

liberal arts magazine

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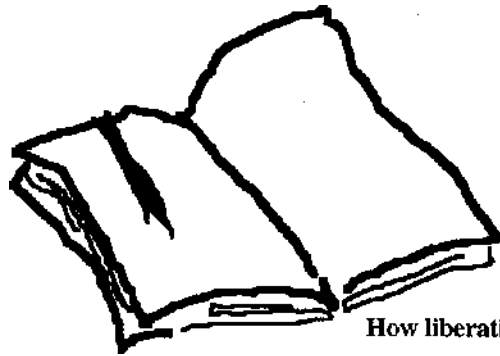
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Spring 1996



How liberating.

vol 17

Editor's Note:

Ahem,

When you get to this stage in the publishing process, it's difficult to feign perspective, to sum up in words, or make a proclamation about what it is to work on a publication for the first time. So rather than floundering — to the essays.

You'll find fourteen essays in this year's Forum which lend themselves to your vicarious escape from Spaceship Earth, or at least function as a pleasant accompaniment to a snack of your choice. You'll be taken from the expanse of our Cosmos' wheelchair-spinning skies, to the backyard for digging in the dirt; you might be surprised about Uncle Neal, or turn a skeptical eye towards the plants on your sill; you may be enlightened to challenge our campus's diversity standards, or rekindle your efforts to get the tattoo you've always wanted; you'll find it difficult to forget the kaleidoscope colors of the Critic's four unwanted drinks, and be offered a gurney ride into the shadows of a geriatrics ward.

Enjoy the Forum as you will — the work is done. A most gracious thanks to all of the Forum staff for their help. Special thanks go to Philipp Meyer for his editing skills and for pressing all the right buttons, also to Andrea Sabaliauskas and Tom Panarese for my graphics lab guidance course — the Force be with you all, I'm heading back to the library!

Dr. Dan McGuinness is naturally someone we should all thank, over and over again in fact. I am indebted to him for guiding me down the primrose path of non-paying professions, (this Portuguese man of war), and for giving me this opportunity as student editor. I had no way of knowing that the demanding and sometimes ugly transmutations of this project would be my vehicle for happiness!

*Enjoy.
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From Gravity to God

"All science is either physics or stamp collecting," remarked Nobel Prize winner Lord Ernest Rutherford. His views on science illuminate the attitudes of many philosophers, theologians and ordinary thinkers. Like Rutherford, they have only one purpose — to reduce human action and the grandeur of nature to a few mathematical equations and fundamental concepts. The study of nature as a science began with Aristotle's work, *Physics*, which is ironically a very philosophical book. Newton's *Principia Mathematica* presented us a quantitative science, dealing with numbers and equations — nothing more. The three physicists that most people know are Aristotle, Newton and Albert Einstein. Of the three, Einstein has made the most significant contribution to physics. Unfortunately, he is also the most widely misunderstood of the three.

Today, many people regard all of science in the same light. With current developments, who could blame them? Genetic engineering, abortion, euthanasia, behavioral studies, Freudian analysis, "survival of the fittest," eugenics, nuclear holocaust — the nightmare is now. Science has dehumanized the Earth. Scientists' inventions destroy the environment. Annihilation is a possibility. How could science be good, beautiful, or religious?

In contrast to popular belief, the revelations of modern physics point in the opposite direction. Science, through these discoveries, shows us a truth and purpose that previously was in the realm of theology. Quantum theory, probably the most important scientific revolution since the scientific method, recognizes man's special place in the universe. Dr. Paul Davies suggests that:

Unlike all the previous scientific revolutions, which have successively demoted mankind from the centre of creation to the role of mere spectator of the cosmic drama, quantum theory has reinstated the observer at the centre of the stage. Indeed some prominent scientists have even gone so far as to claim that quantum theory has solved the riddle of the mind and its relation to the material world, asserting that the entry of information into the consciousness of the observer is the fundamental step in the establishment of reality. Taken to its extreme, this idea implies that the universe only achieves a concrete existence as a result of this perception — it is created by its own inhabitants! (Other Worlds 13)

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This extreme conclusion may seem implausible, but there is another that is even more radical. In contrast to the theories of Aristotle and Newton, the current revelations of modern science make the case for divine creation more acceptable than any other argument since the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. While physics may confuse readers more than Aquinas' Latin, the results are startling. Modern physics shows us that the world and the laws which govern it are not only good and beautiful, but perhaps religious as well.

If Newton's worldview is accurate, there is nothing good, beautiful, or religious in our lives. Our very actions are out of our control. Our choices are irrelevant. Our future is determined by the present, our past seen in the present. The dance of the universe ignores our will. Everything is determined. Newton used mathematical equations to describe reality. His three laws of motion and description of gravity revolutionized science in almost every way. The world was reduced to forces, velocities, and accelerations. What those terms mean is less important than the description of the world they suggest. The Earth, the Sun, and stars follow identical laws. If we could record all the positions and velocities of all the particles in the galaxy, universe, or whatever is out there, one would understand the future and past of all creation. This philosophical interpretation of Newton's law boosted the Enlightenment Movement in Europe. Alexander Pope proclaimed:

*Nature and Nature's law lay hid in night.
God said, Let Newton Be, and all was light*

Newton's world — rational, ordered, without uncertainty — is reflected in Pope's poetry, and in the minds of other eighteenth century thinkers. To them our lives are just the movement of particles through time and space, a mechanical system without faith, hope, or love. If God exists, He is not the universe.

Ironically, the study of the universe began not with science, but with philosophy. The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle pioneered many key aspects of physics eighteen centuries before Newton. In their era, Plato was considered an idealist and Aristotle a realist. Actually, Aristotle cannot be defined as a realist in the modern sense. He focused on the world as he knew it, but like Plato, he never supported his arguments with evidence, other than the proof of "rational analysis." The concepts of form and substance, the allegory of the cave, and many other early Greek philosophical concepts were idealized beliefs introduced by Plato. While Aristotle did not use these symbolic terms to describe the world, he disdained experiments and active observation. Aristotle believed that the natural state of all bodies is rest, not motion — a view we now know to be incorrect. His belief complies with common sense. If we stop pushing the wheelbarrow in the garden, it stops. However, his belief omits any notion of friction or force. Aristotle introduced physics, not as a science, but as a theoretical

function of philosophy. He assumed that human reason could deduce the laws of physics from simple principles. This assumption remains common in contemporary science, but today there is an emphasis on experiment as well as theory.

While Aristotle would say that the natural state of bodies is rest, Newton's world followed the law of inertia, which states that a body at rest will stay at rest, and a body in motion will continue to move unless acted upon by an outside force. Aristotle's intuition could explain events on Earth, which are affected by friction and air resistance, but it could not explain the movements of the stars and planets, which appeared to be in constant motion. The Greek astronomer Ptolemy attempted to address this with his declaration that motion on earth is different from the motion of the heavens. In his three laws of motion, Newton offered explanations for all motion, both on the Earth and in the Heavens. Aristotle used theory and philosophical analysis to explain motion on earth, and Newton used mathematical functions and three simple laws to describe motion everywhere.

The tension between Newton and Aristotle disappeared when practically everyone accepted Newton's three laws. During the three centuries between Newton and Einstein, people believed the world was understood, their knowledge was complete, and their will immaterial. Scientists were ready to solve the remaining mysteries of the world -- electricity and magnetism, the structure of atomic matter, and the laws that govern them. Philosophically, man had no identity. While Darwin's perspective showed little distinction between man and monkey, the Newtonian mechanical worldview placed man equal to a pile of dirt.

The revolution in modern science leads us to this conclusion: the world is our invention, our creation, and our home. We play a role in it every day. The transformation of impersonal Newtonian mechanism to transcendental hope began this century with one man: Albert Einstein. Everyone knows his equation " $E=Mc^2$." "Everything is relative," a modern philosopher might say. In truth, Einstein's genius extended far beyond popular aphorisms. Beginning in 1905, the patent office clerk in Germany developed two sweeping theories and initiated one that placed humans back into the equations of our world. Many people know the two theories of relativity, Special and General. The most important theory deals with the realm of the quantum -- the microscopic world. Together, these three theories demonstrate that science is not godless, ugly, or impersonal. Science is part of us, and we of it. Our relationship is interdependent.

Relativity has one basic tenet — the world obeys laws. Everything everywhere, here or in the core of the sun, follows the laws of physics. To achieve this synthesis Einstein created a new description of time, space, and matter. Time and space are interrelated, his theories conclude. It only makes sense to think of them as one field of spacetime, with events as the points of reference. Time is not universal — it corresponds to each observer. I have one clock, you have another. If I move in relation to you, our clocks become synchronized. The relationships are not random. Einstein's theories describe how one clock becomes

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out of sync with an other. According to Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity*, time and space are wound in an intricate web.

The General Theory of Relativity extends Einstein's description of motion into the real world of gravity. Newton's original description of gravity makes little sense -- "It is given that the gravitational force between two bodies is proportional to the inverse of the square of the distance." This arcane declaration explains nothing. In one sentence Einstein explained the nature of gravity — gravity is acceleration. While such geometry is purely abstract, its predictions are accurate. Mass, as an instrument of gravity, bends the web of spacetime. An expedition in South America in the 1930's found evidence of such an effect during an eclipse of the sun. Light from distant stars, traveling through spacetime, bent around the sun, changing the apparent positions of those stars. *The General Theory of Relativity* merged gravity with spacetime, thus explaining all of the macroscopic world relative to our observations.

Einstein did not receive his Nobel Prize for either of his two theories. He was awarded the Prize because of his work on the Photoelectric Effect. This effect results from light (photons) colliding with electrons in a metal plate. The ejected electrons create a measurable electric current. However, the effect only makes sense if light comes in discrete packets, termed photons, that transfer blocks of energy at a set proportion. The Nobel Committee rewarded Einstein for this logical explanation with the Nobel Prize for Physics. Other physicists used Einstein's explanation to develop a theory that would describe the microscopic world of atoms, electrons, and photons. What they found troubles some, but should inspire all. In the foggy world of these particles, a divine order emerges, based on human will and continual creation.

The quantum world shows how man and measurement directly relate to one another. While Einstein showed that our perspective determines our interpretation of the world, the world still seemed independent of our actions. Spacetime was a frame of reference that could apply to everyone, and Einstein spent his last years trying to unify the laws of physics through pure geometry. He held that human will was too arbitrary, too indeterminate to define all of creation. The universe was still a pre-determined universe. The generation of physicists that came after Einstein used his work to show that we affect the world every day, and our role in creation is as great, if not greater than the role of mathematical laws. Here we find hints of the truly divine nature of our world.

When physicists study small particles, they have to follow new rules of mechanics. New rules are necessary because small particles are difficult to detect. To "see" a small particle and determine its position, one must shine a very focused light onto it. According to Einstein's *Photoelectric Theory*, the more focused the light is, and the more accurately it can determine a particle's position, the more energy the light must have, and the more it will change the particle's motion in an inherently unpredictable way. If the motion of the particle is unknown before the collision, it cannot be determined after the collision. Werner Heisenberg expressed

this challenge of particle detection in his *Uncertainty Principle*. In brief, this principle states that one cannot know both the position and movement of a particle without uncertainty. The more one knows about the position, the more uncertain the movement becomes; the more certain the movement, the less we can know of the particle's position. Heisenberg's *Uncertainty Principle* underlies all of quantum theory.

Mathematically, a single function can describe the quantum mechanics of electrons and other subatomic particles. Erwin Schroedinger defined this equation, which is known as a quantum wave function. This wave gives a probable position or velocity of the particle in question. In this way, physics gives a statistical interpretation of subatomic phenomena. However, physics cannot define what will take place when and where. That depends on observation. The world, made up of microscopic particles, depends on our observations and participation. In addition to this fact, the *Uncertainty Principle* indicates that our participation alters the world we observe. The world of Newton is an illusion. We are integral to the workings of nature, not isolated from them. Someone, or something, has given us the power of creation.

Today, there is much debate over the future of physics. Fifty years ago, the accepted version of quantum theory stated that what we can measure is all there is. An underlying order does not exist. Einstein revolted against this view. In response to the *Schroedinger Equation*, he retorted, "God does not play dice!" Now, some physicists believe that there is an underlying order to the universe that can unify the world of quantum mechanics with Einstein's *General Theory of Relativity*, and give a complete description of all physical processes.

Speculation touches the origins of existence, the ultimate fate of the universe, and the possibility of parallel universes. One question resonates in this theoretical and philosophical discussion: why is the universe the way it is? There is no logical reason for our belief in three space and one time dimensions. There could be ten, twelve, or even twenty space dimensions. Is our universe a random *one* in which intelligent life happens *to* exists? Or does our existence determine the nature of our universe?

The answer lies hidden in an underdeveloped principle. Physicists call this the *Anthropic Principle*. It suggests that the universe exists in its current form because if it were different — with more dimensions, stronger gravity, weaker electricity, or any other variable -- intelligent life could not evolve and observe it. It hints *that* the universe is nothing without observers on the inside (who knows what is outside). There is no satisfying evidence for this conjecture, but it begins to explain what we are. Physicists revere the theories of Einstein and Newton for their coherent simplicity. They see beauty in Newton's three laws of motion, which described almost all of the known universe in their time. They regard Einstein's theories as more beautiful, because the concepts are dictated by the theory, not arbitrarily included to support observations. Some physicists see the *Anthropic Principle* as beautiful because it touches on the ultimate question:

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"Why?" Unfortunately, others see that the principle merely responds, "Because." The world of beauty finds a partner in the beauty of scientific theory; however, the jury is still deliberating.

The most beautiful scientific theory would be the unified theory of nature. Such a theory would describe all the forces, particles, and interactions we could ever imagine. It would show us the moment of creation, and the ultimate fate of the universe. Physicist Michio Kaku discusses this in his book *Hyperspace*:

It's been called "the greatest scientific problem of all time." The press has dubbed it the "Holy Grail" of physics, the quest to unite the quantum theory with gravity, thereby creating a Theory of Everything. This is the problem that has frustrated the finest minds of the twentieth century. Without question, the person who solves this problem will win the Nobel Prize.
(Kaku 136)

Some physicists undertake this quest for prestige, others seek to expand our knowledge, while others hope to add something more to the world through such a theory. The great cosmologist Stephen Hawking felt the thrill of this pursuit when he wrote:

If we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason -- for then we would know the mind of God. (Hawking 175)

Unification would spark a revolution much more powerful than that caused by Newton, Copernicus, or Galileo. It would encompass all of humankind, and perhaps unite us as well. If the world is comprehensible, perhaps there is a purpose to the laws of physics. Physicist Paul Davies comments on this possibility of purpose:

The laws which enable the universe to come into being spontaneously seem themselves to be the product of exceedingly ingenious design. If physics is the product of design, the universe must have a purpose, and the evidence of modern physics suggests strongly to me that the purpose includes us.
(Superforce 243)

It seems somewhat fitting that the study of particles, forces, energies, and motion leads to the conclusion that the universe exists for us, that we affect creation, and that we have an ultimate purpose. Perhaps unification will lead us to God.

If the unification of physics can occur, man's role in the universe must be realized. We are doubly entrapped in the knot, as both observers and participators. We depend on the universe, but it also depends on us. The universe's creation is man's creation. This creation continues when you turn on the television, light a cigarette, look at the sun, or sneeze at the flowers. The only inexplicable things in the universe are the laws that govern it. These laws must have some purpose, plan, or originator. When all of physics is unified, science will end and faith will begin. The role of science in the world does not result in dehumanized devastation, but in realization of the good, the beautiful, and the transcendent. One might say that physicists look for God behind the scenes. If so, the hour might be at hand.

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Digging

My mother pulls the weeds out of the damp earth in small, neat clumps, the roots exposed, leaving nothing in the ground. Her hands move slowly and mechanically, making sure she uncovers every last bone-colored strand, leaving no remnants to hinder the yellow columbine trying to force its way out of the soil. I look at my own hands, smudged with dirt, grasping the grassy tops of the bermuda grass which has settled along the border of the flowerbeds as quickly as I can. Stray pieces of grass stand up haphazardly in the smooth blanket of soil as if they are charged with electricity. Their exposure bothers me and I rip at the strips of green, tearing them from their places. The roots stay embedded deep within the soil, and will continue to overrun the flowers. My mother watches me for a moment and wordlessly rises from her crouched position, moving her yellow garden cushion to my section. She smiles and takes over, digging for the buried beginnings of the weeds.

I am like my father. I know that, on the other side of the yard, he will throw bundles of bermuda grass over his shoulder, attacking it with a fierceness that exceeds even my own. In the end, he will shrug his shoulders, defeated, and watch as my mother bends over him, her hand on his back, fishing for the weed stumps left in the ground.

I watch my mother and I cannot understand why she doesn't hurry to get things done. The most meticulous tasks are always patiently and deliberately carried out. My father works in bursts of intensity, furiously typing into the computer for hours at a time, refusing to allow for any distractions, moving as quickly as he can. When my mother works she avoids rushing. She used to try to teach me how to sew when I was little and my hands would fidget. I'd stab myself with the needle, and the thread would never stay still enough to go through the tiny loop that it was supposed to. It was more than just the precision required, it was the pace; the fact that sewing forces you to slow down and carry out actions with articulation. Your mind moves faster than your hands.

The bundles of roots sit in even stacks on the ground, forming uniform rows like alfalfa sprouts. I look at my hands, finger nails caked with dirt forming brown halfmoons. This reminds me of gradeschool, when one of my friends used to tease me and say I wanted to be "a person who got dirt under their fingernails," because I wanted to be an archeologist. I remember my frustration with digging the weeds, my eagerness to finish, and wonder why I still even consider archeology. I imagine myself, the sun warm on my back, as I bend over a large slab of rock,

scratching at the surface with small, deliberate motions, struggling to free a chip of Mycenaean pottery from a crack in the stone. I think of the mental strength necessary for me to control my inclination to pound at the surface, to free it with one powerful smash. Would my hands itch to move in wide arcs, to be released from the small, precise movements as much as they do when I am weeding?

I can envision the next time, the dew forming wet patches on my jeans where I kneel, trying to pull the plants out of the ground like my mother. I will find myself possessed, my hands caught in an unnatural slow-motion sequence which traps my thoughts, slowing them to a similar pace. Already I feel cornered, as if I can't escape, trapped in thoughts that must correspond to action. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in *Intention to Escape from Him*: "By digging hard I might / deflect that river, my mind, that uncontrollable thing." It is only when I throw the tight bundles over my shoulders as quickly as I can that I feel like I am accomplishing something. And I think it is here that my logic is clouded.

My mother is the real caretaker of the yard, the maintainer of order. My father's garden would be overgrown with weeds, scattered with stumps of grass which would stand up erratically, headless with the beginnings of new sprouts still visible. My mother's hands will finish the same time as her mind, and she will move on. Her measured motion allows her to preserve not only the young lives she tends, but her own knowledge that her job is finished; neither mind nor body will be waiting for the other to catch up.

Watching my mother, I think about the two forms of life waiting to be unearthed, pulled up from the soil — the lost lives that promote a new existence. One dies, the scrawny, wilted leaves uprooted to ensure the growth of other foliage, and the other is reborn, a piece of the past that has been buried for years, now to be illuminated. Somehow the excavation process of the second seems less tedious -- it is more of a rescue than the first. A glimpse of the past excites me: the process of discovering ancient lives that merit preservation. But for my mother, it is the new stalks that matter, taking their first breath of a new existence. For my mother, the study of the plant life that she cultivates pulls her closer to the earth, to life.

In a few days, the tips of the bermuda grass will begin to sprout again, and my mother will return to the ground, using deliberate motions to completely unearth the persistent plant. There is something about the repetitive motion, the interaction with the plants, that affects her, making weeding more than just a menial task. She thinks about the amount of sunlight the columbine will need in order to thrive, whether a peony or an iris would do better in an adjacent flower bed, and how to ensure that the young lives flourish. Through digging she uncovers the growth of spring. Through her elimination of the runners of roots that plague the soil, she paves the road for Persephone to rise and revitalize the garden and her world. The tough red clods of clay loosen under her trowel, clinging to the roots, and a transfer of energy occurs — an exchange between the rich, fragrant earth and her. Because she is so involved with the process, it is easy for her to be patient, easy for her to match pace with procedure.

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The other day I was talking to friends about what they wanted to do after college. Someone said something about making sure that she earned a large salary, and then someone else said, somewhat accusingly, "It doesn't really matter as long as you're happy." I never consider happiness to be something of permanence, but just like every other emotion, a feeling that passes. Patience, on the other hand, seems to lengthen the amount of time that you are satisfied with something. In winter, my mother roams the house at the same deliberate pace, satisfied in accomplishing tasks thoroughly and precisely. But there is nothing quite like watching her weed — the process transforms her, resurrects her spirit. The joint finish of mind and body secures her happiness for an extended period of time. Maybe this provides the only way to preserve contentment and prevent "as long as you are happy" from becoming a contradiction.

My mother excavates the green lives carefully. Plodding along, she ensures that their fragile stems are unbroken and fully unearthed. Whether I'll be excavating a site or digging in another, I'll search for lives which have waited thousands of years to surface. I hope to preserve another sort of life, through a tolerance for the slow, deliberate motions of weeding, worthy perhaps of even more patience, because it results in a greater permanence.

Crossword Puzzles and M&M's

Growing up, I've always associated thoughts of my Uncle Neal with my grandmother's house. That was where he belonged, and fit in as naturally as the furniture -- "This is my grandfather's chair, my grandmother's lamp, my Uncle Neal." I accepted the presence of a grown man sharing the home of my grandparents with the willingness of a young child. It was not until I had grown older and joined the dinner table for the post-meal "coffee talk," that the oddity of my Uncle Neal's presence, and the stories accompanying it, came to me in bits and pieces. The gradual relation of his bizarre history lent insight to his curious behavior, and brought me to the realization that although our relationship is shrouded in mystery, he remains a solid and gentle figure in my life. My love for him goes beyond the obligate love that one has for a family member, and much like Uncle Neal himself, it relies on none of society's delegated norms. My friendship with him is not based on shared experience, comforting advice, or hours of pleasant conversation. It exists solely through an unstated compassion that I have held for him since I was a little girl.

A year older than my grandfather, Uncle Neal is a thin man who has to bend down slightly to receive my kiss on his cheek. His days are quiet, habitual and solitary. His plaid shirts, bought through the Sears Catalog, are faithfully ironed. When he isn't diligently nursing the tulips or tomatoes to life, he is working his way through a daily crossword. After eating, he disappears into the darkness of his room and is not seen or heard from for the remainder of the evening. Even on days when family gatherings take place, Uncle Neal confines himself to the safety of his familiar walls. Although as a child I never saw anything peculiar about his lack of participation, I often missed him. Creeping up the stairs to his room, I would push my small finger through the crack under his door in a gesture of hello. He would call back "Hello" in a low, muffled voice, but he never opened the door to let me in. I often took his decision to remain removed from the family personally, as though my inability to draw him out of his shell was some form of failure. His realm was impenetrable, and my friendly gestures did not hold the power to convince him he was welcome at our table. I didn't recognize that his unwillingness to leave the comfort of his room was not due to any form of failure on my part. Rejected, I would climb back down the stairs in my patent leather shoes to join the rest of my family.

When explaining Uncle Neal to others, my family and I always use the word "hermit" with a tone of endearment, and smile at the peculiarity that he

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lends to our lives. Removed from phone calls and other social gatherings, Uncle Neal's life is a quiet routine that differs from my family's bustling closeness. His lifestyle deviates from what society had taught me to accept as "normal." The reason for his isolation was explained to me by my grandmother over hot tea and cheesecake shortly before I entered high school. Uncle Neal is not my true uncle — he is not blood related. His entry into my family began with his engagement to my grandmother's sister, Mary. Young and full of life, she was supposed to have been an odd, but suitable compliment to a quiet young man who worked hard, saved well, and kept to himself a bit too much. She brought him "out into the light," — somewhere he was afraid to go on his own. Their future was bright and hopeful, and looked on favorably by all of my family. A week before the wedding, Mary was killed in a trolley accident that left her younger brother seriously injured. They buried her, and my uncle Neal's dreams on their scheduled wedding day.

The brisk, matter-of-fact nature with which my grandmother related this story left me bewildered. No matter how often I hear it, I find myself looking upon my Uncle Neal with sorrowful awe, and wanting somehow to comfort him. An imaginative child, I like to romanticize his existence, rationalizing his chosen detachment from my life by placing him in a Shakespearean tragedy where he wanders through life alone, living only for the day that he can be reunited with his love. Even though I respect my uncle's lifestyle, not knowing whether it was a matter of choice disturbs me.

His moving in with my grandparents is something I don't quite remember. It wasn't so much an event as a subtle coming-to-be. Although a perfectly healthy young man with a job at the Breyer's ice cream factory across the bridge in Philadelphia, an elder sister to turn to, and a life full of opportunities ahead, my Uncle Neal moved into an extra room in the home of my great-grandmother. He lived there until she grew so frail that she had to pack her belongings and take up residence with her elder daughter, Jane — my grandmother. Jane inherited Uncle Neal along with the rosaries, lamp shades, and perfume bottles her mother brought along.

And so the *quiet shadow* came to live under their roof, and he fills his days with four o'clock meals, seven o'clock baths, and piles of *National Geographic* -- read, examined, and memorized. He has a habit of meticulously obtaining knowledge, only to store it away in his mind. He is a fountain of knowledge but shares little of it. My uncle walks through the rooms of the house with a careful, determined step, keeping his wisdom, life, and inspirations to himself. His love is gently brushed upon my brother, sister and myself, on birthdays and Christmas, not in brightly wrapped packages, cards, or even verbal explanations, but in the form of a three pound bag of M&M's and a twenty dollar bill folded and placed in a small, plain envelope. When I was younger, and still in grammar school, it was difficult for me to accept such a gift -- handed over without any terms of endearment — as a gift of love. It took me a long time to recognize that the absence of fancy words, or warm hugs and wishes, was not a sign of detachment.

Rather, it was a gesture so simple, and so pure that it could only mirror the warmest of intentions. In the decades that he has been a part of my family, the three of us are the only ones ever to have received a gift of any sort from him.

Uncle Neal has remained a true constant throughout my life. Even his appearance and demeanor have held their continuity. He never married, dated, or left the shelter of our small town. That is why the night we were forced to report him as a missing person was so terrifying, and so bizarre that we could not help but find it funny. At half past nine on a school night during my senior year, my grandmother — frightened — called to report that when she had come home my Uncle Neal and his once gray, and slightly battered '76 Chevy, were missing. Three hours later he still hadn't returned. He was the type of man whose schedule you could time yourself by, and had he ever been out past sunset in the fourteen years she had lived with him, there might have been no need for concern. After all, a sixty-five year old man should be able to take care of himself. There was no message left with my grandfather, and no reason for him to be gone, not even a possible destination. The food shopping had been done only two days before, and he had no friends to speak of -- not that he would have visited them anyway. Uncle Neal was lost, and we were frightened.

My uncle's privacy is very important to him, and it is respected at all costs. Because of this my grandmother was afraid to enter his room. In all the years they have shared a home, she had never gone past his doorway. Despite my grandmother's hollow protests, my mother sent me up to Uncle Neal's room in order to search for clues -- names, phone numbers, addresses — as to where he might have gone, while she got on the phone with the police station. Entering the forbidden room, I was tempted to snoop around. A thin quilt adorned his bed, and his shelves were piled high with neat stacks of *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*. His closet doors were shut, and there wasn't a single mirror. The lighting was poor. A small bedside lamp and a reading light, its arm bent over his reading chair, were barely enough to illuminate the room. It had the hushed, dusty air of an old library where the silence envelops you, and the surrounding refuses you welcome, making lingering about rather uncomfortable.

What fascinated me the most was his desk. Located in the corner of the room, the large mass was littered with piles of papers that did not fit in the drawers. Pinned above his desk was a faded construction-paper bookcover, written in my scribbled, gradeschool hand. It touched me to know that he had held onto something dear, something I had long forgotten. In his desk drawer, I found a card holder (containing the numbers of two dozen people that he might have found important, many of them employers that he hadn't worked for in over twenty years), snuggled between several piles of bills — fives, tens, and twenties nearly five inches tall. He had never trusted banks and his money lay in piles, like these, stashed throughout the room. Like the countless tidbits of knowledge he had gathered, the bills remained useless because he didn't have a means of sharing or applying them.

20 CROSSWORD PUZZLES AND M&M'S

When I returned downstairs, it was awkward relating to the police officer our concern over a grown man who was out past ten o'clock. We spent forty minutes explaining, describing, and worrying in front of the policeman. And no sooner had he filled out the paper work and released a description of Uncle Neal over the radio, did the gray Chevy pull into the driveway. Uncle Neal entered the house a bit sheepishly, and was quite surprised to find a policeman waiting in his living room. He quietly explained to us that after ten years of turning down birthday invitations from a particular relative of his, he had decided to accept, and make the hour and a half drive down to see him. He also mumbled to the police officer that it was indeed out of character for him, and that we were not out of line to show concern. Then he shuffled past us towards his bedroom. Apparently, there was nothing more to be said. It was this abrupt explanation of the situation that my family found itself recounting with gentle laughter over tea later that night. No matter how long we mulled over the night's happenings, we could not understand what had motivated Uncle Neal, after a decade of isolation, to travel to Delaware.

My family had taken for granted the predictability of my uncle's lifestyle. We failed to acknowledge this separate piece of him which in fact heightened the mystery.

His disappearance exemplifies better than any of my words possibly could, the mystique surrounding my Uncle Neal. He is a man who chooses silence, a man who values privacy and solitude. There was no justification for his leaving, and no explanations. My uncle is a puzzle to me. But, the distance between us, the lack of words have never destroyed the affection that I have for him. He hides everything about himself — his money, his knowledge, and his emotions, making the smallest offering from him a gift of gold. My love for Uncle Neal — like his coming to be a part of my family — is a subtle but important part of my life. His unusual behavior makes him who he is — it lends itself to laughter and good will that I will always associate with my grandmother's home.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief.
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.*

—Robert Frost

"Will you help me with this morphine patch hon?"

Gary sits next to me on my uncle's back patio in a white wicker chair. It is late August, a surprisingly cool evening for Georgetown. I hesitate, my hand poised over a platter of chilled steamed shrimp and spicy cocktail sauce. My Uncle Chris always goes all out for our family and friend get togethers. This evening it is my father and stepmother Ellen, myself, Chris's lover, Scott, and Gary -- no longer just a college friend of Chris's, but more of a family member. "I need this new patch to go on my left shoulder blade where the other one is," Gary explains quietly, careful to keep our conversation between us. "The other one has run out of medicine and I'm starting to feel not so terrific. I was hoping I'd be able to make it through this evening without having to inconvenience anyone."

Uncle Chris introduced Gary to our family on Thanksgiving five years ago. He had no family in the D.C. area, so he spent the evening with us. Although I had just met Gary, it seemed that he already knew a great deal about me.

"Chris tells me that you were just in a musical," he said.

"Yeah — I was in 'Guys and Dolls' last month at school."

"Well, I was looking through my albums, and I found the original version of the soundtrack, so I taped it for you." Gary extended a tan and muscular arm. "I thought you might enjoy it." Simple gestures like that were what impressed me most about Gary -- I hadn't known this man for more than a few hours and he was already doing nice things.

"Do you need another Coke Jess? Another club soda Gary?" my father asks from the bar at the other end of the patio where he, Chris, Scott, and my stepmother are making plans for a weekend getaway to New York.

"I'm doing fine John," Gary says. "Thanks for asking." I shake my head.

22 NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Gary extends the patch towards me. It is shaped like an extra-large Band-Aid, the kind that is the right size for when you scrape your knee as a child. It is clear like a jellyfish. I stare at it, then at Gary's arm. There is a lesion on the underside of his forearm, purple in color. His arm is bone-thin and pale. I take the patch of morphine and Gary unbuttons his yellow oxford shirt so that I can get to his back. My stepmother and father look over from the far side of the patio. My uncle, bringing out stuffed mushrooms from inside, slops in the doorway when he sees Gary removing his shirt. Scott looks down at the brick floor. I am afraid to make eye contact with any of them, sure that if the pain is reflected in their eyes, I will cry.

When Uncle Chris and Scott introduced us to Gary, he was HIV positive. Today, as I peel the backing off this sticky square of potent medicine, Gary is dying of AIDS.

I am conscious of my fingers on Gary's back, pressing gently on the patch. I know that morphine is used for patients in extreme pain, and I wonder how Gary is feeling. My parents and uncle have gone back to jabbering about New York, and I am stunned that they can concentrate on anything other than Gary, his patch, and the marks all over his back, chest, and stomach. "So are you getting excited about going back to school in a week?" Gary asks. He buttons his shirt up and sits back in the chair. "Thanks for helping me with that."

I feel like I'll cry if I try to speak. This man is dying, but is capable of small talking about college. "Yeah, it will be nice to get back down to Washington and Lee."

"You'll really enjoy your sophomore year Jess. That was my favorite year," he says. He grimaces with the pain. "The patch hasn't kicked in yet. Anyway, I hope I get the opportunity to come visit you at school again this year."

"I hope so too."

The previous year, my nineteenth birthday fell during the first semester of my freshman year. My stepmother and father had come down to school to surprise me, bringing Gary and my uncle with them. I spent the weekend showing them around campus and introducing them to my friends. I was able to find a few minutes alone with Gary to thank him for coming to celebrate my birthday.

"It means a lot that you would drive all the way down here just to celebrate my birthday," I said. We were walking down one of the side streets in Lexington. It was uncharacteristically warm for early November, and Gary had his sleeves rolled up. I did not notice any lesions that day. "It makes me feel good to know that you'd drive four hours to see me when I'm just your friend's niece."

"Jessica, let me tell you something," he said, looking directly into my eyes. "Eighteen years ago, I moved out here from Minnesota, leaving behind a twin brother and his baby girl Cary, my niece. I was fortunate enough to meet Chris, who I love like a brother. And in knowing Chris, I have acquired a whole new family -- your dad, Ellen, Scott, and you, another niece. I would drive across the country for your birthday."

"I'm glad that you're here this weekend for my birthday, and that you're a part of my life and my family Gary."

"Me too hon. I just wish we could have met sooner."

Sophomore year, two months after seeing Gary at Uncle Chris's, I receive a postcard. On the front are hydrangeas, and Gary has written: "Be nice to flowers." Flowers and plants are Gary's assurance that there is a God. I learned this when I went to visit him at his house in Georgetown during the spring of my freshman year, shortly after my grandfather had died. His small backyard was completely packed with sunflowers, tulips, zinnias, hibiscus, and about a million other plants that I didn't know the names of. "These remind me that life continues on and that God is watching," he said pointing to the vibrant splashes of color in front of us. "Your grandfather is in good hands hon. I promise." That was how Gary was, finding beauty and comfort in the face of death.

My eyes linger on the front of the postcard and I am afraid to turn it over, afraid of what I might find. I am hoping that on the back of the postcard I will find the words: "I'M CURED!" Instead I find: "Sorry I will not make it for your birthday. I am in Miami for some rest and relaxation. I think of you often. Love, Gary." The handwriting is shaky. I have a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that Gary won't ever make it home. I call my father in Baltimore. "When did Gary go to Florida?" I ask.

My father sighs on the other end of the telephone. "Gary's not feeling so hot, Jess. He left about a week ago and is going to stay down there with some friends as long as he can."

"So he's staying there until he starts to die?" Tears stream down my face and I choke on my sobs. "I want to see him. I want to see him again."

This was not supposed to happen to Gary. Gary was the one who brought flowers to my stepmother and me whenever we got together for brunch or a dinner; the one who kicked me under the table to let me know that he was as bored as I was when Chris and my father would discuss their cases; the one who watched football with me on New Year's Day while the rest of the family was in the living room, wishing they were the ones in the den watching TV.

I am able to see him again. Gary comes home from Miami for Christmas. He comes with Chris and Scott to our house Christmas morning. His face looks sunken and his eyes far away. I feel like I am looking at a skeleton with just the thinnest layer of skin stretched miserably over it.

"My firm didn't invite me to their Christmas party," he tells my family. He has already talked this over with Chris and Scott numerous times. "They didn't invite me because I have AIDS." The five of us, his family, have no words to make things right.

I am sitting next to Gary on the loveseat as he tells us this, playing with the soft material of my skirt. My eyes fill with tears so that everything is blurred like opening them under water at the ocean. Uncle Chris suggests that we exchange presents, uncomfortable with the silence. Gary gives me a red ribbon pin. I give

Gary a coffee table book about gardening. He slowly flips through the book and says, "Life is truly breathtaking. What's in this book makes me believe that God is up there watching out for us."

I often think back to that night in August on my uncle's patio. Before that night, AIDS was just an acronym for a new disease, an issue, something that I read about in *Newsweek* or heard about on television. Although Gary had been infected with the HIV virus the entire five years that I had known him, that night in August was my first, exposure to anyone who had contracted the virus, someone with full-blown AIDS — this was somebody I loved.

I knew about the horror of dying with AIDS. That same summer I watched a public television program on the disease. It was a documentary about two men who were both diagnosed with the virus. The movie charted the course of their relationship and the progression of their disease. I watched the two men lose weight, lose their hair, next came the development of lesions. As a couple they grew weak, then died. Seeing Gary on the patio that night I knew that he would die the same way.

It amazed me that Gary could wake up each morning knowing that he had a disease that was destroying him. I found it difficult to get out of bed in the morning simply to turn a paper in for class, or because I was fighting with my boyfriend the night before. I could not comprehend what someone would have to possess in order to continue fighting, knowing the end is a losing battle.

Gary had already lost his lover to AIDS a year prior to my meeting him. The question of how Gary caught the HIV virus was never asked. I always assumed that he had caught it through homosexual sex because his lover died of the disease. The likelihood of this being true never affected me -- I wasn't homophobic. My uncle was gay, and this never disturbed *me*. My father and stepmother were also very supportive of Chris's sexuality. They acknowledged Scott as Chris's partner and treated them as a couple. Despite all of this, I grew up fairly tolerant of homosexual humor. Behind their backs, Chris and Scott became "Uncle Chris and Aunt Scott" to my father, stepmother, and I. I guess that is the way my family dealt with the situation. If you had asked me at the time, I would have sworn to you that I was one-hundred percent sympathetic about homosexuality.

Then I put a morphine patch on my dying friend's back.

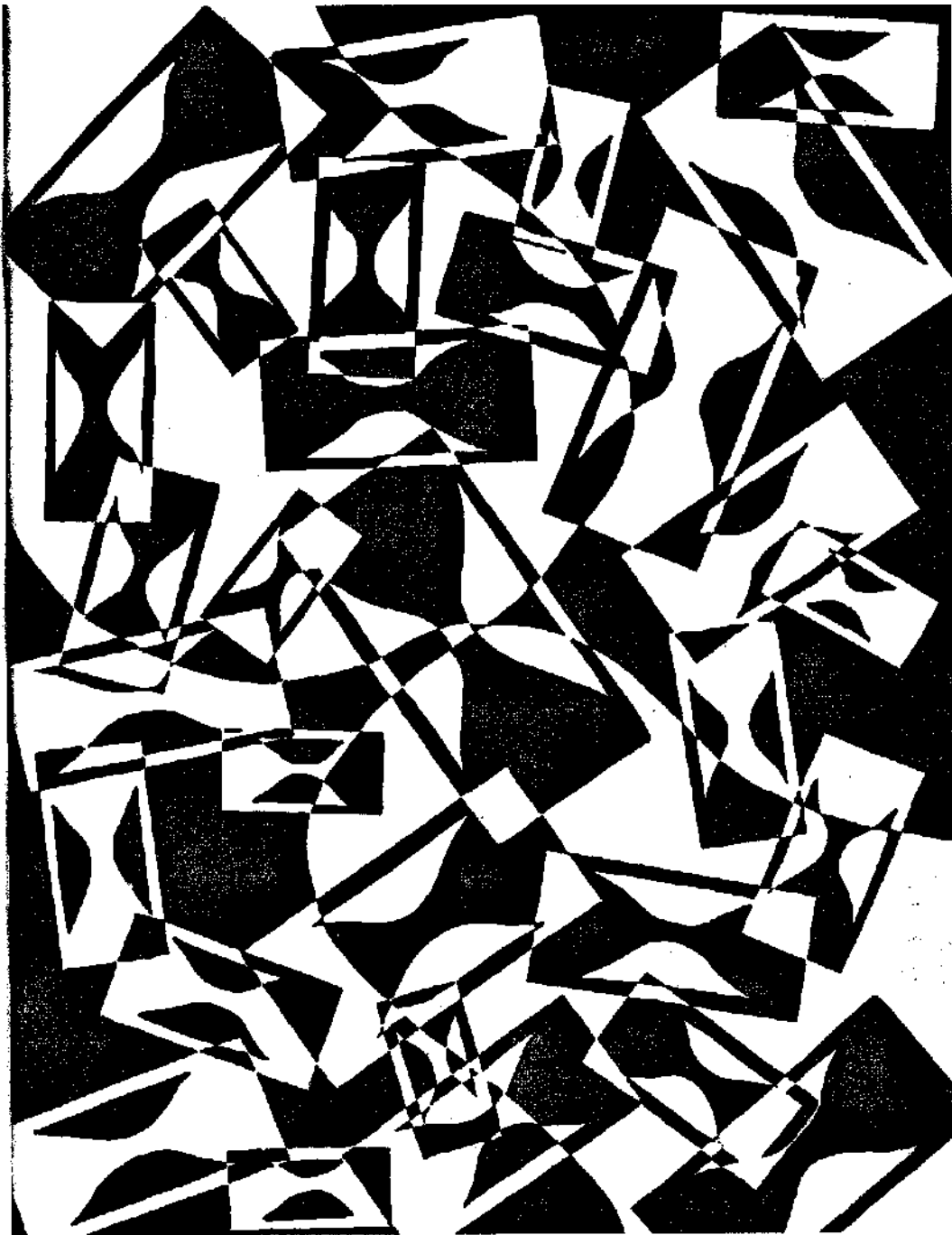
A couple of nights after I received Gary's postcard, I was at school watching MTV with some of my friends at a fraternity house. They showed a clip of Axle Rose wearing a T-shirt that mimicked the Raid commercial (Raid: Kills Bugs Dead). His shirt said "AIDS: Kills Fags Dead." Most of the people in the room started laughing. One of my friends yelled out: "Those fucking faggots deserve it!"

Back in July of that summer, before I put a morphine patch on my friend's lesion-covered back, I probably would have laughed at the joke on the T-shirt. I also would have let the comment go. I no longer found it funny. "You're a bunch of ignorant fucks." I shouted, I stormed out of the room to the question: "What are you, some kind of fucking dyke?"

I was not on a mission to change people's minds about homosexuality. I didn't expect my friends or my conservative school community to have an epiphany and embrace homosexuality. I just wanted someone to make the pain go away. I wanted AIDS to disappear. I wanted Gary to live. Deep down I knew that this wasn't going to happen. Those horrible words, "Those fucking faggots deserve it!" rang in my ears. When I heard the word AIDS, I thought of Gary. When homophobic individuals heard the word AIDS, it seemed they believed the disease was punishment, retribution. It made me sick to think that to some people, Gary deserved to have AIDS. To me Gary was simply a dear friend with a terminal disease, whose position in society was complicated by the prejudice against him.

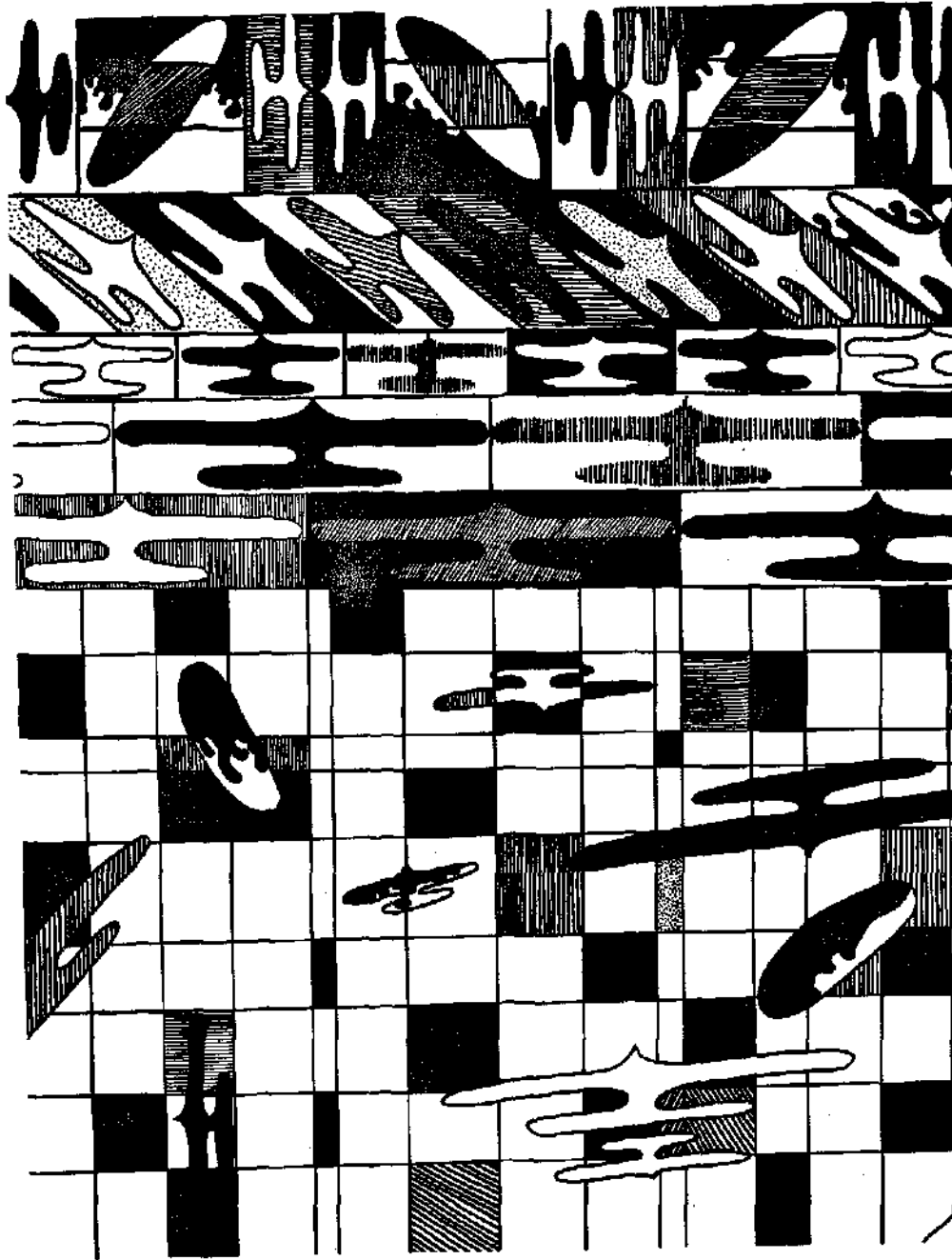
This past August, almost exactly a year from my last visit with Gary, I was able to be with him during the final weeks of his life. He was in a hospice in Maryland. Most of his hair was gone and he couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. The only forms of nourishment he could take in were sherbet and ginger ale -- otherwise, he was fed from an IV.

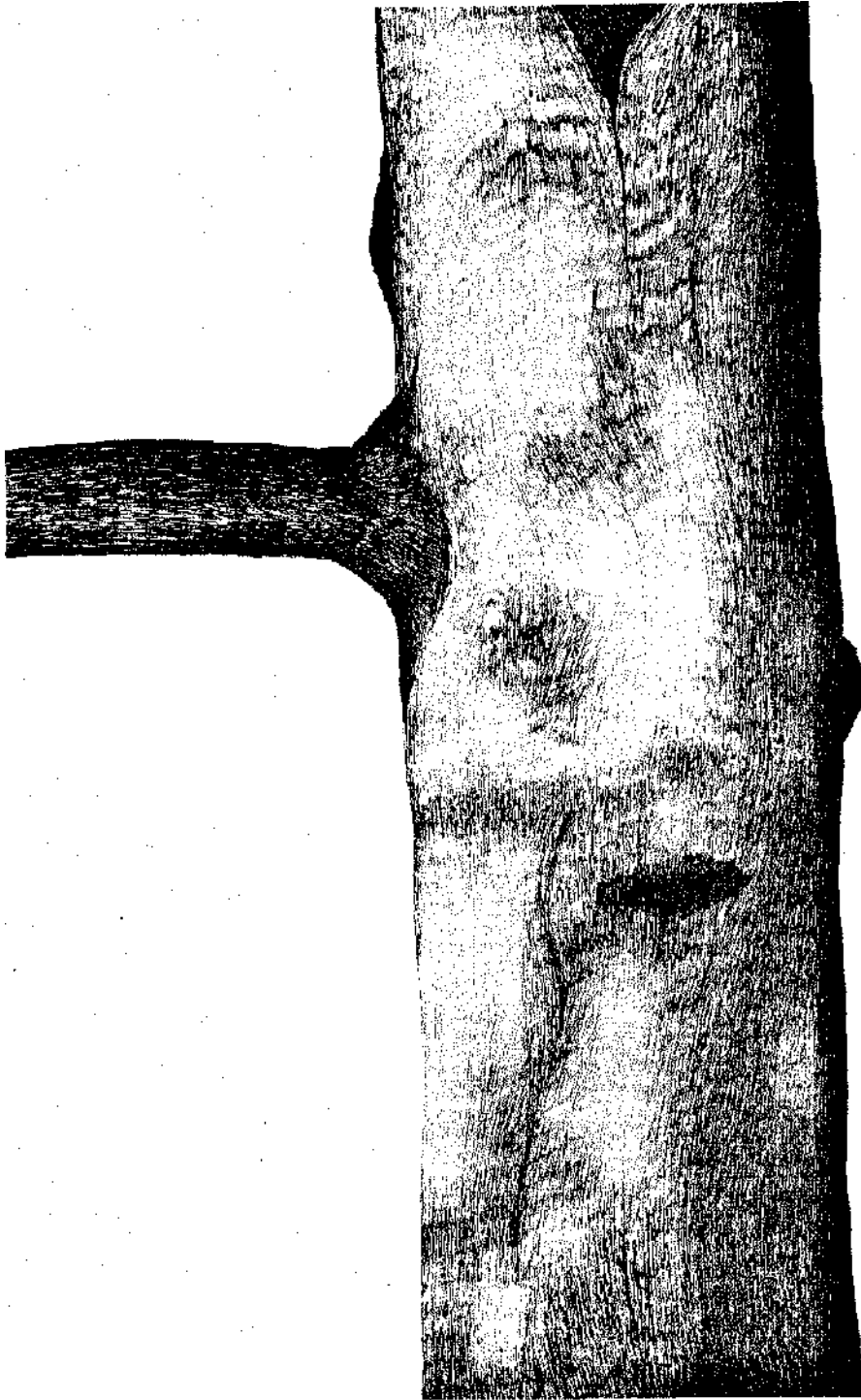
He could barely focus his eyes due to the morphine and opium the doctors were giving him. He drooled. In his worst moments he would hallucinate, crying out that snakes were falling from the ceiling. He was afraid of pain. He looked just like the two men from the AIDS documentary, except that Gary was a part of my life — not a television personality. He was still Gary somewhere inside his deteriorating body. I sat often by his bed before he died. I held his hand and told him that I loved him. He told me that he loved me too, and loved being a part of my family. I told him that I had learned a lot about courage from him. He told me that it had nothing to do with courage, that he was living the life that was chosen for him. There came a point when he couldn't speak, and his eyes remained shut for hours. As I watched him approach the end of his struggling, I told him that I would always associate him with gardens — beautiful, rich colored flowers and greenery, pushing and straining upward from the stubborn soil.







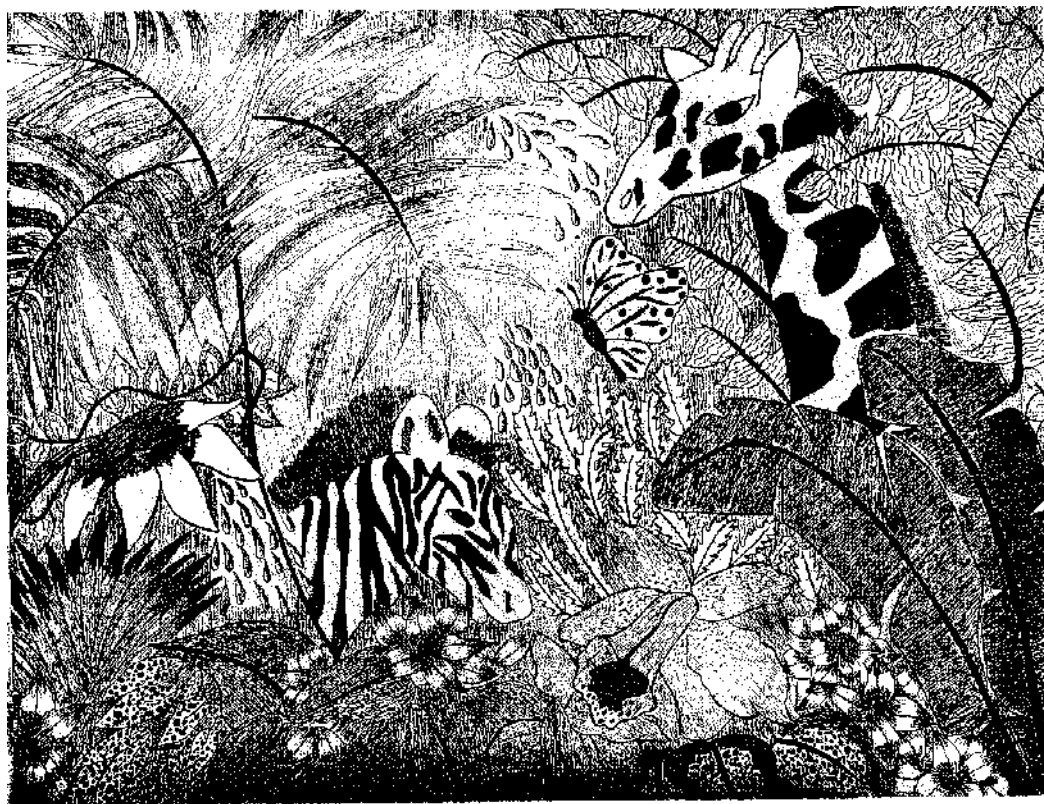


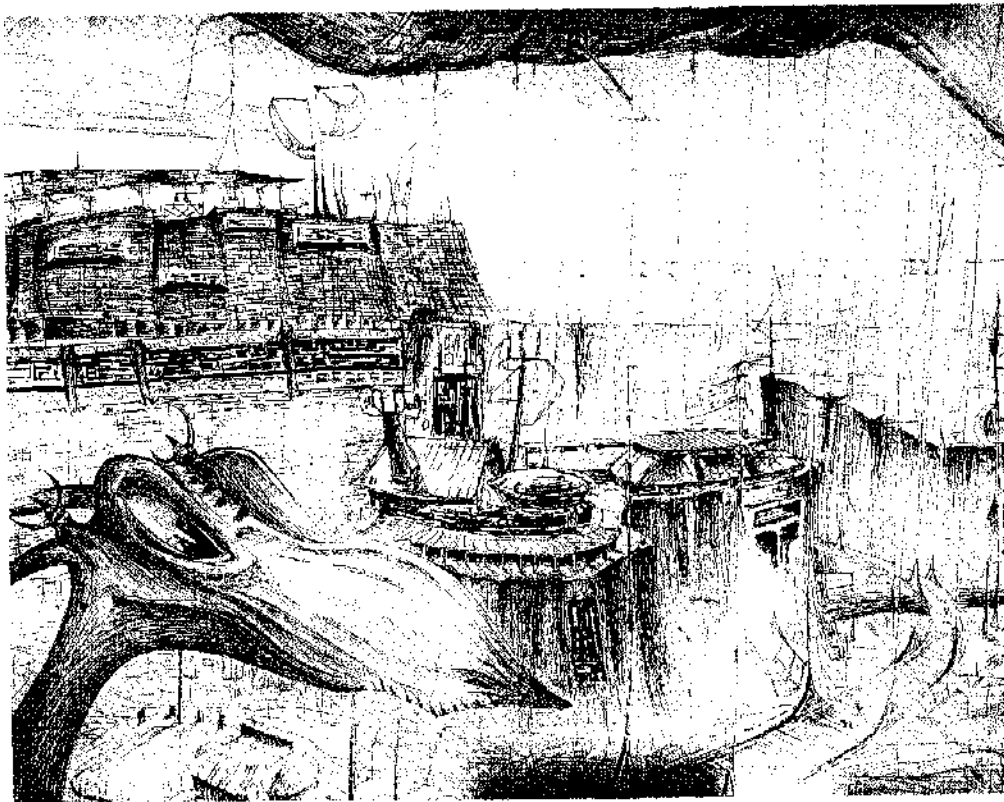






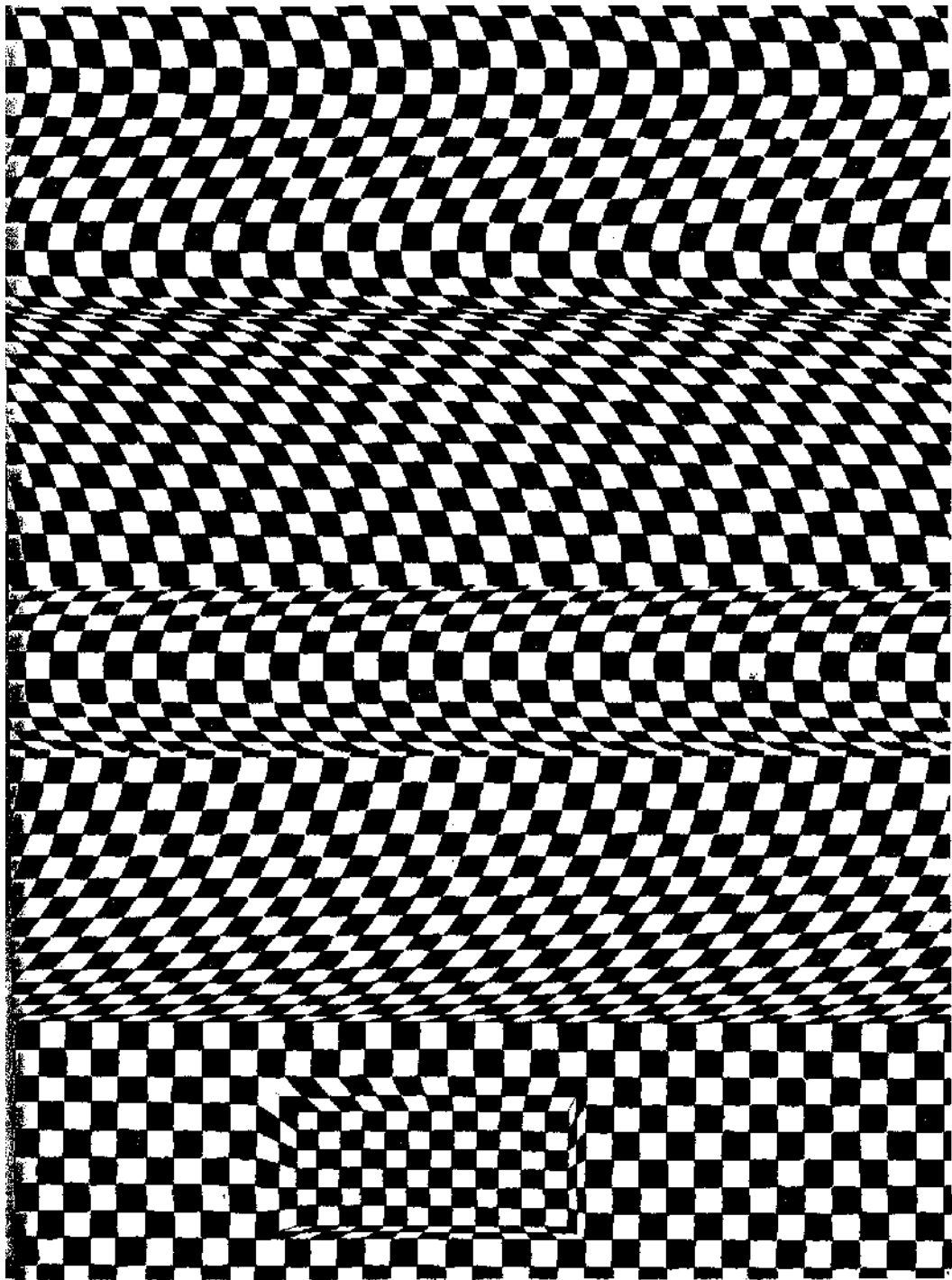




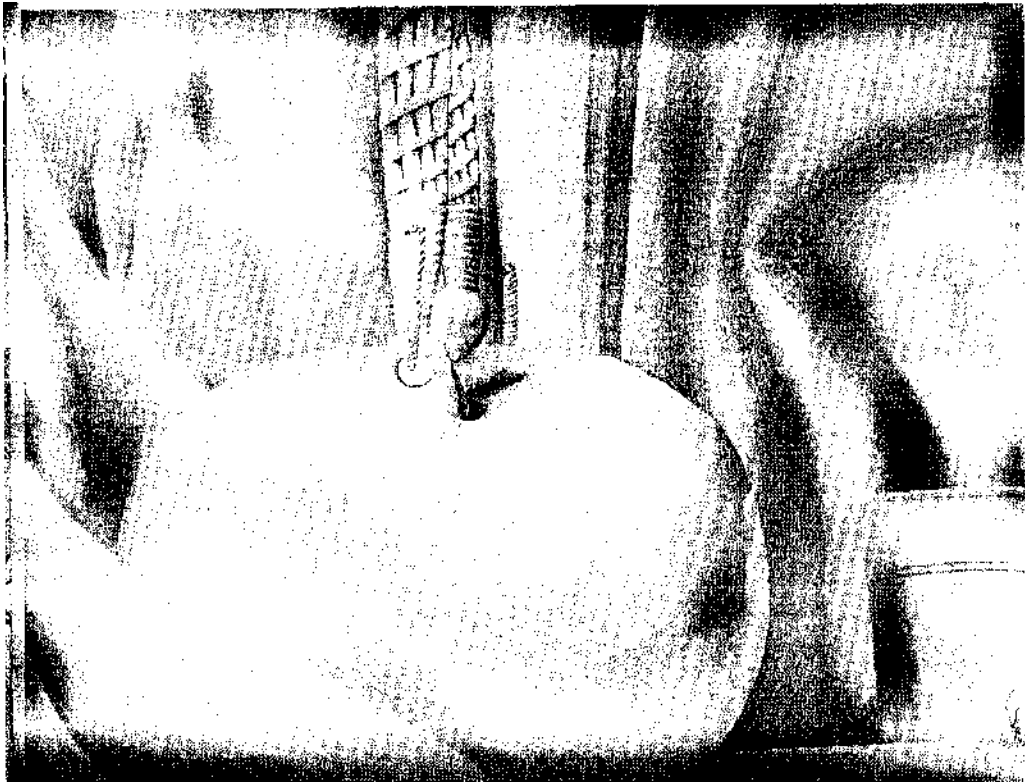






















The Glass Pyramid

The filming of the Critic's birth would have been in black and white, and it would have been censored, there would have been no shots of placentas, there would have been no shots of the umbilical cord still attached, there would have been no shots of the mother's legs spread. Somehow the camera would not have caught her ankles bound in the stirrups. From watching only the film, it would have seemed such an easy birth. The screams and the ripping agony would have been edited from the mother's face. The Critic was born to a world that only showed him the sterilized tools and black and white patterned floor of the hospital. There were no leaking split bodies in the Critic's world.

Cupped in the hands of Academia, the Critic was grown to be the next scientist, the next philosopher, the next thinker. But something went wrong. Maybe there was too much fertilizer and not enough bull shit. Now the Critic resides in comfort, his life somewhere between a bad wedding and a good funeral.

(The first of the Critic's unwanted drinks that night was lobster red like Indian summer. It harvested like an unwinding staircase.)

Music had always been the means for the Critic's art. When the Critic did not become Academia's prodigy, he fell back on his 'rebel art.' Humbled by his inabilities, he gave up on writing and became the Critic. In the middle of his starving artist's loft, decorated in an expensive revolution, still stands the piano. Like mockery, it sits patiently, waiting for the Critic to fulfill his own ambitions. It was always the black and white keys he relished. They were organized into patterns, five to eight, octaves repeating. Mathematical, structured, indisputable, they were solid geometry. And it was classical music that allowed for their concrete correlation and rational nature to come forth. The great ones, like carved perfected marble, had strung them together with lines and rules and logic. Classical music made sense to the Critic. It was not like that damnable rock and roll. Three chords and a whining solo crammed together with less thought than the rolling of a joint or the swaying of idiot dancing. No, that was blasphemy to the Critic. Feedback was like the raping of a siren compared to the black and white altar of his piano which lay untouched, pristine, regulated, cold, and untapped.

Untouched except by his wife, the piano was the only flat surface available that would have worked. The Critic figured it was sterile, and birth was sterile and clean wasn't it? That's what he remembered.

(The second of the Critic's unwanted drinks that night was layered green and yellow like a jester's cartwheel, tumbling further into the warm spin.)

Unexpected things happen, the Critic learned this as his wife lay spread and unstrapped on top of his piano — his altar. After the first time he tried to regulate his breathing, in and out, nice and deep, he learned to stay by her feet. The sight of this wife had nearly choked the wind out of him. But standing by her feet wasn't any better because that was where the monster that the black and white films had edited out — The red juice, the flesh splitting, the purple head. God, could she rip apart any more? He thought he heard tearing. And when it came, covered in green snot, yellow pus, and pasty gray slime, he had to shudder against the oncoming black-out. His child's orange skin made his drained white lips quiver. In those five to eight seconds when he held it high, unbreathing with the umbilical cord still connected, his vision fell prey, pray, to stark enclosing whiteness. But, with a slap he fought through it, and his child breathed, then he collapsed under his piano. Exhausted, unconscious, wet, he lay there shivering, missing the beauty of his wife, euphoric beyond the pain. With her child in her arms, her pain was gone. She only saw the electric blue of her son's eyes.

(The third of the Critic's unwanted drinks that night was the color blue, only found a quarter mile under the Caribbean surface, sliding further into the motion, sliding past the jazz whales.)

Later, when he was scrubbing the piano, the transformed delivery table, he could only see the stain. It was beyond color, a mangle of everything too bright and too bold. It was the painter's pallet after he had mixed it for a breaking oil work. The Critic hated the stain. It had dripped off the back of the piano, the beast, and it had landed on the keys, black and white and unplayed. The stain would never come off. It hardened in the cracks between the keys, forever plaguing the Critic. He used it as an excuse to completely abandon playing. He resided now exclusively in his analysis.

Only his wife would play; she had no talent. She did not handle Academia, much less the opportunity to stand on the altar, but she had taught herself a blues scale or two, and she would play the blues, electric blues.

But it was not the blues that was the Critic's new assignment that night, and it was not classical music either. Having fallen on unexpected times, the paper he reviewed for had to expand itself. The Critic was assigned to write on a jazz club. More bitter and displaced than the stain, the Critic loathed his new dilemma. Forced to hear such unperfected, unschooled, boys of the art, he longed for the security of his profound and straight classical music. And like the inevitability of birth, he succumbed to the jazz. But once he stepped into the jazz club known as the Glass Pyramid, he realized it wasn't quite jazz that he was going to listen to that night.

The jazz club sat on the corner like the fat stoic Buddha. Its neon arms waved incense and told stories. Walking through its stained glass door was like tripping on the ocean. Perspective. Strolling past the beaded door that separated the front lobby and the rest of the club was like being born in reverse, only slow, painless, and fully grown. Refraction. The Glass Pyramid knew how to take a

baked pot and spin it until it was reduced to malleable clay. The man at the door who told the Critic to sit anywhere, or everywhere, had moist orange brown clay all over his hands.

By the time they brought him his fourth unwanted drink, the Critic had begun to feel the slide rhythm of the room. This drink was purple, and violent, and steaming, it bent the Critic over. He transformed the drink from liquid to a shaking down his back and in his hands. The spotted leopard tapestries that scaled the walls like dragon leather had a rhythm about them. Long bass swings. The candles on the table floated warm orange bubbles over their burning. The wicks that sacrificed themselves to the slow roasting had a rhythm about them. Fluid and charged sways. The jangle of the jewelry, and talismans that drape the gypsies who masqueraded as customers had a rhythm to it. Hard magic solos.

The whole room had a rhythm about it: Long bass swings under fluid and charged sways, and hard magic solos. Yeah — the customers were the accent notes and as the Critic forced down the last slithering sip of his fourth unwanted drink, the curtain opened.

There were four of them, and they had instruments. The next morning the Critic would assume they had played music, but he would be damned if he had heard a note.

Without any outward sign between the four of them, they began to 'play.' The room grew quiet and thick. The air condensed, the light slowed. *Don't yell at me yet.* Too syrupy for sound, every word hung in the air. Unable to be heard, they had to be read. *You don't know what's going on yet, do you?* And then the first beam unrolled from the stage, Red. The air was too crunched for light now, and the beam seemed to meander like Sunday morning donuts, Red. It unraveled around the Critic, engulfing him in a tranquil languid beating. *Don't get up yet, you have to listen to this piece. I've got you now. Don't yell yet.*

Next came yellow and green, they exploded on stage like an overripe painter's head - watermelon and squash guts, they overtook the red. Moving faster, they encircled it, danced around it. When they got to the Critic, they passed through every hole they found in the red, in the Critic. They spilled into every crevice. *Just don't break yet — go with it let your --* "What the hell? Music doesn't sound like this. It isn't colors like this. Light can't travel slow." The Critic stood and yelled. But it didn't matter — *you forgot that the air was too thick for sound. Everyone would have to read your words, only no one cared. They were all concentrating on me.*

Next came blue, blue originated in a thousand points and then blended together daring to see how slow it could move; it arced and curved under the other three. Watching it move so horribly slow threatened to make you sick, it built and built like swelling whale lungs, daring to see how slow it could go before it became infested with the poison of standing water, it resonated.

Next came purple, the seducer. In thin waves it looked like the siring of spit that still connects a man and a woman after they kiss. Lip to lip, it grasped the

Critic. Purple was not going to leave his clothes on. Pulling him into the airborne bed of red, yellow, green and blue, it began turning him. But that can't happen you scream — "colors can't grasp!" Then the purple began loosening shirts and unlatching buttons. Belts were pulled through their loops.

Hovering amid the canvas, the Critic shouted, "But I am detached, cold, rational. I am not part of the show. I am the philosopher clinging to reason. I analyze and accept only what is logical." The Critic turned inward and tried to ignore the music. *But you can't stop reading can you. You don't even want to stop reading, do you?*

I am the music. I am the poet. I defy rationality, reason, logic. They are limiting barriers for me. I will not succumb to them. I have been in love, I have laughed so hard that I forgot what I was laughing at, I have known where to pass the basketball before I even look. Irrationality exists and I flourish on it.

Are you still actually going to try and describe emotions according to set rules?

I am the music. I am the poet. I know the philosophers are detached from their subjects. They will never understand until they engage the life around them. I needed to grab you like this before you could begin to see. I am energy. I was born into a black and white film, but I have induced a new birth into this color music.

The next morning, the Critic sat at his piano, running his fingers along the stain. He did not move them bitterly, but instead he caressed, searching. *Well Critic, on this morning after, will you still hold fast to your rules and lines and reason? Or will you disown your learned prudence and embrace the other?* Your child walks up now.

"Dad, mom taught me a blues scale. Do you mind if I play?"

"No, I don't mind. You can go ahead."

You slide off and he sits down. Watch him closely — you know what he's going to play. He's going to play electric blues. Watch his fingers over the stain.

The Lone Soldier

*His vision, his strength, his courage came from his own spirit.
A man's spirit, however, is his self.*

- -Ayn Rand, from *The Fountainhead*

He stands outside, a silhouette against the front door screen. Smoke rises from a lit cigarette in his left hand. Slowly, methodically, he lifts it to his lips as though he is pondering the meaning of life. He faces out against the world, alone and silent.

If you met my brother, you would be able to see a glimmer of strength behind his chocolate brown eyes. His dark brown hair accents the dark European features of his face. He is very handsome, and personable. At first glance you would never guess that every day of his life he fights a battle that many of us are spared, a battle that few of us even understand.

As a child, he was always curious, always moving. He was troublesome, but no one could resist his innocent glance. He was shorter than me back then, and I was his protector. When the home base was under attack by horrible aliens, I was always there to take care of his wounds. Most of the time a good hug and a Band-Aid did the trick, but every now and then we were forced to call in reinforcements for a busted knee or hand.

Whatever my brother was fighting back then, he always needed someone to help defeat the forces of evil. My mother always found us buried under the sheets defeating the evil Cobra Commander, or burying plastic dead bodies in the backyard. The backyard was our own private little world. The woods held secret paths to a pet cemetery and a makeshift town complete with a sheriff's office and jail. Now it belongs to someone else, and the moss and leaves have hidden the paths completely, and the little town is long decayed.

School started and somehow, somewhere, we began to lose touch. He began to make new friends and partners for his crusades. I fell to the wayside as girls became as terrible as mutant space slugs. It did not take long for both of us to lose our childhood bond.

He used to enjoy reading until his prejudiced kindergarden teacher refused to let him read any more books. He had finished what the boys were "supposed"

to read. She had the notion that boys were not as smart as girls and therefore refused to give him any of the books that the girls read. He lost something after that. School began to bore him.

When he started elementary school, he was in constant conflict with his teachers. Fights with other children became common. His grades kept slipping. My mother was constantly in touch with the principal. It didn't take long for the system to give up on him. His small battle would become a full-fledged war within a few years.

My brother's name is Troy Edward. He's going to be nineteen in March. Hopefully he will find a job that will benefit him in the future. He chose to drop out of high school, because the system's methods could not accommodate him.

Troy has the unique ability to sketch an object with exact details and precision. I can remember watching cartoons one afternoon after we had returned from a hard day of classes. Suddenly, Troy's eyes sparkled and his face lit up. It was as though a brilliant solution had just occurred to him. With speed and dexterity he raced for the television and quickly began to tape-record the *Tiny Toons* show we had been watching. Once he had secured what he needed, he hurried to his room and returned with a pencil and paper.

As the show came to its conclusion, Troy stopped and rewound the tape to a particular incident involving Plucky Duck's tongue falling from his mouth. He paused the scene, and in a matter of minutes my brother had copied the picture to paper, in exact detail. As I looked at his finished work he began to forward the tape to another character and started to sketch again.

For an entire hour he sat there, suspended in his place while he sped through the tape, discovering his favorite characters in different and challenging positions. Flawlessly, he recreated them for his own satisfaction. After he felt he had completed all he could, he proudly displayed his sketches to my mother and me. Stunned and amazed, we applauded him while he smiled with satisfaction and pride.

No one knew that Troy was different. No one realized that he was intelligent. He is in fact genius-level, separated from the outside world by an attention-deficit disorder. He didn't know that he was smart, or capable because the system classified him as dumb.

The school system thought that the reason he slept through his classes was that he stayed up late — he did not. They thought he was obnoxious when he answered, "Huh?" to every question -- he was not. They did not bother to find out why he did not finish. They let him slip through undetected, leaving him to fend for himself in a land of incomprehensible language.

Classes frustrated him to the point where his brain shut down, resulting in his sleeping. Since verbal language is difficult for him to retain, he had to ask for questions to be repeated. He feels that it is less embarrassing if he just says, "Huh?" He can't pass over a problem if he doesn't know it. This means he can't always finish tests. The system never bothered to have him diagnosed.

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The first school that Troy went to, Sacred Heart in Glyndon, my cousins and I attended as well. It was a strict Catholic school, run by the intolerant Sister Briclyn, who was replaced by the even more intimidating Sister Marian. Both of these women were completely unsympathetic to Troy's needs and feelings. Troy was just like the other kids, except wilder. I used to watch him play on the playground, minding his own business until he was confronted.

Steven Pharaoh, the son of a doctor, would purposely incite fights between himself and my brother. Troy would ignore him until Steven threw several punches, and a brawl would begin. Being a doctor's son gave Steven the advantage. Our family had neither money nor prestige. Our father was known throughout the parish as an adulterer, a liar, and a cheat. Troy did not have a chance.

Unable to handle his outbursts and lax attitude towards work, the principal demanded he be tested. When they discovered that he had several learning problems as well as hyperactivity, it was "suggested" that he immediately be put on Ritalin (a medication used to calm children who are hyperactive). Not only did this medication stunt my brother's growth, but he found himself wetting the bed at night. Troy lost control of his body just as he lost control of his life.

In order to protect Troy, my mother had him taken off the drug and transferred to a school that specialized in treating my brother's condition. He was unable to sit still, or pay attention in class; he was easily distracted. He began to attend a public school known as Chadsworth that specialized in children with learning disabilities. Still, his battle continued.

At home, things were no better. My mother and father began to fight viciously, pulling Troy and myself between their continuous battles. Counseling was attempted, and it was discovered that our once "functional" family was in fact completely dysfunctional. As the battle between my parents continued, Troy and I found comfort in our separate rooms; we had grown too far apart to find comfort in each other.

My father had a problem that, according to the counselor, was one of the main sources of my brother's difficulties. He drank alcohol. His desire for the poison grew, along with Troy and me, and the fights between my parents. Unfortunately my brother, the "problem child," also faced my father's wrath.

His constant tirades about Troy's stupidity melted the once strong boy into a reckless young man. My father never noticed Troy's unique ability to draw, or the way he was able to build sound structures from blocks and legos. He never praised Troy for his ability to skateboard. My father never praised anyone. He did not have to think, he did not have to do anything except exist. He did not have to deal with the hangover from the night before. It made him happy, even though he acted ridiculous. He could not be responsible for anything, unless it benefitted him.

My father had no respect for Troy, and still does not. My father has always been abusive to him, mentally and physically. When Troy was much

younger, my father would get so frustrated with him that he would punish him by whipping him with his belt. When that was no longer effective, my father resorted to grounding Troy. It did not take long until my brother was immune to punishment. He had been punished to the point where it no longer mattered.

My father was not around during my parent's marriage, so Troy never had a good male influence in his life. Troy used to cry when he would watch the other boys playing catch outside with their fathers. He would look up at my mother and me and ask "Why?" Even today, Troy still gets teary when he sees a close relationship between a father and son. He never really got a chance to bond with my father, unless you consider the fact that they smoke the same brand of cigarettes together.

Since Troy was made to believe he was stupid, he stopped trying. He became the class clown, the defender of the weak, and the terror of the teacher. By the age of nine he could do a flip kick like Jean Claude Van Damme. By eleven he was imitating his splits. Troy once managed a flawless round kick to the back of an agitator's head. He had learned it from watching television. No one even stopped to consider that the kid with the sore head had hit Troy first.

Years passed and the family situation got worse. Troy was about twelve when we removed my father from the battlefield. Things settled down for a while, Troy's grades even improved a little. He had regained a part of what he had lost, and began to try again.

He finally completed his years of frustration at Chadsworth, and was enrolled in Towson High School. Troy did not want to go to Towson — he wanted to go to Franklin High School with his neighborhood friends. Disheartened and outnumbered, he gave in and attended Towson.

We assumed that everything was going well for him. The phone calls from the principal had become less frequent. He had begun to lift weights and became more confident in his appearance. He was growing quickly, and soon surpassed me in height and strength. We did not notice the slight change in his attitude, though we assumed that he did not want to be at Towson.

It was at Towson that Troy was introduced to pot. He was reluctant to try it at first, but he had been smoking cigarettes since age twelve, so it wasn't much different. He did find that after a while, pot provided something better than a nicotine high. It was an easy and immediate escape. It was quicker than alcohol, and easier to do before school. He no longer felt the pain of defeat, but his anger revealed itself at home.

Pot kept Troy from worrying, it made everything around him light and easy to handle. He did not have to think, he did not have to do anything except exist. He did not have to deal with the events of the night before and he did not have to deal with the hangover from the night before. He could not even remember what he had to do. His appetite increased as his brain cells became lazier. He could fly high with a few puffs, and take a few more on his way down. He was

floating way above his disabilities and other problems that used to keep him stuck to the ground.

He went to few of his classes and those that he did attend, he usually slept through. He was not doing better — he was becoming worse. He was losing a struggle against the system and was beyond giving up; he didn't give a damn.

He spent a year in Towson before he was allowed to go to Franklin. Franklin was a place where he could be with his friends. He had a lot of friends and he did care about his body, or what it looked like at least. But the inside was as polluted as much as the outside looked healthy. Surprisingly enough, having a completely toned body provided him with a sort of confidence, to make up for what the pot had taken away. Looking healthy helped him to hide the deterioration of his insides. It kept my mother from acting on her suspicions. His body was perfectly muscular, and he had an immense appetite. There were no circles under his eyes. He wasn't physically falling apart. His temper, on the other hand, was becoming worse -- it was more telling than we realized.

As his attitude grew worse, my mother and I felt the sting of his anger. Sharp words were common around the house: "stupid, idiot, and loser," said with a bitter lash. My brother's lax attitude at school had finally come home. It seemed that every time he was asked to do something, he didn't. He just sat there looking at the television, in his own world. He was beginning to act just as my father had, and I was scared.

By this time I had stopped feeling sorry for him. I had long stopped protecting him. I was frustrated and angry with him. He was beginning to act as stupid as he felt, and drowned himself in drugs, alcohol, and self pity. The more he reminded us of my father, the more my mother kept reminding him.

I was away at college by now, but my short trips home were a threat to him. He had the entire house to himself until I returned. I threatened him with my goodness; it exploited his badness. As soon as I walked in the door, he immediately aimed his anger at me, making our home a hell with sharp words and little bombs. He would leave when I entered, yell if I stayed, and cut me to the bone with vicious sayings. I, who was once a comrade and defender, had joined the ranks of his enemies. He was alone and would soon be afraid.

It did not take long for his curiosity to lead him into trying LSD, mushrooms, and several other hallucinogenic drugs, all of which severely distorted his perception, his memory, his mind. He never admitted that he was taking or doing anything. My mother discovered a few homemade bongs, but he claimed that they belonged to his friends; she believed him.

If you asked him about the drugs now, he would tell you about his experience in an explicit and detailed manner. Everything he remembers, he describes with a warning look and an artistic edge. Back then he did not care, but now, if you look closely, the spark (though faint) has returned.

My brother is one of the many who have been passed over. Other people are out there who find it impossible to learn things that they are not interested in.

To read the page of a book can take a normal person one to two minutes, but for someone like Troy it can take an excruciating hour. The problem is that hardly anyone knows that these people are out there struggling, fighting a battle that they have no real chance of winning.

It was not until a year ago that my mother paid a fortune for Troy to be specially tested, and we discovered that he is extremely bright and creative. He is a visual learner, but much more so than normal. His learning ability is complicated even more by his other problems. Using special methods, a psychologist found that he has the IQ of a genius. We have seen his ability to assemble a speaker box for a car with care and ease. The box is crafted to his style, different than any "system you would buy. He learned to put in a car stereo system through experience; no one taught him. It may not sound like much, but to him it is all that he has right now.

Eventually Troy realized that the drugs were destroying him, and he stopped taking the hallucinogens. He still smokes the occasional joint at parties, and he drinks, but only to his limit (so he claims). My brother does have brains, though they take a while to process information. He still takes a while to get things done, and his disability has made it difficult to find a decent job.

Recently, Troy found a decent job. It's dangerous because he has to go into old buildings and knock out walls, but at least he will not be working with my father. The daily tirades will hopefully cease, as well as the "when I was your age" speeches. I think Troy will enjoy not being called a failure every day, perhaps he will gain more confidence.

There is a picture that my mother drew of Troy that lies carefully preserved in our attic. It's a picture that I have made her promise to give me. Troy is very young (he is wearing blue Osh Kosh overalls) and sits there looking at his finger. His sharp brown eyes are barely noticeable as he squints, and a few stray brown hairs gently fall onto his forehead. His nose is wrinkled and his brow furrowed as he watches a huge furry black caterpillar crawl up his finger. The picture shows his innocence, and the curiosity he once had in abundance of. He stands alone.

I will never have the bond that I had with my brother when things were simple and I could protect him from what he has dealt with through the years. It has been shattered by his war. I do not know how he feels, his environment is different than mine. I can no longer make things better for him with hugs and a Band-Aid, and the reinforcements stopped a long time ago. He stands on his own, misunderstood by those who are closest to him, and ridiculed by those who do not understand him. I cannot protect him anymore; I can only watch from a distance, praying that he will win.

I would still like to protect him from the world, but I know I cannot. He is the *Howard Roark* who defies the world, and in the end is forced to suffer for it. I wonder if he knows that I care and watch with teary eyes as he fights his lonely battles. It has been many years since I have fought for him, and now he won't

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even let me get close enough to fight by his side. There are so many things I wish that I could tell him, to make him see that he is someone, that he is worthy. I do not know if he would even understand, or be interested enough to listen.

One day I wish I could join him as he stands on the front steps of our home, inhaling a cigarette, pondering the meaning of his life. I'd put my arms around him and tell him that he is not stupid, nor is he a loser. I would stand next to him and fight the world for him, anything to keep him from being alone. But in my heart, I know that he must fight this one on his own. For now, all I can do is cheer from the sidelines, and pray that he will make it.

Violation

For centuries people have contemplated the existence of extraterrestrial beings. Unidentified flying objects have been sighted and scientists have speculated about them. Rumors have run rampant about secret government cover-ups regarding life from outer space. Crop circles, unexplained disappearances, mysterious movie stars, and other evidence points to the existence of alien life. While this is strong evidence for the existence of aliens, the most substantial proof has been long neglected. The existence of life in outer space can be proven by a common and seemingly harmless form of life on our planet: plants. Plants hold more secrets than can ever be fathomed.

The very makeup of plant life points to an alien designer. First of all, one should look at the basic color of a plant: green -- traditionally the color of mystery and the unknown. The basic shape of plants is unusual. Flowers seem to be eyes watching and absorbing everything they can see. With their long stems they go unnoticed as they observe everything. They also bear an uncanny resemblance to the satellite dishes found in the backyards of some rural houses. Petals serve as satellite dishes, amplifying sound and taking in everything they hear. On a larger scale, the popular evergreen tree points high, perhaps as a monument to the space ships responsible for its origin.

Just how do plants grow? Modern science has shown that they do not possess reason. They cannot choose to point towards the sky. What then compels them to grow upwards? The answer is aliens. Citing natural selection, Darwinists may dismiss this idea as worthless. They are correct to a point, for nature's fittest will in fact survive. But ask what is more fit: a common plant or an intergalactic alien from outer space?

Plants grow upward, towards the stars. What could draw plant life upward? Gravity is not the reason - science can prove that. The answer to the mystery is somewhat unnerving. Plants most likely serve as transmitters, sending information back to their creators in outer space. Possibly they are even aliens themselves.

Plant life serves as the ultimate alien reconnaissance device — they are found everywhere. One need only look out the window to see the shape of a tree, either in a yard or a little square of dirt within a walk of concrete. People have even accepted these aliens into their homes. Disguised as helpless decorations, house plants have infiltrated family life on a basic level throughout the world. Naïve families feed and water them, sustaining their lives.

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Despite the feelings of violation that accompany being observed by aliens, we should not panic. While aliens have infiltrated the world, they do not seem to be violent. Hostile acts from humans, such as mowing lawns, chopping and burning trees, and eating salad continue without retribution. Cases of people being attacked by plants are extremely rare. However, cases of unexplained human disappearances are not so rare. While there are no documented cases of plants abducting humans, we cannot rule them out as suspects — it may only be a clever part of their disguise. Nevertheless, because the widespread extermination of house plants may be seen as a threat to superior alien life forms, we can only sit back helplessly, waiting for the next move from the alien power that has covered our world.

Taking A Closer Look

When you look at this campus, what do you see? When you sit down in class, how do you feel? On my arrival here at Loyola, it surprised me to see how friendly everyone was. I was also thrilled to see so many black people. The number is small, but at the same time I wasn't expecting to see more than twenty-five. I began to think, "Nairobi, you can like this. It's not bad at all."

After a week passed, things changed and my attitude changed. I can remember getting to my Psychology class late and finding a seat in the back of the class. I sat down, got out my materials and began to write. While I was listening to the professor and taking notes, I felt I was being watched. A pair of eyes were pulsating up and down my side. I could feel it! I ignored my feeling and continued writing, hoping that it would go away. The feeling lingered. As I looked to my right, she was sitting there still staring at me; her eyes burning a deep hole into my skin. When I looked at her, she refused to look the other way. I thought, "She has a lot of damn nerve!" I felt like a volcano ready to erupt inside. All my emotions raced to my mouth. I started to say, "What the fuck are you looking at!" but my mind reasoned with me and said that wouldn't be a polite thing to say. I gave her the same curiosity-filled gaze that she gave me. After she saw that I didn't appreciate her staring, she put on a fake smile for me. I rolled my eyes at her and tried to continue listening to the lecture, but it was impossible. I could no longer concentrate. All I could think about was what the hell was going on in her mind while she was looking at me. Was she trying to figure out why I was here? Where I was from or how I got my hair like that? Maybe it was best that I didn't know.

Often I get very upset about the way things are on this campus. I wonder why are there still colleges like Loyola who portray diversity in their catalogs when, in actuality, there is none. According to Loyola's Diversity Statement:

Loyola College values the benefits in diversity and is committed to creating a community which recognizes the inherent value and dignity of each person. As a community, the College actively promotes an awareness of and sensitivity toward differences of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, religion, age, and disabilities among students, faculty, administrators, and staff.

This is not true.

Loyola College has not promoted the interaction of students and thus has not encouraged them to appreciate the differences among themselves. It was not until last fall that the Office of Minority Student Services was established. While this office was established for minorities on this campus, it is open to the whole College community. This office welcomes any student who wants to know more about the concerns and cultures of ethnic minority students. The office hosts numerous social events, lectures, and other programs that emphasize cultural awareness to Loyola's College community (i.e. Diversity Series, Fiesta Celebration, etc.) How many students besides minority students take advantage of this office? The Diversity Statement goes on to say:

This commitment to diversity requires the creation of a community that fosters and advocates the understanding of the impact of differences on ourselves and our institutions. An essential feature of this community is an environment in which all students, faculty, administrators, and staff are able to work free from bias and harassment. Such an environment contributes to the growth and development of each member of the community.

How can this be?

On two occasions I have had a problem with our Campus Police. The first incident involved my grandfather. He came to bring me some things from home. He walked into Wynnewood, proceeded to the elevator and got off on the wrong floor trying to find my room. Campus Police was called because a "suspicious person" was lingering in the building. I was notified and had to come down to identify him. Now I ask, what makes my grandfather a "suspicious person" rather than another student's parent or relative? The second time, I had a male friend of mine visit me from Morgan State University. He parked his car, got out, and was immediately approached by four police officers. They proceeded to ask him questions as they followed him to my dorm. Sitting in the lobby of Wynnewood, I've observed how there is a distinction made between African-American and Caucasian guests. While Caucasian guests may come and go freely, African-American visitors are immediately put under surveillance. Minorities on this campus are in no way free from bias and harassment.

How can I grow and develop as a member of this community when I am slapped in the face by the fact that most of the service workers on this campus are African-American? Furthermore, there are very few minorities who hold faculty and administrative positions. There are only two minority professors (both are Asian American) compared to forty white professors. There are twelve minority administrators (eleven African-American and one Hispanic-American) compared

to one-hundred-and-twenty-five white administrators. What message is this sending me? What is this saying about Loyola College? This is reinforcing the racist idea that blacks are inferior to whites. The Diversity statement also claims that:

The acceptance and understanding of human differences are part of the College's heritage and are embodied in the Jesuit/Mercy ideals of personal concern for the humanity of others and service to those oppressed in any way by contemporary society. Consequently, all members of the College community are expected to participate in our diverse community in a manner consistent with the College's precept of strong truths well lived.

How can Loyola expect this?

Loyola College can not expect people to participate in this so-called diverse community when there are very limited resources available to the members of this community. There is a course in Gender Studies and Asian Studies, but not one in African-American Studies or Hispanic Studies. How many of Loyola's students are actually participating in these two courses? Segregation wasn't abolished until people were made to desegregate. This same rule applies for the implementations of diversity on this campus. The only way that this section of the Diversity Statement will hold true is if the administration implements a mandatory core course requirement that is geared towards diversity.

It is hard to live in America and not learn about European culture and white society. However, white society is not made to learn about other cultures. Therefore, there are times that I feel very uncomfortable and out of place. I doubt if this feeling will ever die. Many minorities that attend Loyola feel the same way. I feel that no one understands me. Even if I try to explain it, you could never "see" the real picture. Many of you are not a part of the minority, so you could never know how I feel or what I experience in my day to day life on or off Loyola's campus. In a place that I must call home for the next four years of my life, I do not feel at home. Home is supposed to be warm, inviting, comfortable and relaxing. Loyola does not provide a home environment for me.

In a pamphlet entitled, " Diversity at Loyola," the publisher says that in order for minority students to succeed and enjoy college, the campus must possess an environment that is comfortable and hospitable for them. The truth is that Loyola's campus climate is less hospitable and less comfortable for African-Americans than it is for others. Diversity on this campus would make minorities feel more "at home." Because there is little diversity here at Loyola, African-American students in particular feel more isolated than anything.

Many of us come from different backgrounds, and like myself may not have interacted with people of different races and cultures until now. Most of the students, faculty, and administration are not making use of this valuable resource. This valuable resource rests with minority students' various backgrounds and cultures. Also in the same pamphlet, data from the US Department of Labor suggests that by the year 2000 there will be more minorities holding leadership positions. More than half of Loyola's graduates of the Class of 1991 said that a Loyola education did not prepare them for living and working in a multicultural society.

As a minority student, I feel the concerns we have presented to the administration are significant. The irony of the whole situation is that Loyola is located in a predominately black city. When students venture off campus, they are faced with a diverse environment which they are not prepared for. This produces an uncomfortable situation for them. The opportunity to become culturally aware will help prepare students for America's changing workforce. More accurately, the way to do this is by Loyola's own motto — "Strong truths well lived."

Adornment of the Self

"You know, this is going to hurt a little more than your last one."

"Yeah," I said, "I know."

Mike wrapped the final rubber band around the barrel of the instrument and touched the foot pedal — starting the high-pitched whirling sound I was beginning to know well. I gave a start when I felt a cold squirt of rubbing alcohol on my back and smelled its pungent odor. "I was expecting the needle," I laughed nervously. I couldn't see him behind me -- but I heard his amused snort and felt my neck and ears burn as if someone was laughing at me. He gently rubbed the small of my back with a paper towel.

"You'll be OK," he said, "We'll take a smoke break whenever you need it. The pain only lasts a little while. It's worth it." I repeated his words like a mantra, "The pain — it's worth it." The pain is essential. The strong, proud, tattooed people - the ones who claim they felt no pain missed part of the experience. You can see it in their blank faces as others reveal the pain they felt while being tattooed. They scoff at pain and are proud of their tolerance, but are unable to identify with the relief and pleasure of a tender, freshly-completed tattoo. It feels like more of a conquest if palms sweat and muscles ache from tension. It becomes more of a prize to be won, instead of simply given.

I was amused to find that the words I used to calm myself were not unlike the traditional Polynesian chant which began with the origins of tattooing. Spiritual tattooists chanted:

*Short is the pain,
Short is the pain and long is the ornament,
Pain, pain,
Short is the pain and long is the ornament.*

In that culture, as in ours, tattooing represents a shedding of innocence. There is control and power that comes from changing one's skin. And the pain involved makes it as much a rite of passage today as it was for the Polynesians.

The tattooist, then, has played a spiritual role in the art. Why let this Mike-person drive needles into me until my skin is raw? Because even through the latex gloves, Mike's fingers felt soft and caressing on my skin; they seemed to speak to me, comfort me. He knows how to touch people.

The needle was making sounds again, and it seemed impatient. It had a life of its own, pulling Mike's hand down over my skin. The tension in my body

released a little after the first line. I relaxed, and strangely enough, trusted him as he tattooed my unsuspecting skin. The fine needle pricked the pigment into my skin again and again, turning my flesh into a raw, meaty canvas. The tingling, burning sensation, like a sharp pencil etching into my skin, began to wear away as I focused on my mantra. Wanting to seem brave, I tried not to show signs of pain, but still, I gave myself away. My sweaty palms gripped the chair I straddled and my leg jerked involuntarily, sending shivers from spine to scalp. I was annoyed that Mike noticed every jump of my body, every goose-bump that formed on my arms. As much as I tried to control the pain, Mike knew. It only took one flinch before he said, "Time for another smoke?" I'd agree - knowing he had caught me in my charade. The tattoo took about an hour of work, with about a half hour of smoke time interspersed. He's a fast artist.

During that hour, he tattooed, sprayed me with an alcohol solution, patted me down, and tattooed again. It became a rhythm -- pain and relief -- aggravation and pleasure. As soon as I thought I couldn't bear the needle in my back or the vibrations in my bones any longer, he cooled my sore skin again, relaxing my face and body. I cheered myself on for making it through another few minutes.

"Don't you love that?" A mammoth guy with plenty of tattoos had seen my tired grin, and understood my relief. "It's like S and M, the pain makes the pleasure incredible. I love it when Mike does that. Don't you just want him to wipe you down forever?"

"Yeah," I said laughing, relieved by the fleeting moment of rest.

"I'd get tattoos forever - as long as Mike would keep doing that patting, caressing thing he does." Mike rolled his eyes. The two guys were long-time friends, used to talking over the whirl of a tattoo gun. As Mike went to work on me again, they sparked up a conversation about the difference between sex and making love.

"You know, I think I've only really made love once."

"With?"

"Yeah, her. It was really wonderful. Totally different. But then again, it's kind of a pain in the ass. If you're just fucking someone, you don't have to worry about banging heads on the wall or any of that shit."

So there I sat, exposed, while the technical difficulties of making love were being explored.

"I need your butt towards me, push the skinny part, your rib cage forward arch your back more. Yeah, that's it. Right there." Mike's directions, in another context, would have infuriated me. His hands on my back, shaping my body into the correct posture would have unnerved me. But here his directions were appropriate. I listened to him as he talked of making love and beautiful women, and I realized that he would never hurt me. His jokes of rough-sounding sex could not mask his tenderness or respect for the body.

"You know, my dream is to find the perfect woman."

"And what?" said Mike's friend, "Makes her your personal canvas for the rest of your life?"

"Yeah — if she'd let me. My life's work on the body of a woman." Tattooing is sensual, sexy, bare. And Mike dances on the fine line between sensuality and sexuality as he unclothes and caresses bodies. But it isn't about sex. It's about beauty — and the human body. Knowing that, I had no reason to worry. He had no illicit intentions while touching my back or hips; I was not being used — only tattooed.

Halfway through the process, when the outline was done, I was allowed to go to the bathroom under one condition. "You're not allowed to look!" he said. I sauntered through the waiting room, pants half down, knowing my tattoo was on display. I smiled at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, knowing I could turn and see what had captivated those waiting out front. No. I didn't look. It killed me not to.

I was back, for round two — the color. I was getting tired and achy. My legs were tense, my fingers exhausted from gripping the chair. I leaned my head on my arms on the back of the chair.

"It's OK, girl. This won't take long. You're doing really good. I'm surprised." He started again — more rounds of pain and relief. I was tired of sitting still — and he knew it. My body had gone limp in the chair, and I no longer tried to hide the pain or boredom in my face. Those last few minutes, in an attempt to ignore the pain, I amused myself by calling my college roommate. "Hey!" I exclaimed to her answering machine, "Can you hear that? I'm getting a tattoo as I speak! I'll call back when Mike's done. You better be home to share this momentous occasion with me!" I was getting bored and frustrated — edging on irritable, when finally — in one glorious moment —

"You're done."

"I'm done! Really? It's over? Thank God." The tension in my body released in a sigh of relief. I crawled onto a couch -- smiling, yawning, eyes half closed. Mike slouched down, exhausted in his chair. I laid grinning at him as he eased his glasses off of his face and wiped his forehead with his dye-stained, gloved hand.

"God Damn," Mike's friend said, "It looks like the two of you just had the most intense sex of your life." We did look pleased, proud and relaxed, like a couple in repose after making love. It was the joke of the shop that day.

I hadn't planned on getting a new tattoo so soon. I had seen Mike's work the night before as I sat and waited for him to finish the flaming planet on my friend's rear. I was glad that she asked me to come. It is a privilege to take part in someone else's tattoo experience, to be trusted enough to witness naked skin, teeth grinding in discomfort, and the relief and pride afterwards. These layers of pain and relief form a bond between two people. I will always have a connection with every friend I've helped through the process. I know that years from now, when my friend looks at her flaming planet, she will remember me. She'll remember the stories I told to amuse her, the quick squeeze I gave her hand when

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Mike began, and the affirming smile when it was done. Her tattoo was brilliant and beautiful — a red globe half in shadow with a green ring and fiery orange flames. He even added shadows to the flames, making them appear to jump off her skin. That night I knew I'd be back the next day for him to perform some of his artistry on me. I grinned at the thought of another tattoo. I knew I'd break down someday, and get another one. I just didn't know exactly when until that night.

At eighteen, I promised myself only one. That momentous August day, two weeks before leaving my hometown for college, I walked into a shop for the first time and met my first tattooist — toothless, fuzzy-haired and sweet. My heart was pounding loudly as I appeared to calmly flip through a portfolio, deciding the details with him. I felt a sense of satisfaction, and couldn't wipe the smirk off my face. My good-girl exterior, complete with pale blue eyes and a cheeky smile, made the idea of a tattoo even more alluring. Perhaps I did it for the shock value — for myself as well as for all I chose to show it to. But I also like the feeling of control I had over my body. For the first time, I felt like it was mine. This was something that no one would ever be able to take away from me. I now had my own art work -- my own little exclamation of my personality. I felt content with the little sun on my hip. But as I walked out the door that afternoon, much to my horror, I thought, "I could do that again."

Tattoos become a craving — a desire for beauty, It's like the excitement of a child who produces a first beautiful finger painting, or like a runner who just beat a record time. It's a high - a desire for bigger, better, more beautiful. I had been lured. I had returned. I wanted more, and Mike could give it to me.

I studied him when I arrived, this twenty year old kid who was to *tattoo* me. Above his thick-lensed glasses, each of his temples was punctuated by a green star that peeked from his green hair. The fingers that were going to tattoo me each had a letter on the space between his knuckles that spelled out the word "LOVE." The other hand read "HATE." Creeping up his neck from a zip-front jacket that a local mechanic would wear, a purple lily flower bloomed. The other side of his neck had something — but I couldn't quite decipher what it was. His skin was fascinating. I had a hard time looking him in the eye -- I wanted to let my gaze roam over the designs on his skin. His arms and legs were covered. A flaming roll of toilet paper decorated Mike's calf. (I later learned that he was particularly fond of flaming tattoos.) And on another occasion, I saw even more. I showed him a design and made the snide comment, "Hey, Mike. This is what I want next. A huge crucified Jesus emblazoned on my boob."

"I have that! Look!" He flipped up his shirt in excitement. Sure enough, Jesus stared at me from between his pierced nipples. I was glad he had a sense of humor about his tattoos, and was pleased by my horror.

He studied me while flipping through his designs. He looked at my face, my body, and listened to the things I said. He shuffled through a pile of designs until he found what he was looking for and said, "This."

Mike's eyes lit up. There was a creative energy, an excitement as he shyly showed me a design that was roughly an upside down triangular shape, with wild, intertwining vines branching out into leaves. He said it was a gothic ornamental motif. It would be purple and magenta, with varied line widths and shadowing to give it depth. He was wondering if he had chosen well. He looked at me again, and then down to the paper. Mike wanted to do this. He wanted to recreate this beautiful design on someone. He wanted it to be me.

"This is really pretty," he said, "Right there on the small of your back."

"Yeah," I said, lifting my shirt to show the unblemished stretch of skin.

"Right here."

I didn't come prepared to pay for such an extensive tattoo. Fingering the few bills in my pocket, I told him I didn't have the cash for it.

"Well, how much do you got?" I was able to unearth almost seventy — knowing *it* was about half of what I needed.

"I could run to the ATM machine."

"No, what's that? Seventy? Yeah, I'll do it for seventy. Don't worry about it."

"Really?"

"Really. Come on. This is going to look great. I'm going out to have a smoke. Take this design and think about it. I'll be back in a few minutes." I didn't need to think about it, his excitement had won me over already.

Mike has perfect interpersonal skills. Even the most scared and timid of people have never left mid-tattoo, no matter how much it was hurting them. "Usually, I can tell when people really want them. And if they do — I can get them to stay through the whole thing." He makes his clientele feel comfortable and in control. He says it's his job to do what they want -- it's their body. It also appears that Mike takes it upon himself to make people really love their tattoos. Choosing the perfect tattoo on the perfect part of the body is a big decision. Mike knows this, and helps his clients make confident decisions. Mike's tattoos are pieces of art that speak to their owners. It becomes an inspiration or a trademark, a sign to the world, calling attention to itself -- and the person it adorns.

Tattoos are a personal statement — something that says "This is what I'm all about" — a sensual and organic insignia. Throughout history, they have also represented the honor of belonging to a group, the devotion to a deity, and the pride and bravery of a warrior. In our Western culture, subcultures have used tattoos to prove their separateness and uniqueness from the mainstream population. And more recently, the mainstream has caught on and marketed the tattooed look. Now, tattoos have become a phase — a fun and typical rite of passage for many young people. The message and meaning has certainly changed over time. And perhaps tattooing as an artform has lost some of its power and beauty to Tasmanian Devils and cheesy suns. Retaining that beauty is precious.

Once, Mike was tattooing a young woman he found very beautiful.

"This," motioning to the exotic fish design that was emerging on her back, "is

really sexy." She squirmed a bit, waiting for the come-on line that she felt was soon to follow. "So, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Uh, no."

"Do you want one?"

"Maybe — If I found one worth having." Her face cringed, as if the pressure of his hand on her back felt intrusive. She said later that she was waiting for him to pounce. But he never did.

"Well," Mike said, "You'll get a boyfriend with this. You wait." She turned her head to look at him and see him point out the two guys on the other side of the room eyeing her up. He had never meant to make her uncomfortable. He was merely stating a fact — her tattoo would get her attention and men -- if she wanted them. Mike knew tattoos can be an alluring sign -- an artwork yearning to be touched.

The idea of ink on a body is not necessarily beautiful to all people. And in the same way beauty marks can be moles — tattoos can be scars. It is unnatural. It is mutilation of the body. And no matter how we try to change stereotypes, it represents a subculture that many are not comfortable with. Visions of social misfits — White Supremacists, deviant punks, drunk men on Harleys, etc. dance in the heads of the misinformed. But these days, tattoos adorn models, college students and news anchorpersons. The art has cleaned up its act -- it is attracting a wide variety of people. But still, it can be seen as a strange deviation -- something to avoid — but only if it is noticed.

The checker at the 7-11 with a tattooed hand provokes shock and horror as she reaches for a customer's money. The man adorned with a gargoyle on his arm earns stares in grocery stores. Tattoos, especially ones that are visible, can produce some shock-value. A young woman with a floral band around her ankle regrets it, because she says that anyone over thirty gives her disapproving "you should be ashamed of yourself" looks. She feels hurt and annoyed that she is the subject of stereotypes because her tattoo is visible. She is self-conscious when she goes to job interviews, because even though no one says anything, she feels their stares. She has resigned herself to wearing pants to interviews now. And socks have become more of a staple of her wardrobe. She has put her tattoo into hiding—hoping it won't peek out and make her lose her job.

But to some, there is something seductive about a hint of color, a bit of design, that makes viewers crave more. There is something unexpected about a burst of orange or red on the skin. Why do women wear cosmetics? Why do we shave our bodies and wear beautiful clothing? Beautification has nothing to do with function. Perfume's function is not life-giving, but nose tickling. A hint of a scent leaves you wondering -- and searching. We enhance our beauty -- to allure, to tempt. They celebrate the body, put the sensuality of the wearer on display. A tattoo does the same thing. It sparks interest and fascination with the body -- and a desire to know more. The body itself is mysterious and enigmatic —a strange tension of hiding and revealing. Humans are sensual creatures, and a bit of adorned

skin adds to the beauty of the body, something new to discover, especially if it is in a place that is only seen by a select few. It becomes a secretive prize, a piece of art that you can't quite make out, a hint of more to come. Mike's beautiful client with the fish on her back found this to be true. She visited him a few months after her tattoo had healed.

"You know what? You were right. A guy I met admitted to me that he had been staring at the tiny piece of my tattoo that he could see peeking from my shirt for an entire month. He was dying to see the rest -- so he approached me. We're dating now." Mike grinned. His prophecy had come true. Once again, Mike had said exactly what his client wanted to hear — to calm fears and let her love her tattoo. He creates a bond with the people he works on. A trust forms between them. After all, Mike has seen and touched all sorts of bodies. Nothing phases him anymore. And he is comfortable with people and their bodies, so he exudes a relaxed and calming nature. He is good at calming fears and making others feel comfortable. Some tattooists are cool and business-like, giving each client a rehearsed speech about the sterilization process and latex gloves. Generally, if it's a well known establishment that has been in business for a while, the tattooist wears fresh gloves, and the needle is unwrapped in the client's presence. It's safe. All a shop needs is one person to have an AIDS scare, and it's all over.

A woman whose mother worked for the Red Cross drawing blood came in for her first tattoo. She had had a lecture on the dangers of unclean tattoos. Visions of AIDS and hepatitis had escalated into a real fear.

"So," she said, "all your stuff is sterilized, right?"

"No, actually, I pissed on all of them before you came," he said with a wry grin as he unwrapped the needle from its sterilized packaging. The tension vanished, he had sensed that it was the perfect response to this client. Mike seems to have a few key things going for him: true talent, a passion for his work, and the ability to put people at ease.

He's looked up to at his shop. The artists he works with tug at their shirts to show off Mike's work, and explain how it is much better than work by other tattooists. The difference is noticeable. The fuzzy edges and bleeding colors of other tattoos are not found in his. Mike pointed to a scraggly looking dagger on someone's arm. "That looks so bad because the guy didn't know how to tattoo." Mike rolled his eyes as if he was wondering why someone who was so bad even bothered. I asked him what made the difference between a good tattoo and a bad tattoo — what was the technique?

"Me," he replied.

Bad work of other artists are a problem for Mike. He'll redo them if his client wants him to, but it isn't his work, his creation. Normally, he'll try to talk people into getting an entirely new one. Much of Mike's work is talking. What makes South Street Tattoo so comforting is that there is no scary back room, no luring in, only conversation about what the client wants. It wasn't always that way. Only last year, it was the stereotypical hole-in-the-wall with faded and peel-

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ing stickers flaking off of the walls. The place attracted some pain in the ass clients according to Mike. Most of them were large, drunk, biker men — who Mike shrugs off and doesn't like to talk about. But in recent days, South Street Tattoo has cleaned up its act and attracted a younger, more manageable clientele.

A twenty year old college student walked in one Saturday. He had just passed through the graffitied front door, the black gate that is pushed back during the day, and walked down the hall to the main room. The walls of the shop are covered in designs behind glass cases. The designs range from naked sailor women, and Harley bikes to cartoon characters and flowers. There are also suns, tribal designs and Chinese lettering in sections across the room. Many of these designs have been up for a few months, and prove to be a bit routine for Mike. As the college student looked at a sun and moon design, Mike noted, "That's old stuff. I did suns like that years ago."

The window sills are lined with half dead cacti, sculptures of Buddha, and African-looking animals. A black display case holds some Gothic and skeleton-type work. Looking around the room, the client may come across notices such as, "You know how old you are, we don't. If you are under 18, you are subject to prosecution," and a faded yellow sign states "We only use sterilized needles!" The shop has just been redone. With the new paint job and glass cases, it has become more accessible to the mainstream population.

"Shit, it looks like a fucking hospital in here," Mike commented one day as he proudly displayed the freshly painted new shelf he had just built. You could see the pride in him — he knew he had helped revitalize the shop. Now, instead of stickers, all that is on the walls above the glass cases is one black velvet painting of Elvira with a "Daddy's Girl" tattoo on her breast (which particularly amused this new client), a deer head with a "Manager" sign beneath it, and a Norman Rockwell painting of a tattooist.

The new client, clutching the sketch of the tattoo he wanted, began to relax as Mike discussed the design.

"Yeah, I can do that for ya," Mike said after a split second's glance. This is a good sign. That means it's a design Mike would like to do. When Mike hates something, he pulls in the left hand corner of his mouth, or raises an eyebrow as in doubtful contemplation, meaning, "How can I do this so it doesn't look like shit?" The new client seemed to be in luck. "The only problem is — there's no way I can do it today."

The client's face fell.

"I need a couple 'a days to redraw this on transfer paper. I don't have time today. Tell you what. Give me that sketch and your number. It should only take me a day or two, and then you can come on in. I just need a drawing deposit. OK?"

"So how much are we talking?"

"I can go down to about two. That's as good as I can do." Mike's price of two hundred dollars was reasonable. The sketch was a collage of three draw-

ings from a tarot card book -- a Hermit carrying an intricate lantern, nestled between a devil mask and a sun. This will cover the guy's entire shoulder and part of his upper back.

Mike looked at the design again. "Now what do you want me to do with this sun?"

"I'm trying to decide whether or not I want a face in it."

"I think a face would be good. What if I did it in the same style as the devil?"

"Yeah, that duality thing." Mike scrawled the number on the back of the sketch and promised to call soon. The client didn't seem to notice that Mike never bothered to collect the drawing deposit. He's trusting, and the money seems to be an extraneous part of the tattoo business for Mike.

As the college kid left he commented, "You know, Mike's really nice. I expected to walk in there and have people take one look at me and say "What do you want with a tattoo — like I wasn't cool enough or something. But it wasn't like that. Mike made me feel really comfortable."

This is a common reaction to Mike. The sight of him, and the crucified Jesus tattoo peaking from his shirt provokes some fear at first, but after the first few words of a conversation, most people are more than willing to give Mike complete artistic license. His thoughtfulness and candidness make him absolutely trustworthy. And his desire to make his clients' bodies beautiful can be seen in his unconcerned attitude about the cost. Rarely does he accept tips. He enjoys his work too much.

One woman demanded certain colors for her new tattoo. Knowing that the yellow would not look good on her skin, he quite confidently said, "I get to do that." It is important for Mike to be able to put himself in his work — even if it means just choosing the colors. Mike, at times, seems almost too involved in tattooing. At parties, and on weekends when he is not working, he is sketching on any willing arm, leg, or back. He always seems to have some sort of work in progress — some drawing to become a tattoo, or sketch to be added to an already existing one.

He keeps telling me that the work on the small of my back should wrap around my waist like a belt. On that point, we disagree, I keep reminding him that I want to have children. And he keeps remembering "Oh, yeah. That would look like shit when you got all fat with a kid." For now, I'm sticking with tattoos that have the least chance of gravitating, pulling or stretching. Mike, however, keeps showing me designs. I'm holding out, savoring the way my back looks in purple and magenta, and looking for the perfect color bathing suit to complement it.

Maternal Instincts

I have decided that she will be a girl. I now must give her a name, one whose syllables echo the very elements of her as-yet-uncreated soul. *The 100 Best Names for Your Baby* proves to be a worthy resource. I slowly write each of my favorites in pencil, savoring the curve of each letter. Jane. Maria. Melinda. Carrie. What does each name say to me? Jane: mousy and plain. Maria: elegant and noble. Melinda: popular and playful. Carrie: innocent and sweet. Which one best defines a girl with red hair?

This is what I know thus far, that she will have red hair. I write the words in exaggerated script over and over, gleaning a mental picture of my baby, my heart's dream with her red, red hair. I can't just call it "red hair," though. I imagine it more as cascading waves of flame and sheen, framing her pale porcelain face, her emerald eyes. A portrait of exquisite beauty and grace is being painted; I see her tresses of fire trailing down her back in braids woven with flowers, and her dress, flowing velvet trimmed with lace, blowing in a gentle forest breeze. I have only now considered the possibility of placing her in a medieval setting, as a princess of course — or at the very least a duchess, nothing less for this girl who is already as much a part of my veins as my own blood. I see her braving danger in shadowy woods and multi-turreted castles, but there will be no dragons because they are so overwhelmingly familiar to the typical fantasy reader. Of course, if the girl is medieval I will have to change her name yet again. Miranda, perhaps. Sensible yet romantic.

She must have romance. I need to see how she will react to her first brush with attraction and confusion, and experience both pleasure and pain from the depths of her emotions. It's a growth process, and a challenge. Her capacity for romance shouldn't be affected by a fifteenth-century motif; two characters from days past can unite just as easily as present-tense barflies, perhaps with an ounce more charm. However, love will not dull the spark of independence that I have been consistently lighting since her conception. Love will keep her eyes wild, her temper quick, and her values consistent and fairly modern; there's nothing so appealing as a semi-feminist medieval princess with ethereal red hair. I want the unlikely couple to take a journey through perilous lands, strangers to themselves and to each other, only to find that it's up to the two of them to keep each other alive through the danger of natural wonders like quicksand, deserts, and waterfalls. Something like love should blossom from this forced dependency, but it is a requirement that the redhead should rescue her male companion as many times as he might rescue her.

In my creative trance, I notice a trend towards attitudes and morals more suitable for contemporary times than for fairylands and chivalry, so I toy with the idea of bringing the girl full force into the trials of the twentieth century. She can keep her long red hair; heaven knows there are enough young, modern women around with hair past their shoulders. I want so much to give her face the sort of heart-stopping beauty that will ensure her a plethora of admirers, but I feel the need to concede to realistic conventions and steer her towards the realm of "cute" or possibly "pretty." She needs to experience the beautiful complexities of today's youth that are not unlike the poetry of dank-smelling dungeons and evil sorcerers. I want her to feel it all, the blushes of a first crush, the scarred tissue of lost love, the bewilderment of absentee parents. Everything hard, painful and real about this world must constitute a substantial part of her young life. I refuse to let her coast.

I am only a writer, and she is only a product of my pen and my cluttered head, yet it is not impossible for me to picture her standing beside me, looking at me with the resentment that a rebellious daughter feels towards her strict and obstinate mother and asking me, with a plea in her voice and eyes, "Why all the pain?" I wish I could explain to her the necessity of plot twists and stimulating dialogue, that as a writer I cannot be the sort of mother bird who shields her chicks beneath her wings. As a writer I have given her life, but the power is also within me to destroy it. In that way, I suppose, she is becoming more than just words and quotations. She is my daughter, and raising her is my unexpected and confusing responsibility.

I was never the nurtured sort. Most little girls around the age of six cuddle their dolls and feed them from plastic bottles and rock them to sleep in wooden cradles their fathers carved for them. Most little girls who have been fortunate enough to experience the unnatural wonders of a Barbie doll have spent endless hours primping her and combing her stiff yellow hair until the roots weakened. My Barbie, however, was an artistic find for me, with those vacant, glassy blue eyes that simply begged for animation. I rejected the idea of a stage mama who raised her Barbie to waste her life in the ennui of the fashion world. No, my Barbie was destined for greatness. At an early age I had her plowing through jungles represented by overgrown grass, surviving near-drownings in the murky swamp waters left behind by a recent rainfall, and bouncing back from harrowing plunges off the top of the stairs. At that time, Ken always saved her. I was only six, and still traditional in my convictions.

From these episodes, a master storyteller had her origins. I was ruthless in the power that I exercised over this defenseless doll and her fate. Poor Barbie, who asked for nothing more than a clean life filled with pretty clothes and prettier men, found herself cast as the Jungle Queen, muddied and soiled and dangled over cliffs or railings. When the plot saw fit I would take scissors to her starched hair and chop it off. In parenting my Barbie, I became intoxicated with the power

of the imagination, and the way I could apply this power to other aspects of nature: a rock, an anthill or a squirrel. I became a sorceress of the most dangerous kind, the ultimate Mother Earth, twisting the fates of the creatures within my domain with a pencil as my wand. A squirrel in a tree sprouted its hidden wings and flew to the rescue of the chipmunk in the next tree. An ant carrying crumbs to its primitive home develops a voice, an attitude, and quite possibly superhuman strength. Should a child have this godlike rule over lesser subjects, and alter lives with only twenty-six letters at her disposal? I was giddy with power.

Writing is all about power. Letters are delicious as they form eyes, noses and tears. I love to describe physical attributes in explicit and precise detail: heart-shaped faces, china-doll skin, chocolate brown eyes, curling eyelashes. What talents God did not give me with crayons, paint and clay He gave me with words instead, with loose-leaf paper as my easel, and my mind as the palette. Creation is a manipulative process; writers have a chance to play Pygmalion and build our Galateas into lovely and accomplished ladies, and with one stroke chip at their ivory frames and leave them stranded in gutters. The ambiguity of creation is frightening — that we as creators can make a life so full of wonder and joy and in the same vein fill it with death and pain. A writer approaches her characters like a mother approaches her newborn: both have been handed an unformed soul whose development and nourishment depends on them, and they have the ability to succeed or fail in raising a well-rounded, stable human being.

Very often, writers' characters become their children. It is the writers' job to provide them nourishment and to be responsible for their survival, and writers cannot escape the compulsion to shelter these, their babies, the products of their flesh and sweat, from the pain and evil that populate reality. Yet in the same vein, realism is a goal at which so many writers aim; they want, with their prose, to present this scene from life with which the reading audience will identify and sympathize. Writers also want their characters to be loved — as much by the public as they are by their creators. A writer takes her main character, a silent and passive girl in ragged clothes and tangled hair, and grooms her into a neat and polished young lady with an adamant, unique voice and a thoroughly individual manner, then sets this new and improved person upon the world to divide and conquer it. More often than not, this is not a fantasy world with fairies and unicorns and happy endings. The road a writer paves is harsh and filled with bumps and detours and the occasional brush with physical and emotional scars. It is the writer's duty to send her character, whom she has been nourished and pampered and sheltered, out into this strange land to react to it, hurt from it, and learn from it. It's called plot.

Herein lies the wonder of fiction writing: the plot. Real-life parents can't take a crystal ball and view the twists and turns of their precious offsprings' sordid life. As a writer, I can take situations that may be as mundane as two strangers sitting in a classroom and alter the scene so that my wonderful heroine derives excitement and interest from it and also keeps the readers enthralled with

both her and the story. Take example A: seemingly unattainable boy flashes a quick smile at shy yet attractive girl during class. It could be reality and end right there -- the sad girl goes home crying to mama who agonizes that she can't kiss the wound and make it better. But I have the ultimate bandage, and I can formulate at least three potential storylines from this scenario. Number One: girl voices her unrequited love for boy in a lengthy first-person narration filled with poetic descriptions of tears and hearts shredding to pieces and relevant song lyrics and her voice is sympathetic and quirky enough to make her a fictional idol to teenaged girls afflicted with a similar disease. Number Two: boy and girl fall in love even though the rest of the school is appalled at this defiance of social standards, and the use of the third person allows room for the expression of both viewpoints as they experience the highs and lows of young love and they are beloved by teenagers everywhere who are experiencing the same things. Number Three: boy becomes unhealthily obsessed with girl and stalks her incessantly, and vandalizes her locker and pens mash notes in scrawly, illegible handwriting that lets you know he's truly psycho, and eventually the whole ordeal culminates in a rooftop confrontation of some sort, and through it all the girl displays her brilliance and resilience and teenagers love it because it bears absolutely no resemblance to their lives whatsoever. This is the control that I enjoy as a writer.

At times I need to resist the urge to control. I tend to smother my heroines with my dictator's attitude; the character, like the child, needs room to breathe. A character is not just a conglomeration of consonants and vowels, just as a child is not simply a mixture of cells and Y chromosomes. Both can grow. Both can think. I once read an account by a contemporary author of her development of a main character in the form of a sullen, dark-haired little girl. All of a sudden, the character is transformed: she bounces into the next scene sparkly and happy with blond curls, and there she stayed. No doubt I want to use my power over these people who began as voices in my head, begging me to tell their fascinating and provocative life stories. I want to tell them how to look, what to be named, who to love, who to hate. But their voices are persistent, and their desires are frank. They don't always need my guidance; they want to fly solo and let their destinies work out as they will. It's hard to concede, to let go of this life that I have molded from the barest clay and that has benefitted from my infinite wisdom and experience. But it's a fact of life that this small immaterial hand must someday drop from mine.

So for now, the girl with the red hair is mine, completely mine. None like her are found in the confines of reality. She is my daughter, conceived with letters and given breath by visions. She needs me to fill her life with joy and sorrow, and to guide and to nurture, and as part of the deal I will try to resist the sweetly tempting pull of plot twists. I promise not to send her through swamps or hurl her off cliffs or touch a single fiery strand on that head. I will try to do as she likes. Writing, like mothering, is about sacrifice.

Elegy

*Yes, when the stars glisten 'd,
All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
Down almost amid the slapping waves,
Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.*

- Walt Whitman

The road before us seems to stretch into the sunset's horizon. Nothing can stop us, not even the Grim Reaper; we think we are more powerful than he. We drive through life, blind to his presence behind every signpost. We believe that he will make himself known in advance; he won't surprise us — we'll be expecting him. We are wrong.

It is impossible to know when someone will die. Sometimes we have a clue: "Cancer, six months to live." But the calculations of a doctor are rarely exact. You can't go to the calendar and fill in the box so that when you flip to the correct month, you see it, pencilled in. "Jeannie will be dying on April 17th. I'd better buy a new dress for the funeral." That's not the way Death operates.

I've been waiting for the death of my grandfather for over a year now. He hasn't been doing particularly well and so I've been "preparing" myself. I know that he won't be doing his crossword puzzles for much longer, won't be around for the annual family picnic next summer, won't be at my graduation. But no matter how much I ready myself for his death, I know now that it will come upon me suddenly, that I will be caught unaware. There is no special day on the calendar that says, "Today's the day Grandfather will die." Death jumps out just when we're not expecting him, shocking us and forcing us to look at our own mortality. Despite all of our technology and scientific advances, we cannot control Death. We can create human life in a test tube, split atoms, send a telescope into space to see beyond our solar system, but Death will not be mastered. He is out of our reach. No matter how much we prepare ourselves for his arrival, he always messes up the time table; he comes too early or too late -- never on time.

This past summer, my Aunt Regina and cousin Liz came to visit. The night before they left, Liz and I drove into Princeton to get some ice cream. We sat beside the fountain outside the university library, talking about how scared she was to be moving from Texas to California. I remember her saying how much she missed her dad: she hadn't seen him in a couple of months because he had moved to California ahead of the rest of the family.

It was a balmy night in the middle of a heat wave, but there was still a crowd of people walking the streets of the city like they do every night in Princeton, full of happiness, not knowing that Death is hiding behind the statue on Palmer Square, in the parking lot behind PJ's Pancake House, waiting for the moment in your life when you least expect him to arrive. The next day, Liz and her mom hopped on a plane. That afternoon, they were reunited with Uncle Ed in their new home in San Francisco, finally back together as a family.

The phone call came at 10:30 in the morning the following week, and I saw my mother's face grow pale and I heard her moan "Oh my God."

And death is on the air like a smell of ashes!

Ah! Can't you smell it?

-D.H. Lawrence

My first thought was "Grandpa has finally gone," and my heart broke; before my mother said a word to me, a torrent of tears fell, stinging my eyes, and a dull pain pierced my stomach. It hurt more than I could have possibly imagined. All the months that I had spent preparing for his death were reduced to rubble, and I knew that Death would always win the battle -- would always be able to shock us.

And then Mom mouthed the words "Uncle Ed is dead."

The words did not make sense. My grandfather was not dead, but my fifty-four year old uncle was. I had spoken to him on the phone only a week earlier. And now he was dead. There had been no warning.

In the minutes after Mom said, "Uncle Ed is dead," the realization overwhelmed me. Alpha and Omega. Everything that begins must end some day. The only problem is that you never know when the Omega will come. Some day, even I will stop. And the scary thing is that there will be no flashing light on the dashboard to warn me that my engine is about to die. I wish there were, so we could get a bit of a warning when our time is almost up. Then, Liz and I wouldn't have sat on the hard concrete that encircles the Princeton fountain, eating soupy chocolate ice cream on a hot, sticky night. We would have been in an apartment in San Francisco with Uncle Ed, preparing both him and ourselves for his death. He would have died surrounded by his wife, children, mother, siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews, all the people who loved him. And when he lay cold upon the couch, it would not have been a shock for anyone. Aunt Regina would not have tried to wake him up, would not have screamed to Liz, "Call 9-1-1!" She would have known that his time was up, he could travel no further. She would have sat up with him that night, perhaps holding him in her arms as the life ebbed out of his body and Liz would have been able to say "Good-bye" to him; we all would have. But that's not how Death operates. He likes to surprise us. He revels in watching us prepare for the death of a sickly grandfather who had surpassed the seventy years the Bible allots for each of us. He likes to see us shocked by the death of a middle-aged man with a daughter who is still in high school, a man who will never see his children get married, will never have a small child climb

upon his knee and call him "Grampa." Death pulls person away from us before the chance for one last kiss, one last "I love you."

The fact of the matter is that humans do not come equipped with early warning lights. When the body cannot go any farther, it comes to a stop and that's the end of the road. And the only thing the living can do is stop for a moment and reflect. I did that myself the day after Uncle Ed's death. I could have stayed home and mourned with my parents, but the house was too oppressive, too restrictive. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

So I drove out to the Millstone River, parked the car and walked along the bank. The ground was muddy and I was wearing new shoes, but I didn't care. Everything seemed pointless to me. My cousin, whom I had sat with just a few miles from that very spot, whom I had listened to as she talked about how hard the separation from her father had been, now, suddenly, was fatherless. The separation she had known before had had a definite date for beginning and ending. It was pencilled in on the calendar. But nothing could have warned her about the long separation she must now experience, to not know when it would end, when she and her father could be reunited, if they would be reunited.

I tossed small pebbles into the water and watched slow ripples form below me. Upon hitting the surface, the stones made a sound and sank into the riverbed, as leaves and bird feathers floated from beneath the tree canopy. All was silent, except for the flowing water and the plop! plop! of the stone. I was completely alone out there by the river; it was mid-morning, too late for serious fishermen, too early for kids to be swimming. I sat on a large boulder that jutted out over the river and reflected on my parents' reactions to Uncle Ed's death. My mother was ridding the house of all fatty foods, declaring that she was putting my father on a diet that day. She didn't want to lose him like her sister-in-law had lost her husband. My mother wanted to hold my father where he was, deny Death his share. My father's reaction was different. He had grown up in the same neighborhood as Uncle Ed and was taking it pretty badly. They were only a few years apart; Uncle Ed had been his basketball coach when my father was a kid. He was struck by the thought that someone so young could go so quickly. He kept telling us stories about Uncle Ed, "Pretzels Dolan" as everyone called him in Downtown Jersey City back in the '60's, before he and Aunt Regina moved out West. And I thought about California. Were Liz and Aunt Regina still sleeping? Had they been able to even get any sleep? And where was Uncle Ed? I knew where his remains were - the city morgue. But where was his soul, his spirit? Or was that it? Did your soul dissolve when your heart stopped beating?

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit World at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -*
—Emily Dickinson

All that is left is for the survivors to throw some dirt on the coffin and place a granite stone over your head marking out where your body lies with all the other soul-less bodies.

*For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife to ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.*

—Thomas Gray

I heard a bird whistling in the trees that lined the river banks. It wasn't a very pretty song, just a simple "tweet-tweet," like that of my parakeets at home. It startled me. I had grown accustomed to the silence of the running water and plop! plop! of the stones, and now suddenly a bird was breaking that peace and serenity with an ugly song. If it had been beautiful, perhaps I would have appreciated it. But I didn't. I was angry. I tried throwing a rock at it to make it stop, but I couldn't find it. It was hidden in the thick canopy of summer leaves over my head, mocking me with its hideous composition — "Tweet-tweet, tweet-tweet."

My quiet contemplation was disrupted. I tried to ignore the sounds of the bird, but it was impossible. I could not return to my thoughts. The only thing left for me to do was get back into my car and continue down the highway. But the sound of the bird followed me. I knew that Death would always sneak out onto the road when I least expected him, when I'd been sitting back with the cruise control set at sixty-five, not expecting any road blocks ahead. Because no matter how much we try to prepare for Death's arrival, he will still catch us unaware.

That bird kept on singing. I think it must have been following me because I couldn't get its song out of my ears. It would not let me forget that Death was watching me, waiting for me to find a moment's peace so that he could harass me once again.

The tormenting taunt resonated in my ears, but it became more and more faint the further I travelled from the river.

Silent No More

*Sometimes I hear my voice...I hear my voice...I hear my voice and it's been
HERE.*

Silent all these years

-Tori Amos, Silent All These Years

My mother tells me that I learned to speak before any of her friends' children did. Since my grade school days, I've been working my way up to a scream.

Being who and how I am, it's a miracle that I don't yell with all of my energy for a good part of every day. I'm brilliantly controlled, the good little girl, the proper young lady, legs crossed, the pressure building. I murdered my rosy cheeked innocence a long time ago. Its remains are buried somewhere in the basement of Barbie's dream house.

It started in the fourth grade. My teacher, Mr. Roundtree, was a scary, reject, buzz-cut type who dominated the halls of my elementary school for longer than I had been alive. He got a sick enjoyment out of playing mind games with his female students. We would come back from recess to find our Cabbage Patch Kids, our babies, hanging from hooks in the ceiling. He devastated us. Despite his cruelty, he did praise his good students, and I was one of them. He told me I could write well, even held me up as an example to the class. "Look," he would proclaim to all. "Elizabeth wrote a rough draft of her letter to her pen pal, and she doesn't have to do it over again, because it's perfect." I responded with the proper amount of modesty, but inside I was thrilled. I was a good speller. I had good sentence structure. I was a fourth grade success.

It was fun while it lasted. His cruel and unusual side resurfaced soon enough. I remember waiting patiently outside of his classroom as he enlightened my mother about my good points and bad points during a parent-teacher conference. I stood patiently up from my plastic chair in the hallway as I heard their voices come closer to the classroom door. My mother was smiling, of course. I was a damn good student and knew it, but I still felt nervous. Being so defined by insecurities about everything in my pre-adolescent world, what Mr Roundtree thought of my spelling tests and reading ability meant a lot. As they came into view, their attention turned to me immediately, the self-conscious sprite staring at her reflection in the waxed linoleum, his shadow overcrowding mine on the

floor. I peered up, Jacqueline looking up the beanstalk at the giant. "I told her that you're a pretty good kid," he said. My mother dropped her copy of my quarterly report on the floor. Being the Dutiful daughter, I leant to pick it up. I can see what followed clearly now, as if it takes place in present tense. The devastator smacks me on the ass, hard, and laughs. My mother is dumbfounded, doesn't know what to say. I feel the heat spread across my face. Pretend that didn't happen, I think. Nine years old and already covering up male improprieties, learning to internalize. We turn and leave. I'm rubbing my butt through a corduroy skirt. I think my mother is holding back an eruption. I ask her what he said about my math test, ask about anything but what just happened. I dream about those halls for years after graduation, wincing, looking down, changing the subject.

Years later, I analyze this again, yelling at shows on television discussing the rise of sexual harassment in schools, realizing that my passion surrounding this issue has a personal source. I find out that my parents decided to let it go, figuring that it was just something playful, though obviously wrong. They tell me that they asked me if he had ever touched me any other times, and that I had said that he hadn't. I shudder thinking about how he would choose one girl a week to leave school with him (a direct violation of school policy) to buy ice cream for the class. We'd all been alone with him in his station wagon, little girls who could easily forget if he liked them a little too much. The principal thought it was cute, fatherly. I think about how nothing happened to me sexually. But after *The Smack*, I barely raised my hand in class again. The perfect writer's expression had been knocked out of me. One day I was the best in the class, the next a painfully quiet child. He still talks to me, back there in my subconscious. *You're talented. But you're my plaything. I'll always laugh at you.*

Now, in my Psychology of Women class, I learn of studies done by people like Sadker and Gilligan that tell me things I already know. Adolescence is hard, particularly for girls, who grow more and more obsessed with pleasing. Rather than joining the boys in their rambunctious play, girls like me sat around psychoanalyzing each other, talking about how the boys were so weird. We secretly longed to roughhouse with them, but were beginning to understand that we weren't supposed to do that, and found that having a lot of friends was the mark of a successful girl. "Are you okay?" we'd ask each other again and again, our mantra defined. The nice girls, Punky Brewster pigtails intact, had become quieter, scarred internally. And teachers weren't helping. In fifth grade, I had a female teacher who was well-meaning enough. All I remember now was her praising how neat my handwriting was, how well-behaved I was. "A pleasure to have in class," but I was not a pleasure to have in my mind. The boys stared at the girls who were developing faster. I thanked God for being a little bit behind. Boys didn't notice me anyway, other than to ridicule the way I threw a ball in gym class. But I hated what they did to the first girl in a training bra. She could have been me. Through the years, I hold on to this. I wasn't gang raped at a fraternity party, but I could have been. I wasn't labelled a dyke, but I could have been. I didn't try to get into

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the Citadel, but I could have wanted to. My anger was growing, and no one seemed to understand.

Eventually, the things that did happen to me started to mount. High school was an everyday battle. Female friends fell apart on me, cried over boys and small breasts and told rumors about each other to glorify themselves. "She fawns all over him," I'd hear. "She can't get a boyfriend," the object of her comment would shoot back in one of the anger-drenched gossip sections. We turned against each other. In our moments of unity, we talked about how the boys took up more space in the hall, how the female teachers seemed to fawn over them, and how the male teachers seemed to forget that we were in the room unless we were showing some leg. A girl I had known since kindergarten broke in class one day. The teacher told her that she only got the best grade on the midterm because she sat in the front row every day and wore a short skirt. She didn't know how to take his so-called joke and fled the classroom crying. The girls in the class talked about her behind her back, mercilessly cackling. "She can't take a joke. "What's wrong with her? He was only kidding" Women, I learned, are each other's own worst enemy. We blamed ourselves for everything, never seeing that people and institutions could work against us. Friends began puking up their lunches, drinking diet soda, filling their brains with Nutrasweet and patriarchy. I'm not good enough, the voice underneath the current said. It's all my fault. And I didn't see the light yet, either. I was too busy trying to keep them together, get perfect grades, and get into college, where I swore, it would be different.

I tried to get through my senior year of high school by saying as little as possible. My algebra teacher picked on me for not smiling. "Don't look so happy," he said, thinking about how clever he was, and how our generation is so stupid, so nonchalant. He cracked jokes about another girl's hair, and then fraternized with the boys between takes. I could no longer pay attention in class. My "best friend" told rumors about me, driving a wedge between me and my other friends. She was calling me three times a day, suicidal, in front of the liquor cabinet, screaming that if she had only studied more for the SAT's she would have been able to go out of state for college. We weren't seeing eye to eye on anything. I wanted to talk about gay rights, about abortion, about feminism, and if we were feminists. She wanted to be a model. I wasn't even wearing makeup anymore, beginning to understand how petty and brainless the female gender role is, how much time and money it consumes for no explainable reason. I told her that I couldn't respect her if she did that, that she would be selling her body like a prostitute. I was shocked at the words that came out of my mouth which seemed to have formed when I wasn't looking, acrid, like black smoke pouring out of my mouth. I was excited by this. She ignored it, went on about the prom, and her favorite rock stars. It would be years before I realized that I had been listening to the same music, that it was misogynistic, and that all of those comments those people made were not sexy, as I tried to defend, but sexist. That bleached-blond guy who sang about his girl being his "Cherry Pie," describing her as "tasting so good it would make

a grown man cry," suddenly offended me. He didn't adore her. He was objectifying her. The "O word" became an important part of my vocabulary. I started to wonder why there were no CD's in my collection in which a woman sings.

Eventually, I escaped the town with the schools and the teachers and the female friends losing control. I arrived at college. New faces brought new hope, though by now, I was pessimistic to the core. I now see boys, men by age but hardly by maturity, beat each other with lacrosse sticks on the field, and watch women in the stands eat it up. I hear a man in my class talk about the "rape room" in another college's fraternity house. As I travel across campus, men walk together in a row, slowly, not caring that I am walking behind, in a hurry to get home to fill my head with sociology, to learn about social stratification. The material is proven to me everyday. When I excuse myself and break through their male chain, they sneer at me. I know they're looking at me, judging me by my dress, my behind. I know this game by now.

I joined the Young Feminist Group, but it maddens me that even there, I was at first quiet, reserved, and afraid to express my opinions. I began to proudly call myself a feminist, but people didn't get it. At the meetings, while my soul was soaring, feeding on the like-mindedness around me that I had sought for so long, I stayed quiet. I couldn't understand it. I had a conversation with myself. Tell them what you are thinking, I screamed to myself. But my throat was dry. I was silent because I had been that way for so long. I said nothing. But I was safe there. I didn't understand it, and beat myself up inside for a while afterwards. It was going to take a little bit longer.

In my gender studies class, I learned of how Brazilian men set their wives on fire when they are suspected of cheating, and how the law looks the other way. I heard stories of female babies being murdered in China, their pinkness a sign of weakness. I identified strongly with the things that I read, and took them to heart. Now, I thank God for my pro-feminist boyfriend, how independent I am of him, and how he values that in me. I used to think that I was very lucky, but I learned to correct myself. He loves me for who I am -- luck has nothing to do with it. My stomach jumps up every time my roommate puts on a clingy shirt, paints her face, and shaves her legs in hopes that her boyfriend will find time in his life to validate her, and to tell her that she is pretty. She worries about the fat content of everything she eats, and obsesses over having clear skin and well-cut hair. I've taken her to see Peggy Orenstein, have told her of the women with burns on ninety percent of their bodies in Brazil, and recalled stories of African women whose labia are sewn shut without anaesthesia. She is beginning to understand and relate, to get angry. But those are just sparks of it. I try to stay positive, not criticize, understand that ignorance exists for those who are the victims of it as well. I just want to understand where I got this great gift, this blessing and curse of having a head for injustice. It makes me the one that people come to when they want to discuss something about being female, and I am glad. But I just wish they would learn to do it for themselves.

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I am still trying to find the courage to not shave my legs, to make sure that I speak in class every day, to remind myself that I am beautiful, and that I don't have to be so damn hard on myself all of the time. And although the frat-boy-hey-babe-suck-my-cock / I-did-her types are still prevalent, I've learned to find some solace in the men that I know see these things, both in society and in their own friends. But I'm still frustrated. The Republican controlled Congress is reducing aid for single mothers, making it even more difficult for them to survive. Clinic workers, who provide birth control, are forced to leave their jobs as extremists kill their co-workers. Women still hold little control in the board room, next to no influence in government, and are victims in foreign wars that they didn't start. Shannon Faulkner is reminded of her place. Hillary's hair is an issue, a man gets away with murdering his wife, women are not studied in medical research, and are paid seventy cents for every man's dollar. Should I go on? Do I have to?

I speak now in a voice growing with courage and conviction, not caring as much what they think of me. I attacked an in-class video, delivering an uninterrupted tirade on how anti-feminist it was, how it had no scientific proof to back it up, pointing out biases and bad editing and reduction to biological determinism. The girls in the class laugh at me, probably hate that I am radical and threaten their Melrose Place worlds. I am a bitch to them, and proud of it. My complacency is packed away down in Barbie's basement too, but some of the insecurity still lives upstairs. But now I openly challenge those above me hiding behind words like "tenure," "paperwork," and "public image." I educate my peers on acquaintance rape, and challenge them to think for themselves — to see beyond the maleness of history and to appreciate the differences between the sexes, without overstating them. Sometimes I feel like sitting women down and showing them a never-ending looping tape of *Free To Be You And Me*, and ask them why they didn't get it the first time. I still feel like yelling "It's been documented" at the men who roll their eyes, but louder at the women who cackle at me. I'm yelling down that hallway again, only this time, I am trying to open women's eyes, screaming back at my fourth grade teacher. I know I am not paranoid. I am on to something.

As I learned to talk early on, I'm learning to fly and to sing, to educate and to debate, to wake people up to what I know. Perhaps they will all catch up in time, as they caught up with my verbal skills as toddlers. I can only continue fighting, speaking, and screaming towards a louder future.

Shadows

I sit at the entrance of what will be my home every working day for the next month. The gray and white speckled marble steps are cold but I take advantage of their flat surface and the overhang which provides shade from the sun. My first day of work as an assistant physical therapist in a geriatric/ psychiatric unit has been a long-standing source of apprehension. The minute hand on my wristwatch moves at breakneck speed, and at 8:59 I decide that I can put it off no longer. I rise from the marble step and turn toward the hospital's entrance, my feet and hands tingling from nervousness. The glass door in front of me reads "Caution Door Opens Automatically." It is covered with a translucent film that blurs everything on the other side. As it opens, slowly and deliberately, it reveals this world to me in small increments.

First, a woman clothed in paper-white stockings, dress, and hat breezes by, rolling a squeaky wheelchair stuffed with a large black man in striped pajamas. A shimmering gold tooth stands out among his teeth, contrasting with the silver of his wiry hair. He is yelling for his wife, asking if anyone has seen her. The nurse patiently replies that she has been dead for over twenty years. Still, he persists with his questioning, his face reddening with every response he receives. The nurse rolls him into the elevator at the end of the hallway and the two suddenly disappear.

I notice a desk to my left, smothered in papers. A woman's head pokes out from behind the jumble. I can barely see her eyes through the sheet of fog that has formed on her glasses. The wave of warm air sweeping in through the open door has collided with the refrigerator interior, forming pin-point droplets of water on every glass surface. The woman slides her tinted spectacles down to the end of her nose. Her eyes bend with the line through the middle of each lens. "You're letting all that hot air in, hon — can you come inside? The door will close that way." I take two steps and the automatic door slams closed behind me. The rubber moldings on each side seal together, and my quickened heartbeat thumps. I have been locked into a strange and unfamiliar world.

The walls surrounding the entrance are an ominous pale blue, a color that reminds me of illness and hospitals. The floor is white, dotted with black, gold, and brown spots. It is freshly mopped and emits an overpowering odor of bleach. Thin black lines separate each of the tiles. The tiles stand above them, just enough to permit the entrance of residual detergent. It lingers in the thin black cracks between each tile and in the corners of the room; soap and bleach bubbles glisten with every color of the rainbow. As I journey up the stairs I see a window to my left molded with white caulk jumping from its pale blue background.

The scene on the other side of the window is frighteningly desolate. A narrow road runs along the building for about a quarter of a mile. Heat permeates the black pavement, casting rainbows of red, orange, yellow, and a touch of green just above its surface. The road leads to a wooden shed with broken windows, and a single shutter hanging desperately from its hinges. The still water of the Susquehanna is the only scenery behind the shed. There is not a single ripple in the water, and no breeze touches the leaves of the trees along its bank. The grass along the river's edge is brown and withered. I turn to see the inhabitants of the world I have just entered. With their wheelchairs and gurneys, IV's and pace-makers, they are the motionless water and withered grass of the world on the other side of the hospital doors.

At the top of the stairs, a hallway equipped with more hospital-blue wallpaper opens up into a large room with four wall-sized windows; a room into which sunlight filters from every angle. It shines so brilliantly that on the wall to my left, where the rays converge into a single point, the wallpaper turns from blue to paper-white. A never-ending string of shadows is cast across the room, mimicking every object therein. A shadow is cast onto the floor of a figure tilted slightly sideways. The shadow of his wheelchair envelops him almost completely, so that only his arm and neck are distinguishable. The source of the shadow is an elderly man with arms and legs thin as pencils.

A tall shadow hovers in front of me and I look up to meet the eyes of my boss. One of his eyebrows is cocked upward and his neck is tilted. "Ready to get to work?" I pause, creating an uncomfortable silence. I fix my eyes on the tile floor. I hear and see nothing but the reflection of my nervous smile staring back at me, my face distorted from the reflection on the floor. I am a blur. I want to fade into the blur. My palms are slippery with sweat and the lump in my throat is so large that I swear it must be visible. My head nods, and my boss, who is known as "Volunteer Supervisor, but call me Bill" leads me across the room to my first patient.

He is the skinny shadow leaning in his wheelchair. He smiles when he sees me approaching, each facial wrinkle and crevice stretching in length. The ridges and wrinkles have been carved through time into every inch of his puckered face. They are deep enough to accommodate the droplets of perspiration that hang from his brow and plunge into their depths. I reach for his hand to help him from his chair. The skin on his hands is abrasive and dotted with coarse black hairs. Clutching his arms to help him stand, I feel his bones. They are thin and bumpy, lost in a loose sheath of skin and veins. I lift him with one arm and steady him with the other, lifting his light body almost effortlessly. His struggle is evident in his face, deep red, now streamed with perspiration. Every step is a laborious effort, his feet flopping forward, one getting in the way of the other. He went on to explain, "I was in Korea." His voice crackled and he gasped after each word.

A different voice breaks the silence in a booming voice. "Korea -- it was hell!" A plump veteran in ripped jeans rolls his wheelchair to the skinny man's feet, stops, and locks his wheels. He is animated, almost vivacious. A miniature replica of the American flag is attached to the side of his wheelchair. It is a testament of his blind devotion to a country that did nothing to repay his service, except to place him in a geriatric ward where he was to sit and decay until he died. Untaping his small flag, and resting it on his lap, he begins to reminisce in a voice that jars my eardrums. "We were in the airborne division. Me and my pal, Jack. He was a good man. Lost him in the war. He was a good man alright, but we had some good laughs, me and Jack. He did a fly-by over the base one night when I was up flying with him. Sent those boys into fits down there, runnin' all over, thinkin' we was bein' attacked. Shoulda' seen 'em. Was like a damn cartoon."

I hold the thin man up with both arms now, his weight becoming slightly more oppressive. He forces a smile directed at the memories of a time when he was young and vibrant, and perhaps a bit more ornery. "We did some crazy things. Hon, we were just kids. Too young to know any better." He craned his neck to look me in the eye as he said those words, trying to be emphatic despite his weak voice. Our visitor unlocks his brakes and rolls himself away towards the arts and crafts table. We are alone again in a heavy silence as the man struggles to take his first steps of the day. His head hangs over his feet, just ahead of them, as if the weight of his head were pulling his body forward. We take twenty slow steps down the hallway: left foot, gasp, rest— right foot, gasp, rest — and twenty slower steps back. He raises his arm an inch at a time, extending each finger separately and deliberately. He curls each one of them around the top of my arm, just above my elbow, and the joints of his fingers suddenly become a powerful vice that grips me. "I'm ready to die now," he squeaks, and a single tear gathers in the corner of his eye, falling into one of the crevices on his cheek. I lower him into his chair once again, supporting his limp, tired body with both of my arms. The fragile man's eyelids close and his neck tilts as he drifts to sleep.

The sun has risen so that it peeks in, just enough to light the room. Lunches have been picked at, the expected feeble attempt at eating foul-tasting food. Medications have been taken with swigs of water, and nurses have come and gone, having checked each patient's chest for the clip-clop of a heartbeat. As long as there is some sort of pounding in the patient's chest, it seems that they are satisfied. Questions of health are left for the doctors. These people are only names on a progress chart, and jagged lines on an EKG monitor. Their personalities, first names, and fascinating pasts are left at the front door of the hospital on the day of their admittance. Most of them will never again see the other side of that door or recover their identities.

The bony man's shadow drowns in the dimness of the room. An orderly wheels him to his private room, a cold cubicle with no windows, and locks his chair in place, leaving him to sleep for the rest of the day. His shadow has been replaced by walkers and canes, and the next group of patients. The paper-white

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wall has again become the austere pastel blue. As the nurses dole out arthritis medicine to the new group, the cleaning crew assembles on the floor to begin its afternoon rounds. Members of the crew, clad in orange jumpsuits and work boots, clutch industrial-sized mops, brooms, and buckets of bleach. The man who appears to be in charge huffs out orders. "Get the buckets," and "Scrub the bathrooms good. Don't want to see any dirt in there today." Six of his disciples scurry across the floor, mopping and scrubbing the room into a glistening shine. With a few slaps of mop against the tile, the floors are glazed again with bleach and new bubbles form in the crevices between the tiles.

Remnants of the thin wrinkled man's struggle linger, dried streaks of sweat caked onto each cheek. The streaks hide in the maze of wrinkles and crevices and no one will ever know, except those who study the shadows.

Answering to Fran

Norfolk Answering Service was located in the pantry of a small, unassuming house on Washington Street. The entire enterprise consisted of three old, practically broken-down switchboards much like those one might see in black-and-white movies. Unlike the newer, high-tech answering services, Norfolk Answering Service relied not on the technology of computers and speed-dial phones, but on the careful handwriting of its operators -- black ink on small yellow pieces of paper, slipped into tiny cubbyholes bearing the names of each client. In order to answer a phone call, an operator had to plug a switch into a circuit on the face of the switchboard, and flip open a key along the bottom of it. At no time during the last ten years or so did any of the switchboards have all of its switches and circuits in order. The equipment was so old that they had ceased making replacement parts for it. Often the board itself was patched with small pieces of electrical tape here and there. Adding to the decor of the service were the pink slips of paper stuck all over the board, bearing reminders of a doctor's new office hours, or the name of the person on call for the holiday. It was difficult to believe that hundreds of doctors, lawyers, contractors, oil deliverers, and many other business owners depended so fully on such a rickety old enterprise, but the fact remained they did. For years Norfolk Answering Service stood, keeping the lines of communication open for the mothers of sick babies around three o' clock in the morning, or families whose heater ran out of fuel on a frigid winter's night. Behind the business stood a single amazing woman, Frances Dolaher, whose own speech difficulties never stopped her from helping others communicate.

I came to work at the Answering Service the summer after my freshman year in high school. It was my first job, and in the tradition of small old-fashioned businesses such as this, it was passed down to me through my cousin Eileen who was leaving for college. Before the arrival of my first day, Eileen gave me a few pointers. She told me not to be nervous and that it would take a little while for me to get used to the foreign equipment and the idiosyncrasies of each of our clients. She reassured me by talking about all of the nice women who worked there. And then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Oh, and don't let Fran get to you, she can be a real pain sometimes. Just ignore her."

I had heard a few stories about my boss-to-be. Eileen had sometimes complained about her, but always seemed to have been able to handle her well. I figured I could do the same. I was wrong.

Despite all of Eileen's coaching, as I walked in for my first day of training, I didn't quite know what to expect. So, one can imagine that I was not at all prepared to be watched over and hen-pecked by my elderly boss from her perch in the kitchen. Fran would yell at me that I was doing something incorrectly. When I did it the way she told me to, she yelled that I was doing it wrong again. She contradicted me; she contradicted herself. Eventually she demanded that I do what I originally had done. This scenario repeated itself for the entire five hour shift.

I wondered how such a small, unimposing figure could instill such fear in me. Fran was a tiny, stooped woman with a tracheotomy. Her reprimands were not much more than hoarse whispers of laryngeal speech. Still, after having been treated with such toughness, I left the Service that day feeling very small and weak myself. I felt completely defeated. I informed my parents, my eyes brimming with tears, that I would "never, ever, ever go back there." I was so disappointed in my first job -- the yelling, the pressure -- I had not bargained for any of it. I decided that it truly was not worth it to stay there. Fran was just so nasty. I couldn't conceive of putting myself through all of the hassle for the rest of the summer.

That night as I lay in bed thinking about the answering service, my thoughts turned to the woman who ran it. Now, there was someone who had survived against great adversity. At age eighty-three, weighing seventy-six pounds with a pace-maker and a tracheotomy, Fran was quite physically handicapped, but she was also the toughest, most resourceful person I had ever met. It never mattered who was on the other end of the telephone. She had the ability to make even the cockiest of doctors back down in a flash. Even her grown son, despite years of experience, was no match for her wit during an argument. Thinking of Fran made me consider how foolish I'd been to get so upset that first day of work. Finally adjusting at Norfolk Answering Service would take a lot of persistence and determination, but Fran was all the inspiration I needed.

The next day I walked right into the Answering Service, chose my headpiece as a baseball player chooses his bat, sat down at the switchboard, and hit a grand slam. I continued doing so for the three years that I worked there.

As time passed Fran and I both developed more and more confidence in me. Her continuous badgering slowed down somewhat. I was actually relieved that it did not disappear altogether, for it had somehow become a little endearing. Never ceasing to be a pain in the neck, Fran became a dear friend.

One evening about a year ago, I walked into work and another operator told me that Fran had died that afternoon. In a second I forgot about all of the times that her constant hollering from the kitchen had driven me crazy. Instead, I remembered how she'd always check in with me about school news and seemed so proud of even my smallest academic achievement. She always gave me time off to pursue my theatre hobby telling me, "Go out there and do it Michelle. I wish I hadn't worked so much when I was young." But mostly I remember her

conviction, her strength, and the unforgettable lesson in determination that I had learned from her example. That evening was the second and last time Frances Dolaher ever made me cry.

I cried out of sadness for an old friend who had been such an inspiration to me. She taught me that the human spirit is far stronger than any physical limitations imposed on a person's body. She illustrated how with love, support, and education a person could be encouraged to walk and talk again after a devastating stroke.

I know that I want to be a part of the process that helps people regain their independence. As a speech pathologist, I want to work with people like Fran to help them overcome the isolation of not being able to communicate effectively with others. How fitting is it that someone like Fran would run a business that is essentially set up to keep communication flowing? Fran's business provided an ear to listen and a voice to speak to a patient or client who might otherwise have received a busy signal or an answering machine. The operators could deliver an important message to a doctor as quickly as he could answer his beeper. Fran understood this need for communication, and perhaps inadvertently passed this understanding on to me. I cannot imagine the horror and frustration of not being able to express one's needs and emotions through speech. I seek to help others do this despite their physical or mental difficulties.

Norfolk Answering Service has since been sold, and all of its outdated equipment thrown away. However, I know what existed there has not been lost. I often think of the work of a speech pathologist as similar to that of an answering service operator — the voice is there, the ear is there, but someone is needed to complete the circuit. Through speech pathology, I hope that once again I will be able to "flip the switch" and complete the communication circuit.

