



Harbinger
2001

Published by the students of Stephens College

*a person or
thing*

that comes before

*to announce or
give an indication*

of what follows

Harbinger
2001

Published by the students of Stephens College

Editor-in-Chief*Renée Reed-Miller***Poetry Editor***Whitney Beers***Prose Editors***Angela Burke
Andrea Youngman***Layout and
Design Editor***Mary Anders***Advisor***Kris Somerville***Cover Art:***Misery Loves
Company
by
Karin Carr*

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 2001 by *Harbinger*, a publication of Stephens College.

Fiction

- 32 It's About Time *Leah Wyllys*
48 Bubble Gum *Holly Herlinger*

Nonfiction

- 26 I Enjoy the Taste of Darkness *Jennifer Zemke*
27 Split Second *Sara Rae Mercer*
31 Dancing Queen *Jenny Schwade*
41 The Headline *Jill Davis*
45 Who's Rollin' Back Prices? *Yashunda Gift*
50 Passage Rites *Renée Reed-Miller*

Poetry

- 7 there is *Whitney Beers*
8 Beauty Hurts
10 Fishbowl
12 Weekend in Santa Fe *Toni Henzler*
14 Lot's Lamb
14 Foxy Guards the Rooster
15 Arson *Syeria Haynes*
16 On Hygiene *Renée Reed-Miller*
17 Elation
18 Deep Skin *Angela Burke*
20 Kansas Memories
21 Un-titled *Jessamyn Hytrek*
22 How to Write a Letter to a Beautiful Woman *Ian Dodds*
23 I Dream Feather-like
24 The Luna Moth's Dance *Shaen Pogue*
25 Isolated in the Desert

Acknowledgements

Languages and Literature

Judith Clark
Gayle Elliott
Tina Parke-Sutherland
Terry Song

for editing advice and suggestions:

Tom Dillingham
Pam Franta
Alan Havig
Toni Henzler
Bobby Marler
Speer Morgan
Jane Russell
Lillian Sung
Bill Sutherland

for their generous financial contribution:

City of Columbia
Office of Cultural Affairs

We also extend special thanks to:

Sharon Van Deren
Chris Vivion
Ember Cook
Mary Cruise and
General Printing Services

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

there is

something sweeter than water
uncaught and skipping with secrets
rolling out of control
through the covered mossy places
and always humming in the cracks
of green darkness just out of reach
you can smell it with your fingertips
taste it burning deep below your stomach
it makes your shoulders curl
and your thighs press together

something warming in the dark caves
that brings your hand out of your pocket
and into those holes
tracing the currents of last february's frost
searching for your face in the bark pictures
you know if you can't find yourself
outlined there in all that beauty
that you'll go mad

then you see it—you
rippling in the gray brown wood grain
knowing this tree as what it always has been
but you've never noticed
and you too become planted
staring transfixed and transfigured
reaching out from the dark caves hidden
inside your own branches

and at the core of your circle of rings
all you want is to bloom

Beauty Hurts

I am
a princess.
I sit back
tall, shoulders
straight, head
high, hair long,
golden. Black
fingers scrape the
sunshine, fork it
with a comb:
a shredding gift from
Shiva, my mother
claims is made
by Revlon.

My mother, my
jailer bearing ebony
teeth, rips glistening
tangles, jerking
my head to my
back. Sunshine
covered by shadow.
Snagging imperfection,
she growls, mouth
open, arm raised,
black teeth gleaming.
Lightning strikes. My
only umbrella, whimpering
pain, provokes
the storm's fury:
it rains teeth and
red teardrops. Screaming
chokes into silence.

My mother, my
captive, pleads
innocent, grabbing
wadded tissue from
her back pants pocket,
raising white to
her lips, wiping
away traces of
scarlet. Crumpling her
kissmark, stretching out
her hand, she holds
a kleenex flag of truce,
kiss-stained temptation,
whispering: you know
it's your fault, only
babies cry, be mommy's
good girl, you know
I love you.

My face is my
mirror, my fingers
pressed to the glass,
the reflection of pain
creasing my once-brown
skin, now wet
red rivers rolling. Shrinking
from light, I hide
behind a mask of
forgiveness. Truth
always seeps through,
blood crying stories:
stories handed down
from tooth-combs
wielded by mothers
to princesses with
tender heads.

Fishbowl

Haloed in the fluorescent glow of the 7-11 sign,
back straight against orange vinyl, he sits like a pharaoh
eyeing my treasure, waiting for my answer.
Amazed I am worth the effort, I consider the advantages:
I could leave behind bills and 12-hour workdays,
for life in the fishbowl where my hardest task
will be wiping the crystal clean of fingerprints.

Spend my life dusting fingerprints?
He expects me to sign
away my life, my freedom, for more than a cleaning job.
He offers the coveted fishbowl where society looks in
to make sure the wife of a man as rich as a pharaoh
has a clean house and 1.7 blue-eyed children.
Money, fame, attention, all the advantages
seem more glamorous than a life on my own,
so this must be my answer.

I shudder at a sudden thought:
what happens to me if I do give him the answer
he wants? Will I be hidden away in the house,
wiping away fingerprints,
displayed at parties, used only when he needs me,
when the advantages suit him?
Will I sit on my meticulously dust-free shelf,
waiting for the sign that he requires my presence?
The man who thinks himself a pharaoh,
the master of the house, wants me to dance in his fishbowl.

I think of the image of my fish, Antigone, alone in her fishbowl,
swimming aimlessly, her life on display, nothing private.
Is there an answer to her wish of importance, meaning, life?
No self-respecting pharaoh wastes his time on the dreams
of a fish. He only taps the glass, leaving fingerprints

from his fat ring-laden fingers,
mocking the walls of her glass cage: the sign
and reminder of Her Place,
the grave she dug for herself. What are the advantages?

With a grateful nod to my fish waiting at home,
I know there are no advantages to the life he offers me.
No promises of splendor, no gilded fishbowl
no mirage of golden parties—
nothing but a death wish could make me sign away my freedom.
I grab his glass of caffeine-free diet soda,
and for an answer I laugh, throw back my head,
wipe away the fingerprints
until all traces of humanity disappear from his glass.

No longer my smug pharaoh, he frowns and mumbles
fragile promises, struggling to retain his pharaoh hold
over my future. Slowly, it dawns on him that silence
has more financial advantages, and he watches as I pay my half
of the check, smothering the coins with fingerprints,
counting out my half to the penny.
He thought he could bait me like a fish, bowl me over with money,
remind me of loneliness until life with him was the only answer,
cram the promise of happiness down my throat,
then produce the X where I sign.

He thinks he's a pharaoh, but he's trapped in a fishbowl.
I have all the advantages:
my dreams, my life, my own answer.
I leave him only my fingerprints,
pointing the way to freedom like an encircling sign.

Weekend in Santa Fe

Look up. See the turkey
carved in the rock
beside the face with no mouth?
That one looks like a flying saucer;
that one, I can't tell.

See, before you smell,
guano stains on the rock.
They moved the trail out
from under the bat cave,
guess the tourists didn't like
bat shit showers.

Look up. See the diamonds
set in black velvet.
The sky is
close
enough to touch.

I feel the icy breath of the conquistadors
march against my skin,
blow across my face.
Curling tendrils of hair
refuse to be made captive
to my navy ponytail holder.

Look up. Storm clouds rolled in,
low and churning,
early Tuesday morning.
Seething faces in those clouds.
Fat, full drops of rain fell long enough
to make me scurry for cover,
then it started to hail. Hail.
In the desert.

In a courtyard I watched it bounce
off an adobe retaining wall,
felt it bounce off my skull and skin,
picked it out of my hair, wondered
what kind of nightmare the plane ride home
would be.

Get me back East,
to Midwestern plains.
I don't want to die in the desert.

Lot's Lamb

Real tears. I couldn't
have a live lamb
for Easter.

You brought a stuffed one.

Baa Baa Black Sheep,
salt-and-pepper black sheep
like Grandma Helen's hair.

Glass eyes painted to look real,
unblinking, unwavering.

Tear-shaped Pepto-Bismol
colored mouth told no secrets.

Told no lies. Pink satin
lined ears heard all.

A child's toy? or
Lot's lamb?

I looked back and
turned you
into
a pillar of salt.

Foxy Guards the Rooster

Be wary
of women who remain
friends with women
who sleep with their man.

They just
might not have a problem
fucking yours.

Arson

I burn
when you touch me
flickering angelically
from the incessant
beckoning of your caress.

Laboring calmly under the
illusion
you call *enamoracy*,
a mystique of sizzling whispers
preys on my colorless being.

I embrace what I
distrust most
yearn for most,
a moment when a glare
between crystallized portraits
becomes
crisp,
hardened, and
Unemotional.

After the blaze
I am as beautiful as
a porcelain princess.
And
you don't love me.

On Hygiene

My fists dive deep into a crusted dirt mound.
I rub clods of yellow, blue, and purple sand
over my arms and legs.
I am digging for chalkstone
to write my
self
on this street.
I cleanse my pale skin
with desert, shaking off the excess
along the way.

But I want you under my nails,
beneath my skin; let me keep
breathing your mint kiss,
listening to you struggle to speak
English.

Don't.

Speak to me from your walls,
your coffee grounds and sh'warma stands.
I cannot let go your branches
or free the honeysuckle perfume
vining me.
Please embrace me, greet me.
I no longer want to be a foreigner.

Not an inch of me
resides in either place.
I am a divided land,
one half crying to the other
constantly,
let me be
let me be
so I can rest.
Tattoo your signature
on my hands, on my feet.
Copper beads of henna,
write my name.

Elation

I am the plump white sole
of a flip-flop sandal.
Your feet flatten
me into cardboard.

I am a prayer rug
facing East,
ready to rise above
these gravel streets;
I am Aladdin's carpet.

I am salt, seasoning the Dead Sea.
Float on my shoulders;
quench your thirst
despite me.

I am a viper.
My venom will erase,
eradicate you,
in less than twenty minutes.
I cannot deny
instinct,
the innate defense mechanism
ready to strike.

Come to me.
Breathe, drink.
Let this venom
save you.

Deep Skin

I describe
myself
as a fully bloomed
rose.

A red one with
lush petals,
full lips,
thick stem
strong voice.

You get
the picture.

I'm talking about
Deep skin beauty.

I refuse
to squeeze
into Barbie's
plastic skin.
I'm Custom-made
not cookie-cut.

I wear sizes
Twenty
Twenty-two
Twenty-four
head to toe
and let me tell you,
it feels good.

I am Deep Skin
Beautiful
inside and out.

A Bohemian Goddess
lives within these walls,
painting me with
her bronze body,
sleeping like Sheba
in a double bed
with satin sheets
caressing rolling
curves.
My secret is bigger
than Victoria's.

That's right,
I said
Deep skin beauty.

I am a meat-and-potatoes
meal.
And so what
if I'm pear shaped?
It is the sweetest
fruit.

Kansas Memories

imagine an attic
where old dusty comic books
can seem like undiscovered
treasures
in a room where the sun rises
just for me
on the stage of a bay window
illuminating one hundred acres
best seen through
toes
trailing in the grass
on the back of a rusty tractor
driven by an old man
with false teeth
kept in a Santa Claus
cup
that smells of Marlboro
mixed with air freshener and
dust
on creaking stairs leading
down to the kitchen brewing
with iced tea and
baked ham
eaten with fresh tomatoes and
home-grown potatoes
next to the shelter door
which we should never
ever
go near.

Un-titled

“You always need to know where you’re headed.”

Dad would say, “Navigate. Don’t be too proud to admit you’re lost.”

One time, I didn’t stop to ask for directions.

And that landed me here. What is here?

Where is that? I remember only chunks

of the Journey.

I remember I kept going on, on, on

Onward.

Trying to find—wanting to be told my destination.

Tell me, where are you going?

Maybe that’s

my name, too.

And then when we go out everyone will shout,

They are definitely not lost.

I’ve gone through too many yellow lights to know. Where I’m going.

No longer to your front porch.

I finally stop to ask, demand, beg

a place, some coordinates, at least a name.

But those people behind the glass

at the drive-thru gas place

didn’t even speak my language.

How to Write a Letter to a Beautiful Woman

Begin as the moon begins—
Dark; except in early morning, when above blue
a shadow can be seen, peeled black and mottled gray.
What else rises and sets so soon?

It must have temperature;
Words rise and fold in heat. Smokeless
words, like hands, lifting her scapula,
embrace morning with fog, settling the protest

of water & wind alike—*so much and nothing unlike love.*

A day brushes shade side to side.
Walk happens and one sentence
holds hands with the next. Talk reveals

there is nothing lighter than snow, or as well-balanced
as moss on the forest floor, or this:
all things are common in love.

If there is fear, snow becomes rain,
weather becomes heart & must tighten, hold on
to storm. If there is rapture, it must be read.
If there is an end, it should engulf
how a wrist turns to caress, or fingertips
become silk when care takes giant gulps of her.

There is no fire
transforming this substance into another,
no smelting, no undue drag
of form or kindness. What grace is

stays
when even the days
like letters
grow hot.

I Dream Feather-like

I do not mean of a feather,
no, not wing nor bird—nothing hollow;
I do not mean I am a feather,
no, sunrise does not gather up
nor push my spine steaming above a lake.

I am never so weightless.

I do not mean light
nor delicate, opaque,
or gentle.
My dreams angle up;
They cut rain, refract sun;
My body
falls; I know
falling but feel nothing. I dream

a feather is the archeology of flight.
I dream myself.

The Luna Moth's Dance

She darts and dashes, flashes
unfurling agile wings,
graceful for her audience—
rumped, white hens and worn roosters.

With a clap
her dance ends.

She flutters to the floor of the wooden chicken coop,
elegant and trembling
in the sweat of her exertion.

Finale.

Finé.

Finished.

She lies cold and broken for an encore,
dusty wings cloaked in motes.

Isolated in the Desert

I have been here before
in this land of shimmering desert,
without a palm to shade my feverish brow
or a drop of water for my trembling breath.
I have seen the broken statues,
gray-green ashes
of those who came before me
and escaped.
I have seen the golden bird,
majestic and frightening,
screeching,
screaming, *You will
never break free from your solid prison,
never speak with unmarbled lips,
never burn like the phoenix
and ascend a fresh creation.*

I will never leave the desert.
The bird crows proudly,
folding and expanding iron wings
in a copper sky.
You can always leave if you wish, it taunts,
knowing my fear
binds me to the earth,
presses my face in the sand,
bends my back, easily,
knowing I could
break free,
burn free,
be free.
But I will remain in this prison,
my frightening prison,
because I am even more afraid
of the oasis.

I Enjoy the Taste of Darkness

A lone again. Flat on my back in the dark, sinking deeper. I do my best thinking at night, in the cool, delicious darkness. It is like the perfect glass of chilled sangria, smooth and velvety on the tongue. I swirl it around and then swallow. It envelops me.

I lie in the dark, staring at the ceiling. Thoughts rush in like waves crashing on the shore. Some scatter like sparkling water droplets into the air, while others sink into the sand of my mind. “What shoes should I wear tomorrow?” or “I’d really like some chicken noodle soup.”

When I manage to sink past these muddled thoughts, my inner voice speaks to me. It is the child, the one who grew up too fast. She won’t nap for fear she might miss something; she hates being left behind. She used to be afraid of the dark. Now she claims it. That child with dimpled cheeks, rosy and soft, whispers in my ear, reminding me to savor the simple things—the leaves crunching under my feet in the fall, the rich texture of a piece of Dutch chocolate, the vibrations of a purring kitten.

The other voice I hear is the old soul, wise beyond her years. She reminds me what is done is done; it is impossible to change the past. I cannot go back to elementary school and face the bullies with an adult’s confidence. I cannot return to junior high and pick different friends, and I cannot relive my high school years. She reminds me that every experience, even the most painful, is good because I have learned. Each one has shaped me into who I have become.

In the daytime I talk. In the darkness I listen. Kahlil Gibran wrote, “Thought is a bird of space that in a cage of words may indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly.” In solitude I lie in bed, and my thoughts, like night birds, spread their wings to fly free among the stars.

Split Second

It was the last Friday night before school started. I was at the Red and Black Football Scrimmage. My friends and I were in the stands helping the varsity cheerleaders lead the crowd in cheers. We sang, "We've got our left hand high, our right hand low, and that's the way we rock-and-roll!" There I was, jumping around to attract the attention of the hot guy a few rows up. Dressed in worn Silvertab jeans, a navy blue sleeveless turtleneck, and the Doc Martin boots I borrowed from my friend Marcy, I was a cheerleader going into the tenth grade, and I thought I was tough shit.

What I remember plays in my mind like a movie in slow motion. The sounds of the crowd cheering echoed in my ears. The smells of popcorn and humid night air combined with everyone's perfume and cologne to create the perfect atmosphere. Bright lights illuminated the field, and the announcer's voice vibrated throughout the stadium. In Jefferson City, Missouri, the electricity of the event surged through the stands as the town cheered on their number one Jays.

After the game I met my parents at the top of the stadium stairs. They each gave me a hug and told me I made them proud. I said good night, and we left for a party. This was one of my first nights out with older kids. Marcy's friend had a red sports car. We all crammed into it, and I got to sit on a senior guy's lap. I was excited.

I awoke with blurry sight out of my left eye. Someone was holding my right hand. I tried to look over. All I could see was a massive mound on the right side of my face. My eyelids were lead weights. My head was held down by an invisible anchor. I thought I was in a place you go when your time on earth has expired. I didn't feel alive.

I heard someone say, "Sara honey, we're right here."

It took a few moments to register, but I recognized my mother's voice. She was standing at my side.

I whispered, "What happened?" even though I already knew that I had hurt myself and was lying in an unfamiliar bed.

"You were on Marcy's shoulders and fell off and hit your head . . . hard," my mother said, as if speaking to a child.

No I didn't. I don't remember doing that, I thought to myself. How could I fall off her shoulders headfirst? I'm a cheerleader. I know how to do that sort of thing.

The pain was unbearable. My skull throbbed as if my heart was between my eyes, ready to explode. *What did I do to deserve this?* Thousands of questions kept crowding my mind.

Later I was told that I was at the party, sober, not doing anything wrong. On the driveway Marcy and I were doing cheerleading stunts for the guys. When I was dismounting something went wrong. I dove headfirst into the concrete. The last sound that came from me was a loud crack. They rushed me to the emergency room. The doctors thought that I had a concussion until they x-rayed my head, but it was more serious than they had thought. I was flown, by helicopter, to a hospital in Columbia.

Nurse after nurse came in, making observations, taking blood, and changing bags of medicine. Visitors came in and out. Swarms of doctors and med students hovered over my bed, talking. They shined lights in my eyes and asked questions. "How would you rate your pain from one to ten?" It was the worst I had ever experienced, but I didn't want to sound like a wimp. My average answer was an eight. When I look back, I know that my pain was an eleven.

The impact of my head hitting the concrete driveway was strong enough to cause a fracture in two different places on the front of my skull. The fractures didn't break through toward the outside, they went in, puncturing the outer coating of the brain, causing a small blood clot. They sent me through MRIs and CAT scans to check if the clot was growing. If it didn't grow any larger than a quarter, surgery wasn't necessary. It bled to the size of a hickory nut and emergency brain surgery was performed to remove it. If it had grown any larger, I wouldn't have made it through the night.

I remember being wheeled away to surgery. I was unable to open my eyes, but I knew that my mom was on one side and my dad was on the other. I remember them saying over and over, "We'll be waiting right here for you." "Bye sweetheart." "We love you." "You'll be just fine." Right before they put me in the elevator, I tried to open my eyes. The ceiling lights were so bright I thought I was seeing "the light." The combination of my parents telling me that they loved me, being pulled away from them, and the bright light, made me think I was saying my last good-bye. I wasn't scared because I had consumed a concoction of painkillers, including morphine. I said, "Bye, I love you" and then blacked out.

I awoke the next day with a headache worse than the day before and my head wrapped in a turban of gauze. In order to remove the clot from my brain, my skull had to be sawed open. Imagine a Halloween pumpkin, how you cut a circular piece out of the top. A bone saw was taken to my head and used to cut out a circle. After removing the blood clot, just as easy as a pumpkin seed, they put the piece of skull back in, along with four titanium plates and eight titanium screws.

After a week and a half of being bed ridden, hooked up to a catheter, and I.V., it was time to use the restroom on my own and take a bath. The first time I sat up, I needed my mother's assistance. Trying to balance my bowling-ball head was difficult. After I had mastered sitting up, it was time to go to the bathroom, which required passing a mirror. I put it off as long as I could, but I really had to go. My mom held me up and took every slow step with me. We came to the mirror. I did not recognize my own face. It was something out of the movies, something I didn't think was humanly possible. My eyes were encircled by fist-size, black-and-blue rings. The whites of my eyes were blood red. I was amazed I still had sight. Then my mom took off the bandana that was covering my head. I stood there in shock. My hair was shaved from what would be bangs to four inches from my ear. There were about thirty metal staples in my scalp. Scabs held each in place. The skin around them was puckered up about half an inch. There was a chance that my hair wasn't going to grow back.

All I wanted to do was lay in bed and cry, but crying made the pain worse. I slept in complete darkness. Any speck of light sent throbbing through my skull. I didn't want to face the world. I didn't want to move on.

The next day, I awoke with a different perspective. I sat up on my own and told my parents I wanted to walk down the hall. They did not hesitate to help me out of bed. At first I was weak, but soon I balanced my weight on wobbly, uneven feet, remembering what it was like to stand. It amazed me how the smallest ingredients of life are so meaningful. I had never thought my life could end in a split second. It scared the shit out of me.

Walking down the hallway with both parents at my side, I saw how blessed I was. I was given another chance. I stopped and looked at my mom and said, "Mom, be my barre." I had forgotten one of my true loves, dancing. I braced myself with her arm and started doing pliés to stretch my legs, which hadn't moved for two weeks.

Dancing Queen

Tonight I was at a dance club that was almost empty. It was dark and warm inside, and the barren floor was lit with flashing colored lights. People were sitting at the bar or walking around coolly surveying the room, but no one was dancing. The DJ spun infectious techno beats mingled with jazzy trumpet and sax riffs, giving it a sexy Latin flavor. The electronic bass vibrated up through my feet and deep in my chest. My friend and I stood and talked for a minute, before he turned to me and asked if I'd like to dance.

I hesitated. "We'll be the only ones. Everyone will stare at us." But I was tired of playing cool against the wall. Boredom won out, and I no longer cared what anyone thought. I wanted to move. We stepped into the glow of blue and green light and into the curious eyes of everyone standing on the side. I did not contemplate their queries and judgments. I let my hips find the bass and start to groove. I raised my arms to the ceiling and closed my eyes. The liquid melodies wrapped around my body like hot caramel dripping down an apple. The trumpet sang golden and crisp, and the sax wailed velvety notes that twisted and turned like a spiraling staircase to the stars. The beats melted and transformed until they seeped into my pores and made me part of the music. I opened my eyes to see my friend was intoxicated too. He grabbed my hands and we did a wild salsa together, laughing, shaking our asses, swinging, spinning, and grooving. Music was our glass, and dance the red wine that overflowed it, till it sloshed down the sides in waves of scarlet like a river of melted rubies. With each movement my inhibitions faded.

Dancing was like having an audience listen to me sing in the shower. There I was, naked and vulnerable, beautiful; I let my body sing.

It's About Time

The rain beat so fast that no one could see the man with the brown jacket.

"Quite a hail storm, huh?"

"Yeah, I don't know if I'll be able to see where I parked."

Wal-Mart was busy. Like usual. Moms retrieving TV dinners, travelers doing last minute shopping, and retirees who had nothing better to do but read Hallmark cards at 6 p.m.

Susan had looked all over for her Honda, sloshing through puddles and dodging parked cars. Two girls stood in the rain under the eaves by the pop machines. Their eyes focused on her while she jogged fast to keep dry the groceries she carried. Huge puddles formed, and someone commented on how the concrete was now the "Wal-Mart River."

Susan finally found her car and got in. She put on her seat belt and looked in the mirror to check her faded lipstick. Quick movements. But the eyes in the rearview mirror weren't hers. He smiled. "Hi honey, guess who? It's the jacket-stealing man" were his only words. He shot her once in the shoulder, thought that was enough, and pulled her jacket off, the blood seeping through the leather. No one noticed the green Honda with two people in it, or how large Susan's eyes got before she slumped.

The scene that followed looked like ants scrambling to devour a meal. Helicopters and police cars stopped everyone who might have had a gun, and children shouted at the woman who was slumped over her steering wheel. The EMTs removed her lavender turtleneck, placed her on the stretcher, and strapped her down.

"Oh, my God! Is she dead?" a mom screamed. "I didn't know what to do. I just heard a loud bang. Oh, my God. I didn't know what to do. Is she dead?"

No one saw the man with the brown jacket walk to his car; the rain created sheets of white. Thousands of drops hit the pavement and ran down the "Wal-Mart River," following the Ford as the man with the brown jacket banged on his steering wheel.

“Dammit, I did it. I really did it.” He traveled to the next city. He bought chocolate milk and Ben and Jerry’s Cherry Garcia.

The two girls who stood by the pop machines smoked stolen cigarettes and stared at the Honda. The eaves hung over them, and they swore to each other later that what they knew would dry up like the rain and melt like ice cream.

.....

“I believe in miracles, where ya from, you sexy thing, sexy thing you. I believe in miracles.” The man with the brown jacket sang loudly, thinking and dreaming of the black leather jacket and envisioning himself as one of the T-Birds from *Grease*. The man leaned back, set his binoculars down and opened one eye. “Dammit, that’s her. I gotta get in her car.” He grabbed his gun, Kleenex, and the tape recorder. He jumped out of the car, ducked down, and moved his eyes from side to side. He stuck the gun in his pants and held up the recorder.

“Captain’s log . . . uh . . . 20? It’s 7:45.” He glanced down at his watch. *“She’s in sight, moving my way . . . it’s almost over. Wish me luck. It’s 7:45 p.m., signing out.”*

He sloshed through the puddles to her car and glanced over his shoulder. Susan was standing outside the automatic doors, putting on her rain coat and waiting for cars to let her cross.

The man with the brown jacket opened the driver’s door and hopped inside. He sat there shaking. “Oh, my gosh, this is it, this is what I have been waiting for for 3 months, 22 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, and 16 seconds.” He looked around and stared right at Susan dodging cars and ducking her head. His hands tapped the steering wheel and he moved his body side to side. Whitney Houston’s *It’s not right, but I’m okay* song rang in his head. He stopped. “I’m not driving. I’m such a dumb ass.” The man with the brown jacket grabbed for his Kleenex—which was now a soggy mass—the tape recorder he had on his lap, and the door handle. He opened the door. It swung wide and hit the red pick-up truck adjacent to Susan’s Honda.

He curled into a ball and, trying not to be obvious, rolled onto

the wet concrete. He lay flat on his belly and glanced under the car. Someone's feet . . . a lot of feet. He inched his way to the back door using his elbows. The rain had covered him like an umbrella. No one saw him get in the back seat and squeeze into the foot space.

Seven kids ran to their minivan, hoping it would be open. One had to pee and the rest wanted their McDonalds. The Wal-Mart puddle, now surrounding the parking lot, poured on them like a shower. The water enfolded the kids, bathing them with the tears Susan would shed.

"Thank you, honey. You didn't have to do that for us. Henry could have gotten it." The elderly lady smiled at the young woman. Henry was still at the automatic doors putting on his raincoat. Susan smiled and said she didn't mind.

"I'm not in a big hurry and besides it's pouring." She put the milk, orange juice, vitamins, denture cream, and bread into their back seat.

The man now in her Honda peeked out from behind the car seat. "Hurry up, hurry up." He held up his recorder.

"Captain's log, 21, it's 8:06 p.m. It's in sight. My baby is coming nearer to theeeeeee. It's 8:06 p.m., signing out."

He watched Susan walk over from the car, fifteen feet away. He saw her moving in slow motion, saw the black stream of mascara running down her face, her hands rubbing her cheeks. He knew she didn't have a lot of time left. He knew this was the last time he would have to see her with "it" on. He stared. Smiled. He watched her move slowly, like in the *Matrix*, each foot and hand moving air as if through water. Even the rain drops seemed to slow down. They hit her one at a time. His eye twitched, and he sang, *"Where did you come from baby? How did you know I needed you? How did you know I needed you so badly?"* Barry White. He licked his lips, curled down and held his breath.



"It's all here. I don't think I forgot anything?" The man with the brown jacket sat sideways staring at the items in the passen-

ger seat, his right leg bent over the stick shift. "Binoculars. Check. Gun loaded, one bullet. Check. Kleenex. Check. And tape recorder. Check." He pressed play/record and sat while the rain pounded the window.

"Captain's log 2: 6:08 p.m., in the car, not being seen, her Honda is next to mine, empty. No sign of jacket. She must be wearing it. Lots of rain and people out there, I must be invisible. Will wait for hours if have to, will get my jacket back. It's 6:11 p.m., signing out."

He looked through his binoculars and blinked. "What the hell." He turned the binoculars the other way and stared at the automatic doors. Through the rain he noticed puddles and wanted to splash in them like a kid but was afraid he'd get caught. He couldn't be too obvious.

"Captain's log 3: 6:13 p.m., just checking in. No sign of her and it's been 13 minutes. Have to pee; I'm going in. It's 6:14 p.m., signing out."

The man ran through the rain and bumped into a family coming out.

"Daddy, why is that man dressed like that?"

"I don't know sweetheart. Looks like he's hunting in a jungle."

"But why, Daddy?"

The man with the brown jacket looked down at his attire. His green-brown camouflage pants and T-shirt stuck to his skin. He lifted his hand to his mouth and ducked behind a cart of rolls, donuts, and Wonder Bread.

"Captain's log, 4: 6:20 p.m. I'm in. Not caught but was noticed. How? I'm camouflaged. Still have to pee. No sign of her. Good. Need to be invisible, need to blend in. It's 6:22 p.m., signing out."

Two elderly people did a double-take at the man behind the red cart and shook their heads. "Kids these days."

Susan passed the cart only minutes before. She thought she should buy some donut holes but craved Milky Ways instead. People pushed to get through the ten-items-or-less lines.

"Too many damn people. Who would come to Wal-Mart on a

Friday night?" The man pushed up his glasses and grunted at the twenty-person line ahead of him.

"Captain's log 5: 6:31 p.m. Feel better. Went pee. No sign of her, but she's here, she's here. It's 6:32 p.m., signing out."

The man with the brown jacket and camouflage stepped into aisle eight.

"Captain's log 6: 6:34 p.m. Just checking in aisle eight. Hey, that's her. It's her. And that's my jacket! Oh, God, oh, can't be obvious. Should I say something? No blend, blend in. It's 6:37 p.m., signing out."

The man picked up Always With Wings and turned the other way. He ducked down aisle seven.

"Captain's log 7: 6:45 p.m. She didn't see me, but I saw her, and I see her now. She's looking at Kotex. That's not her brand. Bitch, that's not your brand."

Susan turned and set the Kotex down and grabbed Tampax. She walked to aisle nine.

"That was close." He threw the pads on the floor and took a left toward the children's department.

"It's mine! I had it first! Give it to me now! I'm telling Mom!" A young boy screamed at his older brother. They sat on the tile floor of aisle eighteen, not noticing the camouflage man with the squirt gun. He was ducking down, looking sideways and pointing ahead at his imagined enemies. The *Mission Impossible* song rang in his head.

"Captain's log 8: 7:03 p.m. She's in the check-out line now. I'm heading out. Gotta stay low. It's 7:04 p.m., signing out."

He didn't notice the teenage girl by the soda machine vowing she would never marry a man who dressed in camouflage to shop.

"Captain's log 9: 7:10 p.m I'm hungry. I want some ice cream. I want my jacket. She had no right to keep it. Technically it's mine. I bought it. We were together and it was a gift, but I spent the money. It's mine and I will get it back. It's 7:11 p.m., signing out."

The man in the brown jacket held the black binoculars and waited. Cars drove in and out. The parking lot was Grand Cen-

tral Station, and no one noticed the huge brown eyes fixed on the automatic doors.

“Mommy, Mommy help.” A little girl wore a yellow rain coat. She had fallen on her hands and knees.

“Samantha, honey,” said the mother as she lifted the girl off the wet cement, and they ran, like puppets on strings through the storm.

“Captain’s log 10: 7:12 p.m. She hasn’t come out. Still being invisible. No one has seen me. Oh, wait, dammit. A security guard. It’s 7:13 p.m., signing out.”

A uniformed man tapped twice on the window. “Yeah, officer, may I help you?”

The man with the brown jacket rolled down his window. Rain sprinkled inside and drops fell on his face.

“Are you looking for something with those binoculars?”

“Uh, no officer, um, well, actually yes. Watching the rain.”

“Watching the rain? Through binoculars?”

“Yeah, well, I just got the binoculars, only \$29.99.” He smiled and held up his new purchase.

“Right, okay. But, sir, you might want to put those away. People will get uncomfortable with you staring like that.”

“Thanks.” He rolled up the window. “This is getting too close. They’re moving in.” He grabbed his recorder.

“Captain’s log 11: 7:25 p.m. I almost got caught, but I was invisible, smooth. That dumb ass didn’t even know what was going on. Yeah, I can do this. And no sign of her yet. Only saw a little girl trip and fall. Can’t see much, too much rain. Still here. Yep, will be until she comes back to the car. I’ll be waiting. I can’t wait; I can’t wait until I get my jacket back. It’s 7:28 p.m., signing out.”



He sat on the couch and scratched his fuzzy chin. He hadn’t shaved for four days; too excited for the big day. He scattered everything on his coffee table, picked up his white mug with Susan’s picture printed on the side, and sipped the cold bitter

decaf. "It's all here." The .22 caliber handgun rested on the oak table, along with binoculars, a tape recorder, and Kleenex. To wipe off the blood.

"Hello? Check one, two, three. Check one, going to get my jacket. Check two, going to shoot Susan. Check three, going to get away with it."

He sat holding the tape recorder and practiced his speech. *"Hello, honey, I'm back . . . no, too generic. Hello, bitch, it's meeeee. Too corny. Hello, honey, it's the jacket-stealing man. Yeah, now that's good."*

He got up and stared out his third-story window. Cars were honking below and dark clouds formed above. "It better not rain," he said as he stepped away and glanced down at his watch. "It is time," he said in the Lion King's Raffiki voice. All his clothes were laid out: the camouflage pants, T-shirt, belt, a brown jacket, white briefs, and brown socks. He smiled and began changing his clothes. He grew excited imagining what Susan's face would look like.

"Bang bang." He formed his hands into a gun, brought it up to his mouth, and blew. "That will teach ya not to steal my jacket, bitch honey." He hummed, *"You got it, I want it, I'll do anything."* by N'SYNC, while putting on every piece of clothing. He slicked back his hair with Aussie gel and stood in front of the cracked mirror.

"Well, hello, Mr. Handsome, Mr. Invisible, Mr. Camouflage in the car." The man, now in the brown jacket, jumped up and backward then landed on his bed. He took the picture of Susan in the black leather jacket out from under his pillow.

"Oh, my baby, my little leather baby. You will be home soon with Daddy." He kissed the picture and put it into his pocket. He strolled into the kitchen and looked into the fridge: moldy cheese, two eggs, three slices of bread, and a Coke. He glanced in the cupboard at the Campbell's tomato soup.

"Ah, ah, I vwell make toasted cheeese and a can of soup," he said in a French accent. He cut the mold off the cheese and toasted two slices of wheat. He turned on the radio to KVMW 90.7, old-

ies. He danced and sang to "The Twist." He grabbed a microphone-spoon and slid across the tile, pretending he was Chubby Checker. He bowed after the song and checked his soup on the stove. It was boiling; he took it off and melted the cheese on the two slices of bread in the microwave while "You Don't Own Me" played in the background. He ate while he tested the tape recorder.

"Captain's log . . . uh . . . let's say one. It's 3:35 p.m. In the kitchen, eating my sandwich and dreaming of leather. Yeah, this is going to be a glorious day. It's 3:37 p.m., signing out."

He set down the recorder and took a huge bite of bread and cheese. He chewed with his mouth open.

"Who let the dogs out," the man with the brown jacket sang as he barreled down the rocky road toward Susan. The time was 4:40 p.m. He ate a fudge bar, licking the chocolate and pausing to yell a tune. He thought of Susan while the song played and his heart pounded. This was the day he would go to her apartment, wait until she got into her car around 5 p.m. He mapped out everything. He knew she traveled on Saturday, every two weeks. She was one of those counselors at a private college in the city. He knew her schedule by heart.

"She'll never suspect, she'll never suspect meeeee, cause I'm the man. *Who's your daddy?*" He sang in a childish tone, "*Bitch, I'm yo mean daddy.*" He laughed and slammed on his brakes. "I missed the turn." The black Ford did a U-turn at Main and 16th. The fudge bar landed in his lap, but the man with the brown jacket kept turning. Cars honked. Drivers displayed the finger. He didn't see; he only saw Susan's Honda turning right toward Highway 95. "Chica, slow down."

He bent down and picked up the melting ice cream. "Well, looks like I pooped the front of my pants, but at least it blends in." He wiped off the chocolate, while still glancing at the road in front of him, his eyes on her car.

Kids laughed in the blue minivan right alongside of the man with the brown jacket.

"What is he doing? He's licking himself." A boy giggled and

tapped the shoulder of his sister with the blaring headphones on. “Look, look, the guy in the black Ford is disgusting; he’s licking something.”

The man with the brown jacket didn’t notice the van, didn’t notice the kids laughing, pointing, and staring.

“*So build me up Buttercup. Don’t break my heart,*” he sang. The Honda took exit 66, and the Ford immediately turned off the highway following it. “Well, here we go. . . *Let’s pray,*” the man with brown jacket said in a deep wicked voice.

The Headline

It was 1:00 in the afternoon on Saturday, February 16, 2000. I had been awake for about twenty minutes but was too exhausted from the night before to think about removing my body from the soft comforter and the cozy mattress. My head fit into the perfect indentation of my pillow. I was content.

Like a bolt of thunder in a midnight storm, my mother's screams startled me.

"Holy shit!" from a woman who would sooner donate her right arm than cuss. On went the lights. Before I could sit up straight, a newspaper hit my face. My hand fumbled around the nightstand in search of my glasses. I found them and read the headline of the front page of the newspaper. "Teen Charged with Neglect of Baby." I read about an 18-year-old who gave birth to a baby girl in her bedroom by herself. She wrapped it in towels and put it in a duffel bag in her closet. Then she was rushed to the hospital by her mother who had no idea what happened. She had kept her pregnancy a secret for eight months and gave birth a month early. She told one of the doctors that she had delivered a still-born earlier that day. The doctor immediately informed the police to search her house and find the infant for tests, which revealed air in the lungs, indicating that the baby was born alive. She was charged with neglect. I read the girl's name: "Cheryl Sparks from Indianapolis." My jaw dropped, my hands trembled, and chills ran through my body.

Cheryl Sparks had been my best friend. We attended private school together from preschool through fourth grade. We were inseparable. From collecting trolls to stamps, we had a lot in common and intended to be roommates in college. Then I went to public school. Our friendship remained close thanks to Sunday school, but we both had separate groups of friends. We never forgot each other's birthday, we sat together during services, and we always caught up on each other's lives. That was the extent of our friendship during the last two years of high school. Every time I saw her, she gained more weight. She started hanging out

with the wrong people. This worried me, but when she was with me, she still acted like the same caring girl I had been friends with for years.

In the summer of '99, Cheryl dropped by the camp I was working at and said we needed to talk. She recently had a back-alley abortion, and she wouldn't tell me where. She was past her first trimester and Planned Parenthood refused. She described the process in horrid, graphic detail. The shot was injected anally. Its purpose was to coat the ovaries with poison that would slowly kill the fetus. Eventually the fetus would fall out if she sat on the toilet for a few hours. No pain medication was given to help ease the discomfort. Tears filled her eyes while she described its tiny features covered in blood floating in the toilet. She spoke of the pain that intensified throughout her body and the many nightmares that followed.

I was speechless. I covered my mouth with one hand and put out my arm to hug her. I asked if she was doing better now and if there was anything I could do. She smiled sadly and said that there was nothing that could be done. After a few minutes of silence, I nodded and returned to work.

We hung out a few times between that summer and her eighteenth birthday. I took her out to dinner on January 16th. She had more news. One month prior, she was hospitalized for two weeks, because her ovaries would not stop bleeding. She quickly reassured me, however, that everything was fine now. "Not to worry," she said. "It had something to do with an accidental incision they made during the abortion." I accepted this story.

One month passed. It was February 16th, the morning my mom shoved the newspaper in front of my face. As I read the article, all I could think about were the lies. Cheryl's ovaries weren't bleeding; she got pregnant again and couldn't go through another abortion, so she had the baby and didn't tell anyone. Not even me. Why couldn't she trust me with the truth? Why did it take two months after the birth for this to get into the papers? Who was the father? A million questions were running through my mind, and all I could do was stare at my mom while she stared back at me in complete silence.

You always hear about tragic events like this happening, but you never know the person. Now it was different. I could picture the room she gave birth in, the towels she might have used, the bag she stuffed the baby in and the closet where she put the bag. Now it had meaning.

I wrote her a letter and delivered it personally to her mailbox. It stated that I was still there for her if she wanted someone to hang out with. I vowed never to discuss the situation with her if she didn't want to. I said that I wouldn't make another attempt to get ahold of her. Whenever she felt ready, I would be there for her.

Months went by, but she never contacted me. Everything I knew about this case was through the grapevine or the papers. Apparently Cheryl had wanted to keep the baby. She tried to give it mouth-to-mouth. This accounted for the air in the lungs. Another version claimed that since she gave birth by herself, she didn't know to clear out its mouth. This meant the baby could get some air, but not enough breaths to cry. This caused her to believe it was not living, and she wrapped it up. Cheryl, however, was being charged with neglect of the baby, not murder. She kept her baby a secret and did not give herself or the fetus medical attention. She was also into drugs, alcohol and cigarettes while pregnant—all evidence of neglect. If found guilty, she could be sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

Cheryl's case was talked about for weeks in my classes, because our high schools were rivals. In every class all I could do was melt into my seat like ice cream on a hot summer day and observe as people bashed a stranger they had never met. Tears filled my eyes, but I had no words of defense. Both classmates and teachers tore her up like she had been a devil sent to earth. Many assumed she had been fucked up her whole life and deserved more than fifteen years in prison. If only they knew she had been sweet and innocent until the last two years of high school. Then she became friends with the wrong group of people, trying desperately to fit in. She had low self-esteem and turned to heavy drugs and sex to make herself feel complete.

The case was dropped due to lack of evidence. Cheryl had to get a job. To finish up classes, she worked with in-home tutors. She attended therapy to discuss any problems and had a curfew. She also had to take monthly drug tests and report to her parents when she spent money.

I went off to college. She is still finishing high school. To this day, we have not spoken, and no one will ever know the complete truth about what really happened that day but Cheryl.

Who's Rollin' Back Prices?

When most people go into Wal-Mart, they tend to classify those who shop there. When I go into Wal-Mart, I immediately classify the workers. This may have something to do with the fact that I, a three-year employee of Wal-Mart, belong in one of these five categories: the Wanna-Be-Management, the I-Just-Wanna-Have-Fun, the Lifer, the I'm-Just-Trying-To-Get-Paid, and the No-One-Else-Will-Hire-Me.

Wanna-Be-Managements dream of becoming the next Sam Walton, founder of the Wal-Mart dynasty. These people inquire about a management position two weeks after they start working. They invite management over to their house for dinner, referring to it as networking. I refer to it as brown-nosing. Wanna-Be-Management never cut corners. Their work consists of 12-foot high displays complete with lights, balloons, and fireworks. Police are often called in to direct traffic around these monstrosities. When management asks them to make a toilet paper display, they go all out and decorate as if they are competing for an award. An employee handbook is always tucked away in their back pocket, highlighted, tabbed, and ready to go. If a fellow employee asks them a question, they always answer, "Well, I believe that management would want . . ." or "If I were management, I would . . ."

Have you ever gone into Wal-Mart and noticed employees having fun while mopping the floor? These are the I-Just-Wanna-Have-Fun associates. They make Wal-Mart the place to be. They are always playing pranks on their friends, including putting the *No Boundaries* shoes in the *Jubilee* towels aisle. They go out of their way to help customers, even if it means running all over the store trying to find an item that only K-Mart would stock, such as the Martha Stewart or Kathy Ireland line. I-Just-Wanna-Have-Funs decorate their department with balloons and start dancing a pre-rehearsed routine every time the "Rolling Back Prices" song plays over the intercom.

Unlike the Wanna-Be-Management, the Lifers are not there

for advancement. These people have worked at Wal-Mart for twenty plus years without much desire for progression. The Lifers go through twenty vests because of wear and tear. Most of them have ten shoe boxes at home of buttons they have collected over the years. They work there, their children work there, and their grandchildren work there. There are worn-out seats in the break-room where they sit every day; fights break out when anyone tries to take them. Lifers are the ones who worked at the store about ten years before it became a Supercenter. They helped cut the ribbon at the store's grand opening, and if you ask them what they think about a display, they will reminisce about a similar one the store did the first day it opened. I was making a display of school boxes for the Back-To-School aisle when a Lifer door-greeter rounded the corner. As soon as he realized what I was doing, he started verbally laying out the blueprint the store used during the week of grand opening. I am sure it was a nice display back in 1977. Lifers have great pride in the store and will only shop at the Wal-Mart where they work. To them, I am a traitor because I refuse to shop at my home store. They have regulars who give them a hug whenever they come into the store. They know everything about that customer, and that customer knows everything about them. Lifers have been around long enough to proudly wear a silver badge with a big 25 or 20 on it, branding them for their undying devotion to Wal-Mart. If anything negative is said about Wal-Mart, it is a personal blow.

Have you ever noticed a Wal-Mart associate who is just standing there watching a crack in the wall slowly expand? This is a rare sighting of an I'm-Just-Trying-To-Get-Paid associate hard at work or hardly working. Unlike the Lifers, who are there because of devotion and camaraderie, the I'm-Just-Trying-To-Get-Paid are there for the paycheck. They camp out in the back of the store, trying to have minimal contact with the human species. They do the bare minimum and only help the customers when management is watching. After they confuse the customer, it's off to the restroom for a scrub down and then to the clinic for a vaccine to prevent them from contracting social-interaction

cooties. They show up right on the dot—2:00:00 p.m. They refuse to clock in early—1:59:59 p.m. They do not talk to co-workers; they do not want to become attached. Their theory is that if friendships are formed, it forever links them to the store— until death do they part. Not only do they not make friends, they would prefer if no one knew they worked for Wally-World. Funny, the navy blue vest with large gold letters and a red, white, and blue badge does not conceal their identity.

Lastly, there are the No-One-Else-Will-Hire-Me associates. Nobody but Wal-Mart will hire them. These people have applied for every genre of employment from telemarketing to flipping burgers and pushing Avon, but somehow found themselves at the doorstep of Discount City. Wal-Mart has a rigorous hiring process: three interviews, a drug test, a morality test, and two weeks of computer-based learning. The process is involved, yet somehow, the No-One-Else-Will-Hire-Mes slime their way into the company. One week later, they are terminated. They begin their spiral down the discount store chain, starting out at Wal-Mart, then to K-Mart, and finally hit bottom at Dollar General. The No-One-Else-Will-Hire-Mes either talk too much, are lazy, or are major overachievers. They will do anything to avoid being fired, but, in reality, they are pushing themselves into annihilation.

I belong to one of these groups, actually two of these groups: I-Just-Wanna-Have-Fun and I'm-Just-Trying-To-Get-Paid. Wal-Mart is not a career option for me. It is only a steppingstone. As soon as I walk through the automatic doors, everything turns to dollar signs. Blue bags, carts, and aisles cease to exist. I immediately start calculating a running total of my earnings for the day. Minimum wage is easy addition.

Bubble Gum

See, my four friends and I were bored in my yard, some perched on their bicycles, others sitting with their knees poking the sky, arms behind them. We all chewed strawberry-flavored gum that Michael had given us. The summer sun didn't keep us from playing, but we couldn't think of anything fun to do. Everything had been done already—a lemonade stand, putting balloons in the rusted spokes of our bicycles to make motorbikes, and playing hide-and-seek. We had already been swimming and built an entire town with Legos. The blanket tent in my bedroom had slid to the carpet, and the Slip' n' Slide had been rolled up for a week after Dad decided he was sick of a swamp in the back yard. So after a lot of "I don't want to do that" and "That game sucks," we all agreed on a game of Chinese Freeze Tag.

Michael, the oldest, and definitely the cutest boy, was the leader of our group. He was always "It" and stood by "base," the ugly plum tree that couldn't stand up on its own. That stupid tree kind of bent over to touch the ground, so Dad put three stakes at the base and tied a brown rope from them to the trunk. Then it just bent in the other direction.

Anyway, the game started and all four of us scattered between trees and limp azalea bushes, while Michael counted to ten by the crooked plum. When the ten seconds were up, Michael tried to dart after Audrey. She was the slowest, so we always went for her. But instead of tagging her, he tripped over one of the stakes holding the tree, and smacked his face hard into another. Blood came gushing out of his nose. I'd never seen blood like that. It came out like two big, red worms and wiggled into his mouth. He tasted blood, then spit out the redness and the strawberry gum he'd been chewing. A disgusting spray of blood droplets and spit came from his lips. I envisioned Michael as a world famous boxer. He was in the ring with Muhammad Ali. The crowd was screaming for him. I was in the front row with a big posterboard that said, "I love Mike!" Then, Ali broke his nose.

Michael's crying brought me back from my daydream. If he wasn't able to be in charge, then I was next in line, because at seven, I was second oldest. I ordered Audrey to stop crying and go in my house for paper towels. Then I had Keller, Michael's little brother, stay with him, while Ellie and I knocked on Michael's front door. His mom answered with a cheery smile, but when she saw the tears in Ellie's eyes, her smile turned upside down with worry. I reported, "Mrs. Osterman. Mike hurt his nose real bad, and now it's bleeding." She got that worried look, the kind moms get when it's their kid who's crying.

She opened the screen door and called to Michael. "I'm coming Mikey." Ellie and I followed Mrs. Osterman. I was feeling important because I'd been able to think when everyone else couldn't stop crying. Actually, I couldn't cry. I was weirded out to see tears on Michael's face. I had never seen a boy cry. Ever. And there it was, happening on my lawn. My first crush was screaming for his mommy.

I was still chewing the strawberry gum, but then I thought of Michael's blood. Two red things—blood and strawberries. I started thinking I was chewing blood, so I spit it out. My mom rushed out of the house with Audrey. They had paper towels in their hands. Michael's mom held them to his nose, and he hugged her waist as they crossed the street to their house. Keller trailed behind them, his eyes all wide. I wonder if all this scared him, seeing his big brother cry. It sure scared me. It scared all of us.

Audrey climbed on to her purple bicycle and took off for her house, plastic streamers flapping from her handlebars. Ellie wandered across the road to her house, looking kind of pale. I stood next to my mom with the smell of strawberry gum in my nose. I stared at the blood on the stake and the dribbles in the green grass.

Passage Rites

Cinnamon and maaji beckon me into the cooking cave: I tiptoe in and peer at the master. She conjures today's secret brew. Um Saleem senses my presence and lifts her head without turning from the stove.

"You are early. Dinner will not be ready for another hour." I do not answer aloud. *Yes, I am early, and not by accident.* I am here to watch and learn, delve into the ritual.

Potions steam from the copper pots, filling my nostrils, intoxicating me. She raises her eyebrows and turns around, waving a twisted finger. As she makes a *tsk, tsk* noise, an "S" whistles through her teeth.

"Sit, child, you look pale. How long since you have eaten?"

There is a glint in her eye when she pushes a chair into the backs of my knees, forcing me to sit at the table. She won't admit it, but she is pleased by the effect her cooking has on me.

"Help me prepare," she commands, fetching a pot of rice and meat mixture from the peeling yellow countertop. She grabs the pot with both hands and shoves it under my nose. It reeks of raw lamb and pepper.

Her thin wrists gain strength in this gesture. The muscles and tendons obey; they are loyal to the task at hand, strong enough to support her aging hands in passing the undone victuals. My hand grazes hers as I receive the pot. Her fingers are shrivelled, like a white grape after days in the sun, after days of waiting to dry up.

Um Saleem strains the vegetables, baptizing the squash and green peppers under a stream of cold tap water. She sits across from me, cradling the christened brood. The chrome strainer, filled with its purified specimens, scratches the war-torn, formica table. She grabs the zucchini with her left hand and shakes off the excess water. It flies into the air, drying on my cheeks without an apology.

I watch the squash-surgery begin. Sharp finger bones, thick knuckles, gnarled branches of an ancient olive tree, carve the

vessel, thrust peeler through koosa's stem, deep into its interior. A cool white cylinder emerges. She hollows out the seedy heart and lays the entrails, exposed and vulnerable, on the scarred table.

"You will eat well today? Not like a bird. I make your favorites."

Three plates, I say to myself. Three plates, full.

She harvests a wild strand of coarse black hair and stores it behind her ear, depositing a piece of white squash-meat on her dampened temple.

"Here," she says, handing me a hollowed squash. "You stuff the koosa while I stir the labane-yogurt sauce."

Obediently, my hands dive into the pot, and my palms squish the sticky pink mess of lamb-littered white rice particles. These ivory grains resemble dried maggots. I am callously unaffected as my index finger stuffs the empty vessel with this decayed, larvae-ridden paste. My fingernails turn from white to red. I have done my part; I release the subjects to their burial.

Um Saleem lifts the copper lid and embeds the stuffed squash in yellow rice and blackened chicken. She sprinkles the plot with pine nuts and shoves it into the gas-lit tomb. Koosa ferments in the chamber while I sit at the table, obediently eating a snack of hommous and flatbread. She turns to the sink and washes the dishes. I notice she does not use any soap, only scalding water. Her hands, numb and desensitized, faithfully endure this penance.

When the aroma of spices seeps into the air, she lifts her Gibraltar nose and gauges the readiness of her concoction. She rips the pot out of the stove, and in one quick motion, turns it upside down onto an aluminium platter. Her fingers loosen rice from chicken and dig the withered koosa from its grave with a spoon. Brown tissue and squirming rice ooze from the gray, bloated bodies of decayed squash. She bruises the mushy skin with the serving spoon, and curses, as if it is their fault for being overdone. Then she looks at me, at my under-done body.

"You will make a good wife, someday—if you add some flesh. You are too thin, just bones, my sweetheart, Ha beehti."

She pinches my cheeks with pity, tastes them with sweet kisses. Three pinches. Three kisses. Three plates. I breathe deep the garlic welcome of her skin. Dark hands clamp down on my shoulders, and her eyes, deep as a nomadic night sky, stir it all together—the kitchen, the pots simmering, the plates waiting—and me, my small girl’s body, not yet ready for the feast.

“This,” she says, laughing her moon-laugh, showing the empty arc in her right front tooth, “This is the table of life. Dine heartily.”

Whitney Beers is a sophomore 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 sophomore working toward a BFA in creative writing. She is a Dallas, Texas native and is the Vice President of the Stephens Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She is currently the Languages and Literature student/faculty liaison and a second-year member of the academic honor society, Alpha Lambda Delta.

Karin Carr is a freshman from Woodland Park, Colorado. She is pursuing a degree in theatre.

Jill Davis is a freshman from Carmel, Indiana. She is pursuing a degree in fashion design. Her campus activities include Innovative Fashion Association and Kappa Delta sorority.

Ian Dodds has served as editor-in-chief of *Timberline*, the University of Oregon literary journal, and as an intern poetry editor for three years.

Yashunda Gift is a freshman law, philosophy, and rhetoric student from Joplin, Missouri, and has been a Wal-Mart employee for three years.

Syeria Haynes has been interested in creative writing since the age of ten. She is a native of Kansas City, Missouri.

Toni Henzler has lived most of her life in Central Missouri and currently resides in Northern Boone County with her husband. She is pursuing a BFA in creative writing.

Holly Herlinger transferred to Stephens College from Katy, Texas, as a theatre major. She has since changed to a creative writing major with a minor in communication.

Jessamyn Hytrek is a creative writing major and a Glenwood, Iowa native. She has sold two original children's play scripts.

Sara Rae Mercer is a freshman dance student with a minor in art. She is a native of Jefferson City, Missouri.

Shaen Pogue is a freshman majoring in creative writing. Writing is one of her passions, and she believes her writing skills have developed greatly since joining the Stephens family. This is her first publication.

Renée Reed-Miller is a junior working on a BFA in creative writing. She was raised in Amman, Jordan, and currently resides in Columbia, Missouri, with her husband of five years. She has served as a student/faculty liaison to the Languages and Literature Program and is a member of the English honor society Sigma Tau Delta. She recently won second place for her poetry presentation at the society's Midwest Regional Conference in Decorah, Iowa, and presented her work at the National Conference in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Jenny Schwade is a native of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and is majoring 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.

Jennifer Zemke transferred to Stephens College from Drury University in January 2000. She is studying fashion marketing and minoring in business management.

Whitney Beers

Angela Burke

Karin Carr

Jill Davis

Ian Dodds

Yashunda Gift

Syeria Haynes

Toni Henzler

Holly Herlinger

Jessamyn Hytrek

Sara Rae Mercer

Renée Reed-Miller

Shaen Pogue

Jenny Schwade

Leah Wyllys

Jennifer Zemke