minor.

**Jessica Stack** is a senior from St. James, Missouri. She is pursuing a BFA in Dance.

**Leah Wyllys** is a sophomore from Portland, Oregon, majoring in Mass Communication with a minor in English. Besides devoting free time to writing, she participates in many campus activities, including Public Relations Student Society of America, Modeling Group, Sigma Tau Delta, and Christian Outreach Fellowship.

**Andrea Youngman** is completing a BFA in Creative Writing and has presented her work at regional and national conferences. She currently resides in Columbia with her husband and their four kids.

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