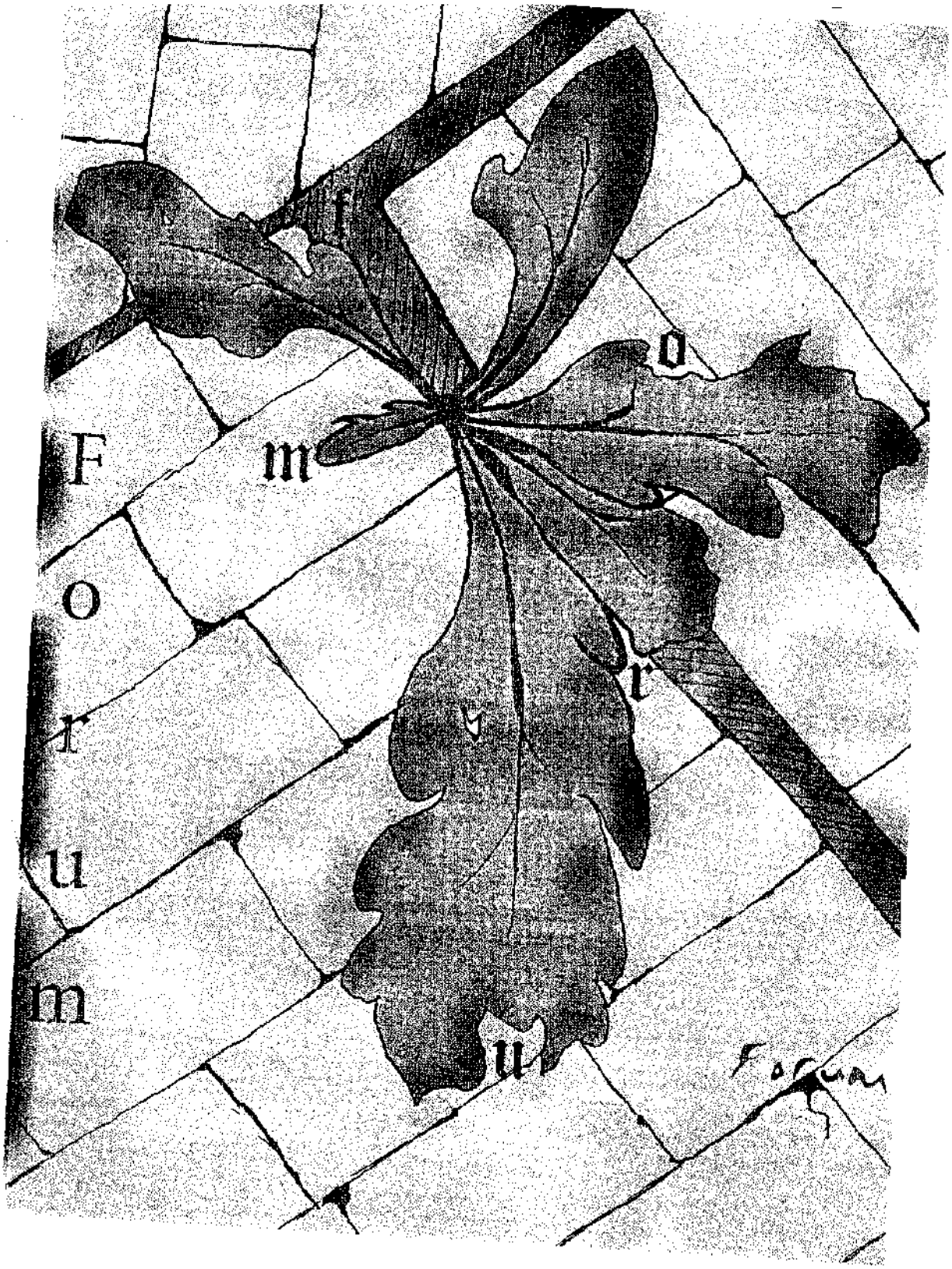
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Forum

Spring 1997

The Forum showcases the writing and artwork of the students of Loyola College. Works are submitted and reviewed by a selection committee. There are no requirements for submissions, except that any writing must be in essay form.

Volume XVIII

Editors' Notes:

We had a fantastic group of submissions this fall, which led to heated debates in the selection committee. As usual though, we had more good essays than space, so if your submission wasn't printed, don't despair.

This year's essays run the gamut from light-hearted to serious (it's your job to figure it out). Learn about foreign lands, anorexia, self-centeredness and mothers, why you are privileged if you are reading this, why we should eliminate the speed limit, racism, defining the individual, and why we should invade Canada.

I'd like to thank Dr. Dan McGuiness, who gave me my beginnings as a writer and an editor, and set me on the course I am on today (mostly by not answering any of my questions).

Thanks to Jim Robison, Barney Kirby, and Dr. Margaret Musgrove, who also helped me grow as a writer and person.

Finally, I am indebted to Camille Whelan and Jaime Fischbach, whose hard work during the closing hours of this project saved the day. Look for them again on next year's staff.

Turn the page and begin your journey.

Philipp Meyer

This year's magazine is full of outstanding pieces of work. There aren't enough words in the thesaurus for wonderful, to describe the essays and artwork we received. The essays are a mixture of levity, seriousness, transformation, and beauty. Enjoy!

I would like to thank Dr. McGuiness for trusting me enough to take on a job this size, and having faith in me. I would also like to thank Camille Whelan and Philipp Meyer (who volunteered to pay my phone bill), for putting up with me and my "perfection." I would also like to thank, last but not least, Dr. Judith Dobler, for support and encouragement, especially through the flu season.

Jaime Fischbach

This year has certainly been crazy for the Forum. *Its production this year has been marked by change--change of office (it was homeless for awhile), change of editors--but through it all, one thing has remained constant, the talent and brilliance of Loyola writers and artists. Thanks to everyone who contributed to this year's edition, thanks especially to Philipp and Jaime, and thanks to the Loyola community for supporting and encouraging the* Forum *tradition.*

Camille Whelan

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Szép Duna
Camille Whelan

The Danube in the evening is dark, like brown velvet-bland, but with movement, rich amber highlights reveal themselves. The water swirls peacefully as it disappears under the Margit Hid, but on the opposite side, it churns out, frothy and turbulent, only a few shades lighter than the grim stone supports which obstruct its path. The Margit Hid, one of seven bridges that span the Danube, is plainer and more angular than the others. Although unadorned with monuments or engravings, it is unique because it arches higher than the other bridges. From where it leaves the land, it is a pathway into the evening sky.

Far down the river, Buda and Pest converge into a spatter of lights: yellow, white, blue-white. SANYO! screams an enormous, fiery neon sign amid the smaller lights, but the building it heralds is anonymous among the angular shapes that form the city skyline. Along the riverside is a highway. Paired lights crawl toward the Margit Hid, turn instead toward Pest, and disappear into the quiet congregation of buildings and trees, replaced just as quickly by another meandering chain of lights.

The city is built in a valley; it runs into the mountains, which on all sides frame the sky. Jagged black hills contrast sharply with the mahogany sky of this particular evening. The sky is lovely, like marble: a deep base color, swirled with lighter and lighter shades of mahogany that finally recede on the horizon into pale cream. Unlike marble, though, it is not flat. It arches over the city as if someone had placed a bowl on the mountaintops, sealing the city dwellers in a private, intimate place. The warm isolation is broken only by the river. Those waters, tainted with foreign lands, flow silently through the city's center.

The water laps against the concrete river banks, swishing through dark

moss that has sprouted there over time. Both banks are lined with wide concrete steps that descend down to the water. They are crumbled with erosion in places, but still intact. Their chilling Communist gray on warm afternoons is colored with bodies—Hungarian girls in bright bikinis, with or without their tops, sunbathe drowsily in the summer heat. On these afternoons, the water is sluggish and muddy. Unhealthy streaks of yellow and gray, spots of oil, and brilliant scraps of water-logged rubbish materialize from beneath the Margit Hid and drift by, pleasantly *en route* to Austria. Those old cans have seen more of Europe than some will ever see.

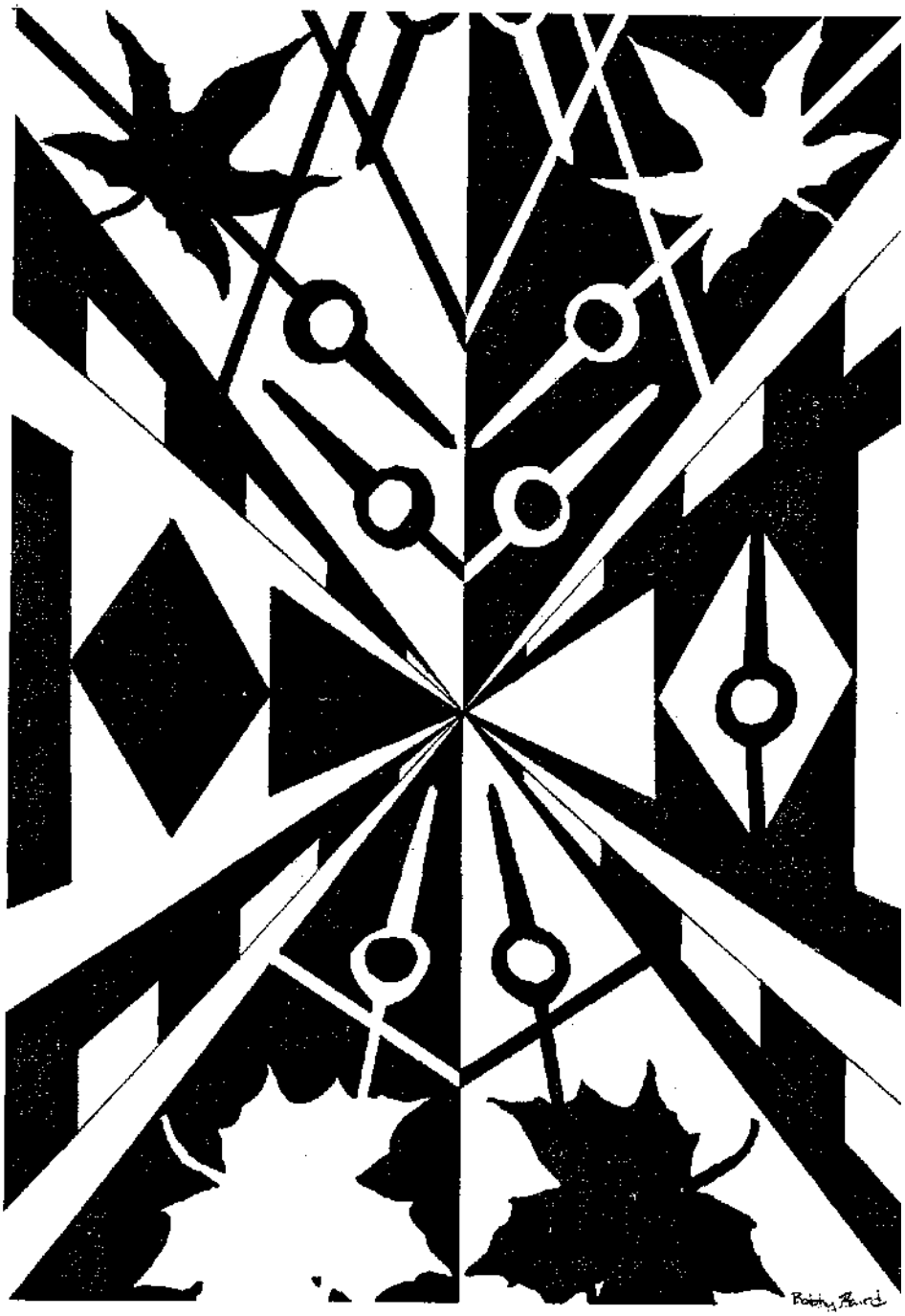
Nature serves to remind humanity of its own foolishness. Humans erect barriers separating themselves from each other. They confine themselves to a piece of land and christen themselves a country, a people; but nature continues as she always has, considering humanity whole, not fragmented. She binds people together where they seek to isolate themselves. Hungary was racked with controversy when Romania, lacking resources and money, disposed of chemical waste by dumping it into the Danube. Poisoned water flowed through the Hungarian cities. Corpses of Romanian political prisoners washed onto the shores of the bucolic, picturesque Szént Endré. Outraged Hungarian citizens complained that Romania's problems should not be Hungary's problems. They ignore, deny that the river is a single, pulsing vein which connects them. Although they were born together into the human race, and bore side by side the Communist regime, they seek to sever themselves. They destroy all but Nature's bond.

For economic reasons, European societies have straightened the natural banks of the Danube to better accommodate commerce and shipping. To traverse all of the Danube's meanders and backloops required a great deal of ship fuel, at enormous expense to businesses. The current, deceptively leisurely at the Margit Hid, has become dangerously fast and erosive in many places.

European countries learn each other's languages, but Europe is divided into small, sometimes hostile, sections. European countries, with vehicles and trade agreements, bridge the chasms they have constructed, but with the intent to create more specialized, isolated economic communities. The river, in their eyes, is not their bond, but their means to independence.

The *Duna* tonight is glimmering. Only under the moonlight does the water lose its yellow brown pallor, and assume its calm blue. Not merely blue, but cobalt, flecked with silver and cerulean, shaded with midnight and navy. Strauss must have been sitting on the banks many a quiet night, watching the light glisten off innumerable blue peaks.

Sometimes it is good to sit, as he must have, and listen to the sleepy, contented silence of the city, broken only by the rushing of the river and occasional passing boat. The boat, shadowed with evening, could be Hungarian, Romanian, Austrian. Night will not reveal, though, because to the evening skies, the boat is only timber and iron. Humanity alone assigns symbolism, makes the boat Romanian, itself Hungarian, seeking to forget that identities are as distinct as river currents, yet as inextricably bound together in purpose.



CANADA:
Solution for our economic difficulties and weapons system testing ground

Haywood J. Blome

America's leaders have always sought ways to unite its culturally diverse population and to stimulate growth in its economy. Expanding across the continent and plundering its natural resources was a successful tactic until we recently ran out of natural resources to plunder and land over which to spread. Many recent governments have presented solutions to this problem, the most notable of which was called the "trickle down" theory, introduced by Republican administrations during the 1980's. Under the premise that hardships tend to unite people, our government borrowed billions of dollars from foreign powers, making America into the world's largest debtor nation. Although most Americans united against the small percentage that grew wealthy from the loan money, the unifying effect was not as great as was hoped. Our government continued to search for other solutions.

Most twentieth century governments faced similar problems, and several arrived at the same solution. It is simple in concept and in execution--involve the country in a war. Adolf Hitler transformed Germany from an impoverished, debt-ridden country to one of the world's most powerful nations by encouraging armaments production and the invasion of militarily weak countries. The Bush Administration experienced increased public approval ratings during and after America's involvement in the Persian Gulf war. The Clinton Administration bolstered its image by involving our country in military action in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. However, both administrations simply took advantage of pre-existing conflicts, commit-

ting forces to battle without carefully considering the optimum characteristics of a country against with America should go to war.

Once we have decided to go to war, we must decide who to fight. Geographic proximity should be held in higher regard than any other factor when selecting an adversary. The two closest countries to the United States, and hence the two best candidates for invasion, are Mexico and Canada. While Mexico may seem to be an excellent choice due to the anger felt by many Americans towards illegal Mexican immigrants, the country's poor air and water quality would not provide optimum living conditions for an invading force. Canada has air and water quality similar to America's, would provide a healthy living environment for our troops, and is a much better candidate for invasion than Mexico.

Beyond practical reasons such as reducing troop movement expenses, and maintaining good working conditions for the troops, there are philosophical justifications for invading Canada. One of the most important justifications for invasion is that Canadians are un-American. This is evident in their odd accents, different language ("Eh?"), and ice-dependent sports such as hockey and curling (it has been observed that hockey games often include use of the word "puck," which is considered an "occasion of sin" in advanced, forward thinking societies such as ours). They also have little or no automobile industry, which should be a mainstay of any economy. Finally, Canada practices socialized medicine, which all Americans know is communist and immoral.

Another justification for the invasion is that the Canadians do not expect it. From a practical standpoint, there are many advantages to this. Our invading army will advance Blitzkrieg-like, smashing any resistance that the Canucks provide, and minimizing material damage to our forces. This tactic would also be consistent with our cultural values: research has shown that when given a choice, Americans prefer the "sucker-punch" method of fighting over any other.

Given our country's current economic state, it is necessary for us to become involved in a war. Canada is the best choice as an invadee, due to its geographic proximity and Americans' philosophical differences with the Canadians. An invasion would provide millions of listless, mentally unstable Americans (who until recently had a nationally aired murder trial

to provide them with intellectual stimulation) with entertainment. The invasion of Canada would also provide unemployed defense contractors with the opportunity to develop and test new weapons, presidential candidates with new debate material, and their campaign advisors with a powerful motivational slogan: "It's Canada, Stupid."

Twice What I Used To Be

Teresa Bacewicz

I sit back on my heels and take a deep breath. Seeing me kneeling on the floor in my bedroom, one might think that I was about to offer up some desperate prayer. Instead, I am about to clean out my drawers before going to college. For most teenagers, this ritual is seen as a tedious chore, if not a nuisance in the last few precious days before leaving for school. For me, the mere thought of cleaning out my drawers and closet brings tears to my eyes. It is something that I have been putting off for a long time just to avoid...well, just to avoid. When I open the first drawer, the one that is overstuffed with numerous pairs of my jeans, I see my favorite pair right on top. Under it are the other pairs that I have worn throughout the years, all in various forms of decomposition. I take them all out and stare at what is left in the bottom of the drawer. I haven't worn the remaining pairs in about six months and do not even want to take them out. Yet, some sort of grotesque curiosity overtakes me and I reach down and take them out. I unfold them and can feel my jaw go slack in surprise. They are so small! Holding them up, I roughly estimate that they would not even fit my twelve year-old sister. In a second, I'm on my feet in front of the mirror with the jeans held up against me. I really used to be *that* thin? There is a voice inside my head that tells me that I was unhealthy and sick when those jeans fit me. I was *anorexic*. I start to fold them to put them in a box to be given away after my sister sifts through it, but another voice inside my head tells me to try them on. There's no harm in it. With my back to the mirror, I slide them on and when they are up as far as my knees, I know that there is no way that they are going to go any higher. Yet, I am determined to get them on only to prove to myself that I haven't gained that much weight. I finally manage to get them all the way up and have to lay down to pull up the

zipper. These jeans, which were once baggy and loose, are now skin-tight. Could it be possible that I gained that much weight? Suddenly, I am disgusted with myself. I have come so far only to be wallowing in self-pity. I frantically tug off the jeans and even rip them in my haste. The jeans, like myself when I wore them, are tired and worn, with many holes and tears. I know where these jeans belong. I push aside the box and throw them in the garbage. They are from a chapter in life that I wish I could forget but know that only by remembering will make me stronger.

It is quite easy for females growing up in our society to become prey to the disease known as anorexia. Perhaps in our society, where almost everything is based on looks, this disease goes unnoticed: seen only as a rite through which most women go in order to achieve society's physical perfection. Yet, most people have a shady idea of what anorexia *really is*. The word, defined from the Greek, means lack of appetite or loathing of food (Alexander-Mott & Lumsden 3). I feel this definition only skims the surface of the true meaning. Anorexia is made up of complex internal and external forces within the victim. With increasing pressures created by home, school, friends, boyfriends, work, and self, a common solution or escape is to say: "I can fix what is wrong in my life and feel better about myself if I only loose weight" (Phillips 1). This much can be observed as true; the anorexic does feel great when she loses those first few pounds. The irony of anorexia is that the victim thinks she has such control over eating when, in reality, eating has control over her. The base of anorexia is complete loss of control; in the end, even if she wants to eat, she is often unable to do so because the disease refuses to let go. Anorexia is not something that just goes away and stays away. It is like a dark closet, so overpacked with personal belongings that every time the victim tries to open it, all the contents tumble out onto her.

When I tell people that I once was anorexic, they don't say anything at first; they only look at me as if trying to picture me weighing less than a hundred pounds. Some people shake their heads in disbelief that a person like me could fall prey to such a terrible disease. People have often told me that I'm pretty, and my grandmother's friends have always preened over me as if I were some sort of prize bird in a circus tent. Yet all their words have no meaning, they simply float in the area that is a void inside my

head, not connected and seemingly senseless. I am painfully aware of how I look at all times and so self-conscious that I won't even work out in a public gym for fear that someone is "looking" at me. Most of my close friends and family call me paranoid and I am always told that no matter what, people are going to look at me so I might as well become used to it. I just don't think that they understand what it is like for me. It is almost an emotional isolation in the sense that no one understands how I feel. Even though anorexia is such a public disease, it manifests itself in private. It is not obvious like alcoholism, but more subtle, like a cancer that eats from the inside out. At times, the only thing that gnawed at me more than my hunger was my loneliness. I had tons of "friends" and not a friend in the world.

What is it about young girls and our society that make the perfect breeding ground for such a prevalent, yet subtle illness? The reason is different for each individual and every anorexic will tell you that many factors contributed to her downfall. Most, like myself, are unable to pinpoint exactly what caused it and when it started. Anorexia is like a snake that can slither around its victim without her knowing it is there until it is too late. With this disease, you don't just wake up one morning and see that you suddenly weigh eighty pounds and then decide that you are sick. Instead, you become so entangled in the trap of the disease that you do not possess the capacity to see what you are doing to yourself.

Now that so much time has gone by, you would think that I have a rehearsed answer as to why I became anorexic, but I don't. I believe it was a combination of many different factors that drove me to such an extreme. Everyone has a breaking point and when they reach that point, everyone reacts differently. One of my main reasons was because of conflict within my family. My father divorced my mother when I was about six years old. For several years, I lived with my mother and my little sister, who is six years younger than me. When I was eleven, I moved in with my father and my soon-to-be stepmother. A year later, my mother passed away and my sister came to live with us. It was then that my stepmother decided to enforce her cruel regime. Like the fabled wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, she became an all too real character in my life. During my adolescent years, it was difficult living in the house with her. She had been diagnosed with clinical depression and it was apparent that the Prozac wasn't

enough. With my sister and me, she was a control freak. We were each given a list of chores and were excessively punished if we forgot to do even one. If we forgot to put one of our belongings away, it would be confiscated for several weeks. My sister and I had to ask her permission to watch television and even when I was sixteen years old, she kept the remote control in the kitchen with her so she could control what we watched and lower the volume if she felt it was too high. She made our home into a concentration camp. It was only as I got older and sought my independence that the real problems arose. She still treated me as if I was a little child when I was almost sixteen years old. I was rarely allowed to go out with friends and she often felt that it was her right to search through all my belongings. I felt trapped by her, I wanted to protect my sister, who was only nine and often was the brunt of her sudden eruptions of anger. My father chose the easy route out of the entire situation—he would look the other way and pretend that nothing was wrong with the irrational behavior she inflicted on my sister and me. As much as I hated her at the time, I also desperately wanted her acceptance as well. Now, I have come to the realization that there was no way that I should have expected someone who hated herself to actually accept or even love another person. She knew my weak spots and was constantly putting me down. Her remarks were vicious and she had the ability to crush me for days with just a few words. She is the type of person that was and still is so health conscious that she measures her cereal in the morning. As you can imagine, whenever I ate something she did not approve of, she would make comments such as: "I don't really think you need to eat that." Little did I know at that time that this issue of eating would become the focal point of the many problems ahead.

As I grew older and more concerned with my appearance, her need to control what I ate became more evident. It seemed that despite her bad judgment calls and medications, she was determined to raise two "healthy girls." She forced me to drink milk with every meal for five years until I detested it and could barely swallow the vile liquid without gagging. She was a health food nut and a bad cook. As you can probably guess, this is not the best of combinations. Even though my father, sister and I grimaced as we forced down her food, we ate it just to avoid her wrath. If I even made a comment about how "healthy" the food she prepared was, she

would say that I weighed enough and did not need to eat the regular food that she considered "junk food." I was so self-conscious at the time and worried about my weight and appearance that a comment like this would make me feel fat and ugly for several days. I began to see myself through what I perceived to be at her eyes: a girl who was heading down the road of obesity. At that time, she had such a strong hold over me that I thought that there was no way to squirm out from under her grasp...until I discovered a hidden power of my own.

The summer previous to my junior year in high school, I embraced anorexia. My family problems had increased during the two years as I struggled to assert my independence in a household where the word itself was foreign to its inhabitants. The main control issue conflict that had been increasingly progressing was that of eating. Other issues also followed close behind like a chain that seemed to be bound to my ankles. It seemed that everywhere I turned for freedom, my stepmother slammed the door in my face. The situation got to a point when I wasn't even allowed to lock the bathroom door when 1 took a shower. I felt crushed under her oppressive rule of my life. I had no privacy and no means by which to stand up for myself without being punished. The only way I could regain some control in my life was to stop eating. I did it to spite her and to prove that no matter what she did, she could not control this aspect of my life.

At first, it seemed that my stepmother was jealous that I was losing weight as she had been trying to lose "those last five pounds" for several months. I mistook her jealousy as a form of acceptance and once again was slapped in the face with her cruel insults. If I had been too fat for her standards before, now, according to her, I looked disgusting. For a while, my sister and I would kid about how "disgusting" I looked. At that point, I began to stop caring about what she said because she no longer had such a strong hold on me. I would tell myself that I looked great and that there was nothing for me to worry about. I now realize that by putting on these blinders, I also shut out the important messages that the people who really did care were trying to tell me.

I was your typical anorexic. When I say typical, I mean that if you watched me close enough, you would have been able to see that I had a problem. However, most people rarely took the time and I became a mas-

ter in the art of deception. First, and most obvious, I would always make comments about how fat I was and how my clothes didn't fit, etc. I skipped meals, and if someone asked me if I was hungry, I indignantly took it as a personal offense and responded with a quick "No." If I did eat, I would make sure that I ate excruciatingly slowly and never finished what was on my plate. Even though my stomach would be growling loudly, I would still deny that I was hungry. If I felt I had overindulged by eating a nominal meal, I would spend more time on the activity to which I already devoted at least nine hours a week : exercising. I was always planning one form of exercise or another to burn off any extra calories that might have been lurking in my system.

When I was anorexic, I was a warrior and my body was my armor. At first glance, I might have even appeared to be healthy, yet much lay beneath the surface. First, and most obvious, I lost a significant amount of weight and dropped two dress sizes. Besides the weight loss, my other ailments were among the more common. I bruised easily and half the time I didn't even know where my bruises came from. I was tired all the time and had to nap in the afternoons just to have enough energy to do my homework and exercise. All the time, I was freezing cold. I felt as if I had perpetual frostbite on my nose, fingers, and toes. When I combed or ran my fingers through my hair, huge clumps of it would come out. I slept terribly, waking up several times every night, and was consequently more exhausted during the day. My tolerance for illness was about zero and I would get whatever was going around. Instead of being sick for a few days, I was sick for a few weeks. All these afflictions scared me--but not enough to make me begin to eat again. To me, there was nothing wrong.

As the disease progressed, I became less and less involved in it. Anorexia seemed to take over me and I didn't have to put as much effort into it as I previously had. Counting calories, eating small portions, and exercising constantly came like a second nature to me. At first, people told me that I had finally begun to shed my "baby fat" and that I looked great. Then, the compliments stopped coming and were replaced with incredulous remarks about how thin and sickly I had become. If anyone, friend or family, tried to bring up the issue of eating, I refused to speak to them. I denied the fact that I had a problem and continued in the mind set that I

needed to lose just a few more pounds. Even when I had begun to look pale and sick, I was still in denial that I had a serious problem.

After months of physical and emotional stress that not only nearly destroyed me but affected my relationships with others as well, I finally broke down under all the pressure and maintenance of my appearance. With the support of my boyfriend, I was able to overcome my eating disorder. I realized that I needed to accept myself before I opened myself up to be accepted by others. I came to the realization that no matter what I did or how I looked, I was never going to win my stepmother's approval. In shrugging off the control of my stepmother, I had bound myself up in a different way. During the entire time that I was anorexic, I thought that I had such a good hold on my life and that for once I had everything in my life under control. I did not realize that I was still being controlled by a more dominant force—my stepmother. In the beginning, anorexia clung to me, but in the end, I was doing the clinging. I was so afraid of letting go of the semblance of control that I had achieved on my own.

The months that passed during my recovery proved to be painful. Sometimes I was gung-ho about changing with the hopes of being healthy. Other times, I hated myself for eating and the weight that I was beginning to gain. I was like two people: one, who was striving to return to life and the other that was clinging to something that would never go very far. My estranged boyfriend re-entered my life when he realized that I was beginning to recover. Armed with patience and endurance, he proved to be the support line that my parents had failed to throw me. During that time, it was he who put up with my sudden, unpredictable fits of self-loathing. Yet, in this case, it was time that healed all wounds. My skin grew over the emotional thorns that had been pricking me for so long.

It was almost as if I had grown a new layer of skin. I chose not to discard my experience but to let it shape the core of who I am and to learn from it. My new skin was tougher; ready for anything. I was not the push-over that I used to be—eager to please everyone else just to feel good about myself. It seemed as though all the thoughts that had been repressed flooded forth. I took with me the confidence that anorexia had given me. Before, I was confident because I knew that I was thin. Now, I was confident as a real person rather than the paper doll that I had been before. My loneliness

seemed to dissipate as even when I was physically alone, I still had the company of myself. I was actually beginning to like that self as I came to the realization that I did not need anyone else's approval to be content with who I was.

Believe it or not, it was this new skin that caused even more problems in my household because I was able and willing to stand up to my stepmother. Although this caused even more conflicts between us, it was my new found perseverance and strength that made me want to liberate myself from her. Over time, the fantasy of freedom became reality as she realized that all of her efforts were being thwarted and my father was finally taking some notice of the injustices she committed against my sister and me.

When I look back at pictures of myself when I was anorexic, they do not look like me. Rather, the girl in the photographs is a miserable shell of a person with fragile arms and sunken eyes. There seems to be no connection between the person that I was then and the person that I am now. The girl in the mirror now tells me that I am healthy and have my future awaiting me with open arms. I realize that my attempts to please my stepmother were futile because I was never happy with myself in the first place. I was not able then, and never will be able, to work for someone else's approval. I once read in a Nike ad that "no one is worth comparing myself to except for me." I think that the intended meaning of this ad was to inspire athletes to remain persistent but ever since I reordered my life, I see it in an entirely different way. I have stopped comparing myself to others and trying to fit into my imaginary perception of what everyone else thinks I should look like.

False happiness is something that is so slippery and deceitful that when you think that you are really happy, everything slides down the drain and you are left with nothing. I thought that if I was thin, my life would be perfect and all my problems would dissipate. However, the fragile shell that I had built around myself was shattered when the stark light of reality showed me what I was doing to myself. Change brought progress, and progress, in turn, shaped me into who I am today. I do not equate thin with being healthy. I try not to look at others with the judgmental eyes that I

once saw myself through. In my metamorphosis, I have realized that I do not need the crutch of anorexia to live my life. Without having to lean on anyone or anything, I have learned to stand on my own two feet.

Restoring the Balance of Nature

I.B. Falsche

America is a land filled with woefully underskilled drivers. Even so, recently there has been much debate about raising the speed limit. Those who object to the increase say it will lead to more deaths and injuries on our roads. I agree, and believe the speed limit should not be raised. The universal speed limit should be eliminated, and our present motor vehicle licensing system revised. America is experiencing a population boom, and technology is responsible: natural selection can no longer keep pace with the population boom this country is experiencing, and it is necessary to reinstall it as an institution on our roads to control the growth of our species.

In most areas of modern life, humans have put a stop to any sort of natural selection. Through the mechanisms of soft dashboards, laminated safety glass, seat belts, "crumple zones," air bags, and side impact beams we have virtually eliminated this phenomenon in motorized travel. In fact, there are concerted efforts by highly educated and intensely trained groups of people, who collectively call themselves "Automotive Engineers," to continue to fly in the face of nature, inventing automotive safety devices that protect the occupants of a car without regard to their intelligence or societal value. Unlike these safety devices, nature has been discriminating for thousands of years. The chariot drivers in Ben Hur—where were their airbags, crumple zones, or side impact beams? The most capable chariot drivers survived the race, the rest were trampled by horses or gored on spikes.

America's fecundity, combined with a lack of voluntary population control has left it with a population so large it cannot afford to educate, employ, and house everyone. Two hundred years ago, offspring that would

not have survived until the reproductive age are now able to do so. Despite this, the intelligent, educated, yet misdirected group called "automotive engineers" continues to force safety devices upon a society that needs just the opposite.

One solution to our population control problem is to cease the sales of these entirely oversafe automobiles (and to recall all of those already in circulation) to certain people. These individuals may have been somewhat oxygen deprived "in utero", or may have simply selected their genes from a much shallower pool than the rest of us. They would be issued subcompact cars made of recycled aluminum beer cans (with no seatbelts), or racing motorcycles. To further hasten the population reduction process, there would be no speed restrictions or other traffic safety laws imposed on these individuals.

It is likely that some of the individuals selected against (or, more likely, an unemployed personal injury/ class-action lawyer) will sue, claiming discrimination. Therefore it is important that we place all lawyers in the same driver's category as those with U.O.D.S. (uterine oxygen deficiency syndrome) until their numbers have been sufficiently reduced to prevent their participation in frivolous lawsuits. With time, the numbers of lawyers and less gifted will begin to decline, eventually reaching a dynamic equilibrium in which the number of lawyers and genetically deficient persons born would be no greater than the number that died.

Limiting the safety features found on modern automobiles to certain individuals has many benefits. Those who deserved safer roads would have them--other vehicles on the road with them would offer little resistance to an impact, and impart little damage to a larger, more sturdily built vehicle. Insurance rates would plummet, along with the number of lawyers, lawsuits, and incompetent drivers. Our population would stop growing and would eventually decline, reducing economic pressure on individuals, and causing unemployment, crime, and homelessness rates to drop. We would experience a societal "brightening" and a mean IQ increase. Finally, Americans could be more philosophically at peace, having made progress at restoring the "Balance of Nature."

Neighbors

Elizabeth McKeever

"Can I call you back, hon? I have a young college girl interviewing me," she says affectionately. I laugh to myself while her back is turned to me, standing by the phone on the desk in the living room. I am not used to hearing her refer to me in such unfamiliar terms, so I know that she isn't talking to anyone too close to her. I am sitting on her couch, notebook on my lap, busy writing down this sentence that seems absurd to me. It's hardly an interview in my mind; that word evokes visions of a hard-nosed journalist grilling her subject for details and explanations. This is more like the conversations that I have had with her in the past.

Being in her house is familiar in many ways. The Long Island town in which we live is one of the villages that sprung up after the war. It is not far from Levittown, the famous suburban prototype-rows of identical, affordable houses in which GI's and their wives started the baby boom. The house that I grew up in, number 13 Narcissus Drive, is next door to Trudy McLaren's, who has lived at 15 for my entire life. Our houses are exactly the same, but are mirror images, placed that way so that our kitchen doors would face each other and therefore allow for better socialization. As I sit in her living room, it is just like being in my house, but is always a bit disorienting because everything seems backwards. As I reflect on this, she hangs up the phone and returns to her chair opposite my spot on the couch, and I return to my questions. So far, I've already learned things about my neighbor that I didn't already know.

Trudy's mother came to the United States from Sweden in 1902, at the age of twenty years old. She had intended to come to America to go to college in Connecticut, get her degree, and then return to her home country to be a schoolteacher. Her plans changed when she met the man that would

be Trudy's father. He had come over from Sweden in 1897, driven by the desire to travel. The couple met in December and were married by the following May. Her mother never returned to college, but was too much in love to really mind.

Her mother's life in Sweden reminds me of something from a Hans Christian Andersen tale, complete with ice skating to school on frozen canals. At home, she also learned how to cook and sew. She demonstrated mastery in both skills. "My mother could throw down a piece of cloth on the floor and just cut out a dress, without any pattern. She was very talented." What Trudy says she remembers most about her mother are the meals that she would create. She was also a very devout Christian, a woman who never missed a day without studying her Bible. But she believed that religion is a private thing, never forcing her opinions on anyone, including her children. She died in 1957. At her funeral, the minister said that he came to visit to learn from her, and not vice versa. When I look at Trudy now, I see how much she is like her mother. Church is important to her, though she's changed denominations and parishes a few times. And she can whip up a smorgasbord that leaves every guest raving. When I ask her what she learned from her mother, she always mentions religion and cooking, but modestly says that she can't sew at all, and seldom breaks out her ice skates.

Trudy speaks less vividly about her father, who died when she was young. But she tells the story of an immigrant boy who had to teach himself English, and as a result came to value education above all else. While her mother's friends were all immigrants who, including herself, never lost their Swedish accent, her father was out in the business world, becoming Americanized. He easily let his accent fall away. She remembers giggling when he'd announce that he'd brought home some "scrimp" for dinner. It was the only word that reminded anyone of the land from which he had only recently come.

From this marriage came ten children, of which Trudy was the second to last. Her mother was 41 when she was born, and 48 when her youngest brother was welcomed into the family. She bore children over a period of 25 years, the last two after she had suffered a heart attack at the age of 40. First came Hilma Elizabeth, then Mildred Signia Theresa, Carl, Ann

Hildegard (always called Hildy), Jenny, Walfred, Arvid Rudolph Valentino (apparently the Bergmans were fond of movies); Herbert Lincoln (named in honor of the president on whose birthday he'd been born), then Trudy (Gertrude Helen), and finally, Jerome Edward. The names became a bit more Americanized with the younger children, no doubt the influence of her father.

The ten Bergman children spent their youth in the family home in Jamestown, in upstate New York. Her father once described the house as Grand Central Station, which doesn't seem too surprising by observing the amount of energy this now older twelfth of the family exudes, sitting before me telling me stories. She tells me about one Christmas when her father, tired of the constant ruckus, asked that the family have a private holiday, with no extra extended relatives around. And so they did. I picture the twelve of them sitting around a long table, eating quietly, until her father, now disturbed by the stillness, begins to laugh, and goes to call the other members of the family, in hopes that they can make it for dessert.

When I ask her about her fondest memories of growing up, there is no hesitation. "The Chatauqua Institute," she says immediately, a pleasant look spreading across her face. I ask her how to spell this; she helpfully reaches for a brittle, yellowing atlas. She identifies Jamestown, pushes her finger along the lines of the topography, and finally settles on Lake Chatauqua, reciting its confusing letters. I write them down quickly, but more importantly, I note in the margin above that the veins in her hands are blue, and bulge out from behind her nearly translucent skin. I realize that they are one of the few features that show her age. I am getting distracted by these observations, and she is beginning to tell me about the good times she and her siblings had there. I scribble quickly to catch up. "It was the coolest place ever to go." She tells me about the visitors who travelled to New York from around the world to spend their summers studying music. Her family owned a cottage there, and would spend each summer by the lake, watching these fancy people come and go. There were two big amusement parks nearby, and a dance pavilion that must have been lit up at night, where the music carried through the clear air and the skirts of the women swirled in dance. "You really miss out on things like that these days," she tells me.

I ask her about more every day occurrences, particularly about school. She says that school was "alright." She corrects herself, telling me that she really did enjoy the social life, but that classes were boring. Mr. Peterson, her class advisor and chemistry teacher, stands out the most in her memory. She recalls the "big apple" being a popular dance during her high school years. At graduation, as a joke, the class gave him an apple, knowing that he would understand the gift to mean that they appreciated his sense of modern culture. To everyone's surprise, he leapt up on the stage and proceeded to dance wildly, proving that he was more in touch than his students realized. She left one year later than she had expected to, after missing many school days due to pneumonia contracted during a time that didn't know the miracle of penicillin.

Trudy's best friend growing up was named Marsha. They first met in kindergarten, and finished up school together. They even decided to try to become nurses together, applying for positions in the Deaconus hospital in Buffalo. Trudy had made a bit of an oversight, however. The sight of blood made her queasy, and this had obvious drawbacks. Marsha went on to become a nurse, staying in Buffalo while Trudy set out for the drama of Manhattan, They managed to remain best friends despite the difference. Their bond was broken when Marsha entered her forties and discovered that she had cancer. Now a bit more withdrawn, Trudy tells me simply, "One of the hardest things is to lose a dear friend." I imagine the woman who was not cut out to be a nurse sitting at Marsha's bedside, the caregiver dying while the friend begins to prepare for the rest of a lifetime without someone who had always been next to her.

She turns her head, bemused, when I ask her what she wanted to be when she was growing up. "I just fell into everything I did." After nursing had fallen through, she took glamorous jobs in New York. She was a Seventh Avenue model, meaning that she paraded down runways modeling the latest in fashion in a time when supermodels didn't exist. She was also a Star Girl at Stern Brothers Department Store, where she worked as a personal shopper for women who could afford to employ personal shoppers. Life as a single woman in the city must have been risque in a way that it cannot be for me. I imagine her, blonde and trim, wearing beautiful skirts and sweaters, walking tastefully but suggestively down the Avenue, catch-

ing the eyes of potential suitors. I can nearly hear her coming home, paper shopping bags of just-worn clothes crumpling as she pushes through the apartment doorway to greet her sisters and roommates, home from her day at work. I wonder if this is what the scene looked like the day she came home to find two strange young men sitting on the couch. And he looked up, taken by this radiant beauty who stood in the living room, cheeks flushed from the cold of the 1942 winter. Hugh McLaren had just come from the very store in which she worked , where he had been shopping for a new overcoat. He had met a friend there, who asked him to join him in going to the apartment of a young lady he knew. As her sisters entertained the men, they introduced them to their younger sister, Gertrude Helen.

Sometime later, after they had finished their tea and the conversation had slowed, the two men excused themselves. As they stood in the foyer, they paused to put on their coats. Hugh's friend told him that he was interested in asking the blonde out on the date. Stoically, young Coast Guard Lieutenant McLaren told him that this wouldn't be possible, since he was sure that she was the woman he was going to marry.

Of course, he had decided this without asking her. Trudy was engaged to a man named Paul, whom she cared about, but didn't particularly love. The man she really liked, Arnie, was not someone of whom her parents would have approved. Despite learning all of this, Hugh persisted. He wanted to give her an engagement ring for her birthday the following month. She refused, thinking him forward, but was somehow intrigued. Eventually, she agreed to go on a date with him, her promise to Paul broken, and the forbidden man out of her mind for a while. A relationship began to develop, but faltered along the way somewhere. They broke up, and Hugh was called to Boston for a few months.

About seven or eight months later, Hugh was coming back into town for a day, and decided to call Trudy to see if they could get together, if only for a drink. She hadn't been taking his calls, but missed him, and found no harm in a simple drink and a few minutes of small talk. But that was hardly what happened. By the time their glasses were empty, they were laughing and smiling again. He was talking about getting engaged again, and this time, she said that she could see them doing it sometime in the future. He would be in Florida for three months, and they would make it official upon

his return to New York.

The next morning, the couple walked to Grand Central Station to meet Hugh's father, who would be arriving in town at nine. The three decided to have breakfast together. No sooner did Mr. McLaren pull out his chair to sit down at the table in the diner did he say, "So, I hear you're getting married." She nearly missed her own chair upon sitting down, thudding a bit too hard onto the seat. They had agreed to wait until three months, but apparently Hugh had been too excited to keep the news from his family. She thought that she would have time to think about it, but realized as she sat in front of the two expectant, smiling men that this time she would walk down the aisle.

The wedding date was set in 1944, and was pending every day. Hugh was on twenty-four hour notice, and could have been called to Washington at any moment. He would have been sent to the Azores as a civilian, to serve as a Panamerican representative. If he had been caught, he would have been executed as a spy. This was all confidential, and even his mother, who was incredibly close, did not know what could happen to him. All she knew was that she always had to have a bag packed for him, like for a woman, nine months pregnant, ready to jump into the car and head to the hospital at any moment. The bride was glad that she didn't know the danger of his mission until after the war.

The wedding took place on the scheduled Saturday, and was a small affair with just close family members invited. The wartime economy and circumstances didn't allow for a large church wedding, with siblings in satin and mothers shedding tears onto their husbands' tuxedo sleeves. Hugh went to serve shortly after the ceremony. During the war, Trudy tells me, she volunteered with the USO, and took up Hawaiian dancing. She danced at the shows for the soldiers, swaying her hips in a grass skirt rather than in fashion show styles.

When the war was over, the newlywed couple remained in Washington, DC. They then moved to Boston, where Trudy loved the atmosphere and the people. They did not stay there long, moving to Cape Cod, where Hugh had been restationed. Then they returned to Boston, where his new job with a building corporation took him to work on building a tower. They lived in Cape Cod one more time before he received his official discharge. They

returned to New York, purchasing a house in Hollis, Queens. They moved once again, this time to Burlington, Vermont, where they met many friends that she still keeps in touch with today. Hugh stayed there to help complete a hospital. When it was done, they finally settled in Syosset in November of 1952.

I realize while she tells me about all of this, that she tells me nothing about her own job. It is understood that she was his wife, and took over where his mother left off in a sense, using her cooking skills to entertain to the delight of their friends and Hugh's important business associates. In a way, she became her mother as well. I can hardly imagine being as patient as she was, moving so often, entertaining constantly. But I understand better when she explains to me that her husband has been her closest friend, and she describes him with the tenderness that I reserve for only my significant other. I realize that though I would express my love differently, we feel the same about our relationships, and it simultaneously makes me feel warm about their marriage and my future.

"Rotten," is the word she uses sarcastically, a glint in her eye. When you ask her to talk about her children, she is like any mother, pride welling up inside of her, expressed similarly about two very different children. Nancy came home from the hospital to the house in Hollis in 1946. She was a strong girl, an elite student. A portrait of her sits in a frame on a small end table across the room. I study her elegant face. The photo seems to be from high school, her fashionable flipped hair brushes her shoulders,and bright eyes peer from behind bangs. After completing the Syosset Central School District's curriculum, she went to Drexel on a scholarship. She wanted to work in fashion merchandising. She was immediately hired by Bloomingdale's, her first choice of any department store. She made full buyer there in four and half years, which was unheard of for a female. Her college roommates had been intimidated by a male boss, were told that they didn't have the talent, and swiftly gave up. Nancy overcame the man's obnoxious character by acting as she did with her father, with brashness and affection. She was sent to Europe four or five times a year to purchase the best of the new collections for her store. Her success continued, until she met her future husband, Bob, and decided to leave. Bob owned a casino in Las Vegas, where she moved when they got married. Much to her

father's chagrin, she decided to elope. Her younger sister would get the large wedding that both her older sister and parents never had. Nancy doesn't have a paying job, but is an important figure in Las Vegas charity, coordinating big Andre Agassi fund raisers and setting up charity dinners. She raises the couple's only child, Lindsay, whose picture is lined up with her mother's on the end table. The resemblance is striking. She is almost exactly like her mother, and is now nearly fourteen. She is about to make her debut into Las Vegas society.

Patricia, Trudy says, would have been an only child if she would have been born first. The first story she tells me of Patti's youth is of her disappearing one summer afternoon, only to turn up high in a neighbor's tree. When Trudy looked out her kitchen window and saw her daughter hanging at an unsafe height, she ran out of the house and insisted that she come down immediately. The little girl proceeded to reply, "If you're so nervous, go back into the house." Another time, two-year-old Patti got angry at her mother in the mall, so she decided to remove all of her clothes and run through a department store. Trudy, so angry she couldn't speak, grabbed Patti and threw her into the back seat of the car, warning her that her father would deal with her as soon as he got home. She was so afraid that she walked with her backside against the wall for days. Trudy rises from her chair and demonstrates her daughter's walk, and I have to stop myself from laughing. Patti never liked school, though her parents always expected her to go to college. Their assumption proved to be wrong when after she was accepted into a school and had attended orientation, she decided not to go because her high school sweetheart, Norman, had decided not to go. They married in 1977. Their union has resulted in two children, Katie, the eldest, and Michael. Katie is very shy, though when she gets on a stage, she becomes outgoing, which fascinates Trudy. Michael is a blonde cutie, just finishing the second grade. He has an amazing vocabulary and a sizable personality to match. He and his sister fight ceaselessly. Trudy describes Norman as "an enigma." I remember the stories my mother used to tell me about him not showing up at Trudy and Hugh's for family gatherings because he said he didn't feel like attending. No doubt because she knows that I'm probably thinking of these stories, she comes to her son-in-law's defense by explaining that his family life was difficult, and that she

believes that if Patti doesn't have a problem with it, neither should she. She explains that both of her sons-in-law have come from broken homes, and that she doesn't feel she can judge them because she hasn't experienced what they have, and has seen them deal with the consequences.

This leads to an inevitable conversation about her role as a daughter-in-law, about which I have particular interest. She and my mother have become better friends because they both have strained relationships with their mothers-in-law. Some of the stories that she tells me make me grateful for the difficult but polite relationship that I have with my boyfriend's mother. Hugh's mother refused to accept Trudy at first, mainly because she was too fashionable. She believed that, because Trudy wore nail polish, it reflected negatively on her moral character. She says that his mother constantly tried to break up the couple, even after they were married and had children to think about. Hugh seemed to favor trying to keep peace, putting up with his mother's surprise visits, her expectations that the couple would always be at Sunday dinner, and her need to hold on to her son and refusal to acknowledge that it was time to give him up to his wife. Eventually, Trudy could stand being silent no longer. When her mother-in-law made a comment about how lucky she was to have good crystal and china (which she had given them as a wedding present and for which she expected them to be eternally grateful), Trudy boxed it all up and got into the car, ready to take it back. She enclosed a note asking her mother-in-law to send her a large silver platter, so that she could return her son to her as well.

Hugh stopped her, and promised that he would resolve the competition. He confronted his mother, telling her she had to accept that his wife came first, and she needed to accept it if she wanted to be involved in his life anymore. Despite his mother's immediate protests that Trudy was trying to ruin the close family relationship, Hugh stood his ground. It took her three months to decide if she could accept being anything but the only woman in his life. Over the next twenty years, the two women didn't argue again, but there was always tension between them. Three weeks before she died, Trudy's mother-in-law finally accepted her. "If I would have picked a wife for my son, I think it might have been you," she said. Trudy then tells me stories about my grandmother and my mother that I didn't even know. I am reminded that not only do I have lessons to learn from her sto-

ries, but that she knows stories about my family from a time I was too young to understand. And now, I can speak about my own experience. I am overwhelmed suddenly by a feeling of history and multi-generational sisterhood.

The conversation becomes more casual. I put my notebook aside for a while, and we talk about more broad subjects, like travel. She tells me that she has been to every state except for Washington, North Dakota, Oregon, Alaska, and Hawaii. She spent many winters in Florida, and began going there regularly once she had children. She explains the beauty of Mexico, and for a moment, I flash back to a memory of sitting on this very couch, watching slides of that vacation. We talk about what she's up to now, and about her new church. Trudy was baptized and confirmed a Lutheran, married in the Presbyterian church, accepted into a nondenominational Christian church once in Syosset, and has spent the last six years at a Presbyterian church she found particularly enticing. She tells how helpful the congregation was when Hugh died. I'm leery to bring up the topic, but it comes up anyway. I suppose it's hard to avoid. His birthday is coming up, and my mother says that she has been emotional about it lately. I don't want to be responsible for making her sad, so I skirt that issue, and talk about community service I have done at school that mirrors the work of her new church.

In thinking about Hugh's death, I draw again from my own memories. We called him Uncle Hughie. I can see a picture of us in my mind, of he and I when I was about four years old. I am riding a tricycle that must have been Nancy's, and he is standing behind me. The two of us are both happy. I am wearing a red hooded jacket, my tongue hanging out of my mouth eagerly as I lean over the handlebars, trying to pick up speed. He is protectively behind me, jovial, probably remembering what it was like when he did this with his own daughters. I remember that he was intensely loyal to his alma mater, Dartmouth. I remember getting a school sweatshirt for Christmas one year when I was small. At their home gatherings, he would always have a scotch and soda in his hand. I remember the way the ice used to clink against the glass when he'd get up to change the big band records he would play over and over again. He was always dressed in plaid golf pants that my little sister and I used to mock as we peered at him out in the

yard from behind our kitchen curtains. I remember him handing us Halloween candy; their house was always the first stop on the block. As executive director of the school buildings division of the New York City school system, he supervised the schools I passed through, and those my younger sister still attends. And I remember my mother's voice, protective over the long distance line, telling me about his death. I remember I sent Trudy a condolence card that had purple flowers on it that I'd bought at the college bookstore, and thought about how hard it would have been to go to the funeral.

I can only guess what he meant to her, but I know that now is not the time for this topic, and that neither of us can really handle it right now. I don't have the energy. The house has grown dark around us; we've talked now for hours. I suppose I'm remembering him as his cuckoo clock chimes, combining my picture of him with the vision of him asking her out on their first date with my memories, and Trudy's face before me.

As we draw near the end, I ask Trudy about her greatest successes. She says that she is most proud of the successes of her husband and children, and now, her grandchildren. I know that personally there is much more of which to be proud. She is an outstanding friend, both to my mother and to the seemingly hundreds of other people with whom she is either playing bridge or golf, or having a lunch date, or working in the church Women's Guild. She is a source of endless stories, about those people and about our neighbors, most of whom we don't know anymore. And I have my memories of a patient grandmother figure who made me the welcome home sign that graced my garage door the day I was brought home from the hospital, and who played pretend tennis with me, each of us carrying metal strainers and tossing a bright green ball.

There is no doubt that she has changed since Hugh died, but some of it is simply because she has gotten a bit older. But the Swedish beauty is still beneath, her undyed hair still yellow, her laughter still clear. *Newsday,* a New York magazine, printed an article about the evolution of our town from twelve years ago. She, being one of the original residents of the town, of course was interviewed, and I am struck by the image it provides me of a time when I knew her, but was too young to appreciate her.

Trudy McLaren doesn't play bridge as obsessively as she once did, and

it has been years since the striking blonde waited in a shiny yellow convertible for the arrival of the 7:05 from the city, her husband and three other neighborhood Dashing Dans. She lends me the copy of the article she has saved so that I can learn about the history of the town. I thank her profusely for sharing the past several hours with me, and she tells me that she didn't mind it at all. And together, we descend her kitchen stoop, walk across the small patch of grass that separates our patios, and enter my house, where my mother has dinner waiting for us both.

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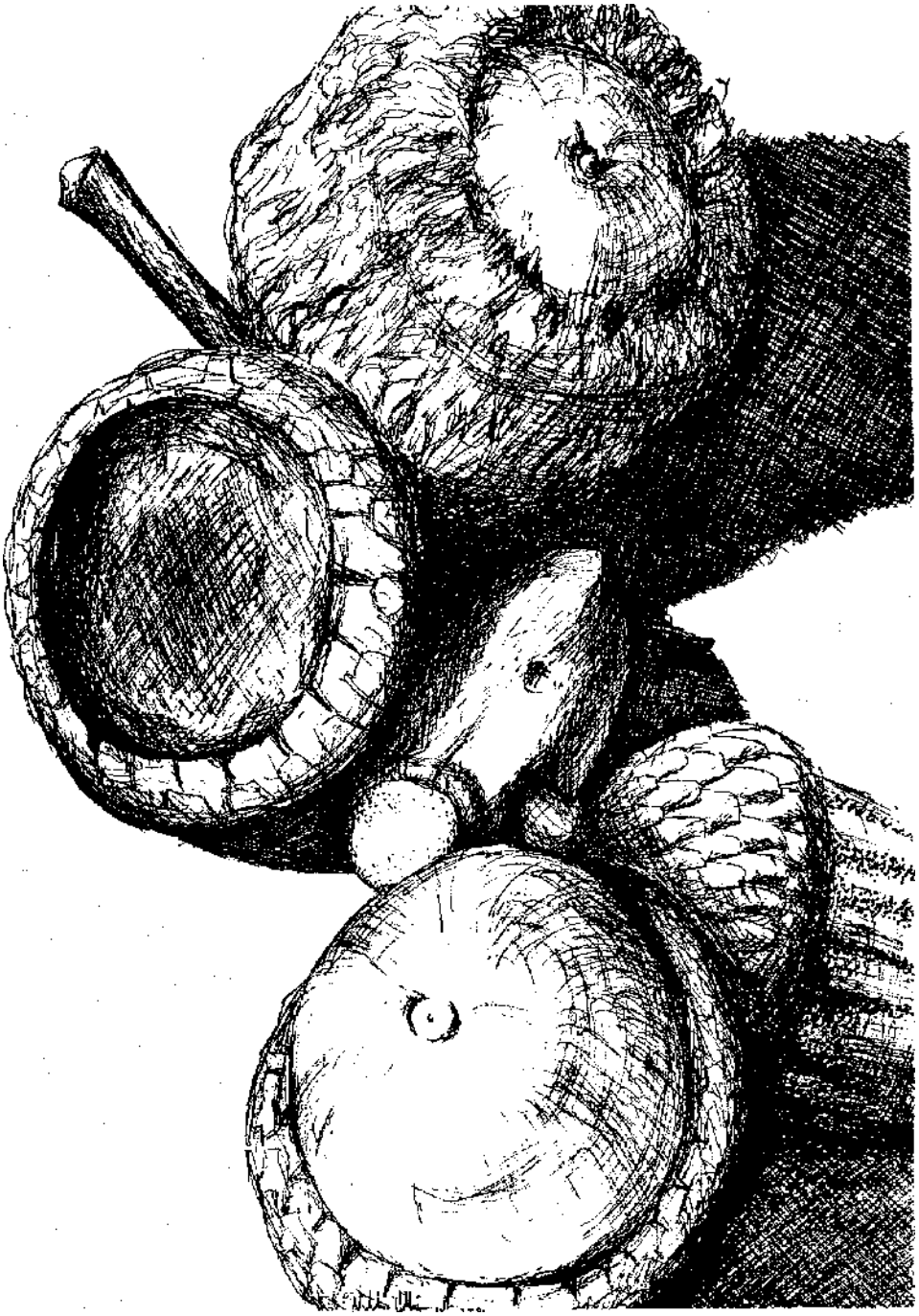


On Being a Reader

Heather McCarron

It's not a terribly difficult thing to be, and you can do it anywhere, anytime. Beneath a tree, in bed, on a train, even walking down the street, as long as you stop at the corner and look both ways before you cross. You can sit or stand, lie down on your back or your stomach. It can be done in public or private, indoors or outdoors, anywhere, as long as you've got enough light to see the print. Best, it's cheap, affordable to anyone with a few bucks in his pocket; if you want, even free, as long as you don't forget your library card. You can do it anytime, too. On your lunch break, after dinner, on a cold winter afternoon in your living room while the snow falls outside, or in a lounge chair at the beach, as the sun warms your skin.

Despite the relative ease of becoming a Reader, for some reason, not everyone wants to be one. I'm not talking about the thirty million Americans who are illiterate, who for some reason or another never were able to learn how. I'm referring to the tens of millions of men, women, and children across America who turn up their noses at the sight of a book, who actually say, "I hate reading!" Nothing irritates me more than those three words. "How can you hate reading?" I ask. "Because it's so boring." Boring! Nothing could be further from the truth! With each book you choose, you visit an entirely new world.

It doesn't matter what kind of book you choose. The good, the bad, and the ugly can all be fun. Clive James once wrote a review of a Judith Krantz novel, *Princess Daisy.* He had less than a positive opinion of the book, attacking Krantz's inability to create realistic characters or believable plots, and her simplistic, Harlequin-romance writing style. James disliked the novel, but said, it should not be despised; I don't begrudge the time I have put into reading *Princess Daisy"* because even reading something ridicu-

lous, as any Reader will tell you, can be as much fun as reading something which moves your heart and soul. I am reminded of a Cecil Vyse commentary on Eleanor Lavish's book, *A Room With A View.* He points out the split infinitives and "an absurd account of a view." "I think nothing's funnier than to hear silly things read aloud," says Lucy. That line perfectly sums up why bad books can be just as pleasurable to read as great books. No, Danielle Steele won't change my world view, nor will I be very impressed with her writing style, but even something as tawdry and inane as her work can be a welcome relief to daily hum-drum life. Sometimes, when a Dickens or a Tolstoy just feels too heavy in my hands, when turning nine hundred pages of difficult diction seems too much effort, I like to grab something a little silly off the shelf for a good laugh and a quick skim, like *The David Letterman Book of Top Ten Lists,* or the adapted-from-film version of *The Karate Kid.* Being a reader does not mean that you must have read Nabokov or Nietzsche; it simply means that you like to visit another world for a couple of hours, to lose yourself in a book.

The telephone rings in my parents' house. "Have you read the newest Grisham?" my grandfather asks Dad. "I've got Peter's copy if you want it." Books in my family are often borrowed by a sibling and returned by a fourth cousin, six years later at a wedding. Owners' names have to be inscribed on the inside covers if they ever hope to see their property again. (As a Christmas gift one year, we received an embosser that leaves a raised imprint of ridges encircling a unicorn and "The McCarron Family Library." The official seal adorns hundreds of our books—Tom Clancy and John Grisham, books about Ireland and the Scopes trial, mystery novels and cookbooks). My parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents will read anything they can obtain. It doesn't have to be Updike or Orwell, though both have made the rounds. Right now, an aunt is passing around the Colin Powell autobiography; a grandmother is sending around a novel with *Clown* in the title; and a Robert Ludlum book is always on the reading circuit. They'll read anything recommended by another family member, because anything that offers the opportunity to relax is worth reading, no matter how simple or difficult the book may be.

If reading is such a great past-time, why isn't America a nation of Readers? I'm sure much of the issue deals with the fact that we no longer

know how to enjoy leisure, and reading is a time-consuming, leisurely activity. You have to be willing to sit still for an extended period of time, hold the same immobile object between your hands, shift your body when your lower spine begins to stiffen from the strain of not moving, ignore all activity around you for a few hours, and move your eyes rapidly from left to right down the page. It's infinitely easier to watch television for a couple of minutes, changing the channel when a story doesn't interest you, but a book, if written by a good story-teller (not necessarily a good writer-John Jakes and James Michener come to mind), will always arrest your attention. Even if you're not crazy about the book, you might not discover this until the hundredth page, and by then, you've invested too much time to put the book down. Besides, the great thing about a book is that with every page comes the possibility that the story will get better, that something great will happen.

A Reader never admits to defeat. I've tried reading *Middlemarch* three times now, but each time I get to Dorothea's engagement, I cast the book aside in despair. Why couldn't Eliot have picked up the pace for this one? *Silas Marner* was a breeze and *Adam Bede* felt just like a Hardy novel—a bit of a challenge to get through the lengthy Victorian sentences, but a quick read nonetheless. *Middlemarch* never seems to end, never goes anywhere. What is really distressing about the situation, though, is that I know the book has a conclusion, that all of the loose ends come together, because I've seen the BBC mini-series on *Masterpiece Theater,* and I know that Dorothea will marry Casaubon and be a miserable, devoted wife. For some reason, though, I just can't finish the novel, can't wait for the denouement. But I never give up. That's the important thing about us Readers. We're a plucky group, intent upon completing everything we start. There's a bookmark in *Middlemarch,* so I'll know where to pick up when I return. Of course, I'll have to start over next time from the beginning, and I know this when I insert the bookmark, but I still put it in; when I try *Middlemarch* again, I won't be re-reading it—I'll be refreshing my memory. I might even get beyond the engagement, but I'll never quit. Who knows? Someday, fifty years from now, George Eliot and I might actually get to the last chapter, and see Dorothea married to her true love, Ladislaw.

When you read a book, you and the author work together toward coming to a conclusion. You are asked to follow the author on a journey, and you give him your hand, but he doesn't expect you to be a blind follower, like a lemming leaping off the cliff after the one in front of it. The author wants you to develop your own opinions about his characters. He wants to surprise you with his plot development and literary pyrotechnics, and all the little tricks he pulls out of his pen to seize your attention, to make you think, "Wow!"

E.M. Forster put it best when he said that you are being influenced by a writer when you say, "I might have written that myself if I hadn't been so busy." A good author knows just what to do to make the Reader feel as though the book was written "just for me." That is how Stanley Elkin's *The MacGuffin* touched me. After ten pages, I was in love. The plot was warped and insane—two days in the life of a paranoid, middle-aged City Commissioner of Streets fleeing from Oriental rug smuggling rings, a crooked mayor named Hizzoner, and a son who may or may not have been involved in the hit-and-run death of an Iranian graduate student. The premise was enough to send thrills of delight rushing through my body as I grasped the book, eagerly flipping pages, not even realizing until I was nearly done that all 250 pages comprised a single chapter. The story fit together so well, flawless in construction, and was just the kind of zany flight of imagination I might have created myself had I ever the inspiration. I know, though, that I could never have written the novel—not just because the plot is so unbelievable, so complex and twisted that no one but Stanley Elkin could have had the language mastery required to take the reader on such a wild mind trip. Elkin has a special style, one that many may attempt to imitate, but that no one will surpass.

Sometimes, while reading Elkin, I'll come across a paragraph that I'll have to read several times because it is so wonderfully crafted. So goes one part in *The MacGuffin,* where I had to do this over and over again:

> -Are you psycho, or what? You fair give me vertigo.
> Until you've walked thirty-nine steps in my macmoccassins,
> kiddo, don't you go be comin' up in my face like you be
> some man who know too much.

-Why?
-Cause it give me the frenzy.
-It do, do it, Mr. Bones?
-Without a shadow of a doubt, Rebecca.
-Well, I'll be spellbound, Druff went on.

It took me a few readings before I made the connection. *"Vertigo, Psycho,* Frenzy...Hey, those are all Hitchcock films!" I read some interviews Elkin gave at the time and learned that Druff's alter-ego is his MacGuffin, the device Hitchcock used over and over in his movies for plot advancement. Cary Grant puts his briefcase down at a public pay phone. Another man puts the exact case next to it. They both make telephone calls, and then the other man picks up the wrong briefcase, plunging Grant into a murder mystery. The briefcase is the MacGuffin. It's the element that sets the ball rolling, that turns an ordinary day into something wild and frenetic. I went back, and read the passage again and thought, "This Elkin guy is amazing! Who'd have thought that?" In a way, Elkin, like all authors, wants his reader to make connections, to figure out the whole book with only a gentle shove in the right direction. When a writer can do that with his literature, when he makes a game of it, or better yet, a secret between himself and his Reader, he has really accomplished something magical.

The act of reading can be viewed as a partnership between the Reader and the Writer. Neither can succeed without the other. Forster said that the best books are those which "tend towards a condition of anonymity...To forget its Creator is one of the functions of a Creation." Though I usually agree with what he says, here I have a different opinion. Literature can't be anonymous. Even when the writer's name is unknown or lost, he still exists. He manipulates his Reader's emotions, evokes images in the mind and makes a companion of the Reader. Reader and author walk through literature together, making discoveries, but also disagreeing with each other's conclusions. Perhaps that's the best thing about being a Reader. If you take your position seriously, and allow yourself to ride with the writer, not only will you learn something about another person—the author—but you'll probably discover something about yourself.

I can still remember with vivid clarity the day I became a Reader, the

day I shared my reading with the author and no one else. Until then, I was at the mercy of my parents and grandparents to read to me. They bought my books, deciding for me that *Make Way for Ducklings* was a must-have for my little library, while Dr. Seuss was not. The tones in their voices, as they read, affected my perception, and before I could read for myself, I would sit on my bed and look at the pictures, trying to remember the words that my mother told me went along with them, never sure if they were the correct words or if she had made them up.

Then, one afternoon, just as I turned four, the words inside a book actually made sense to me. I could *read* them. I had been looking through a thick collection of children's stories, the biggest book I owned, and my most prized treasure. I stopped on a page with a picture of a blue tugboat floating in the water. I don't remember actually trying to puzzle out the words, or what the story was about, but I do remember that moment when the little black lines came together and formed "boat, river, and whistle." From then on, I could create my own impressions of the books I read.

Once I became a Reader, my parents stepped back and allowed me to choose the books I wanted to read. When Troll Books circulars were distributed at school, I filled out the order forms and paid for the books with my allowance. I started walking to the library by myself when I was nine, spending hours on my tip-toes and my knees, reaching for books with attractive bindings and exciting titles. I had a *My Friend Flicka* and *Black Beauty* pre-pubescent horse obsession, common in young girls, which gradually became a preference for gender-neutral books by Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume, *Ralph the Mouse, Iggy's House,* and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing.* Then there was a period where I read nothing but *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* books, over and over again, memorizing every page of Jo March's and Anne Shirley's lives. My parents were pleased with my voracious appetite for books, not just any books, but classic, well-written children's books which had won awards and critical acclaim. But then, some time around my twelfth birthday, something snapped.

I wanted guts and gore, horror and mystery. Vampires. Rabid dogs. The possessed. Stephen King. Dean Koontz. My parents were. . .concerned. . .with my choice in literature, to say the least, but they let me have

it, no matter how gruesome it seemed. I don't think they ever read Virginia Woolf's essay, "How Should One Read a Book?", but they certainly followed her opening advice:

> The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions.

My parents trusted that some day I would want a change of pace in my reading material, and that day came—four years later—when I read Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd.* The day I read that book, my future as a Reader of the highest caliber was ensured. King became second to Eliot, Koontz to Faulkner. Gothic gore was cast into the deepest recess of my closet, replaced by classics.

If anything, my appetite for books increased after I shed the influence of horror novels. I wanted to read as much as I could, and perhaps because I inhaled mediocre books such as *Salem's Lot* and *Cujo,* when I finally did discover the "good stuff," I was able to distinguish on my own the difference between good and bad literature. Forster quotes Carlyle as once saying, "A good book is not the facts that can be got out of it, but the kind of resonance that it awakes in our minds." This is the greatest thing that can happen to a Reader, when he discovers something inside himself as a result of reading a book.

I was getting into tougher material, challenging myself with Shakespeare, Updike, and Vonnegut. Eventually, I chose to move beyond fiction. I tried some poetry—didn't like most of it, and still don't. Maybe if I'd started out with the easy stuff, like Shel Silverstein's poems, universally loved by children, or maybe even someone precise, like Robert Frost. But no, it was my choice to start with e.e. cumming's "anyone lived in a pretty how town." I loved the way the words flowed in undulating rhythms—"summer autumn winter spring" and "sun moon stars rain." I could actually feel the words rise and fall, "with up so floating many bells

down," and could see the children guessing, "but only a few/and down they forgot as up they grew." Cummings' words had a magical attraction for me, and though I often became lost, uncertain of what I was reading, I didn't mind the confusion. The words were what I loved, the way he placed them on the page in strange and exciting patterns, waiting for me to unravel them. It was as though "anyone" was written just to enrapture and mesmerize me.

Reading has become an obsession for me, and buying books a hobby. I still go to the public library occasionally, but I've developed my taste in literature to such a degree over the past two decades that I can determine from reading a book cover if I'm going to like the book in Barnes and Noble. Even my old college books from Freshman year, which I have no intention of reading ever again, such as *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas,* are perched on my shelves. Something is so pleasing about seeing the rows of books, neatly lined up, all different colors and authors and genres together, like Thomas Jefferson's library at Monticello. Behind glass cabinet doors, Jefferson had thousands of books—poetry, history, philosophy, theology—a microcosm of the world on a couple of shelves. Looking at my books makes me feel as Forster felt:

> It is very pleasant to sit with them in the firelight for a couple of minutes, not reading, not even thinking, but aware that they, with their accumulated wisdom and charm, are waiting to be used, and that my library, in its tiny imperfect way, is a successor to the great private libraries of the past.

It isn't just owning books that excites me. Seeing their worn bindings, knowing that I am the person who first cracked open their pages, gives me the feeling of complete possession. There is a certain thrill in taking a virgin copy of a text, and opening it to the center, folding it back so the two covers meet, hearing the sound of stiff paper cracking.

Even when my book has been used by someone else, I still love seeing

the broken binding. The more worn the spine, the more cherished it has been. A paperback is best when you can hardly read the title because the cover has been bent so many times it is whitened, blurring the words. The more dog-eared the pages, the more underlinings, the more hand-written comments in the margins, the more I can see what about the book affected other people. Reading an older book takes on new meaning. Not only is it a relationship between myself and the author, but between myself and all previous readers who have brought different perspectives to the literature. I love going back and being able to see myself and others puzzle over a book like Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49,* "What kind of name is Genghis Cohen?" "Does Tristero exist or not?" "Vesperhaven House—death with meaning or meaningless death?" And on nearly every page a solitary question mark adorns the margin, expressing combined confusion more concretely than could any words. To this day, I remain perplexed by the novel, still trying to figure out just what is going on. I know that I will probably never have an answer, that each reading of *Lot 49* will leave me with more questions than before. The great thing about reading is that each time you read a book, hope remains that this time, it will all make sense, because each reading brings new understandings, deeper levels of meaning and interpretation.

Nothing has given me more joy than being a Reader. On cold afternoons, when a blizzard rages outside, I curl up in a wing-backed chair, cover myself in one of the afghans knitted by my great-grandmother, and sip orange pekoe tea as I turn the pages of a book, perhaps the complete works of Jane Austen, which I unearthed in a local bookstore last winter. I'd never read Austen's work, and thought, "Why not?" In four days, I raced through *Emma, Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility,* and *Mansfield Park.* They were not difficult; I realized that Austen told the same story over and over, about young women searching for love. What a joy it was to be transported away from the bitterly cold world outside my house to pre-Victorian England, where people had noble aspirations of finding true love, unlike our times, where we must evade terrorism, famine, and gang warfare. When the snow stopped falling, I had gone far away without ever leaving my chair.

With the relative simplicity of obtaining books today—practically every

town has a public library-it still amazes me that of all the people who have cracked the code of language, so few take the time to be transported by it. It's easier, I suppose, to turn on the television, to get the answer to the murder mystery at the end of the hour. But you can't understand a character on a television program in sixty minutes nearly as well as you can someone in a novel, someone whose thoughts and experiences you share. With television, you never become acquainted with the creator of the character; television writers stay hidden, are nothing more than a quickly scrolled name at the end of the program. A novelist, on the other hand, stays with you all the way to the end, interjecting every now and then to make known his presence.

Readers have such fulfilling interactions with books that I'm amazed there aren't more of us, especially now, when the world seems to be falling down around us, when children are starving, racial tensions raging, and unemployment running rampant. This is a perfect time for people to turn to literature, both for escape and for a better understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. It isn't much of a commitment to read a novel, a poem, or an essay, contrary to common misconception. All you have to do is surrender yourself, body and soul, to the writer's vision. It only takes a few hours, and when you're finished, you feel like you've taken a piece of another world into your own. Characters come alive, become new friends who accompany you wherever you go, who are reliable when you need them. The great thing about literature is that you can choose what you want to read; you're not at the whim of a network programmer who decides that *Mad About You* will work best in this time slot when what you want to see is *Law and Order*. You can read anything you want, any time you want. There are no restrictions. As a Reader, you are free to make all the decisions. You don't have to wait for the commercial break to step away for a few minutes. You don't have to worry about bothering anyone with your reading—it is an isolated activity, with no volume control knob. You have the power to choose Danielle Steele or Charles Dickens. Once a book has been published, you never need fear its cancellation. It will always exist somewhere in the world, on some fellow Reader's bookshelf.

Waking Up to the Bomb

Rana Malek

"Oh shit, please don't let it be the Arabs." My prayer to any existing deity escaped my lips as I heard on the radio that a federal building in Oklahoma City had been destroyed by a car bomb. As soon as the nineteen casualties were mentioned, the NPR report moved on to say that "three Middle Eastern-looking men were seen driving away from the scene."

The rest of my day became dedicated to the bombing. On the news, pictures of dead children were being flashed, horrifying those who saw them. Reports of a Jordanian-American being detained in London's airport were mentioned almost simultaneously with the death count.

The atmosphere in my house was somber that evening, more so than in a lot of other homes. When my dad came home, we were told that if we went to school the next day, we shouldn't take part in the discussion of the bombing, shouldn't attract any more attention to ourselves than needed. It was tempting not to go to school, and I wouldn't have been alone if I hadn't, because many other Arab-American parents kept their kids home from school the day after the bombing.

I went to school though, because I was naïve. My school was quite multiracial and we never had skinheads marching in the hallways. I never really felt at odds because of my heritage. Sure there was the awkward period during Desert Storm, when anti-Arab hate crimes increased by 300% in a year, but I never confronted the attitude I was forced to face in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing.

That day in school was unbelievable. I had never hid my heritage from anyone, because I had never felt the need. After four years, my classmates knew a lot about me and I knew a lot about them. That was the one day in

my life that I wanted to make my heritage go away. In my AP classes, Oklahoma City was brought up, and as people shared their hurt and outrage, many cautious glances were thrown in my direction. The discussion focused more around the perpetrators than on the deed. What kind of monsters could kill children, what religious cause could warrant such violence? Of course they were talking about Islam, and the monsters were Arabs. The words were carefully chosen on my behalf. The racism didn't become truly clear until I went to International Business. It was a class I had to take for a graduation requirement, and it was a far cry from the atmosphere of my AP classes. As my teacher clicked and clacked her way into the classroom, she tossed her hair and asked, "People, is there any International News we should discuss?" Immediately the class erupted into cries of Oklahoma City. The loudest voice dominated, and we all listened as Christina shared her vast and impressive knowledge on the subject: "A bunch of Arabs blew up the building because they knew children were in there. In fact, they arrested the three Arab men who were driving away from the building this morning." Her words set off a vast array of the many Middle Eastern Scholars in the room who explained how killing children was typical of Arabs, how mad they were at the government for letting "them" in the country, how they better catch those s.o.b.'s and make them pay. I watched in horror as each statement became more unveiled and more violent. I watched in horror as the teacher made no attempt to explain that no suspects existed, and I watched in horror as she nodded her head in agreement at times. She knew I was Arabic, and the rest of the class knew it too.

Somehow the day ended, and I came home to the nervousness of Janet Reno's press conference. I actually heard the first part on NPR on my way home. I had no way of seeing the sketches of the two suspects, of knowing what they looked like. As the car pulled into the garage, I ran into the house, up the stairs and to the TV where my mom was watching. As the camera moved to the sketches, I grabbed my mom's knee. "Mom, they can't be Arabs, they're white!" John Doe #1 was as un-Arab as possible with his fair hair and eyes. It was such an incredibly emotional moment, my joy at the feeling of being vindicated of a crime I didn't commit, and the horror that the nation's hysteria made me experience racism up close.

I do admit that my first inclination was that the bombers were Arabs. After all, we had the World Trade Center bombing and the conspiracy by the fundamentalists led by Sheik Rahman. In addition, the Islamic world has remained somewhat of a mystery to most Americans. The press has chosen to constantly focus on the anti-American rallies and the fundamentalism. Stereotypical movies such as *True Lies* further implant the notion of missile-toting, American-hating swarthy Muslim men, crusading for a radical religion. In other words, the press finds the minority of the fastest growing religion far more interesting than the actual, scholarly, meditative religion that it is. I didn't expect America, with all these hateful images, not to have the same suspicions that I as an Arab-American had. But what scared me at first, and then infuriated me later, was what Richard Lacayo, in a *Time* editorial, summarized as: "For a while last week, something in the national mood appeared to be turning darkly against Arab-Americans." Damn right it was. In the time between the bombing and the flashes of Timothy McVeigh's WASP face, an Arab-American woman living in Oklahoma City suffered a miscarriage in her seventh month of pregnancy after a mob surrounded her home and threw rocks through her windows and shouted racial threats. Thousands of Arab parents kept their children at home after hysteria was instilled by people like former Congressman Dave McCurdy. On the Larry King Live Show, the ex-Congressman explained that he knew Arab terrorism "could happen here." An American-Islamic convention had been held in Oklahoma City and the presence of Muslims, according to McCurdy, was proof enough that Arab terrorism could happen in Oklahoma City. In a *Newsweek* editorial, Jonathan Alter sums up McCurdy's influence: "McCurdy...got the anti-Arab finger-pointing going early by sounding on TV as if he knew what he was talking about; he didn't." So many "Middle Eastern experts" fed growing assumptions by saying that the bombing was typical of Arab terrorists, implying that killing children was typical of Arabs.

While I would accept suspicion at an initial level, I could not accept how, overnight, I became one of "them" and now it was the USA versus "them." My belief that a group is not judged by the actions of a few of its members came up against harsh reality in my America of those few days.

And even after Timothy McVeigh was arrested, it didn't end. Because

now the line was "How can it be one of us?" It fed the notion that terrorism and crime are a foreign import, when in reality America is crime's capital. Alter, in the editorial, defined the emotions of the country best when he writes, "Who can deny that it would have been emotionally easier if foreigners had done it? Had 'they' been responsible, as so many suspected, the grief and anger could have been channeled against a fixed enemy, uniting the country as only an external threat can do.. .And if we couldn't identify a country to bomb, at least we could have the comfort of knowing that the depravity of the crime—its subhuman quality—was the product of another culture unfathomably different from our own." In other words, my culture would be so much easier to associate with depravity. How am I supposed to swallow that? A culture that I associate with warmth and family and history becomes a culture of terrorists instead. We choose to accept this stereotype because it is so much easier, because to actually learn the culture would be far more difficult. It also would be so much more difficult to learn that Arab doesn't equal evil and terrorism. It is a choice of ignorance that many make, many educated and liberal minds included.

A few hours after the Reno conference, my sister called from Italy, where she was finishing her junior year of college. It was amazing that even though she was in Italy and wasn't facing what my brother, sister, and I were facing here, she knew instinctively what would be going on. And that bothers me. That the four of us have this weird sixth sense that comes with our dark hair and dark eyes. Alia's call came with the blessing of her sarcastic humor and we joked about how the next day in school we Arab-Americans could be self-righteous for a change. And as she ended our expensive phone call, she reiterated a sentiment my parents had been constantly saying: "I am sorry you have to go though this."

What infuriates me is that they are sorry. No one else is. Why should my parents and older sister be sorry because of a heritage that I was fortunate enough to receive. I wondered why NPR wasn't sorry for the claim of three Middle Eastern men driving away from the building when it turned out there was no source to back up the claim, and in fact, it was nothing but a rumor. I think my friend, Dan, who spoke in my place during that awful International Business class, summed it up when he asked: "What does it mean to look Middle Eastern? Because if it is dark hair and dark eyes, I

have both and I'm not Arabic. And what about Greeks, and Italians, and Spanish? They're all dark." And he was really right. How in the world do we pass judgment on people's ethnicities, as NPR did, on no definite source and a glance from a passing vehicle? There is a great deal of danger in identifying race by face. After all, it was the slanted eyes of the Japanese that forced them into placement camps during World War II.

I had assumed that the vindication of the Arab race would put an end to the problem. I could go to school, make a couple of remarks about how quick everyone was to judge and the whole situation would be over. In reality, it wasn't.

The bombing brought to light a decision I had to make, as to whether I would accept my heritage as an Arab-American, or to take the stance my brother had. He decided that even though my parents were Syrian, we, the kids, had no association with their heritage. We, his sisters, call him the same name he goes by in school, Sam, while my parents call him by his birth name, Hussam. He never discusses or publicizes his heritage the way my sisters and I do. But I have come to realize that Sam's position has been built up as a protection of sorts. He doesn't want to be forced into a group, a stereotype based on his birthright. And it's a path that many kids of ethnic backgrounds choose. And I do think that my brother didn't feel the effects of the bombing as much as I did, because his classmates had no real insight into his heritage.

But I came to find a flaw in his stance as well. No matter how much we choose to deny our past, it really does catch up with us. Because whenever I, or my brother, meet someone, our names automatically kick in that something is different. Eventually people wind up asking about your heritage, and no matter how born, bred, and true to the USA you are, that heritage becomes quite visible. So I have come to realize that I have this choice, to simply deal with the situation whenever it arises and pray to God that it never does, or that I can find something that makes me proud enough that I can fight the stereotypes that are going to be thrown at me.

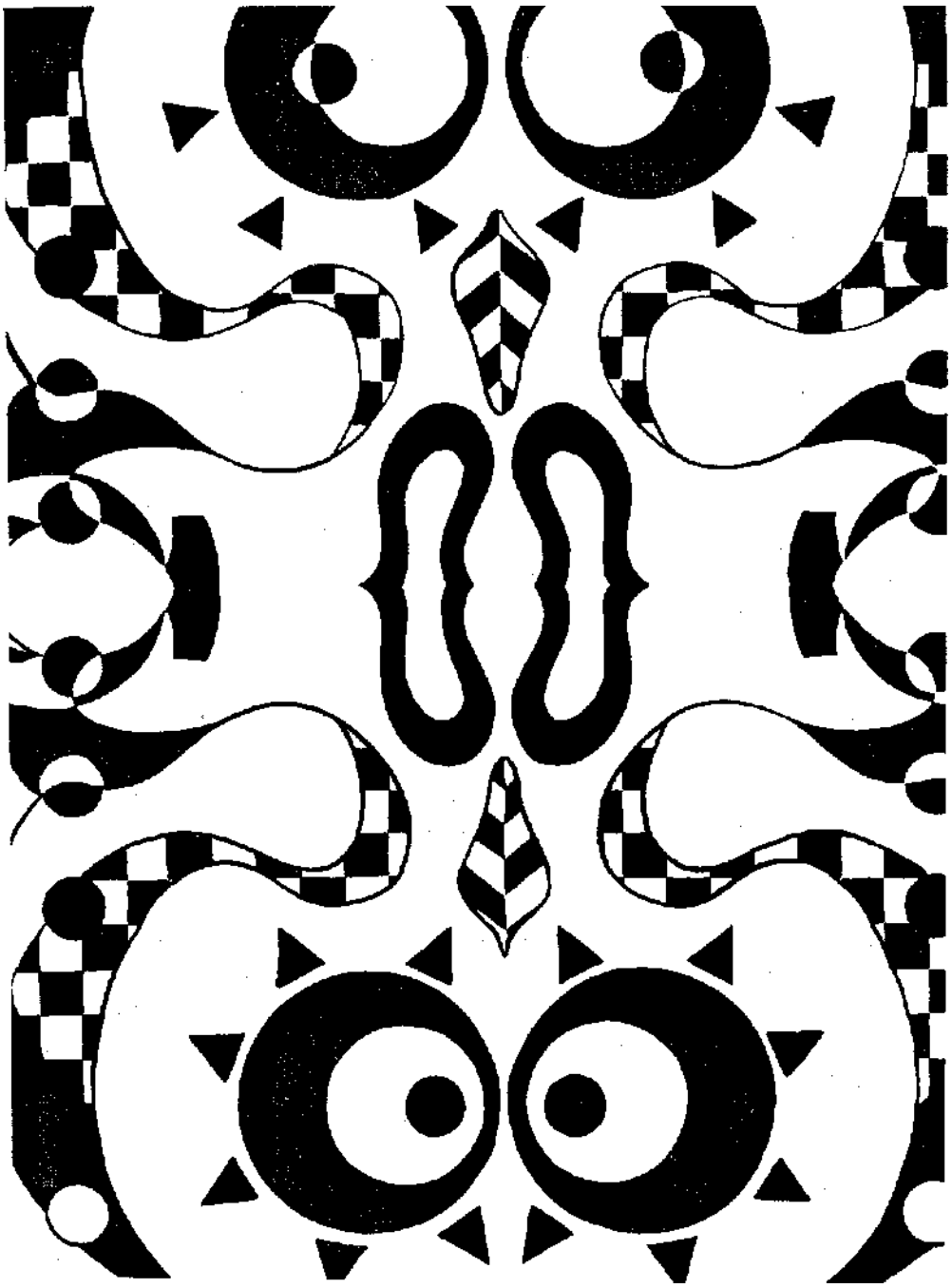
The Oklahoma Bombing has forced me to reevaluate many of my assumptions. I have the complex dilemma of trying to balance the fact that I hate some of the beliefs of my culture and the fact that I am still bonded and respect the culture in a thousand and one ways. I used to differentiate

myself by my religion: I was Christian, while most Arabs were Muslim. But that really meant nothing especially since Arab equals Muslim in this society. I found myself needing to understand a religion that I had brushed aside as not being important. I found myself dedicating so much time to reading anything I could on Islam. After all, how can we defend or insult something of which we know so little? Interestingly enough, my older sister decided to write her junior thesis on women and Islam. Even though we were separated by ocean and country, each one of us was triggered into understanding something of which we had only surface knowledge. For me, it was the fact that Oklahoma City proved that in some way, I would always be tied to my heritage. After all, chances are if something gets blown up, we will again assume it is Arabs, and I need to be prepared to face that. As for my sister, she found herself in a country that lived completely differently from the lifestyle of the Middle East, yet at the same time the sense of judgment did not exist in comparison to the USA.

Even after this searching, we both reached the same conclusions. Our relationship with this religion that so drastically affects our culture is complex. As two feminist women, we find that we are one of the first to defend Islam when it is insulted, and one of the first to critique the religion when it is evaluated by our Muslim friends. One could argue that there is no real sense to our thoughts, that we haven't reached a conclusion at all. However, after our probing and research, I think we both can defend and critique the religion far better than before Oklahoma City and her year in Italy. Truly there is some comfort in being knowledgeable about this religion. When the religion and its followers are attacked, I can tell when it is justifiable or not. I know when the truth is used in the attack, or when the truth is altered to fit devious minds. In all honesty, I don't really want to champion this cause, but I do not want to deal with the stereotypes resulting from ignorance. It is not possible to reap the benefits without being a part of the fight. I never want to go through the Oklahoma City experience again. I don't want my sisters and brother to ever have to suffer a minute of racism if I can help it. This is the only way.

The past is the past, and I can't change it or its aftermath on my heritage, but I will not allow the actions of a few to be the only representation of my culture to America. That is cheap and dangerous. America didn't

deserve the hysteria that malicious minds created in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. The anger and hatred directed against Arab-Americans faded too rapidly after the identification of the actual perpetrator. The wrath that could have bombed any Middle Eastern country was silent against the blond hair and blue eyes of Timothy McVeigh. It is frightening to contemplate where it went. Is it that we can't hate our own as much as we can others? Or is the anger waiting for the next opportunity to rear its ugly head? I don't know, and I am afraid to wonder. But from now and until that time, if it ever comes, I just might be able to do something. It just took a car bomb and racism to get me to see that.



It's a Small World After All...

Joseph Truong

A few years back, I was at the Keleti railway station in Budapest, chatting with a young Belgian girl and her Swedish friend while we were waiting for a train to whisk us off to Bulgaria for a week. Budapest was one of the last stops we'd make before arriving in Bulgaria, where a world youth conference was being held. My two friends had just finished attending another congress which ended only a few days earlier in Zaleregerszeg, a city to the west of Budapest. We were having a great time comparing our observations and adventures up to that point. Of course, we did this all in Esperanto. . .

Many Americans have never heard of Esperanto. Esperanto is that "joke" language of the media, mentioned when a comedian needs new material, or when Murphy Brown wants to be truly sarcastic. For others, it was a novelty from the 1920's, after World War I when everyone was so eager to promote world peace and understanding, long before the rise of the United States and, thus, of English. Some applaud the basic idea, but think it too obscure to ever receive recognition (thus the plethora of songs referring to Esperanto, by alternative bands such as They Might Be Giants, Shadowfax and Prefab Sprout). Yet Esperanto is neither a joke nor a thing of the past. Despite what everyone may believe (or may want to believe), it is still being used and is in fact thriving across the globe.

The word "Esperanto" literally means "one who hopes" in the language itself. It was taken from a modest book published in 1887 in Warsaw, Poland, the work of one man, Dr. Ludovic Zamenhof. Having grown up in Bialystok (in present-day Poland) which was the home of Russians, Germans, Jews and Poles, he recognized how ethnic tensions among the four groups were only made more salient by their differences in language.

This small city in Eastern Europe mirrored the world, one fractured by a multitude of languages just as the Tower of Babel documented.

Although sharing a neutral language would not in itself automatically bring world peace, it would, Zamenhof thought, at least reduce the tensions that existed by facilitating communication, something which the world has always needed. But what was meant by "neutral"? Few, especially Americans, ever realize the politics of language. While I was attending a youth conference at the United Nations this past summer, this became cruelly clear.

According to the United Nations, nearly 80% of the world's youth live in the lesser--and least developed--countries (which before were known as the "Third World" nations), but practically none of the delegates of these nations ever contributed to the dealings at the conference; the majority of the views presented came from European or North American voices.

The entire conference was held in English alone, because the United Nations lacked money to interpret into other languages. Unfortunately, many of the participants could not speak English adequately enough to keep up with the rapid-fire happenings of the conference. Some did speak Spanish or Portuguese, yet even they were excluded in the conversations by the English-only chats.

Here we were, trying to deal with the problems of the world's youth, and the representatives of the majority of the global youth community could not even understand what we were doing to help them. If the United Nations could not afford interpretation for the event into Spanish or Portuguese (languages which are widely known and spoken), what were we to do with those persons who spoke lesser-known languages?

Basically, if you didn't speak English, you weren't included at the United Nations. It was that simple. Should those in economic power force everyone else in the world to speak their language simply because it serves their needs? How is it that the few with economic power can dictate the wills of the many? Why shouldn't everyone speak Chinese, the world's most spoken language in terms of population, or Hindi, the first runner-up for this title?

Esperanto was created exactly to surpass that. While it may look and sound like other languages, it is not linked with any language nor with any

specific country; an "Esperantoland" does not exist. Esperanto can be heard and spoken as much in Washington as in Moscow, Dar-es Salaam as in Copenhagen. No country can lay claim to Esperanto as being "its" language, and thus using it helps speakers take off their political jackets and simply communicate with each other. People learn it without feeling that they are somehow giving up their own native tongues, or unconsciously showing the importance of another. Politically, Esperanto has no strings attached.

Esperanto must be considered a success after its more than 100 years of existence. A respectable number of people (estimates run the gamut from 2 to 16 million) still speak it, without any institution or army to enforce its use, nor any economic powerhouse to support it. Esperantists can be found in 110 nations, with national organizations in 80 of them. There exist Esperantist literature (original and translated), periodicals, music, clubs (with subjects from agriculture to Quakerism to yoga), radio stations (which included, for a short period of time in the 60's, the United States' own foreign broadcast system, the Voice of America.). . . it is used just as any other language would be used.

While a variety of renowned personalities either spoke or supported Esperanto, from Leo Tolstoi (who wrote the first play in Esperanto, in 1896) and Mark Twain, to Alfred Fried (winner of the Nobel Peace Prize) and Pope John Paul II, the reason that the language has survived is that it is accessible to the common person. For each famous person who speaks or supports the language, there are probably hundreds of "normal" people using it in their lives.

Zamenhof, in having the ability to "construct" a more ideal language, had a few goals in mind, all to help make the language simple and uncomplicated.

A primary concern was making it consistent throughout—any grammatical rule once made would be applied everywhere in Esperanto. No exceptions. Anyone who has tortured themselves with irregular verbs, tables of adjective endings and such will immediately see the results of such an improvement.

Nouns end in -*o*, adjectives in -*a*, and adverbs in -*e*. Plurals are formed by adding a -*j* to the end of the word. Infinitives end in -*i*, while simple

tense endings are *-as* (present),-is (past) and *-os* (future). The same grammatical points which take students years to understand in other languages has just been summarized into three lines in Esperanto. Another two or three years of study could be eliminated by the following reminder: there are no exceptions to the rule. All nouns end in *-o,* all verbs are conjugated alike. . . few other languages can say that.

Since it was intended for a global audience, Zamenhof likewise had to be considerate of not only other Europeans, but also of those on other continents and other linguistic families. The finished language, according to Pierre Janton in his book *Esperanto: Language, Literature and Community* , has a vocabulary in which 75% of the "root" words come from Romance languages (primarily Latin and French), 20% from Germanic languages (which includes English), and the remaining from Greek, Slavic languages, and a variety of other languages.

Anyone flipping through an Esperanto dictionary would be able to notice this unique festival of words from different languages. Even without the translations, English-speakers would be able to guess a large amount of the words: *letero, familio, somero, birdo* (plurals would, of course, be *leteroj, familioj, someroj* and *birdoj).* Fortunately for us English-speakers, some other important words are based on English: for example, the word for "yes" *is jes,* but pronounced exactly the same. The pronoun "I" is *mi* (pronounced as "me"), and "she" is *si* (pronounced like "she" itself).

A final consideration was that the language's grammar be functional for everybody. One example is word order. In English, we've been drilled with the "subject-verb-object" structure of sentences; however, not every language has that basic order. To accommodate this problem, nouns used in the object function end in -n. This allows the speaker to switch the position of the words to one with which he or she is comfortable. For example, making a sentence around the verb *skribi* (to write):

Mi skribas la leteron.
I write the letter.

means the same as

Skribas mi la leteron. or *La leteron mi skribas.*

To someone who just learned a little about the language within the past few minutes, the last two sentences may appear to be totally different from the first. Yet, because the object ending (*-n*) affects only the word *letter*, a speaker of Esperanto would immediately recognize that *I* am doing the writing, regardless of wherever the word may actually appear in the sentence.

While there is no one "perfect" sounding example of Esperanto, according to Zamenhof, it should sound roughly like Italian or Spanish. All the consonants are generally pronounced as in English, while the vowels sound like what we'd call "short" vowels (ah-eh-ee-oh-oo, if you couldn't remember). So, the first sentence would sound like (mee skree-bahs lah leh-teh-rohn). Of course, it's terribly difficult to put sounds onto paper, but it nevertheless gives an approximate feel to the language.

This rough introduction to Esperanto grammar is obviously meant to give only the bare essentials of the language, but it should be enough to allow comparisons to be made with other languages. There are other more technical bits and pieces which must be studied as well, but some of the more characteristic grammatical points do show the differences between it and other languages.

Because it has a simple, "no-exceptions-to-the-rule" grammar, a vocabulary which is created and structured logically, and a pronunciation which is always consistent, many have managed to learn the language well not only through classes and course study, but also through books and correspondence courses.

This free and open access to the language via sources outside formal institutions has made the biggest difference in the world in spreading Esperanto to all classes of people, particularly those in lesser-developed countries. English, in these countries, is highly-prized not only because English-speaking inhabitants can gain access to the more-developed countries such as the United States and Canada through it, but also because it is a language which is generally restricted to those with the power and money, who can afford to learn it through expensive classes.

Being able to learn Esperanto through books and correspondence courses enables those who normally would not have an opportunity to learn any other language know one which will also help them access the world. The recent increase of Esperanto-speakers in Africa has supported this idea, since young people there, who would not be able to afford a course at a university or high school, can still learn the language through books sent as donations from European or North American clubs, or through correspondence courses.

I'm no exception to teaching myself the language. I learned the language through a book which I borrowed from the local public library when I was twelve. I continued borrowing it over the course of the next six months, and within that time I had taught myself a rudimentary knowledge of the language. Of course, as with any language, it takes quite a few years of experience and use to reach a stylistic flair which is a sign of a respectable speaker of a language.

At first, I didn't really know what I was getting into: I was always interested in languages, so casually reading here and there about the language kept my interest alive. But what exactly would make people want to learn Esperanto? According to Sybil Harlow, who is the current secretary of the United States Young Esperantist Organization, the reason comes from the attitude that some people have. "I think that most people who learn Esperanto are very interested in what is going on around the world (very anti-isolationist)," she said.

Sooner or later, that was the same conclusion to which I came. Because of the immense global opportunities which Esperanto offered (particularly to someone who lived in no-hum Lancaster, Pennsylvania), it would be impossible for someone not to gain an understanding and acceptance of the cultures and peoples of the world.

I also discovered that those who speak Esperanto share a special connection and attitude, one which transcends the superficial boundaries which may tangle others, such as nationality and ethnic background. Considering the reasons behind the creation of the language and in light of everything Zamenhof did to accomplish that, Esperantists try to maintain a sense of respect and tolerance for others, and to treat each other as equals.

For example, the internationality of the language helps Esperantists

learn to accept that there is no Esperanto accent. Yugoslavs are said to speak the "clearest" Esperanto, but no one really has a perfect Esperanto accent. Although one's grammar and pronunciation may be better than another's, his or her native accent is not considered a help or a hindrance.

This comes in contrast to what we, as native English-speakers, have accustomed ourselves. Simple accents do a great deal to separate even those with a common tongue. As native English-speakers from the United States, we are sometimes considered among the "models" of what English should sound like; English speakers in the world are rated relative to us.

We look with favor on the British when they speak because their accent is so charming and "quaint." Speaking with a British accent is even considered a sign of education, high culture and civility.

A person just as educated and high cultured who happens to speak in a Spanish accent is not as easily accepted. Hearing an accent which doesn't compare with ours (especially one which denotes a culture unfortunately looked down upon), Americans will be quick to distinguish him from the Brit as not being quite as educated, or as coming from a background of lesser status, and numerous other pre-judgements, regardless of whether they are correct or not.

An example of this surfaced in the press a few months back, when an applicant of Indian background was denied a job. The prospective employer claimed it was based solely on his lack of proper qualifications, but it became evident later that this was not his only reason. The job required quite a lot of talking to clients by phone; having someone speaking with such a noticeable Indian accent would give the company a poor image. Regardless of how qualified he was, the applicant would have his accent to hold him back from certain occupations.

Yet, an even more striking example of this separation comes from my father's experiences. Maybe I'm biased because I'm his son, but I don't think my father speaks English with an accent at all. However, sometimes I've heard inconsiderate, passing comments from others about how he doesn't speak English like an American, although he has been speaking English for nearly 40 years, was documented as a superior English speaker by the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), and has been living in the United States for 20 years. It hurts to think that, despite all of these cred-

its to his name and everything else he has done in the United States already, he could still be considered a foreigner only because he "sounds" like one.

These experiences Esperanto speakers do not have among one another, because they realize that no one in the group can claim to be a native speaker and thus naturally be superior to another. This serves to make learners of the language more confident because they can feel that they will be able to use Esperanto without being looked down upon because of something as trivial as their accent.

Yet the true reason why Esperanto has attracted and worked with even the most common of persons is because it enables them to reach and affect the world outside of their boundaries. Esperanto has a worldwide use which may not be as large as that of English or French, yet it reaches as many countries, if not more. The majority of these contacts happen through pen pals, periodicals, clubs, radio broadcasts. Through each channel, anybody, regardless of background, can learn more about other cultures.

One of the best ways I've been able to truly enjoy the language has been through traveling. The Society for International Business is one of the only other campus groups which shares this wanderlust. It, too, realizes what Saint Augustine said: "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page."

Esperantists tend to be very hospitable to other Esperantists, considering how relatively few there are in the world and how widely scattered they are. So, they will often offer traveling Esperantists food, a place to eat, information on the local area. . . in other words, host them as friends. Although this is most often done informally, there does exist an actual network, known as the *Pasporta Servo* (Passport Service), which offers a printed booklet of names and addresses of those who offer free lodging to other Esperantists.

Yet, more importantly, Esperanto gives the bewildered traveler a local contact, to help make the experience a little more personal and memorable. Some people simply zip in and out of cities, with nothing more to show than photographs and tacky key rings. Esperantists pride themselves on helping others put "faces" on these cities, and letting fellow speakers leave with friendships and special memories.

While all of these trips and exchanged letters and radio broadcasts may not seem to do much for world peace, they are essentially doing what Zamenhof hoped the language would accomplish--they are helping to promote world understanding. And, of course, the more we communicate and understand each other, the closer we can get to world peace. Realistically, we may never reach it, but there is no harm simply in trying.

World peace is not accomplished when countries stop fighting, or when wars end. It is very much a piecemeal miracle, one which takes place one step at a time. World peace is my experience at the National Congress of Esperanto in Hartford two years ago. I just met a young Esperantist from Uzbekistan there whose tape recorder snagged his tape. Another young person, from Cameroon, happened to walk in while I was fiddling around with it. There we were, three young people from Uzbekistan, Cameroon and the United States, trying to solve an international dilemma in Esperanto. We all understood each other and came together to find a solution. (By the way, a pair of scissors and Scotch tape eventually came to the rescue).

When one person can understand another from a foreign culture, numerous walls come down. They come to a realization that simply being of another nationality or peoples is not enough to wage war, to murder each other, or to have resentments.

Through means such as Esperanto, peace is something which anyone can help attain. You don't have to be a world diplomat or a politician to make constructive change towards world peace. Often it is the "little persons" who can rally together to help the world.

During World War I, when communication was nearly stopped between the eastern and western fronts of Europe, the Esperantists on both sides of the war volunteered to become maildrops for their respective cities. Anyone, regardless of whether he or she were an Esperantist or not, could give letters to the city's Esperantist delegate who would then forward it to the offices of the Universal Esperanto Association (the international coordinating body of the Esperanto movement, which was then located in Geneva, Switzerland—neutral territory). The UEA would sort the mail, then hand it off again to delegates in cities on the other side of Europe to re-deliver. This action, free out of the goodwill of the Esperantists strand-

ed on both sides of the war, kept families and friends in contact with each other throughout the war years.

This example not only shows that anyone can aid in the peace process. It also points out that everyone is needed to help, if world peace is truly desired. It was quite important that as many Esperantists as possible helped with this project, to cover as much of the European continent as possible. Missing only one person in a certain area would mean that the system wouldn't be able to function there, causing concern to anyone with loved ones in that area.

Even a naïve young writer from Pennsylvania can help bring world peace. I was fortunate enough to experience world peace once again in Bulgaria later that summer. By some strange coincidence, some of the participants (luckily, I was one of them) bumped into each other on the streets of Sofia while waiting for our trains home. We all decided to have one last dinner together before heading back.

It was undoubtedly a magical evening. It may have been the ambience, a lovely and elegant restaurant located in a well-preserved garden, where cats would bravely climb up the ivy-lined gates only to fall back to the ground. Maybe it was the food, the first time I had eaten something other than yogurt in nearly two weeks.

But, more than likely, it was the people who made the experience so memorable. At the last-minute banquet table which the waiters happily set up for us were seated Belgians, Germans, Dutch, Yugoslavs, French... and Americans, of course. We were all enjoying the grilled beef patties, shopska salad, and hearty bread while reminiscing in Esperanto about our recent experiences, joking about the "food" at the Congress, and swapping addresses. This, for me, is world peace.

I Am Only A Part

Vanessa Cisz

> Now I fall, from dizzy heights and expectations, why do I hit the ground so hard?
>
> —*The Innocence Mission*

For the first twelve years of my life, I thought that all my mother concerned herself with was baking fresh cookies, cleaning my room, and making sure that I had plenty of clean underwear. In my eyes, my mother had no brothers, no sisters; I never really understood the idea that my grandmother experienced with her daughter all of the trials and tribulations that my mother went through with me. When my mother, father, and I went back to Germany to visit family in 1990, my eyes were opened by what I saw and heard.

I missed the indications—certain things slipped out of my mother that showed she was miserable here in America (she was born, raised, and later married in Germany). We moved to America in 1987, when the Army restationed my father to what my mother called "the lovely little backwater state of Pennsylvania." On our first night in our new American home, she sobbed uncontrollably. I attributed this to "post-move" nerves; I did not even stop to think that she missed her real home-a small town named Klanxbull, ten minutes south of the Danish border. Never had I realized how closely she connected herself to the flat, green land that used to belong to the wild, harsh North Sea, the sheep that dotted the fresh countryside like white crests on a flat lake, or the grass covered dikes designed to prevent last century's floods. It was a part of her, a part of her that filled her with quiet comfort.

When my mother called home to Germany, it seemed to me that she always spoke to my grandmother, my Uncle Bernhard, or my Aunt Friede. She never spoke to her mother, her brother, or her sister. It never occurred to me that she had siblings upon whom she played tricks and with whom she became angry, as I did with my older brother. As soon as she spoke to her family on the phone, I left the room, for I did not understand a word of "that awful German language," as Mark Twain once described it. During my stay in Germany, my family had lived on an Army base and I attended an American school for Army children. The German instruction there was not as intense as the instruction in a regular German school, and I never really picked up the language from my German family. I suppose in leaving the room while my mother rambled on in German, I shut myself off from a side of my mother about which I did not wish to learn--that she had interests and memories to share, not all of them necessarily with me. Learning German, I felt, would have forced me to enter that world. I would then have to listen and understand the discussions that crossed the dinner table. Knowing my mother's language would bring me closer to her past life, of which I was not a part. Perhaps I was afraid of seeing and learning all of the deeper connections she had to this place. It would have hurt me to know that "I was not her whole life" (Friday 2), and, I did not want to be hurt.

Usually my mother and I agree on any given subject, but about the trip in 1990, we did not. My mother was obviously excited to be going "home" for three weeks, but I remained neutral. My father was travelling with us as well; he, too, was excited about revisiting the place where he met and fell in love with my mother. He had not even parked the rental car in the gravel driveway when my grandmother came running out of her house, babbling in a German dialect that flowed over me and around me until it reached ears that could understand it. My mother stood up, visibly inhaled, and let a few choked cries escape. "She is glad to see her mother," I realized. "I guess I would be, too," I thought. How shallow I was, it occurs to me now. Why hadn't I known that? How was I to know that this was where she felt safe, happy, at peace, that she was where she belonged?

Rejoicing, laughter, exclamations—all this I watched as if I were a total stranger watching two old friends reunite. Instantly, mother and daughter

were catching up on family gossip and local happenings—if my older cousin was finally going to marry his girlfriend of three years, and how could an East German be named postmistress? Of course, at that time, I did not understand a word of the conversation. Instead, I attempted to steel myself for three weeks of solitude in a country full of family. As my father unloaded the trunk, I turned around to rejoin my mother. I wanted to enter the house with her; I did not want her to be alone. But she wasn't alone. She wasn't even there. She had left me all alone; she could see me anytime, but she would see her family for only three weeks. Her brother, her sister, her many nieces and nephews, all waiting to see the youngest member of the Hansen family returned home. Realizing this, I walked through the doorway to endure unfamiliar greetings in an unfamiliar language in an unfamiliar place.

My displacement, in walking through that doorway, was similar to my mother's displacement when she first came to America. I looked at all of the faces looking back at me, smiling, nodding, asking questions. I constantly turned to my mother for a translation. I then answered in English, and she would translate my reply back into German. I felt both relieved and burdened. It was relief to have someone close to me who could make sense of this foreign language. However, I felt like an encumbrance to the whole reunion. My mother flitted around the room, talking to relatives she had not seen in three years. I followed her everywhere; I needed her to translate the essentials of the conversation to me. I could not go alone by myself—I could only communicate in smiles, shrugs, and nods.

My mother's displacement when arriving in America was similar. When she walked through the doorway of the household with my father for the first time, she knew none of the faces that looked and smiled at her. To her, each person was merely a member of her new husband's previous life. How was she to communicate with them? She stuck close to my father in talking with the family, but like me, she had trouble bridging the language gap. Although her English was considerably better than my German, she was not prepared for colloquialisms or the accents that some of my father's relatives possessed. I was grateful that my mother was able to sift through the complex German that was thrown at me and provide me with something that I could understand—slang and accent-free German.

My mother's birthday arrived while we were still on vacation. I don't recall exactly who planned the party, but I do remember that none of the young children were invited. "Fine," I thought, "perfectly understandable. The adults just want time to themselves." However, on the day of the party, I did approach my mother to ask, "You will come by in the evening to say goodnight, right?" (To a twelve-year-old, these kinds of things are important.) "Yes, of course," she assured me, "You can count on it." With that in mind, the day proceeded smoothly. Later that night, I slowly got ready for bed—slowly, I knew, so that I could occupy myself while my mother made her way up the long staircase to my room. I brushed my teeth, even flossed them. Washed my face. Put on my nightgown. I eased myself into bed and began to read...for an hour...and another. Tick, took, the clock constantly reminded me. A knock. All of the angry thoughts drained out of me; I was merely relieved that she came, finally. But it was my father who pushed open the door. Even though I love my father deeply, I blurted out, "Where is she? Why doesn't she come?" My father knew of whom I spoke. "Vanessa," he said seriously as he sat down on the edge of the bed, "I don't think you understand the situation your mother's in right now. She hasn't seen her family in years. She misses Germany terribly. Can you imagine being separated from your mother and brother for three years, and living in a country where no one speaks your native tongue? Where the customs you followed as a child are not even heard of? How about living in this country against your will? I feel terrible that I was restationed in America. That's what your mother feels like a lot of the time. So let's allow her some fun while she's here. She's got a lot of catching up to do." And before I could say a word, he kissed me on the forehead and left the room.

About three days before we headed back, my mother took me by the arm and led me into the living room. "Come on, I want to show you something," she said. She saw my puzzled look and explained, "Let's look at some really old photos of my family." We started with the baby pictures. I saw an old black and white shot that showed three children--a five-year-old girl with brown hair stood behind a small block of wood, and a somewhat younger boy sat on the block of wood. "That's your aunt and uncle," my mother told me. "But who's that?" I asked, pointing to the blonde-haired baby who sat on the boy's lap. "That's me," she continued softly.

We continued turning the pages. Was that really my Uncle Bernhard sitting on the tractor, holding my terrified mother when she was only five years old? Was that really my Aunt Friede helping my mother curl her hair for the dance? "Oh, oh," she would exclaim, "I remember that night. That was the night when our teacher took us out to our first beer hall. Oh, my, what a night that was...and there's my good friend...," and then I realized that at that moment, she was speaking only to herself. School events, family occasions, the departures of my aunt and uncle on their separate paths of life, the marriage of my mother and father; all these flew by us. For me, these pictures were new information, but for my mother they brought back precious memories. Occasionally, I would glance at her face, for she had grown quiet. Suddenly I understood. I understood why she was excited to come back home. I understood why she stayed late at the party. I understood why she took long bicycle rides into the country. She wanted to store up wonderful memories, like those in the pictures, to last her until her next visit. This was a whole dimension of my mother that was just now coming to life—she had led a full, diverse life before my existence. It no longer hurt when I thought about the fact that she spent time in a whole different realm, an area of life of which I was simply not a part. So I understood why she cried when we came back. She had no idea when she would return to the house in which she grew up, to her family who knew her better than she knew herself, and to the land she found so beautiful.

Did I come closer to realizing that my mother was once like me? That she went out with friends? That she had arguments with her mother? That her siblings did things that she didn't tattle about? That providing milk and cookies for me is only a small part of her life? Yes. From that point on, I have looked at my mother in a whole new perspective. She is not only my mother, but a daughter, a sister, an aunt. And she has thoughts, hopes, and memories about a place which I may only visit and hope to learn about.

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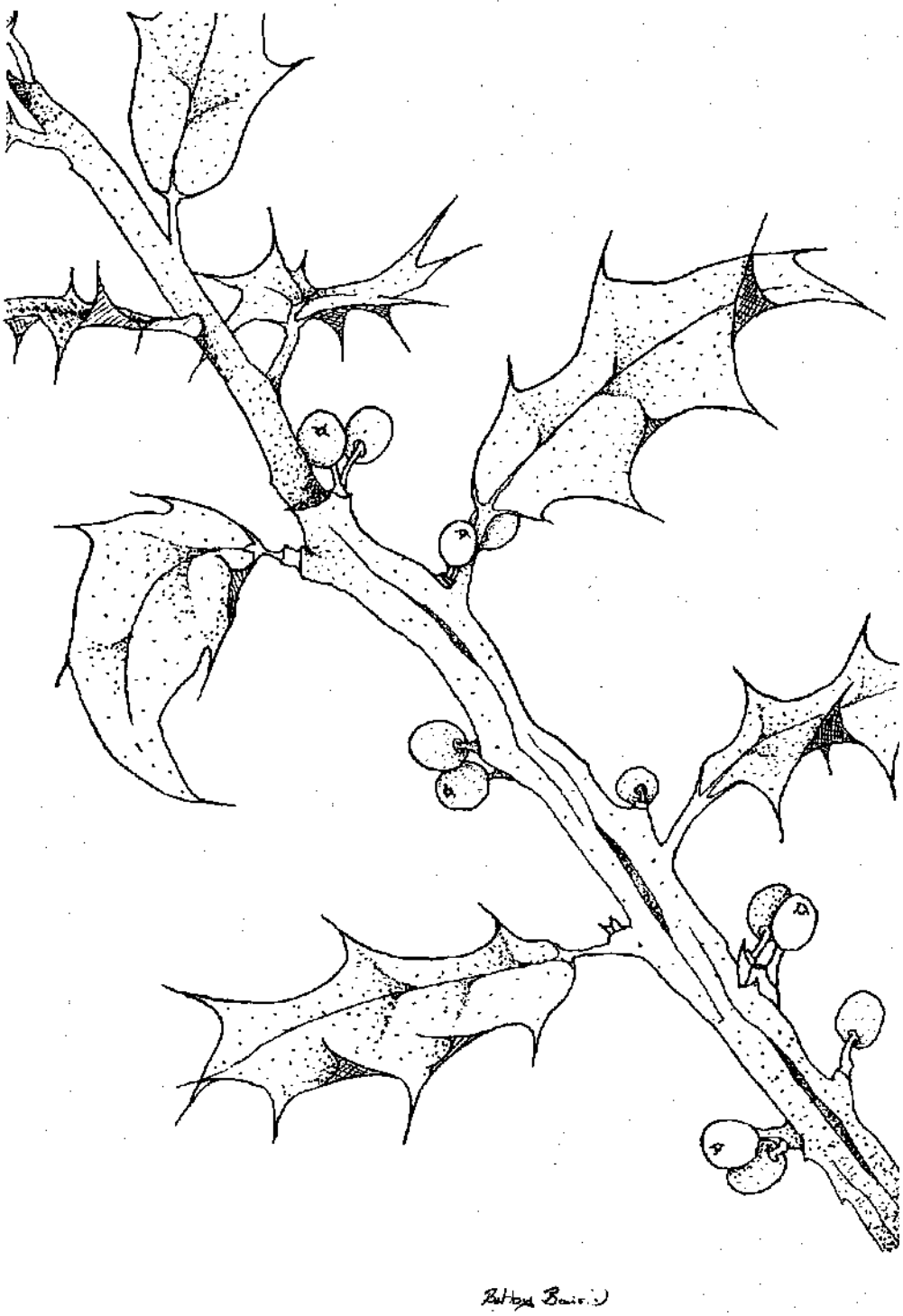

The Lesson
Camille Whelan

My time in the Ukraine forced me to examine my advantages, which I had so taken for granted, and consequently, caused me to change my life philosophies. My Ukrainian experiences threw me into a blur of confusion about my priorities and goals. I was revolted. Most of all, though, I was exhilarated. Standing in the soggy streets of that city, I experienced a fleeting moment of understanding; a moment which was gone so swiftly it was almost incomprehensible, but which left me with the conviction that I was truly blessed.

Gábor, Vadim, Mr. Lareau, Rachel, and I arrived late at the Dudás's house in Vinogradov. From what I could surmise, the city was old-fashioned and glum; the houses, stone shanties surrounded by decrepit board fences. To my intrigued eyes, though, it was all mysterious and deliciously foreign. The barren countryside fascinated me, as did the woolen-clad families that tramped by, walking because they didn't have cars.

Shivering, I followed Mr. Lareau into one of the ramshackle yards. A scruffy dog, chained near the door, began to bark; and amid the clamor, the door was flung open and Rita Dudás and her sisters stood silhouetted in the warm light of indoors. Attracted by the hospitable light, I allowed myself to be drawn with Mr. Lareau into the girls' laughing, joyful midst. They immediately surrounded us, chattering excitedly and eyeing our American fineries with enchantment and wonder. Mágdi, her soft brown eyes glowing, took our coats, while Rita consulted with Mr. Lareau in heavily-accented English and Káti watched us adoringly. Gábor, Vadim, and Rachel came piling in, and in the whirl of excitement that greeted their entrance, I took a moment to study my surroundings.

We were standing in a drafty cement entrance hallway. Cluttered with coats, boots, and stained furniture, it ended abruptly in a dingy bathroom. I could see into the next room, which was sparsely furnished with heavy wooden pieces. Garish colors screamed from every corner—rusty oranges, pea greens, bawdy browns. Everything looked exhausted and ancient. I felt a surge of depression at what seemed a life of pathetic destitution. The girls were beckoning to me, though, smiling and chattering alternately in Hungarian and English, delightedly asking questions. I smiled in response, but their clothing horrified me, reminding me of cast-off 1970's attire. Their threadbare corduroy pants sagged off their hips, and foolish sweaters hung oddly from their thin shoulders. I jerked my eyes from the disturbing sight, disgusted by my snobbery. Their faces were so innocent and so ignorant of their ridiculousness that I could not bear myself and my patrician thoughts. Was I really so decadent that I could attach such importance to the trivial matter of clothing? Was I so shallow that I could ignore the spiritual beauty that shone through their poverty? Resolutely, I buried my self-doubts, and allowed them to welcome me with kisses and seat me at the lavishly spread dinner table.

Dinner at least allowed me the opportunity to be silent and insignificant, since the Dudás's were very caught up with Mr. Lareau. Numbly, I gulped down a spicy concoction of noodles and slimy meat. Afraid to think about what I was eating, I concentrated instead on what was happening around me. Mr. Lareau, who commuted from Budapest to the Ukraine, every weekend to conduct Bible studies in Vinogradov and the nearby city of Uszgöröd, was chatting easily with the Dudás's. Mrs. Dudás in particular was fascinated by him and clung to his hands, drinking in his attention even though she understood him only through an interpreter. Puzzled by her eager responsiveness, I began to study discreetly the way she strove to fulfill his every whim, accepted his words without question or argument, worshipped him with her whole spirit shining in her eyes. It didn't occur to me until much later, after the Dudás's had retired and I was left alone to prepare for bed, that this woman's life was so simple the ministrations of a mere foreigner could bring her complete joy. To her, Mr. Lareau was a god—kind, gentle, omniscient, omnipotent. He was a hero. More than a little awed by this realization, I collected my soap and my face cloth and

moved into the kitchen to wash my face.

As I huddled over the tiny kitchen sink, scrubbing my face, I reflected on the next day's schedule. Rachel and I would tour the marketplace and the downtown shops and then *rendez-vous* with Mr. Lareau, Vadim, and Gábor in the main thoroughfare of Vinogradov. Mr. Lareau would then preach while Gábor and Vadim translated and Rachel, Mágdi, Káti, Rita, and I would pass out tracts. I was avidly curious about the city: would it be as squalid as the Dudás's house seemed to be? Finishing with my face, I set down my bar of pineapple-oatmeal soap in the tray by the sink. I gazed for a moment at the rusty tray, then I saw the crumbling walls, the mildewed floorboards, and the meager, cracked dishes assembled beside the gnarled kitchen stove. The humble scene made my specialized soap seem terribly pretentious, and I was suddenly ashamed of my opulence.

It was with great reverence that Mágdi awoke me the next morning. I smiled to indicate that no, I was not annoyed with her for disturbing me, and reassured, she beamed. After she was gone, a vague sense of trouble pervaded my mind. Was I, as a pampered, privileged American, really meritous of such worship? Trying not to feel silly at the excessive attention I knew my appearance would generate, I trudged into the kitchen to wash my face, and found Mrs. Dudás shredding cabbage.

"Jó réggelt," she chirped, and a painful conversation ensued, in which I struggled to understand her Hungarian and she, seeing my trouble, spoke even more loudly and with greater deliberation. Confused, I finally took to nodding my head whenever she spoke. In the midst of my consternation, I was struck by the fact that this visit, a fleeting moment in time for me, would be long cherished in their hearts. It seemed ironic that even though I had, since arriving, been continually reminded of the impact I was making on their lives, *I* was the one overwhelmed. *I* was the one being affected! And furthermore, here I was, caught in the trauma of two colliding worlds, incapable of even the most basic communication! The absurdity of the dilemma bordered on depressing. Luckily, I was rescued by the entrance of her husband, which distracted her enough to allow me, face still unwashed, to escape.

Rachel was awake and seated at the table when I sat down to breakfast. She looked mournfully up from the unappetizing contents of her plate, but

continued eating without a word, since Rita was in the room. I gazed from the greasy slab of meat that lay on my plate to the oily black slosh in my coffee cup and thought with longing about the can of peaches in the travel bag I'd brought from Budapest. With no way to avoid eating breakfast and no explanation to justify myself to the Dudás's if I did, I rationalized that I was enriching my life with a cultural experience of which few could boast. Somehow, this conclusion made the tough meat seem more endurable.

Finishing breakfast quickly, we cleared away the dishes and then donned our coats to explore the marketplace. My spirits rose as I tramped along the avenue with Rachel and Rita. Both sides of the road were lined with magnificent cathedrals, and the passing natives on bicycles gave the scene a quaintness that appeased my battered sense of aesthetic appreciation, and almost atoned for the city's shabbiness. We passed a towering statue of Vladimir Lenin and I gazed in awe at the visage of this evil man who had kept whole nations grovelling under Communism. My thoughts were occupied with socioeconomic structures as we entered the marketplace, so a moment passed before the scene registered on me.

A large, muddy lot sprawled before me, filled with frail, rotting booths. Cheap displays of eclectic Western paraphernalia abounded. Grimy gypsy children knelt in the muck, accusing the passers-by with silent, embittered black eyes. What arrested my attention, though, was a crowd of ragged peasants that surrounded a vegetable truck. A crew of men worked furiously aboard the truck, shovelling limp white roots into canvas sacks, and the air resounded with the squawks of the crowd as it jostled for attention.

I stared for a moment. These people were fighting for food—for mere roots! I was staggered. Never in my life had I conceived such poverty. I had heard since childhood, of course, about the sorrows of the people under Communism, but the harsh image of the oppressed masses, regurgitated in every political argument or commentary, had dulled into triteness. I was suddenly aware of how caught up I had been in myself and my painfully small world. Nothing anyone told me had prepared me for the decay and misery that I saw everywhere, in the neglected buildings, in the dreary marketplace, and in the eyes of the careworn citizens I encountered in the streets. My disillusionment increased as sleet began to fall and cold drops lashed my face. I felt emotionally battered and wounded, and ashamed of

myself, my country, and my wealth. I wanted only to crawl into a corner and cry. I struggled to keep my despair from showing, though, since I felt neither capable nor inclined to sharing my feelings with my companions.

As I stumbled miserably along after Rita, I thought about my life in America, As an American—prosperous, healthy, comfortable, secure—I had a great deal for which to be grateful. However, I had spent my life dwelling on my disadvantages. Born into a poor family, I had become accustomed to viewing myself as underprivileged and downtrodden, but now, confronted with real poverty, it occurred to me how ungrateful I had been. The thought stunned me. I had wasted the first half of my life wallowing in discontent, and it suddenly became very clear to me that I had no real reason to be discontented! Memories came flooding to me: memories of lavish Christmas dinners, of stockings stuffed with goodies, of my family's two cars, of my closet filled with colorful, eccentric shoes, of my sister's piano—small pleasures, really, that I had taken for granted. *I had never had to fight in the mud for something to eat!* It was indeed bewildering. I had never before considered my life beautiful and full and rich, but now I couldn't think of it as otherwise. The sleet was still slashing my face and the cold was slowly numbing my body, but in that bleak moment, I felt absolutely and completely blessed.

Walt Whitman Was Wrong

Daniel Newell

Once I was bold and could speak with much more literary creativity than this and go on and on about the same not-yet-dead topic for hours upon hours until finally I realized something. But I have become a coward, and will never quite express these truths to another human being except in the form of these jotted-down words. Ideas fester inside until I write about them or let them wither away into nothingness and get confused with all the other thoughts and emotions and fury and so many dreams. It is from this chaos that this idea comes, jumping out so brilliantly between my ears that I must free it in this medium out of fear that it will disappear like so many other thoughts. In other words, this is the story of the search of an unconfident, yet egotistical man, concerned with the world yet absent from it in all ways but that which is on the page.

Other people surround me but their faces are blank; their minds are a mystery, yet are the only things that matter, besides their hearts. It is the mind and the heart that matter for all, because those places are where the self is, they are where the essence lives, inside the mind and underneath all the meaningless appearances. Is this true self the being on the outside or is the true self that thing which exists on the other side of so many almost-blank faces? So I guess what I am asking after all this stream of consciousness babble is; what is the essence of this worn-out word "self?

Does this self have its own identity, or is it so influenced by all the media and the images pouring in and the teaching and un-teaching and the religions and the demagogues and the sex and the drugs and flat out beatness that individualism is dead? Does the individual survive in the post 1980's world, where fringe is accepted, and being "different" is sold on the billboards and on the opium boxes in front of which we sit, submissively

wasting our lives. In every big city or small town there is in every other apartment or home an anti-American dreamer who wants to be a filmmaker, artist, musician, actor, and dare I say writer. So many people these days want to be "different" or "special" that it would appear we are faced with the death of the individual. Is individualism dead? In order to decide if this is the case, an attempt must first be made to define an individual.

This is one of the oldest struggles that philosophers and poets alike have tried to tackle, and still few definitive conclusions have been reached. The young, as yet unpublished poet Tina Lawinski explored this in "The What You Are":

> But then he lets go too soon
> and leaves you standing naked in front of the
> mirror
> And the only thing you can possibly realize in the cold
> is that who you are, and the what you are
> And you want to throw the labels and limits and the
> definitions back in their faces
> for they have held you back all too long
> And you finally see
> yes you finally see your own self and you know
> you don't need them anymore

Lawinski reached this conclusion for herself and that is all one can ask. However, no one else has to agree. The definition of an individual is and should be unique to each person who asks the question. So all I can attempt to do is form my own definition, being true to the chaos from which it comes, since it would be impossible and contradictory to attempt anything else.

The most simple place to start is with the basic definition that is attributed to the word "individual." A vast majority of those with whom I have discussed the topic define individual as being "different" from everyone else. "Different" meaning dressing, acting, and thinking in a way in which most other people do not. This definition is a good working explanation since it lays out some basic ground rules for being an individual. An indi-

vidual must be in some way different from the norm. This idea would be perfect if we lived in a generation which has definite ideological norms and mainstream beliefs. In that case there could be a clear distinction between the masses and the individual.

Society has gone through periods where this is basically the case. In the fifties there was a definite idea of the typical American (or at least that is how the story of the fifties has come down in popular culture). Supposedly, in that time society was obsessed with the American dream, which is now a dead remnant of what it once was. This dream was the underlying social current of that generation. As we all know, it consisted of the work hard, succeed, raise a family, and keep the cycle going philosophy. Of course, not everyone achieved this dream, but pop culture would have us believe that everyone strove to have a family with "two cats in the yard." We might have had to believe that everyone lived for this same purpose and that there was total conformity in the society at the time if not for a young boy named Holden Caulfield.

The *Catcher in the Rye* challenged the social norm of the day, the idea of the American dream. *Catcher* told the story of someone who dared to think differently. J.D. Salinger realized the meaninglessness of the prevailing social philosophy. Holden saw the phoniness apparent in a society that is conformist by nature. Throughout the novel, he uses the word "Phoney" to describe anyone even remotely associated with the American dream. He drops out of school, and entire generations of people young and old still remember how they felt when they read of his adventures through New York for those few days. How his pure innocence, and his rejection of everything people ever thought he was inspired that rebellion inside. They remember how his love for his sister and contempt for his lawyer father made them want to run away and find some rye where they could catch those who are still real before falling into conformity. Those days where he was searching for something, searching for something, something everyone should seek if there is to be such a thing as individuals, assuming that individualism even matters.

Holden's world was so afraid of individuality that his search landed him in a mental hospital. This is not a testimony to what will happen if one goes on that search, but what happens when not enough people do so.

They are the ones who need help. If a society gets to the point where its members have no concept of themselves, the society is meaningless. Holden ending up in a psychiatric ward shows how crazy everyone else in that conformist society was, and how Holden was perhaps the only sane member of the whole group. His family and teachers feared his search and angst. They feared how real he was becoming, and how close he was to figuring himself out. Perhaps they were compelled to commit him because they were so out of touch with themselves that they could not understand Holden trying to find himself. The hospitalization shows the craziness of the world. Holden was not crazy, but unique, and it scared those around him. He was unique because he defied established beliefs and went on the all-important search.

Drawing from this, the next logical question that presents itself is: is individualism possible in a social era which has no established belief? The *Catcher in the Rye*, along with a plethora of other factors, caused the following decade to be one of anti-establishment. Everyone began going against the norms, and many young people were or at least attempted to be "different." There was no definitive belief system which could categorize the society in the age of protest. Or was there? That statement in itself, calling the sixties the "age of protest," is a statement of its beliefs. Even in a counterculture there are certain things in which a majority of the members believe. A group's beliefs may differ from larger parts of society's standards or social norms, but the members of that group are alike in the fact that they all disagree with some norm.

For example, the 90's is the so-called "alternative" era. Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X* and the Rich Linklater film *Slacker* started a movement against society. Both told the story of disillusioned, unemployed youth who couldn't find meaning in the yuppified 1980's world. Bands like Pearl Jam and Nirvana led a revolution in music and culture, proclaiming a non-conformist attitude and life style. Those who follow this philosophy feel that they are "alternative," and against society. They are self-proclaimed rebels who don't want a cause. But this movement has become so popular that it constitutes a large portion of those under thirty years old. The society against which the movement went has ceased to exist. So they cannot all be alternative, since there is no longer anything

to which to be alternative. The counterculture has been marketed and sold in the 90's, and now it seems like everyone is "alternative."

So the problem to which we have finally come is the concept that if everyone is different, everyone is still the same. The unity comes from the fact that many people believe in something, regardless of the essence of the idea. To illustrate this concept further, a large number of people disagreed with the Vietnam war. That made them different from those who supported the war, but not from each other. So since there were many who disagreed with the same things, they cannot be called "different" in the sense that would make them individuals. So, still working in our original definition of "individual" (as one who is different from the rest), we can conclude that disagreeing with tradition or a mainstream part of society does not necessarily make one an individual. Individual means uniqueness, not just difference. It is possible for a group to be unlike the rest, but the simple fact that they are a group disqualifies them as individuals. If everyone is different, then everyone is the same.

And this is the problem with which my generation struggles. Individuality, in the traditional sense of the all-encompassing "different" theory (which has been shown to be false definition) is the popular thing to be. No one wants to be like anyone else. The outsider is now the role model, the loser is now the saint. But this has become so prevalent an idea in the 90's that literally everything has been tried. There are no new ways to dress or act. Thinking is perhaps still free, but that is not really what it means to be an individual to "generation X." It is the image of individuality that is sold to every youth.

Experimentation with sexuality and pseudo-spirituality is everywhere. On every street corner there is an iconoclast standing on a soap box ready to scream at the next person who walks by. The downsizing of traditional jobs has fueled the movement towards art and music and film and so on. You never see an accountant or a teacher on MTV or "Entertainment Tonight." What used to be outside mainstream society has now been marketted and sold to us in so many mega malls. A *Time* magazine headline last year read "If Everyone is Hip... Is Anyone Hip?" Hip used to mean something underground and counterculture, and a hip person may have even fit the definition of "individual." The article pointed out that hip has

totally lost this definition. Hip is now what everyone strives for, whereas it used to be what people would avoid. The greatest irony is that the article was appearing in *Time* magazine. Such a huge enterprise as *Time* publishing an article on "hip" totally proves the point that hip and individualism are everywhere. They have become popular and consequently have lost their true meaning. If they still had their old essences, *Time* would never have considered running an article on them.

The same thing is happening all over the landscape of our national consciousness. The Gap put Jack Kerouac in an add for khaki pants. "Kerouac wore khakis" read the caption. The man must have rolled over in his grave. A capitalistic, corporate institution such as the Gap stands for everything Kerouac was against. The caption did not mention that Kerouac found most of his wardrobe in dumpsters and thrift shops, and that he could never afford Gap pants even if he wanted to wear them. While *The Catcher in the Rye* was being written (in the early fifties), Jack and his friends were driving back and forth across the country looking for the next new high or novel to write. *On the Road*, Kerouac's revolutionary novel, took free thought even further than *Catcher* did. Salinger's and Kerouac's ideas in the fifties became popular in the sixties and the decades after. The nineties are again an age of counterculture, and Kerouac's anti-establishment is again in fashion.

The *Time* article and Gap ad show that the idea of difference is the sought after status. However, obscurity does not necessarily equal uniqueness. So does this mean that the individual is dead? Yes, the traditional idea of individualism is dead, but the individual still survives. The fallacy lies in our old, used-up definition of an individual. The "Different" individual is certainly dead. These days people try to be individuals not for the sake of finding their true selves, but because this is cool or hip or popular or whatever you want to call the things people strive to be.

So we must create a new definition of an individual, one that fits this complex time. We must attempt to come closer to its true meaning. This new definition must center around intent, not action or image. It must be rooted in the mind and the heart, not in the popular movements of society. Individuals are people who hold on to their beliefs, act how they act, and are who they are for themselves and themselves only. Not for popularity,

not to go with or against anything, but simply because they are being true to themselves. Consequently, those who are different for the sake of being an "individual" are fooling themselves. Individuality lies in the following of one's soul, regardless if others call that person right or wrong or mainstream or different or any other limiting label.

This new definition centers on the self, on the inside. An individual can be like everyone else in style or thought or religion, as long as that person is honestly following him or her self. Two people could hold the same beliefs, let us say they both are pro-choice. If one has thoroughly thought through the issue and come to his or her own conclusion, he or she is making an individualistic choice. But if the other is simply pro-choice because he or she is following some political group or movement, then he or she holds a conformist belief. Following a crowd, even an extreme crowd, is still conformity and anti-individualism. Many ideas which differ from traditional norms are popular these days, such as homosexuality. So does that mean that no gay rights activist can be individuals?

Certainly not. The essence of individuality lies in the intent and the following of the self, so it is possible to go in the same direction as the crowd, yet not follow it. Consequently, one could take the most seemingly "conformist" person, someone pop culture would call a meaningless part of the masses, and if that person truly believes in everything that he or she does, no matter what anyone else has to say, then that person is a true individual. This new definition centers on the reasons rather than the actual status or beliefs. If someone is an existentialist, and holds that philosophy because it is in style, he or she is the farthest thing from an individual. But if another existentialist has read Sartre and Camus and truly believes in the philosophy, he or she can be called an individual.

In this age of counterculture and anti-American dreaming, the individual must let this idea of reason-oriented action permeate the entire philosophy of life. Everything, ranging from unimportant things such as style of dress to the most important things such as religion, must be deeply examined and contemplated. The search must take place on all fronts, but there is a catch. One must search for the self, not for the sake of being unique, because, as we have seen, this would be antithetical and would produce nothing but a pseudo-individual. One must search for the self because of

one's burning need to find out who one really is. We need to cast off influences and up-bringings to become the people we are inside.

This search is what makes one a true individual if that even matters. Even if a million others are searching in an identical way, if the search is sincere, it creates an individual. Maybe you want to be an actor. Well, if you truly believe that acting is what is inside of you, then you are an individual. But what about a business person, not a job that carries the hip implication of "actor." If you believe that a business person is what is inside, you are just as much an individual as anyone else. So what it all comes down to is following the heart and the dreams, regardless of the society around you. Everyone should take up this search, for if they don't, they will regret it their entire lives. Look at Prufrock.

"The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by Thomas Stearns Eliot, tells of a desperate man tormented by his emotional paralysis in the face of his hopes and dreams and ultimately his self.

> And indeed there will be time
> To wonder, "Do I dare" and "do I dare"
> time to turn back and descend the stair.

Do I dare to find myself? Does the J. Alfred in everyone dare to search for the self? "Self realization " is the best definition of individuality so far. Prufrock's lack of self realization causes his emotional impotence and identity crisis. It cause him to define himself as the most meaningless of creatures:

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

So according to Eliot, if one does not search for the self, all meaning will slowly drip away. If a person constantly does what others say, or always follows the crowd, that person will lose all ability to "move" under his or her own will. Man's soul will get lost in the crowd.

Take *Waiting for Godot,* the absurdist play by Samuel Beckett deals with the inability to act which comes from a lack of individuality. Two men stand

by a tree waiting for someone named "Godot" who never comes. We do not know Godot. They never look for Godot, they never seek out Godot, and they never search for Godot. They suffer the same fate as Prufrock, an inability to act caused by a lack of self realization, a lack of individuality. The last lines of each act exemplify this idea:

> Well, shall we go?
> Yes, let us go.
> Stage directions: *They do not move.*

If we do not seek out the self, inside, we will all end up perpetually waiting for Godot, and become a mass of conformists incapable of action. Never achieving individuality may not even matter, but never finding the self does. The search for the self must never stop. It is the most crucial part of being human, for if the self is never found, many Prufrocks will one day scream out at the same time, calling for the end of man. And if that day ever comes, there will be no way to find the lost time, to gather the rosebuds, and search for something real, something that matters, even for an instant, before Godot finally comes.

The search is not easy. It is a journey to a grand destination which is forever just beyond the next obstacle. It is always just barely in sight. Sometimes the end seems closer, other times it is far, far away. As one travels along this path, searching for that illusive self, one can laugh or cry or sing, and searchers usually do it all on a regular basis. Sometimes it is easy, other times it is hard. Finally, one may think that he or she has reached the emerald city, but once inside the gates, he or she finds a false wizard, or only a clue to where the real self is. This happens to many people when they really get interested in something, especially during their youth. How many young people play a musical instrument intensely for a few months and then lose interest? Different things appear to us to be our essences, and ourselves, but these things turn out to be nothing but pretty imitations or answers that only create more questions. These questions make the never-ending search more difficult, and the journey more complicated.

And then there is that moment, that moment where you finally think

you have reached the end of the journey, and have found the thing for which you were searching. The moment it occurs to you, out of nowhere, that you have found your self, you are exhilarated, and try to hold on to that moment for as long as possible, because you know without a doubt that it is real. You become an individual, and could care less about it, because that is not why you went on the journey in the first place. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the moment is gone, and a thousand different new roads appear before your eyes, and the self that you just found needs to be sought after again.

This is the essence of an individual. Individuality is following hopes and dreams and loves, regardless of any outside influences or societies. It doesn't matter if a hundred or a million others are doing the same thing as you. If you are truly, not as Whitman said "Marching to the beat of a different drummer," but marching to the beat of your own drummer, then you are an individual. And if being an individual is meaningless, at least you know what you are inside, and are still trying to find out more.

So all that is left to jot down is that the beat of your own drummer will beat away inside of you anyway, whether or not it is sought. So do not repress it as Prufrock did, and do not follow a false beat like so many others. Embark on the search for yourself and march to the beat of your own drummer. Time is not on your side. Don't end up at some nowhere stop just off the mainstream highway, and don's, do things or believe ideas for the sake of being "different," or for any other popular trend. Follow your path until you find something real, until you reach that moment of truth, and then follow some more. What does your beat sound like? Do you even care?

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Frightful Fun
Danielle Ariano

I present my fake ID to the bouncer at the door of The Bank in downtown Baltimore. He smiles, revealing his crooked teeth, and lets out a deep, quiet laugh from his bearded mouth. Running his fingers through his long, greasy hair, he eyes me. Abruptly, he shoves the ID back into my palm, and stamps my hand so solidly it throbs. I feel branded. I am ushered in the door by the people advancing in line behind me. Once inside, a large drop of some unidentifiable liquid splashes onto my head. Peering up at the ceiling, I cannot find its source. I notice a puddle at my feet, and realize that the drop I intercepted was intended for this small pool. I step out of the way, trying not to let it put a damper on my excitement for what the coming night holds.

I look around and see that before me lies a set of stairs to the lower level of the building. Curiosity about what is down there is interrupted by my friends. They are excited and sharing stories about the bouncer's reaction to their ID's. We climb three steps up to the large dance floor. The stage at the front is unoccupied. The band scheduled to play tonight is not going on until midnight, two hours away. We sit at one of the small tables that line the perimeter of the room. I scan the crowd, recognizing most of the faces as Loyola students, all sharply dressed. The far corner, where the bar is located, swarms with people eager for alcohol. I see a girl pushing her way fiercely through the crowd and coming out with a big smile and a beer, her barbarous behavior rewarded with the prized golden drink of choice. Those around her shoot her angry glances as she passes. On the remainder of the floor, groups of people gather to talk and dance as clouds of smoke curl above their heads.

The walls and floor of the room are painted black. The only lights are

black lights that cast an eerie glow on anything white. I glance back at my friend and I am startled by the evil appearance of her eyes caused by the illumination of this strange light. When she turns her head she looks normal. Giant replicas of insects hang from the ceiling in attack positions, creating a threatening atmosphere.

Since our arrival, a steady flow of people has been coming into the club, thickening the crowd each moment. We walk around to talk with everyone we know, and I nearly lose my friends twice as we make our way through the mob. With every step, I rub up against the sweaty body of some stranger, many of whom feel they have a right to grope my behind as I pass. We reach the other side of the room and stand in the corner. A boy with shaggy brown hair staggers by me and collapses into a nearby chair. Slumped over, he looks like a melted clay figure. He can't be any older than fourteen, yet he is obviously drunk, on the verge of passing out. This does not surprise me because most of the people in here are underage. His condition is horrifying, he is scarcely capable of holding his body upright, his hands hanging lifelessly between his legs. Some people stare at him with scared looks on their faces. I too am frightened, and approach him to see if he needs help. Squatting down to talk to him, I see that he is slobbering all over himself, and some of his saliva drips onto my jeans. His words are barely comprehensible, but he tells me that he is okay, that he is here with his sister. The thought that he could die terrifies me, nevertheless, I slowly back away and leave the young boy slouching over in the chair. I try my best to put it out of my mind so that I can enjoy the night, but he remains impressed in my memory. As midnight approaches, there is a push toward the stage. When the band comes on, the crowd begins to dance. It surges to the rhythm of the music; bodies smash violently against one another. Because of their force, I can't help but to move with them. I am tossed from side to side, powerless and at the mercy of the unyielding group. I begin to wonder, is this supposed to be fun? The boy next to me in his impaired state appears to be having a good time, unaware of his disgusting surroundings. The rip in his expensive Ralph Lauren polo shirt and the couple beside him, who are about as close to having sex fully-clothed as you can get, don't seem to bother him in the least. In the midst of this bulldozing pack of people, a smile remains frozen on his face. In fact, most people

here are so drunk they seem oblivious to the repulsiveness of this place. There is an unspoken rule that in order to have a good time you have to be drunk.

My friend taps me on the shoulder and I see her lips move, but I can't hear her above the blaring music. "WHAT!?" I scream back at her. She points to the stage with an inquisitive look on her face. I gather that she wants to go up to "dance." I hesitate, then nod in agreement: I did come here to have fun. It seems that with every step toward the stage, we get shoved back to our original place, but finally we manage to make it. We engage in this form of hurling ourselves aimlessly around for five minutes before my friend gets elbowed in the ribs and knocked down. She has been permanently tattooed by boot marks and is covered by a dark, wet slime consisting of beer and whatever else might have been on the floor by the time she gets up. She and I depart from our group to head for the bathroom. The nearest ladies room is next to the stage. After pushing our way to it, we find that it is closed. The only other restrooms are downstairs, so we begin our journey across the room to the stairs. Half-way across the floor, a cup of beer is dumped on my head. I turn to see a girl standing with an empty cup and a shocked look on her face. She mumbles an apology and gestures to a guy wildly slam dancing next to her. My friend and I continue our battle toward the bathroom. Ten minutes later, we're downstairs. People are packed into two rooms. The smoke and heat are oppressive. It is a bit more quiet down here and I realize that my ears are ringing from the music upstairs. We find the bathroom. A line of girls extends out the door, and we place ourselves at the end. A girl sits next to the line, with her face buried in her knees. I've been there, alone and softly sobbing, just another nameless face in the crowd, another stranger no one cares about. I can see myself in her, and I remember how places like this can seem so fun until you find yourself separated from everyone. It is only then that you see the crowd for what it really is, a group of people linked by emptiness, searching for fulfillment in the bottom of a cup of beer. I pass her as we slowly advance in line. I can no longer remember why I came.

A foul smell hangs in the air and becomes stronger, more invasive, as we near the bathroom entrance. There are only two stalls inside, and one is occupied by a girl hugging the dirty toilet. She sits beside a trail of her own

vomit that leads into the bowl. Her friend is standing beside her holding her hair while she throws up. In the other stall, the seat is splattered with urine. A roll of toilet paper lies on the floor next to a used tampon. The walls are covered with obscenities. The cracked mirror hanging above the sink overflowing with cigarette butts reflects my image, slightly distorted, with a hot pink lip print stamped in the middle. As I stare at the mirror, I do not recognize my own filthy image. We abandon the idea of cleaning ourselves up in the dingy room and return to the war zone above.

Back upstairs, the two of us decide that we have had enough of this place. We find our friends after a half hour search, and tell them that we are leaving. As I am walking to the door, another drop of mysterious liquid pelts me on the head. I am standing in the same puddle, which has now grown to twice its original size. I stare at it for a moment. It looks like a big, empty hole and it makes me think that weekend after weekend, month after month, this puddle forms in the same spot. I guess no one cares enough to find the source of the problem and fix it. When I finally step outside, I look down at the bottom of my jeans and shoes, both of which are caked with remainders of this hellish place. I don't know if I will ever get them clean.

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