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VICTORIA VALET
It's Not Just Diamonds and Tutus
1st place

Abusive relationships - they bruise the victim's mind and body and pound her sense of trust into the ground. They rip apart a psyche and throw emotions into complete chaos. People wonder why the 20% of women who are involved in abusive relationships don't get out; after all, they are mistreated, degraded, and battered. These women all have different reasons for not escaping; some claim that they themselves were at fault, others are convinced that in time the abuse will end, and a few even explain not fleeing by simply stating that, despite all of the harm they have experienced, they are still in love. I fall into the latter category; however, my abusive relationship was not with a person - it was with ballet.

It started at a young age. Like many other mothers across the globe, my mother enrolled me in ballet classes for two reasons. First, she thought that it would be adorable; after all, what could possibly be better than watching your three-year-old daughter daintily prance around the kitchen in a glittery pink tutu? Second, as my mother put it: "Looking back at [my] own childhood, ballet is something [I thought that I] would have really enjoyed, but did not have the opportunity to do," therefore, by bringing ballet into my life she could provide me with a chance she never had, while simultaneously living out her own youthful dream. And so, I ended up in ballet class. The majority of girls who participate in ballet, especially from such a young age, drop out. Once they realize that the stereotypical "perfectly delicate ballerina in her pink tutu" is not a reality for most dancers, and that a dancer's life is, instead, filled to the brim with heartache and pain, they flee, leaving nothing behind but a cloud of chalk and a slipper spinning on the floor. I did not flee. Despite the great physical and emotional turmoil I experienced over the course of my fifteen years of ballet, I stuck it out. In my heart, I truly believe that it was all worth it, and would do it all again in a heartbeat, but why? How could I still love something that had been so awful to me?

It is a well-known fact that ballet studios are a breeding ground for eating disorders. From the installation of "fat mirrors"

to make dancers think they are larger than they are, to the straight forward yell of a teacher exclaiming that you need to lose weight, it is no wonder that "[the] frequency of eating disorders [is] twice as high for dancers than for students who do not participate in ballet" (Ackard 486). Anorexia, bulimia --I have seen it all. I can even remember the five-year old version of myself, standing in line after a ballet class, waiting for a reward from our teacher for having pointed our feet throughout the entire class. What was this gift? A gummy worm, advertised by the teacher as "a calorie free treat to keep her dancers thin." As time went on, the reminders to stay slender became less subtle. Teachers yelled at my fellow dancers and me for not holding our stomachs in. We were required to attend nutrition classes, in which we would learn the lowest calorie foods we could eat and still gain enough energy to finish an extensive rehearsal. I had friends who were not given roles in ballet productions, not due to poor ability or technique, but due to their size. There was even an instance in which a teacher of mine yelled, "Suck it in, I can see your dinner hanging out of your stomach!" at me during a class. It is no wonder that in time, I began to obsess over my weight.

My mother never thought I would have to worry about my weight, as she always thought that I was "blessed as a ballerina with a natural thinness"; however, I was living in a world where thin was not good enough. My best friend, Erin observes that she "always had to try to make [me] eat during the day at school." There was a time in which I would consume only 300 calories daily, while working off 600. In reference to my issues with eating, Erin said, "... at certain points a lot of [our friends] got really worried, particularly me, about your eating habits, because they were so uneven and random. Also it would worry me when you said things that made it sound as if you didn't think you were skinny. Because you are absolutely.... very skinny."

If there were only one thing standing in the way of you and your dream, wouldn't you do anything and everything in your power to remove the obstacle to achieve your goal? Well, what if it was your weight that was your hindrance? Yes, says one observer, "the ruthless ways in which dancers and dance teachers often treat the body is bewildering. In an occupation where the body is so all-important one would expect the practitioners to treat it with the utmost respect to keep it health and in shape"

(Aalten 110). If you want something as badly as I wanted ballet, it is hard to see the damaging effects of your own behavior. Even professional dancers can be blind about the health risks involved with extreme weight loss as they strive to be thin. Gelsey Kirkland, a former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, admitted to "her struggles with cocaine, eating disorders, and a choreographer who made her pop amphetamines while issuing dictates like 'must see the bones'" in her autobiography, *Dancing on My Grave*. Lauren Cuthbertson, a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet, believes that "with a BMI of 18.5... '[her] body might be slender... but it's not too slender'" (Johnson). "The tendency of female dancers to exhibit disordered eating may be because female dancers are subject to enormous pressure regarding their body shape.... Dancers are exposed to additional ideals that are considered to be necessary within the dance community, such as that preferred by ballet master George Balanchine and his followers of a straight body and long limbs" (Ackard 486). As one can easily see, the existence of these problems is well known throughout the dance world. Despite this awareness, to be thin as a rail is still the ideal, and dancers, like myself, continue to strive towards it, regardless of the dangerous health risks involved, including that of death.

The way in which a dancer is supposed to stand and move is anything but natural; however, after hours of painful stretching and grueling workouts, the bodily contortions that make up ballet begin to feel innate. I have had classes in which a series of 500 crunches and pushups are the norm, and have sat in splits for so long that I have been unable to rise up off of the floor. I have known dancers who have had teachers stand on their legs, forcing them to rotate from the hips as far as possible, and have heard stories of girls who have been instructed to break and reshape their feet so that the arch in their foot is more prominent. "'Your knees are stretched beyond their limit, your legs are over your head and your back is always bent,' [dancer Mara] Galeazzi says. 'I don't think it's a very natural way to train'" (Johnson); however, strength and flexibility are essential, and without them, you cannot be a dancer. A dancer needs to have control over her body so that she may gracefully float across the stage, making every movement appear to be so simple, as if she is walking on air. No one wants to watch a clunky dancer.

My feet, which are now entirely distorted with scar tissue, callus, and bunions, have been through hell and back. I have bled through my pointe shoes, have worn up to ten Band-Aids on my feet at once, and have even had all of the skin on the bottom of both of my feet torn off after a particularly grizzly Nutcracker rehearsal. Why didn't I stop? Why didn't I ask to sit down? I couldn't - asking to sit out was too risky - I can't even count the number of times in which dancers in my classes had been screamed at for asking to fix their shoe or complaining about the pain. Ballet dancer, Nienke Bonnema agrees: "[At] school you were never allowed to show if something hurt... Crying if you were in pain was absolutely forbidden. When you did, the reaction was always: 'Keep smiling! You are the one who wants to be here, if you don't like it you can leave. If you want to stay, stop whining'" (Aalten 116-117), and retired ballerina Mariet Andringa observes that she "... [used] to be that dancer who could almost die of pain and still go on smiling" (Aalten 120). I am very familiar with that sentiment. No matter how much pain you were experiencing, you had to keep dancing, you had to make it look easy, and if you didn't, you were out.

When I was sixteen, I began to feel intense pains in my calves and shins; however, I refused to go to a doctor, as I feared being told that I could not dance. Eventually, I was dragged by my mother to a physician, purely against my will and was diagnosed with tendonitis and shin splints in both legs. After my appointment, I was given a physical therapist, and banned from dancing for the time being. But I couldn't stop dancing; rehearsals for The Nutcracker had just begun, and I couldn't risk having my roles taken away; therefore, I ignored the doctor and danced through the pain. As I jumped on my crippled legs, I bit my lip, kept smiling, and couldn't wait to go home and jump into a tub of ice. According to cultural anthropologist Anna Aalten, in the ballet world, "[When] the body 'speaks up' it is habitually silenced into a mode of bodily absence to allow the dancer to continue working." That is exactly what I did. I danced through the pain and held back tears, and in the end, I was dancing on stage in The Nutcracker.

My fellow ballet student, Rose, has had similar experiences with injuries, stating that she has had "sprained ankles and leg muscle pulls that I probably shouldn't have danced on, but I did anyways because I felt the drive and love for dance overcome

any minor pain that I felt from the injuries." "Every dancer knows: if you want to be good, you have to suffer... Pain can be a sign that you are working hard or that you are improving..." (Aalten 116). Because of this nonchalant attitude that dancers have regarding pain, it should come as no surprise that "the pain threshold of ballerinas is 3 times higher than that of non-ballerinas" (Johnson).

"I can't, I have ballet"- this has to be one of my most overused phrases, and it is so cliché in my world for a reason. Ever since I was young, I always had to make sacrifices for ballet. I missed out on so much - birthday parties, weddings, vacations, my brother's sporting events - I was never there. I rarely saw my family. I would eat dinner with them maybe once a week, and the most time I would spend with my mother was during the one hour and fifteen minute car ride to American Repertory Ballet's Princeton Ballet School. I never saw my friends, and they never understood my lifestyle. As a result, I did not have a normal childhood or adolescent life. I couldn't just "hangout" on the weekends; I was dancing four to twelve hours everyday, seven days a week, 365 days of the year. When I wasn't dancing, I was either doing homework, or was passed out from exhaustion. My best friend, Erin, can recall instances in which I would even fall asleep on the phone with people. Many of my friends were unable to put up with my irregular life and left. Because of my unstable relationships, I developed my "bail instinct." Whenever I began to get close to someone, I would throw commitment to the wind and bail - that way they could not leave me and hurt me first. I hated being constantly disappointed. I would lie, convincing myself that if something didn't work out that I didn't really want it all that much anyway. I would always expect the worst, that way, if things happened to go my way, I could be pleasantly surprised - this was a rarity.

My mother, the one who brought me to my first ballet class, began to question whether or not this life was for me. "You often put too much pressure on yourself," she told me recently, "and I wanted you to be able to see that while ballet was an important part of your life, you had many other talents and opportunities yet to be discovered. My fear was that ballet, at times, was closing the door to new experiences. It was your whole life." Yes, ballet was my whole life, but I liked it that way. It was the only thing I could always depend on and I loved it - it was my drug.

"You idiot, you haven't done it right once!" the dance teacher shouted. "Not once! I'm telling you, you're insolent! You have to kill yourself to get the class to work, to get them to do anything!" No, I have not had these exact awful words directed at me, but I have heard similar things shouted in my direction and in the direction of others in the ballet studio. These words of "motivational criticism" were spoken by Ludmila Sacharova, one of the most prestigious ballet teachers at one of the most renowned ballet schools in the world, The Perms Order of Honour Choreographic School in Eastern Russia. According to her, in David Kinsella's documentary, which examines the ruthless nature of this school, "Idiots don't dance. NEVER. Only the clever ones dance. And only clever people work in this profession."

Many times, rather than taking the time to rationally explain what you are doing wrong, ballet teachers will simply shout at you. According to psychotherapist Julia Buckroyd, "Some dancing schools operate in a totally unethical way. They treat their pupils in such a way that they lose self-esteem. Attitudes and teaching methods are extremely traditional and teachers are the only people allowed to do any talking that needs to be done" (Morgan). Ballet teachers understand how difficult and competitive the profession of a ballet dancer is; after all, they have been there. They know that "29 [is the] average retirement age of professional ballerinas" and that the ballet world is "a tough and often thankless one" (Johnson); therefore, they try to prepare you in the best way they think that they can. "[This] training process that occurs in ballet [is] one which 'prepares and conditions the young female dancer to fail'" (Summers-Bremner 95). This approach to teaching may not be right, but ballet teachers around the world have utilized it for centuries and they may say things like: "You are not working hard enough! If you are not going to work, then get out of my class!" "If you are not smart enough, and not thin enough, and not talented enough, then quit ballet and go become a cheerleader!" "What are you doing? You are doing it wrong! Why should I bother correcting you if you are not going to pay attention!" "Ballet is not just diamonds and tutus!"

As dancers, we are constantly told that the more a teacher corrects you, the more they care about you, and the more they believe in your ability and want you to succeed. My mind has taken this lesson too far. As researchers Summers-Bremner

point out, "[The] hard work, repetition and structure of the daily class frequently results in 'un-thinking'dancers, trained to accept unquestioningly the professional requirements'" (96). I accepted everything I heard, believing every negative criticism about myself to be true. I am so accustomed to hearing what is wrong with me that when someone, regardless of whether or not they are affiliated with ballet, compliments me, I have no idea what to do. In fact, the majority of the time, I don't believe or trust them. Only recently have I been able to open up. According to a study done by psychologist Diann M. Ackard, "Ballet dancers scored highest on measures of emotional instability..." and "... 13-to 17-year-old female dancers described their personality as less beautiful, pleasant, attractive, confident, lovable, and good than the nondancing girls did" (486).

People are often dumbfounded when I state that I miss ballet greatly, for I often speak of it negatively and it has caused me a great deal of emotional and physical pain. "Eating disorders, overburdening, exhaustion and dancing with pain and minor injuries are considered by many dancers unavoidable risks of the profession," concludes psychologist Aalten (121), and for me, it was all worth it.

Ballet is freedom, beauty, and above all, happiness. Nothing can compare to the feeling of successfully completing a triple pirouette after weeks of tireless practice, or the high of performing on stage in front of hundreds of people. I have absolutely no regrets about any of my experiences with ballet; in fact, I almost wish I was pushed even more than I was. If I had it my way, I would not even be in college right now - I would be out in the real world auditioning for ballet companies.

At the same time, I must acknowledge that "love and hope... play a strong part in keeping women victims in abusive relationships" (Daw), and this is what kept me going in my own relationship with ballet. According to Ester Protzman, a former soloist with the National Ballet in Amsterdam, a "dancer wants to dance" no matter what (Aalten 118). That is exactly how I feel. Somewhere "in amongst the tortured components of the dancer's self-image there is her sense of her own talent, purpose, presumably enjoyment of and in dance" (Summers-Bremner 96), and despite all of the torture and sleepless nights, this is what keeps a dancer going. And so, no matter how many harsh words were

yelled in my direction, and in spite of every tear that I shed, nothing could change the way I felt about ballet. When I was dancing, it was like I had escaped from the realities of life, and inhabited a world where nothing could touch me. Without ballet, I would not be me. Yes, ballet does bear much of the responsibility for the issues in my life, but it has also taught me so much, and I am better off for having experienced it. "It has and will continue to weave who you are as an individual," my friend Erin said recently. "[Ballet] seemed like part of your identity, from walking turned out to jumping strangely on the trampoline, I couldn't imagine Vicky not being a ballerina." According to Oksana Sokorik, a ballet student at The Perms Order of Honour Choreographic School, In "ballet, there is always a story about a girl who falls in love with all her heart. When you are dancing you become that girl." I am that girl.

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LAUREN HALLMAN
Find Your Phoenix
2nd place

*".. there is one, a bird, which renews itself, and reproduce from itself..
When age has given it strength, and it can carry burdens, it
lightens the branches of the tall palm of the heavy nest,
and piously carries its own cradle."
-Ovid*

"Excuse me, Mrs. Clark? How do birds fly?"

"How is that relevant to chemistry?"

"It just doesn't make sense."

"Lauren, please take your matches, stop stalling, and begin the experiment."

We were learning the fundamentals of science, which—sadly—involved Bunsen burners. We were to work in partners, but that didn't excuse us from learning to light our own matches. I had studiously avoided fire in every sense up until that day but suddenly, my status as a student relied on me creating that which had tried (and might have succeeded) to destroy me.

I stared at the red tip of the match as if combustion was imminent. My brain involuntarily started to replay images of that night. It was as if a record was skipping and repeating back and forth. It was painful but there was no way to make it stop.

I struck the match. Nothing.

I struck it again. It broke.

I kept striking until the box was heavy with emptiness.

With childish resolve, I raised my hand and asked for another box, even though it made my palms even sweatier and my outstretched fingers shake. My partner, Ben, was staring at me with a combination of incredulity and skepticism. He had probably been lighting matches since he was four—he had the look of a pyro.

My teacher, bless her heart, calmly asked Ben to light my Bunsen burner for me. As soon as he was distracted, she knelt down on my level and asked me if I was alright. Tears of frustration welled up but didn't spill over. I didn't want the match to light. I didn't want to cause a spark. I didn't want to tell her, but I could see a glimmer of understanding deep in her eyes. She knew. They

all knew. It occurred to me that I had been a source of gossip for teachers whose names I didn't even know. My fire-red hair marked me as that girl. They didn't even need to know my name. I hated the way they looked at me, like they could see that my clothes had come in a bag some lady from church had dropped off with a casserole. It's not as if any of them even knew who I was. Did they know that I hated math or that I currently held the hula-hoop record? All those teachers knew was that the girl walking past their classroom door was someone they had been told to pity. I feared that pity more than I feared the fire itself.

Back in fourth grade, before anything bad had happened, life was simple. I woke up each morning, went to school, aced my tests (or didn't), and came home in time to watch Pokemon. My greatest worry was that the bus would run late and I would miss the Pokemon theme song or that my mom would burn my toast. One particularly ordinary morning, I woke up to the fire alarm blaring (again) and assumed my mom had tried to make something ridiculous and failed. My body was telling me that it was too early to be up so I rolled over and pulled the pillow over my head, waiting for the scent of too toasty toast. However, my door opened with such urgency, I began to wonder if this was going to be a break in the normalcy of weekday mornings. I sat up and looked at my clock: it wasn't even 5 AM. Ominous tendrils of thick black smoke followed my dad into the room as he hurried me out of bed and down the stairs.

So much can happen in an instant. I remember standing across the street watching my life go up in smoke. Glass fell from two stories up and a tongue of hot light licked the night sky. I said a prayer for the firemen, my books, and my Pokemon cards (may they rest in ashen pieces). The house lit up the sky, casting shadowy images on the smoke it produced as the fire truck lights made pictures on my closed lids. There was too much light, too much heat, and too much smoke. We all stood separated from each other, too alone to touch. Too afraid that if we felt each other, it would make everything real.

I don't remember much more of that night. I remember the sting of smoke in my eyes, the firemen in their red focus as they ran by us into the house, my dad carrying our St. Bernard down the driveway because she was nearly paralyzed with fear. I wasn't paralyzed by fear, I was paralyzed by loss.

I wanted to go back to the safe cocoon of that morning. My warm nest of blankets was suddenly a sharp contrast to the scorching heat emanating off the house like the first blast of air from an opened oven. I wanted to go back and hide my head under the pillow to shut out the screaming world, to close my eyes and forget the nightmarish reality. I was still too young to realize that no matter how fervently you wish for something to be true, what's done is done and there is no turning back.

For the next couple of weeks, I woke up in our friend's basement. We blew up air mattresses and unrolled brand, spanking new sleeping bags and all slept together like one big sleepover. The first deluge of donations brought us back to reality. In addition to the customary casserole, progressively perky philanthropists stopped by with the basic hand-me down clothes from the 80's or lurid cardigans that their own children were too embarrassed to be seen wearing in public. Shiny, new trash bags were opened to reveal toothbrushes, toothpaste, razors, shaving cream, bobby pins, hair ties, shampoo, conditioner, soap, deodorant, underwear (praise the lord), and all of the other basic necessities that people use every day and take for granted. We were occasionally surprised by the offerings that we didn't need, but that reminded us of what had been lost. I got a pink Britney Spears diary and a stuffed animal. When my best friend found out that I had gotten presents despite the fact that Christmas has passed, it no longer mattered that everything that had mattered to me was a worthless pile of black. In her eyes, I had everything. She forgot that one crucial thing was still missing: a home. To her, being homeless was far less tragic than the fact that I was getting more presents than she was. Normally I would have shared with her as she was sharing her home with me, but I didn't have much to offer and she lived in a two story mansion with a fully furnished basement (complete with a pool table, air hockey, a big screen TV, full kitchen, and space to store their highly expensive extra gadgets and gizmos). Even though she had everything a ten-year-old could possibly hope for, she was jealous of my Britney diary. That envy morphed into malice. I walked into the basement where I lived one day to find that she had stolen my diary and showed her brother the part where I declared my love for him. So embarrassing. I couldn't comprehend that this rich girl who had six TVs in her house, two sports cars, a pool, and a house the size of Maine was jealous of me—the girl whose prize

possession was a stupid diary. I promised God that in gratitude for Him saving my life, I would never take advantage of anything again. And the second I had two dollars to rub together, I bought a composition notebook and wrote about how much boys stink.

We relocated to a hotel, and then a rental house as we began to rebuild our lives. Part of that process was rebuilding our house and that project could only begin after assessing the damage. I didn't want to see my room—I had come to terms with the fact that everything was gone; being reminded of the loss seemed counterproductive. I was too young to be realistic about what we would find. It would have been easy to walk in and find the remnants of our previous life stripped away. It would have been easier still to have found some sign of life among the wreckage.

The worst part of returning to the rubble was the distant familiarity. Everything on the first floor was just as we had left it, but we had to leave it where it was because smoke is a sightless killer. Even though it all seemed to be fine, there was a layer of ash tainting the surface.

Walking up the stairs, I couldn't decide if I wanted to get my first glimpse of a real-life house fire, or if I wanted to run until my legs gave out. Some part of my brain was still convinced that there would be one book unharmed on my shelves, one shoe untarnished, one Barbie not melted beyond recognition. I kept going; reciting a line from Emily Dickinson to keep my feet moving.

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul...*

We started where the fire began: in my sister's room. My sister had always been creative and artistic. She won all sorts of awards in high school and dreamed of being an artist or at the very least, an art major. She and my mom had even decorated the walls of my room with a soft robin's egg blue and then collaborated to paint a great sprawling tree in the corner where my bed lay. At night, I would lie on my top bunk and imagine I was in a nest and that in the morning, I could fly away. These lasting dreams gave my imagination wings.

*And sings a tune without the words,
And never stops at all...*

The walls were bare of her many prize-winning paintings

and drawings. Nothing was recognizable from a distance, but as we inspected the remnants we could see the foot of a dresser here, a bedpost there. Things that had defined her just days before (her favorite books, pictures of her and her friends, the quirky clothes that I secretly admired her for wearing) were gone, it was like the fire took her identity with her prized possessions. I could even see the patch of her neck where the fire had burned off her hair. I kept checking myself over to make sure I hadn't missed something like that on myself. I felt sure that the fire had left some visible scar or burn or even just a cough to prove that it had actually happened. As it was, our only proof was the blackness of nothing. We were hoping for something more like...something.

*And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm...*

The fire hadn't come all the way into my room, but it had raked its ugly claws through my closet before it could be contained. I couldn't find even one sign of a survivor. Not a page of a book, nor a buckle from a shoe. That wasn't the worst part. The worst was seeing my room as a skeleton. I could see through the smoke to the bones underneath. The black was worse than the red, and it was everywhere. Red is alive and angry and passionate. Black is dead. Black coated my blue walls, my bunk bed, and now my skin. There was a fine layer that had sprinkled down from the ceiling and transferred from the walls and drowned me in ashes. But I could still see what it had been underneath. I could see my backyard through the window the firemen had tried to cover up after chopping it out. I could see the places my bookshelves used to hang from. Worst of all, I could see the dim outline of that tree on my wall.

Seeing the tree was like seeing a younger version of myself through a haze of smoke. It scared me to not be able to remember events that had happened a year before, a month, last week. It truly felt as if the fire had annihilated every bit of my former life. There were no survivors.

*I've heard it in the chilliest land
And on the strangest sea;*

Yet—

And yet there I stood - whole, undamaged, but tainted by a layer of soot and memories. I walked into my bathroom and splashed some water on my face.

Some people think of baptism as a cleansing of the soul in a holy, watery bath. I was baptized by fire. I came out of that house not once, but twice and left my old world behind. Like a phoenix, I rose from the ashes and was reborn scarred and damaged, but inexplicably still whole. At first, I found I was too weak to fly on my own. I struggled through so much in the aftermath of that event. I rebuilt a life, bought a new bunk bed, and eventually learned to appreciate fire for what it was: fire destroys the old so that we can move on with our lives.

Once, while watching the Discovery Channel, I saw first-hand how a volcano wipes away the landscape around itself so that new life can form from the fresh soil. There is a shiny new scar covering the burn. The new is richer and healthier than the old. It may seem unfamiliar, yet skin is skin, bone is bone, and the heart can't be stifled so easily. A house fire is nowhere near as dramatic as a volcano, but when you're staring at flames dancing in windows where you once stood and watched for the ice cream man, it ages you. It's not as if you can remain in that window waiting for the "Ice Cream Theme Song" for the rest of your life. Time moves in one direction: forward.

I see fire as having a dual nature now: it's not purely evil. It can tear down walls or warm some life into numb fingers. It roars and cackles with mirth; powerful as a dragon. Eventually, it fades and dies. It is an entity to respect, not fear. I try to emulate the passion of flames in my own life: to burn like a steady ember, dim and flickering, but with an enduring flame. From that spark comes new life. From the ashes emerges a downy head blinking in the light of a new morning. This time, no blaring alarms will wake me up—I will wake up with each new morning and appreciate the second chance I've been given.

*I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.*

VALENTINA GUZZO

Piecing Together the Unemployment Puzzle

3rd place

I spent most of my pre-college summer days checking my emails on my Loyola account. I would skim through all of the emails clicking next at the sign of "Desk Assistant Positions" and "Phone-a-thon applications." At the time I was still sun dazed from the beach, filled with the false assurance of being a federal work study student, and a brief look was all I gave those attached applications.

Unfortunately, come the second week of September when I had finally settled down and was ready to go job hunting, I found it a lot more difficult than I had anticipated. Desk assistant positions were out of the question. I was emailed back about the Phone-a-thon saying all the positions had been filled and my inquiry about jobs at the Library went unanswered. Although I found solace in the other 30 plus federal work study students who could not find a job, my weekly conversations with my parents always ended with, "Have you gotten a job yet? What do you mean there is nothing? They have to provide you with a job its part of your financial aid package! You are just not trying hard enough." Really, Mom and Dad?

What was worse, was that all the other job emails I had received I had simply deleted because I figured that it was morally unethical to apply to more than one job and take away that opportunity from someone else. After having received the biggest lecture of my life from my parents on the importance of contributing to my college education, I checked my email to find that the CCSJ [Center for Community Service and Justice] was offering federal work study students service jobs. At \$8 an hour, my schedule was compatible with CARES, "a GEDCO [Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation] sponsored program that is a combination Food Pantry and Emergency Financial Assistance center." According to the GEDCO website, "CARES was founded in 1993 by a group of extremely dedicated volunteers from churches in the Govans area." I emailed Carol Cyphers about the position, went on an interview, and sure enough I was working Tuesdays and Saturdays from 9-11 am. It is an off-campus job located at

St.Mary's Church on York Road (yes, that York Road), and it is, ironically enough, working in Career Connections, the program aimed at filling out job applications and resumes for citizens of the Baltimore area who either do not have the means or technical knowledge to complete online applications.

Initially I assumed I was going to be helping high school dropouts fill out cashier applications for the corner CVS. About a month in though, I realized that almost everyone I had worked with thus far had at least a high school diploma, if not a higher form of education. They were victims of circumstance. For example, a registered nurse who attended the University of Maryland could not get a full time job after leaving her last position to take care of her ailing mother. Another woman who was trying to get a job as a medical assistant, like the one she had before she got into a car accident two years ago, had to quit due to intensive physical therapy.

In my month of working at CARES, I believed I had discovered the missing piece to the puzzle of unemployment...technology. Most of the individuals that come in have knowledge in their line of work. Under job description in their resumes, they have the credentials to administer treatments and therapies and consult with physicians about a patient's condition, but they are like a prize horse with a lame leg because they cannot fill out a simple online application.

As college students, we reap the benefits of being educated in a society where technology is constantly reinventing itself every 5 months. However, in today's economy it seems not even having the knowledge of Bill Gates, is enough to guarantee you work at the most basic data entry job. One Thursday, I came in to work as an interviewer for the Food Pantry, a relatively simple job. I would call a name from the list and then ask the person to step inside my sectioned-off cubicle, so that they could provide me proof of identification and receive their groceries. After about 20 minutes I had gotten into the rhythm of it, I would buzz in and out of the waiting room and call "So-and-so" to be interviewed.

When the room finally began to clear out I noticed a woman in her thirties who had come in earlier that morning with her sleepy four year-old son. I asked her to come with me, asking, "Are you a new client?" As I was filling out her address, I noticed that her zip code was not on the list. She was not eligible for this

program because she lived a block outside of the designated area. I said, "Look, I am so sorry to tell you this, it is the fault of someone who took down your information, but you live outside the zip codes we provide assistance for."

After I uttered that final "r" in for, I wished more than anything I could have taken it back; her yellowed eyes began to pool with water and turn bloodshot. Her son began to pull at the sleeve of her coat and begged to leave and she shrugged him off and said, "I will get you juice if you are a good boy." She returned her gaze to me and said in a defeated voice, "You try to do the right thing and this is what happens. I was referred to this program by Social Services. My husband does not even know I am here, he would kill me...he is so proud. I used to be like you," and she pulled out a calendar from her big bag. She showed me a picture of a smiling, put together woman in her twenties wearing a red two-piece suit, with a pixie cut, holding a basket of food and said, "I used to help people like you. I worked at a similar place like this...doing data entry for financial assistance and food aid. I do not know what happened to my life."

There was no way I was going to let her leave without doing something to help her, even if it meant helping her myself. I approached my supervisor and told her about the situation trying to keep my voice from cracking in emotion. Much to my delight, an exception was made and I put her name on the grocery list along with any extra items wanted (juice for the little boy.)

As she was about to leave, I said, "Wait! Come in on Tuesday because I work with Career Connections and I can help you fill out applications to find a good job."

She smiled at me brightly and said, "I will try to get my husband to watch the kids."

It really shook me up to learn that my previous theory of technology being the missing piece of employment was faulty. Here was a woman, who had years of experience using computers and doing my job and yet she could not find suitable employment. I realized that Career Connections and the Food Pantry are inseparable—like the brain and the body, one is useless without the other. People who are unemployed are less likely to be able to provide food for their families. If people are told there is a place that will motivate them in their job search, it is proof that these "moochers of society," wrongfully typecasted, are willing to

improve their lives.

Education also appears to be another missing puzzle piece despite confounding information. Behavior Analysis Digest reported that high school drop outs are at four times likelier to be unemployed than those who completed high school, earning an average of \$6,415 less than high school graduates. Baltimore has attempted to remedy this situation by founding FUTURES, a five year program beginning in the summer of ninth grade. Students are given basic skills enhancements, development student support, transition services, academic mentors and an allowance to encourage them to stick with the program and pursue of a higher education. So far the results have proved to be effective; the FUTURES program had a dropout rate of 5.12% while the Baltimore City School system reported a drop out rate of 8.14%. The program relies on smaller classes, specially trained teachers and regular education classes to demonstrate that, "it is a future kids can live with." (Source: "School Dropouts Have FUTURES").

Now I know what you are thinking how does this affect me? I have another couple of years and what goes down must come up right? By the time I come out of college the economy will be fine and I will get my dream job. Maybe...maybe not. If technology is the corner piece of the puzzle and education the side piece, then the middle piece has to be skills. It is not necessarily our education that managers notice when we walk through the door but the ability to, "work from Day 1 ."The adage to take from this seems to be that, "experience will always trump education."(Source: Portland Unemployment Examiner).

If this is true, should college seniors be filled with trepidation to enter the work force? According to Hanah Cho, a Business Reporter for The Baltimore Sun, in 2006 the job market was "hot" for college graduates. "Companies were filling more entry-level jobs and offering higher salaries than in previous years. The National Association of Colleges and Employers called the job market the best it had been in four years." However, a lot has changed over the course of three years and employers were expected to hire 22% fewer graduates from the Class of 2009 compared to the Class of 2008. With this thought in the back of their mind, college students might want to pursue more education, look for opportunities in non-profit sectors or move back in with Mom and Dad.

The University of Maryland is attempting to instill a bit of optimism in their frazzled students by providing workshops which involve mock interviews, resume critiques and network training. Cho surmises that the motive behind these conferences is to raise morale and encourage students to learn where their strengths lie and how to articulate them in a way to get them the job they want. Similarly, Loyola University is also trying to cushion the blow of the recession on its upcoming graduates. The "Life after Loyola" program is geared for Loyola Seniors. It will set you back about \$150, but it aims to squelch the fear of unemployment by having workshops on social network etiquette, transitioning from the classroom to the office, job searching in a difficult economy, speed interviewing, and critiquing resumes. Even with national unemployment reaching an all time high of 10.2% in October, the types of workers that have been hurt the most are those who are uneducated. "Even a small increase in education can help a worker in the labor force. A high school diploma greatly benefits a worker." The reasoning behind this being that college graduates are relatively in lesser supply than workers of less education levels. A low supply means a high demand and their skills are, "generally harder to find in the labor market." (Source: "Unemployment rate of uneducated workers is more than 3 times the rate for college educated workers").

Although we are in an economic recession, education is still an integral stepping stone to getting the profession you want. Baltimore is susceptible as any other city to an increase in unemployment; however, its tactics to alleviate the strain and its resiliency is what makes it unique. Our current strategies are inadequate; CARES runs on a grant that will expire soon and it only helps Baltimore citizens in the neighboring area codes. Workshops are great for morale but they do little to simulate the harsh reality of the work force. The FUTURES program provides incentive to young low income individuals, but in today's society, a high school diploma is an unsaid necessity with an undergraduate degree taking its place.

If working at CARES has taught me anything it is that there is not just one missing piece to the puzzle of unemployment, there are many. It is the folly of a sheltered individual to think that just because you are a college student, you have another three years to worry about it or that because you have

a college degree you will automatically get the job you want. In an ideal world, sure, that would make sense, but our chances are diminished even more so by the recession. It is up to you as a student to be proactive: fill out job applications even those that you are remotely interested in, obtain internships during the summer to gain experience, update your resume, and never hesitate to network. Good luck...you will need it.

JUSTIN KRAJESKI

On Mortality & the Human Form

The bungee jump. Typing it now, the words seem rational. Almost inviting. But I assure you that, as I stood one-hundred-and-sixty-four feet high on the top of a very unstable platform, "inviting" was not my word of choice. Try crazy. Masochistic. Suicidal, even.

We were on our Australian-styled "spring break"-a ten-day tour of the Australia we'd never seen before: islands, beaches and the Great Barrier Reef, all experienced in the blink of an eye. Although I thought I had read the itinerary, it seemed as though I had completely overlooked the bungee jumping segment. And I was terrified.

Before the standing, I had been walking. And by walking, I mean trying to move my shaking legs up nine flights of stairs—wondering what in the world might have possessed me to be doing this, contemplating whether or not someone had slipped Rohypnol into one of my drinks earlier (though, if they had, I doubt I'd be contemplating the notion) to cause me to perform such an idiotic activity.

Thank God I never told my mother.

There were three people in front of me, but for whatever reason, whether it was for their own sick enjoyment or the proximity of my body in relation to their equipment, the men who were working the bungee decided that I should go first. Damn. They must have smelled my fear. The initial steps I took toward them are indistinguishable in my memory; what I do remember are my ankles being tied together. Tightly. Tied and padded. The city of Cairns lay before my eyes, bright and sparkling in the distant night sky, and my fate was sealed. I was going to die.

I was going to die in Australia and my parents were going to get a phone call from our tour guide at a peculiar hour of the morning, and they were going to know I was dead, too. It would have to be a closed casket funeral, because there was no way in hell that they would be able to piece my body back together after this steep fall.

No way.

To add to the agony and anticipation of my death, there

was a count down.

"5... 4... 3..."

The last forms of human life I was going to see were these men. I didn't even know their names.

"2..."

Oh, no.

"...1."

And I dove. I dove head first into oblivion, into blackness, into nothing. But, to my own surprise, the last thing I saw before the fall was not these men—it was Cairns. Cairns' skyline was breathtaking at this time of night, I realized.

I recognized this, literally, because I couldn't breath.

I kept my mouth closed as I fell, and the city of Cairns transformed from a dark omen of death into a breath of life—and

I was alive, I was so alive!

I was falling and falling and life was gushing past me and past me in spurts of oxygen and wind, and even though it was night, everything suddenly became all the more vibrant. I opened my mouth and screamed. I don't remember if it was an obscenity or if it was simply intelligible, but it was happy. And so was I.

As I hung there, with the cord keeping me in place, the worker pulled me down and said gruffly, "Nice form."

This, among other things, has wholly embodied my experience of living in Australia for five months.

I'm a little kid. I was only a teenager when I left the States, and now I'm a twenty-year-old boy—I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a "man" quite yet.

When you're walking up those stairs to the jump, when you're packing your clothes and all your assortment of belongings away to move to an entirely new continent, you can't help but shake. You can't help but to think that your life, as you know it, is now over.

And it is.

You kiss your parents goodbye as you board a plane to take you away, and you wish you could kiss them once more, just once, because God only knows when you'll see them again, just as when you touch the ground—you touch the ground before you dive off of the platform. You wish that you could take one more step, just once, with whichever foot is most appropriate, because the next time you feel anything grounded beneath you hasn't been determined just yet.

And there's this gigantic fall. While traveling, the fall, unlike the bungee, lasts for a little more than thirty seconds—it lasts all the way through till the very end. You're falling and you're falling and you're trusting and you're trusting that everything will be okay.

This trust is key, as is the cord.

The cord, which ties around your ankles and keeps you alive and dangling, is where you store all of that trust. The cord while you travel is your parents, your relatives, your friends, and your wits.

This is the part where I forget to breathe.

We were on a trip once, into the outback of Australia, and one of my buddies received an e-mail on his phone. It's not unusual, you know, for us to receive e-mails—from Loyola, from our friends, from Internet spammers—it's how we stay in touch with the reality at home, in the States. It's our link to the life we used to live actively, the life we now only experience passively. E-mail is extremely important in these scenarios.

This email was from Loyola University Maryland; an e-mail that said, very bluntly, that one of his friends from school had passed away. Can you imagine? Can you imagine, even in your wildest nightmares, receiving an impersonal text informing you that someone who was once a part of your life has just had his taken away?

Another one of my friends who I've been traveling with also found out that her aunt passed away—over the phone. Just like that. Gone.

And you're still falling.
We trust.

We trust when we go abroad that none of our strings will snap—we trust that our parents, our friends, our relatives, will all remain exactly the same while we're gone so that we can return to them in the same fashion as we left.
We trust them not to hurt themselves. We trust them not to die.
If they do, we feel robbed.

Robbed of a father, a friend, a future. You choose. Or don't, because in this game, none of the players have a choice. Whatever our religious affiliation may be, whatever our beliefs—it doesn't matter. The point is that they're not going to be there when you return. You won't find them how you left them. You won't find them at all.

Snap.

And the bungee cord starts to fall apart. Rapidly.
We trust when we go abroad that we will be able to support ourselves, physically and emotionally, so that when we fracture a wrist, lose a friendship, or make a poor decision, we won't go entirely crazy. That we will be able to mentally handle ourselves. We trust that we will be able to balance our grades, our social life, our bank account, and our human desires in a reasonable fashion; that we won't weigh too much significance on one or the other—that we will think before we leap, and that we will use all of those preschool Aesop's Fables to our advantage. Now is the time that we must have faith in all of these kinds of things.

This cord of trust, tiny threads of health, sanity, and balance, among others, is, hopefully, never broken.
When it is, it takes a lot of time to piece back together the fragments of ourselves, just as it might take quite a while to piece back together my body, splattered across all of Cairns, if my bungee cord snapped.

That's a morbid thought.

All we can do is close our eyes and dive as we board the

plane, as we find our seats and prepare for take-off. We might discover, occasionally, that we fall short of breath, but in the best cases, what we truly find is that we are able to open our eyes and see the beauty that lies before us, and fall and fall and continue to be alive.

We continue to be more alive than we ever thought we could be, with more potential than we had before, with screaming obscenities and intelligible shrieks and faces composed of brilliant and awestruck wonder.

If we get lucky, we may even depart from the foreign land in which we traveled and explored, in which we trusted and believed, and land back at home, all in one piece, smiling and accomplished.

And, if we get extremely lucky, we may even be able to look back on all the photographs and memories and whisper, gruffly, to our very own selves, "Nice form."

LISA SCOTT
Untitled

I was driving, which was nothing out of the ordinary, considering my insistence that I drive so we could listen to what I like to think is "real music." I don't mean that new Usher or Pink soundtrack, I mean that old school, raw, dirty rock and roll. I'm rapping my fingers on the steering wheel, noting that my two friends do not seem to be enjoying it as much as I am. As we pull up to a stop sign, and I see a fellow Loyola student stopped to my left. I know he is from Loyola because of his out-of-state license plate as well as his out-of-place car. I tend to make the assumption that if I see a young person driving an overly expensive car in Baltimore; they must be a Loyola student. He and I make eye contact. He is stopped in the bumper to bumper traffic, so I decide I am going to go ahead of him. I throw him a hand, a kind of wave, a kind of thank you, a kind of rock and roll beat, and pull right in front of him, just to be stopped by the traffic.

The music is still blasting. And while the outside world is but a reflection of Aerosmith's poignant drum beats, my eyes are still aware of what is going on around me. I see the door behind me fly open, and that same Loyola student walking towards me like his ass is on fire. Apparently his ass is on fire, for as he gets to my window, I see his indignant and fuchsia flushed face inches away from mine. My heart is beating faster than Aerosmith can keep up, and I have to admit I am slightly afraid. Is this kid going to slap me across the face, kick my door, do I have to fight my first fist fight? He opens his mouth and screams, spitting all over my startled face, bellowing "DON'T EVER PULL OUT ON ME LIKE THAT EVER AGAIN." He hits the side of my door with his self righteous fist, and sprints as fast as his overweight body allows him to. I see him shut the door to his car. I see his angry face in the rear view mirror, staring at me like he has just met the reincarnation of the devil.

The experience was incredible. I had felt real emotion, felt pure anger, and felt its spit all over my confounded face. It was the start of a relationship (for lack of a better word, I hardly consider us as having any sort of future relations). That boy and I would see each other many times after that fateful incident on

Cold Spring Lane. I have still never seen him smile; he traverses the quad with a sulking expression, a pervasive bitterness leaking from his pores, and his aura insinuating that the world owes him something. I hope to encounter this fellow one day so that we can chat about the unfortunate circumstance that is his unstoppable fury. Perhaps we will never have any chat about that day; perhaps we will look one another in the eyes, knowing that we have gone somewhere very emotionally powerful together, and leave it at that.

LISA SCOTT
Childhood Story

This Sunday afternoon was like every other. We played in the acre backyard with the scruffy half-breed dogs, jumping intermittently in the pool with our cozies when we got too hot. We played mindless games, just the three of us, like king of the bed or hide and go seek. We ate mangos by the pool, basking in the sunshine, on the warm bricks under the South African sun. It was like every other Sunday of every second weekend, until my mother came to get us from our father's house.

We were unenthused by her arrival. We loved her, but after a weekend with our father, understandably it was almost difficult to like her. She was the tyrant, he was the rebel, she was the enforcer of normalcy, and he was the refreshing anti-authority. Of course, they were both our parents, they shared that equivalency, but in our minds we associated him with relief from school, homework, and obligatory duties that our mother emphasized all too consistently.

Upon arrival, she commanded us to change into our clothes and get our bags to leave his house. We packed slowly. I noted the dread in my sister's movements and the soundtrack of my divorced parents' tense and rapidly elevating banter. They were fighting, which was also normal for these Sunday afternoons.

However, today they spoke longer. I should have noted time, but time seemed irrelevant, time seemed to be gifting us longer to pack, longer to linger, longer to love our father. Walls separated my sister and I from our parents, but their voices carried over to us, they were yelling now. We emerged timidly from around the corner, only to be confronted with abrupt silence. Abrupt silence and awkward stares from them both; their questioning faces studying ours to see if we children had understood. I wish I had understood.

We were summoned to the car by the tyrant, her bony fingers directing us to our next location, our obedient footsteps following the line of her finger's curvature. Before we got into the car, I searched my mother's face deplorably for signs of emotion, but her face was a blank canvas, a pale canvas, an empty canvas.

She knew something that I did not, something that I would find out later and would have plenty of time to bitterly ruminate upon.

Like I said, this Sunday afternoon was like every other. My father embraced us tightly, kissing our cheeks. But today, when he pulled away from the side of my face, I noticed the dampness of my visage; I noticed his tear stricken face, the sadness in his hollow blue eyes, and the look on his face of distraught disbelief. I wish I was old enough to understand his facial expression and the lingering time when he held me against his heart. I wish I was old enough to understand my mother's facial expression as I studied her stern wrinkles etched into her unyielding brow, her impatience with preciously wasted time.

We got into the back of the car, without saying a word more. I fastened my seatbelt monotonously and dutifully as the tyrant quickly glanced behind her to check. As she turned around, I peered over my shoulder out the back windshield. I saw my father standing behind me, his body limp and helpless, his shoulders hunched, his hands empty, an erect corpse. We drove forward as I glanced backwards, his face a blur, then his body an unshapely bubble, then his presence a speckle.

I knew that something had just occurred, something I would not understand until years later, but I was a child, fleeting in emotion, and I turned forward, politely asking the tyrant to raise the volume of "The Rescuers Down Under" as we tumbled down the road towards the airport.

forum photography

FARTHER



MARIA MANALAC

PERUVIAN MUSEUM



ARIANNA VALLE

LA BASURA O LA VIDA



SARAH KEENAN

FERRIS WHEEL



MEGAN MCHALE

MISTRESS OF THE CARDS



NICOLE FERRARI

YACHT WORKS



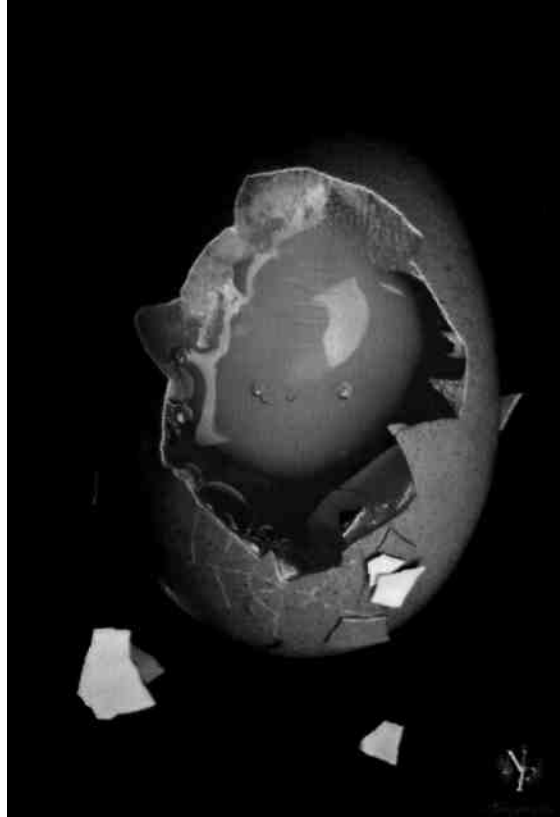
MICHELLE COWAN

REFLECTION



MEGAN MCHALE

THE OPEN EGG



NICOLE FERRARI

ANNA IDLER
On Studying

Last time I checked, this trip was supposed to be to see a forest of redwoods, not a city of skyscrapers. Even just mere feet away, it's difficult to tell the difference. Driving towards Muir Woods, the trees in the distance fly past my passenger window; when we stop to park in the lot; however, the redwoods ceased moving, and the few enclosed by my window were lined up vertically between the panes like a jail cell's door. I touch my hands to the glass and ball them into fists, pretending I am grasping the iron bars of my make-believe prison. The redwoods infiltrate the sky like daggers, the tops of the trees disrupting the sky's innocent sapphire coloring with harsh red branches, the shade of dried blood. The emerald ferns surrounding the trees seem to cushion them, enclosing them with the comfort that they have permission to grow as tall as they please, for the ferns will always guard the area around their base: the most essential part of a tree. The bark coating the redwoods is a faded copper, like the rust that crawls over time on a child's forgotten bike that has sat too long in the garage. The bushels of chartreuse leaves on the branches of the giant redwoods quiver in the wind, as if shuddering in disdain at the thought of yet another tourist group here to scrutinize their home.

The air in this haven does not carry the staleness of San Francisco's smog as it did just a couple miles back down the road. Instead, the air is sharp, smelling of pines and freshly cut grass. I observe the dirt path leading into the dense abyss of the forest. Good to know there's a definite route to follow. But is it? Is it more beneficial to have a designated pathway in a forest of this immense size? Or is it, in actuality, a disadvantage? How limited numbers of pathways can truly allow tourists to witness the essence of the redwoods is beyond me at the moment, but I trot on, sneakers kicking up dust, each step leading me further and further away from any doubts I've been subconsciously holding in my mind about this revered place.

* * *

While explaining a short story that dealt mainly with its

main characters having flashbacks, my Literature teacher bluntly stated to our class, "See. The past penetrates. It's good to remember where you came from. But, sometimes, it's a burden." I saw this in that short story just as I see it in the redwoods. Trees of the same species from the same geographical location share fairly similar ring patterns, visible only when they are chopped down. Irony. By starting with living trees and then finding samples from trees a bit older from ancient sites, current archaeologists are now able to overlap data extracted from tree rings to construct accurate chronologies that date back to thousands of years. Variation in tree rings is caused by variation in environmental conditions, in which the tree first began to grow. Therefore, studying tree rings and their intricate patterns and discrepancies leads ultimately to enhanced comprehension of past environmental conditions.

I'm not a scientist, but I could do without elaborate knowledge about past climates. The fact that redwoods, and all trees, carry the past within themselves is a burden, for humankind as well as nature. Do we sacrifice obtaining new knowledge and instead fight to keep our precious trees alive? Or do we sacrifice nature for more information of the complex world we live in? We are torn, and still choose to tear down.

On January 9, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed Muir Woods as the 7th National Monument, and the first created land that had been donated by a private individual; it consisted of 295 acres. So, look before you chop. The burgundy trunks rooted in the ground, like mythical giants' obese legs stuck in quicksand; the overgrown moss engrossing the ground like a scab; the leaves cascading below the canopies when it's their turn to break away from the disarray of branches and fall. Writer Road-dog Wolf said in his poem, "Redwood Forest" that the redwoods he has come to love "paint silhouettes in the skyline breeze / a thousand feet above the ground." In our world today of polluted city skylines, office cubicles, conferences, and classrooms, we are so frequently confined indoors in an enclosed space, with a computer or cell phone as our only companion. Being enveloped in nature's wonders should be a welcomed release from this restricted lifestyle of four-walled rooms and technology. In fact, my mother and father purposely left their cell phones in the car as we set out into Muir Woods, not even wanting to use them for pictures, stopping themselves from corrupting the tranquility of

the forest even in this miniscule way.

During our walk, my mother, sister, and I pause next to a redwood's trunk that has somehow been split in half, perfectly symmetrical. This split creates a dark, serrated hole in the middle of trunk. As we creep closer, we discover it's hollow. The three of us decide to investigate. I almost feel as if I am intruding when I step into the trunk of the majestic redwood; as soon as we set foot in the trunk we hear frantic skittering, a faint clawing, and manage to catch the very end of a bushy tail sprinting out of our newfound shelter; clearly we were not welcome. The dank hollow opening is murky and humid; a stench of rotting wood encircles us, almost too strong to handle. My sister holds her nose, a look of pure disgust on her face, and attempts to sneak back outside to my father, waiting safely on the path. But my mom and I gently pull her arm back, look her in the eyes. "When else will we be back here?" we say in unison. She stays. Through the overwhelming aroma of mold, the moving shadows of creatures, the damp mud slowly seeping through the soles of her little sneakers, she stays. Along the way, we saw a few logs in the depths of the forests, fallen redwoods that had not been moved. The bark was ashen in coloring, tattered. A tragic sight. But surrounding the lifeless redwood were a myriad of tiny, plush, mint-colored ferns.

An 800-year old redwood tree fell down of its own accord in Muir Woods in July of 1996. About 50 visitors were present to witness the 200 foot tall, 12 feet wide redwood topple over with a thundering crash that could be heard almost a half a mile away. The redwood however, caused no damage and no injury. It was decided the tree would stay where it had fallen, no clean up necessary. The redwood would provide nutrients to the soil, a place for plants to grow, and nesting for birds and other animals for years to come.

The past penetrates.

* * *

6:15 PM -We've been here all day. The California sun blazes on, now casting a tangerine glow on Muir Woods. Scattered splinters of bark stick to the palms of my hands from my walking stick, but I don't dust them off. Instead, I hold them reverently away from one another and away from my clothing for fear that the fabric will wipe away the only remains I will have

of the redwoods after I depart. I trace my finger over the deep cracks and crevices of the wooden railing separating me from the redwoods, and dread going back to the buildings and bustling of San Francisco. The summer sun reflects off the bark that's slowly peeling off the redwoods' trunks; its rays, shining through the jagged scrapings of bark, make dotted shapes of light on the ground, sending shadows across mine and my sister's faces - one of nature's many masks. Despite the changing time from late afternoon to evening, the redwoods stand firm, each a statue with its own story attached. We amble on through the woods and spot a brilliantly colored teal tail above our heads, a Western Bluebird flittering through the maze of redwood limbs as if he's committed this confusing route to memory. Below the bird, the roots of the redwoods grow like cages, tangles of branches spilling over one another in a mess, its scarlet tint deepened by the setting sun.

I hear a crunching beneath my sneaker and crouch down to discover a rectangular piece of bark. It is bulky and substantial, the shape of a bar of soap, yet the texture of aged, dried out wall paper shavings. I glimpse ahead at the pathway, now winding to its end; I can begin to make out the log cabin that sells trinkets to tourists that say "Muir Woods" all over them. I knew I wouldn't be asking my parents for any tacky tee shirt; this portion of bark is my souvenir.

With my hand on the cool lever of our car door, I turn back for one last look. The sky is now light lavender, still being pierced through by the black silhouettes of redwoods. Muir Woods is a multitude of monsters growing in harmony, cursed by the past that they presently hold within their trunks. But I'd rather count trees than rings; a history that has to be extracted from a slashed redwood tree is no history I desire to study.

ANNA IDLER
Fish Out of Water

I fished for the first time when I was nine, with my grandfather on the shores of Brigantine, New Jersey. We cast our lines into the blue sea in the evening light; the only visible part of the twine was its slight sparkle in the orange glow of the setting sun. Seagulls screamed; I screamed back. "You'll scare the fish," my grandfather said. I was quiet. We waited.

To fish is to write. We cast our ideas onto paper, unorganized at first, a free throw into the abyss of language and its infinite possibilities of words to put on a page. We pull and tug our line of different ideas strung about in our heads, striving to find the words that can correctly convey the particular experience we are desperate to write about. The wait for the bite on the fishing pole line is like writer's block - it is natural, known to come with the process, yet intriguingly frustrating; we know we are capable of acquiring the finished product eventually, but it seems to be endless.

There are distractions and diversions. Many times I felt the heaving of my fishing line and thought it to be a fish finally taking hold, but as I instinctively began to reel in my much awaited prize, my grandfather takes hold of my hands, tells me to let go; he explains that nine times out of ten, that slight twitching fishermen feel on their poles is a clump of seaweed caught on their line, or the momentum of an especially choppy wave. Nine times out of ten, unwanted phrases we know do not fit the ultimate theme of our piece can wedge themselves in our brain; but, as writers, we cannot be fooled. We must fight to disregard these false hopes, throw them back into the sea of idioms like we would a bad fish.

"This one is real."

I am sure this time; my grandfather sees the determined look in my eyes and does not question my assumption. I yank, I haul, I twist, I bend. I would give my soul for this idea, this fish floundering on the other end of my long twine, cutting through the salt air like the black line of the horizon across the water. I can see the foggy eyes of the fish, looking up at me, curious about who is this human that craves him so badly. He bites through the invisible line, is pulled onto shore hardly breathing, breathless. I've

hooked the fish, completed my piece of writing that has taken me ages to perfect. My grandfather applauds, and smiles at me. He proceeds to teach me the hardest lesson to comprehend about fishing.

"Congratulations, Anna. Now, throw it back in."

The writing process is endless, and the intense satisfaction gotten when finishing an essay or paper is exhilarating, but yet, also a bit frightening. With our work now complete, it now must be tossed into the public. Be it a magazine article, a screenplay, or simply just a class essay assignment, our finished works of literature must always be tossed into the public eye. It is with courage that we fling our work out there, facing the criticism and scrutiny to come. And perhaps one day, our hard work will capture a publisher's eye, and they will reel us in, craving more of our voice, our wit, our words. Hook, line, and sinker.

MEGHAN L. PETERSON
La Metropolitana

The sunlight burns through my clothes and I blink one last time before descending the stairs into Rome's metro. If I thought that it was scorching out there, it is even more of a desert down here. My pupils take a moment to adjust while I stride blindly towards the row of small, sliding gates, insert my card, and descend another set of stairs. I am now completely cut off from any sounds or beauty of the world above. No ambulances scream, no trees scrape or whisper, and no marbled columns impose themselves.

The only life down here is that which surrounds daily business, the goings to and from one destination to another. Businesspeople stare at the mounted television screens, transfixed by the daily news or horoscopes while teenagers wait to get to school, each already an hour late but not seeming to care. Less often, young families and people advanced in years will also make an appearance, but they often have trouble keeping up with the rapid flow of life beneath the surface. No matter who is here though, there is always a crowd. It is rush hour and today is not an exception.

My destination today is Spagna and I am on time, just as I was the day before and will be again tomorrow. I stare at my feet as I wait, no longer struck off balance by the darkness of this underground terrain. I try my best not to truly notice the floor, walls, or air. It is a Pompeii down here—piles of ash and soot remain from ages past, filling my lungs and decorating my shoes. Unlike the streets above, the metro stations are seldom given a washing and scrubbing. I lift my eyes and notice that somewhere beyond the yellow line—the line of which crossing is forbidden unless one wishes to throw life to the fate of a speeding tram—a few days' worth of newspapers have collected between the tracks. Berlusconi, Italy's current prime minister, smiles out from the one cover page, and I immediately dislike him. When water bursts from a hole in the wall and dampens his face, it is a sort of justice.

Rome's government built its first metro, or subway, in 1955, over a century after most other countries had. London was the first, with its construction of the tube in the late 1800's.

It adopted this name because of the construction method with which it was built, the cut-and-cover, which created tube-like tunnels beneath ground. The first trains used there were steam engines, so perhaps it is better that Rome originally stuck with above ground transport such as horse-drawn trams and later, electric trams and cars. During the Fascist regime of Mussolini, Italy sought to connect Rome's northeastern and southwestern corners. But when Italy entered the war, construction ceased and some of these areas were instead used as air raid shelters. It was not until 1955 that the Metro B Line was finally completed.

But, I rarely take the B Line, and since my Italian classes have ended, I take the metro less and less. Since my time in the metro is nothing compared to that of Mary, my host mother, who has lived in Rome for forty years, I seek her knowledge. As we sit in the safety and quiet of her room, she confirms all of the things that I have witnessed on the metro myself. She shakes her head when I ask her if she has any good stories about the metro. "No, my love, only bad stories. And I do not like to talk badly of Rome. But only bad stories."

One of the worst problems about the metro is that it is inhabited by Rome's large gypsy population. Gypsies, young and old, stroll up and down the cars, panhandling, performing, or just plain stealing. Having drugged their babies to force them to remain quiet or to sleep, they try to look very worthy of any penny. It is more than uncomfortable to see any small child holding a crinkled cup out to you with hardened, pleading eyes. With every, "Prego, signora, prego," I have to turn away.

La Metropolitana is very important in Italy because it is a reliable means of transportation; the above ground buses and trams delayed by traffic, pedestrians, and construction can be avoided. It is also important because the piazzas, or town centers, are accessible by car only through the hours of 6-11 pm. Although this protects pedestrians, reduces pollution during the morning rush hour and allows construction to be completed faster, it creates a large inconvenience.

This is just another thing that the government controls here. ATAC (the transportation system company), the water company, and the electricity company are all controlled by the government. Mary shook her head as we discussed the government one day during dinner. Once again, the look in her eyes matched

the displeased frown on her lips."The public workers, they cannot get fired because they work for the government. The teachers, the postmen, the administrators—none of them can be fired."This does not make for a beneficial working place; people tend to do what they want, unlike in America where we strive to have "user friendly" businesses with excellent customer service.

People file past me swiftly as I enter the tram. The seats within are Clementine orange. For once, there is a spot available and I fill it. The continuous pausing, shifting, and speeding process of the metro not only upsets my stomach but makes me nervous. There are a lot of things that can happen down here amongst strangers with virtually no escape.

Perhaps it was the anti-service attitude and unproductive work ethic Mary described that contributed to an accident in the metro two years ago. Two metro cars crashed into one another, injuring many people on board. Those in the station who heard the sound of the crash echo down the long corridors of tracks panicked. As they scattered towards the supposed safety of the world above, one young woman was knocked over and trampled to death. After this accident two years ago, another bizarre and gruesome incident occurred. An old woman had been annoyed by a young girl who was sitting next to her and listening to music too loudly. To quiet the girl, the old woman hit her with her pointed umbrella in the eye. The girl was blinded. Most Romans no longer discuss these events aloud, but they are dark stories that haunt the backs of their minds during their daily routine in the metro.

Termini Station is a name that clenches my stomach with a grappling hook of dread. As the main metro station and train station in Rome, it is an endless maze of staircases and escalators, rushing and ramming bodies, suffocating air, and general mayhem. It is my least favorite place in Rome. Its heavy business is due to its central location; travelers can switch from the A Line to the B Line and vice versa. Often I must walk hurriedly, moved by the blob of the crowd for fifteen minutes or more to get to where I must go. The main terminals for the A and B Lines are so far away from one another and there are simply too many people between the two to get there quickly. When I finally do arrive at the correct terminal, I am packed away in the individual tram like a sardine, invading other people's personal space, praying to God that a gypsy does not manage to steal my wallet as I sway with

the masses and wait. I am told that this is a part of life in the city, but somehow, I know that my feelings are justified.

The part of Rome that I frequented for my Italian language courses usually only required me to take the A Line. This line was not completed and added until 1980, connecting the northwest of Rome with the southeast. Rome did not use the cut-and-cover method for this line because it would have seriously interrupted pedestrian and auto traffic above ground. Meanwhile, construction halted several times because of archaeological discoveries. After one layer was uncovered, the builders would stop and be required to call in archaeologists. Once the excavations had been completed, the construction workers would begin again, digging through another layer, and would have to stop once more. As each layer was investigated, they proved to be historically interesting, confirming that Rome truly was built one century on top of another. At the same time, I am certain that this construction process was as frustrating as waiting for a Roman bus.

The shadowy aura, stench of sweaty humans and unpleasant experiences that are associated with the metro do not prevent Italians from using it. It is definitely a modern convenience by many standards and is constantly being improved. As ATAC's mission statement says, "ATAC's story is one of constant growth." Case in point, this government-owned company is going to start up construction again of Lines C and D; apparently the excavations have been completed for now. Throwing out some impressive statistics, ATAC also states that it "operates over a territory of 1,285 square kilometers in which more than two-and-a-half million people are on the move and 2.4 million vehicles use the roads (including 1.8 million cars and about 450,000 motorcycles)." In a quiet form, the metro is a blessing for the air quality of Rome.

I ascend a staircase towards the proceeding escalator *con passo veloce* (with speed). The length of the stucco-ed tunnel extends like a hollow in a mountainside. I go "towards the light at the end of the tunnel"—literally—and as quickly as I am able, I weave in and out, passing the slow walkers ahead. At last, as I burst through the exit, I claim a deep breath of fresh air that I have long been awaiting. I have survived the gypsies, the bored yet large morning crowd, and the motion of the metro. The dry air and ash still cling to my clothes and skin, and I look forward to a

shower later in the evening. Yet for now, it remains in a thin layer slowly oozing through my pores. Over time it will immerse into my bloodstream, becoming a part of my blood, becoming a part of me. I can already feel it stirring, poking my sides and pushing my back in the opposite direction of the daylight.

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PETER KANE
You Don't Know Me

You don't know me at all.

"That sucks!"

Yes. I am working tonight, a Friday, from 8p.m. through midnight. Why? Because I need money. Because I spend everything I earn. Because I don't ever score high-paying jobs. Because I'm an unmotivated piece of shit. THANKS.

Oh, but you mean besides work. It sucks that I'm not going to have any fun tonight. They're really fucking concerned about my good time. Because they know what it is, they know all about it. Because they do this every weekend. Why don't I go out? I don't drink. "Oh." One of the best of them persists, "You don't have to drink to have a good time out there, man." Surely you're mistaken. First, I'll have my masculinity questioned. (Though, by virtue of not going out, it has probably already passed question: pussy.) Second, I'll have to deal with X, who is drunk, who cannot reason, who cannot act like anything but an animal. Third... well, that's enough for now. Plus, I could be wrong entirely already; I'm basing this all too loosely, too defensively, too immaturely because it really all boils down to my first two points and that I don't want to feel left out. Wait... that I don't want to feel when no one else is. Because I'm afraid of feeling blue.

It seems that by not being a part of that, I am possibly the lamest person on campus. I am misunderstood, seen as an elitist or worse, a loser. But I have neither the stomach nor the means to rectify my image.

And if I did, if I rectified my image, if I had an iron stomach, if I had a wallet drowning in twenties, and I went out, what would happen?

I'd have a great time.

I'd have a girlfriend. Or girl friends. With benefits. Like bubbles that form out of nothing on the bottom of the glass and swirl to the surface. POP.

"We gotta find her a guy tonight." "Find me a guy, too!" I'd be found. Almost as obtrusively as those "That sucks" com-

ments. And would it hurt me like those do? I'd step on toes, I'm sure. I'd be unapproachable after a few crushed toes. Unless that was ignored, you know, by someone careless—like a drunk. Ah, what a substance.

zOh, my, though. So many beautiful women. It's almost disturbing. What IS disturbing is the men they'll be with later. But who am I to judge? A broke, blue, blubbering fool. Sonofabitch.

TINA FERMA

Emily

I miss hearing the light padding of her slippered feet past my bedroom door every morning before class. The rustling of thin paper filters and the opening and closing of cabinet doors would follow. My nose had almost trained itself to play a game with my head in anxious anticipation for the aroma that would be sure to waft slowly through the halls and into the bedroom. Will it be Hazelnut Creme, French Vanilla, or Dark Columbian Roast? Awaiting the fate of my tongue on this particular morning, my ears would be the next sense organ to perk. Finally, the pot would hiss and I would wait beneath the soft, familiar comfort of my red jersey sheets, savoring my last few minutes of warmth before the start of my morning routine.

The mornings when she chose Hazelnut Crème were my personal favorites, but she never knew this. I never told her. And I never told her the degree of my appreciation for those freshly brewed pots each morning. Even so, she never failed in her faithful dependability. It seems silly, doesn't it? It's not like coffee is difficult to make. The little plastic measuring cup makes failure an impossibility. One scoop of fresh grounds for one cup of cold water. (Or in my case, one heaping scoop for one cup, and maybe an extra scoop at the end for good measure.) I know how to make coffee, but that isn't the point. A sandwich always tastes better when you're not the one who made it; freshly cut fruit is most refreshing when someone else does the washing, peeling, and cutting; brownies are best eaten as soon as your mom takes the tray out of the oven. When I make myself a pot of coffee these mornings, I think of her all the way in Copenhagen, wondering whose day she's beginning by making this unknown someone a fresh pot.

ALEX VAN HORN
Unanswered

We were in the living room, surrounded by the ceramic cherubs and iconography, and you were asking me how my day was, what I did in school, and what I learned. It was the standard parental questionnaire. I pulled a page from the child's rulebook of answers: my day was fine and I didn't really do anything in school, so I didn't learn anything. You paused for a second, as all parents pause when they hear about an education being wasted, and then started to speak: "Do you want to come to church with me on Sunday? You can see your cousin Zach, he's been asking about you." I was already gone by the middle of the word "church." You didn't call after me, you were used to this. I never answered when you asked about going back to church. Now I realize that you deserve an answer, not because I've hid it for so long, but because if I was in your position, I'd want an answer.

It was foggy outside, the kind of fog that gets so thick it could crack weak windows and seep into the house. I stayed in bed, hoping I could fake a dream long enough for you to realize you were running late. I was hoping you'd just forget about me and only take Raymond. I was eight years old and still couldn't tell time, but I could count, and I knew from staring at the dull green digital lines in your car that it was a fifteen minute ride. Fifteen minutes to this stone building with a short steeple, across the street from a vacant lot. Fifteen minutes of being forced to listen to Heaven 600 to get us in the mood for church. Maybe I would have been in the mood if you played other stations other days. I was tired of hearing gospel every day of my life. I was tired of waking up at ungodly hours on Sundays just to go worship God. But, it didn't seem to matter to you. After 30 seconds of knocking politely, you started to bang. I couldn't take ten seconds of that and rushed over to answer the door.

You were standing there, towering over me (you were still taller than me then), holding a white dress shirt, black dress pants, and a clip-on tie with a ridiculous pattern that only looks cute on kids. I tried to mumble a "Good morning" just to keep up the illusion that I had been in a deep sleep, but the dizzying, wet smell of Nag Champa was going to knock me out again, and I couldn't

utter a syllable. You reminded me to brush my teeth before I got dressed. When I finally was dressed, I walked into the kitchen, hoping to get some of the bacon and eggs that Dad made. "You'll ruin your shirt if you eat now," you said. I begged for something because I was hungry, and you handed me a couple of Werther's Originals. They tasted good, but I was far from full. Sunday was already becoming unbearable.

And this feeling grew. We sat in that church, surrounded by people catching the Spirit, hollering in the pews and shouting from the aisles as the pastor's sermon grew more intense. Every time he punctuated a word with a breathy "ugh" to give his words more power, someone shouted an "Amen!" or a "Hallelujah!" and I looked up at you, hoping you were as annoyed as I was. You just sat there calmly, accepting all this showmanship without a comment. So I sat still too, trying not to fidget.

Then at some point, the pastor broke from his sermon and said it was time to welcome all of the new members and guests to the church. Since we'd been there every Sunday I could remember, you figured you'd say hello to the new families, showing them that Morningstar Baptist Church was a place where you can raise good kids. When you stood up though, and those women who you see and talk to every Sunday, the same women who gossiped about ill church members like they were doing something wrong by being sick, walked over and thanked you for visiting the church, I knew how mad it made you. How could they not recognize you, when you hadn't changed one bit? Some community. Some fellowship. Of course, I was eight, and I didn't know the word "hypocrite" yet. If I had known it, I would have said it. Instead, I didn't say a word, and you sat down, with this defeated look. I just stared at the ground, unsure of what to say to you.

It's a Wednesday, and I'm dressed for school. I'm doing one last check in the mirror like dad always says I should, and I'm feeling pretty good. My shoes fit, my socks match, my pants are clean, my shirt is tucked, and my tie is straight, but my glasses are a little crooked. Oh well, nothing I can really do about that. You say I should probably stop wearing them to bed, but I don't listen. I'm in the third grade, so I'm still young enough to get into trouble without really being in trouble, but old enough to decide on some basic things for myself. The school uniform means I can't wear what I want to school, which is probably best, because if I

had to dress myself, I would most likely wear my Iron Man Halloween costume. I don't care if it is February; Iron Man is awesome year round. I run my fingers over my freshly cut hair. There's a delicate pins-and-needles feeling on my fingertips. Yesterday, you let me decide if I wanted a part in my hair; of course I said yes. I asked Mr. Macy to cut a zigzag, and he did it. Surprisingly, you thought it looked nice; it worked with my personality.

Now I'm sitting in the back of Mrs. Hathaway's classroom. She has us organized alphabetically by last name, so I'm sitting next to Tiffany. She likes my haircut. Mrs. Hathaway is talking, but I'm not sure what she's talking about; I'm staring at the clock. I know when the big hand and the little hand are both touching the 12, it will be lunch time. The big hands at the mark right before the 12, and the little hand is already touching the 1. The second hand is sweeping at its usual pace. It's not slowing down as it crosses the 3, passes several unmarked ticks to round the 6, swings up to touch the 9, and finally smashes into the 12. Lunch time. I didn't eat breakfast this morning and I'm starving. Mrs. Hathaway has eyes in the back of her head because she was already telling us to line up while I was counting down. We line up by height, which puts me in the middle, between the two Matts in the class. Once everybody is where they're supposed to be, we march like ducklings behind Mrs. Hathaway. We know the routine. We have to stop at every corner, so she can look both ways to make sure the halls are clear. It's supposed to teach us about crossing the street, but I don't know of too many cars that drive indoors. I'm staring at the ground, counting the floor tiles and seeing how many are just green and how many are red with a gray gradient. While we're walking, we pass the Vice Principal, Mrs. Shaw, and she smiles at us. We're still walking when all of a sudden, Mrs. Shaw shouts, "Wait a minute!" to Mrs. Hathaway. Everybody stops. Mrs. Shaw's heels click quickly against the floor. She sounds like a galloping horse. We're thinking she's going to ask Mrs. Hathaway a question, but there will be no questions today. She doesn't even reach the front of the line; she stops right in the middle, grabs my head, and turns it to see my part. I'm hoping she compliments it, but I know better. "Come with me," she says.

I follow her to her office, a cold room with stone walls. She put pictures up of her husband and kids to make the room

warmer, but the constant draft and the way she crosses her arms and paces when she speaks negates all that. She said my haircut violated the dress code, that it looked gang-related, and that it wasn't becoming of a good Christian. I didn't say a word.

Now that I'm 21, I know the words I wanted to say. I wanted to say "Fuck you!" to Mrs. Shaw. I wanted to get up, in the middle of church, and shout "Fuck you!" to those women who made you feel unwelcome. I don't say this to ruin your image of me, but because you've always wondered why church is a place I reject. It's not the subject matter, my faith is strong, but it's a quiet faith. Maybe I get it from my father. He doesn't go to church because it's too theatrical, too much of a spectacle where some people believe they really absorb the Holy Spirit during the service. He probably got it from his father, who died when I was four years old, but I remember the eulogy at his funeral mentioning he was a man who wouldn't tell you his feelings on religion, but show it through real action. He wasn't the type to jump in the aisles at church, but he was the type to show his family, friends, and strangers love and respect because it was what he expected from them in return.

But I haven't seen that in the wider church community. The people I've seen in church never acted like brothers and sisters. They were ready to condemn someone for being different, for not being "holy" enough. You've said it will be different at a different church, that it will be more like it was when you were growing up, when absent church members were prayed for and contacted immediately after the service to see if everything was all right, and church members didn't gossip about each other. I disagree, and I'm too proud to entertain the idea that I could be wrong. You know my pride, I won't even accept your help when you send me e-mails about writing opportunities. You once told me I was walking down a lonely path; I don't remember why. I know I kept quiet, and accepted it, even though my response was so clear to me: how can it be a lonely path, if I'm not really alone? God is always with me, and He doesn't speak with a loud voice. Why should I?

A black and white photograph of a cloudy sky over a field of dry grass. The sky is filled with large, dramatic clouds, and a bright light source, possibly the sun, is visible through a break in the clouds. The foreground shows a field of dry, tangled grass.

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