

Illuminations

Volume 12 | 2011



Illuminations

A magazine of creative expression
by students, faculty,
and staff at
Southeast Community College

Volume 12

“Good friends, good books,
and a sleepy conscience:
this is the ideal life.”

Mark Twain

***sc* Southeast community college**

2011

Illuminations Volume 12

Conceptual Creator: Shane Zephier

Editorial Team: Debrenee Adkisson, Heather Barnes, Mike Boden, Nicholas Borer, Mark Burkitt, Jennifer Celler, Dan Everhart, John Kuligowski, Jessica Larimore, Micaela Mota, Nicholas Muthersbaugh, Chuck Parker, Ben Penton, Caitlin Phelps, Lydia Phillippe, Claudia Reinhardt, Mary Ann Rowe, Kathy Samuelson, Natalie Schwarz, Debi Smith, Susan Thaler, Sarah Trainin, Matt Ward

Project Coordinators: Kimberly Fangman and Jennifer Muller

Project Assistants: Cathy Barringer, Rebecca Burt, Sue Fielder, Nancy Hagler-Vujovic, Rachel Mason, Donna Osterhoudt, Merrill Peterson, Janalee Petsch, Carolee Ritter, Amy Rockel, Richard Ross, Kathy Samuelson, Barb Tracy, Bang Tran, Pat Underwood, the English instructors of the Arts and Sciences Division

Visual Publications Team: Tom Duong, Rachel Abernathy, Amber Cushman, Caleb Eubanks, Erica Graves, Emily Johnson, Mary Krula, Diane McLain, Dustin Rutledge, Dominique Whitehead, Amanda Whitlatch

Illuminations publishes creative prose, poetry, and visual art, as well as academic and literary writing. We encourage submissions from across the disciplines. Our mission is to feature outstanding artistic works with a diversity of voices, styles, and subjects meaningful to the SCC community. *Illuminations* is further evidence that critical thinking and creative expression are valued at Southeast Community College.

Illuminations is published in the spring of each year. Submissions are accepted year-round from SCC students, faculty, and staff. Submission forms and guidelines can be found at online.southeast.edu or in campus LRCs. Submissions or questions should be directed to:

Kimberly Fangman
c/o Southeast Community College
8800 O Street
Lincoln, NE 68520
402-437-2844
kfangman@southeast.edu

The content of this magazine does not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial team, the Arts and Sciences Division, or the Visual Publications Program of Southeast Community College. The content reflects student, faculty, and staff work without censorship by the editorial team.

© 2011 Rights revert to the author or artist after publication in *Illuminations*.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Brown Walls | 1 |
| Katrina Bennett | |
| Postcard from the Wrong Side of Anxiety | 9 |
| John Kuligowski | |
| Yucca Plant | 10 |
| Amy M. Salisbury | |
| Mija | 11 |
| Ashley Cornelsen | |
| Rush to the Bus | 19 |
| Amy Keller | |
| Nap Time | 20 |
| Jennifer Creller | |
| Father, I Thank You | 21 |
| Jon Bradford | |
| Fence | 27 |
| Aaron Brix | |
| Abstract Self-Portrait | 28 |
| Brittni Wolff | |
| True Troubadour | 29 |
| Natalie Schwarz | |
| Ladybug Boneyard | 30 |
| Uriah Rittenhouse | |
| Caught | 31 |
| Kara Gall | |
| Coming to America | 36 |
| Hani Sharro Hadgi | |
| Asylum | 42 |
| Danul Patterson | |
| Capitol Stairs | 43 |
| Amy M. Salisbury | |
| Moving on Up | 44 |
| Trevor N. Geary | |

| | |
|--|----|
| Looking Up | 49 |
| Aaron Brix | |
| Collie | 50 |
| Amy Keller | |
| I Hear the Snow Coming | 52 |
| John Mayan | |
| Standing Parallel | 53 |
| Mike Liedtke | |
| Wings in the Sky | 54 |
| Teresa Bissegger | |
| My Neenie | 55 |
| Jennifer Creller | |
| There's a Little Cowboy in All of Us | 64 |
| Savana Riley | |
| The Miracle that Saved My Life | 65 |
| Sara Elizabeth Henrichs | |
| Not on my Watch | 69 |
| Travis Koch | |
| Los Diablo's | 70 |
| Natalie Schwarz | |
| Black and Chrome | 71 |
| Jennifer Creller | |
| Picasso Face | 72 |
| Lydia Phillippe | |
| Modern Monsters | 73 |
| Elliot Newbold | |
| Cows | 78 |
| Desirae Bennett | |
| Tales of an Eighth Year Nothing | 79 |
| Zachary Knipe | |
| Hallway | 83 |
| Matt Ward | |
| Lessons | 84 |
| Daniel Cromer | |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Grandpa's Chair | 89 |
| Amy M. Salisbury | |
| Orb Weaver and Prey | 90 |
| Jacob Linderholm | |
| Hangin' with the Felons | 91 |
| Alex Cordry | |
| Portal. | 95 |
| Jeremy Bishop | |
| Tracks | 96 |
| Laura Drawbaugh | |
| Just One More Day. | 97 |
| Sarah Yoakum | |
| Late Show. | 100 |
| Natalie Schwarz | |
| Wreck | 101 |
| Natalie Schwarz | |
| Scuttlebum | 102 |
| Mark Burkitt | |
| Hidden Strength | 103 |
| Emily Danekas | |
| Fly, Birdie, Fly. | 106 |
| Laura Drawbaugh | |
| Splat | 107 |
| Laura Drawbaugh | |
| Kurt Cobain | 108 |
| Casey Carbon | |
| Oliver | 109 |
| Alejandro Pages | |
| Spiral. | 115 |
| Aaron Brix | |
| The World's Youngest Conqueror | 116 |
| Marc Otero | |
| Scotty—Almost 3 | 117 |
| Mark Burkitt | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Just One Drop | 118 |
| Mike Liedtke | |
| The Not So Magic Bullet | 119 |
| Kiley Blanc | |
| Jaeger | 123 |
| Nancy Hagler-Vujovic | |
| Pinecone | 124 |
| Jacqueline Parks | |
| What Jeremy Paslawski Believes | 125 |
| Jeremy Paslawski | |
| Deep at Work | 127 |
| Emilio Franso | |
| Wildfire | 128 |
| Hiliary Cary | |
| April Showers in September | 129 |
| Danul Patterson | |
| Open Tulips | 130 |
| Michelle Brinkman | |
| Just One More Time | 131 |
| Debra M. Lamprecht | |
| Water Spigot | 134 |
| Amy M. Salisbury | |
| The Human 'Being' in the Written Word | 135 |
| Lynn Saffer | |
| Waterfall | 138 |
| Emilio Franso | |
| Needle and Thread | 139 |
| Britnie Naprstek | |
| Hollywood Hogs and Hot Dogs | 144 |
| Uriah Rittenhouse | |
| No Account | 145 |
| Megan Vertz | |
| Dancing People | 150 |
| Phip Ross | |

Shoe Shine 155
Jennifer Creller

Our Contributors 156

Front Cover image, “Standing Parrallel,” by Mike, Lietdtke and back cover image(s),
“Nap Time” by Jennifer, Creller.

This volume of Illuminations is dedicated to Savana Riley.

“Music is well said to be speech of angels.”

—Thomas Carlyle

On January 20, 2010, Savana submitted photos for publication in *Illuminations*. On February 11, 2010, she was involved in a car accident near the 84th and O Street SCC campus. Her injuries left her in a seven-month coma. On August 24, 2010, Savana died at the age of 20.

Savana was to have married her fiancé, Thomas, on June 19, 2010, and he remained at her side throughout the coma. Savana wanted to be a children’s minister and had been on several mission trips. Family and friends spoke of her beautiful singing voice, her vibrant faith, and her undying devotion to children. Although we were able to publish only one, Savana submitted four photos to *Illuminations*, all of them tender portraits of children. We’re honored to have her photo featured here, and we thank Savana’s family for their help in coordinating its publication.

Illuminations Volume 12

Prize Winners

Illuminations awards prizes for student submissions in three categories: prose, poetry, and artwork. Grand prize winners receive \$50, while runner-up winners receive \$25.

Prose Winners

Grand Prize: Katrina Bennett, “Brown Walls”

Members of the editorial team called Katrina’s intimate narrative “vivid and engaging.” Members felt her use of succinct, clipped sentences and condensed flashbacks created an emotional patchwork that connected strongly with the reader. One team member called “Brown Walls” a “sensitively written piece that leaves me wanting to help and wanting to know more.”

Runner-Up: Ashley Cornelsen, “Mija”

Editorial team members agreed that Ashley’s moving essay packed an emotional wallop without falling into bathos. One team member wrote that the essay showed “wonderful use of detail and strong use of personal voice.” Throughout her story, Ashley succeeds in offering insights into the complex social and emotional life of a young, rebellious Hispanic woman.

Poetry Winners

Grand Prize: John Kuligowski, “Postcard from the Wrong Side of Anxiety”

Editorial team members were impressed with the craftsmanship of John’s poem and his ability to subtly shift the perspective from pleasant images at the beginning of the poem to nail-biting anxiety by the end. As one team member wrote, “Even with the shift, the images are unified, and the theme is mature and focused.” Another member appreciated the “imagery induced through wordplay; the deft juxtaposition of hope and despair.”

Runner-Up: Amy Keller, “Rush to the Bus”

Called “vivid and sweet” by one editorial team member, Amy’s “Rush to the Bus” recounts a single, common event in a young woman’s life while simultaneously revealing emotional dimension. As one team member wrote, “This poem has a great sense of place and imagery. The poet lets you hear the sounds and feel the cold; you are rooting for her to make the bus and not be left behind.”

Artwork Winners

Grand Prize: Amy M. Salisbury, “Yucca Plant”

Amy’s intriguing close-up of a yucca plant captured the eye of many on the editorial team. One team member wrote, “This is an interesting shot of a traditionally ugly plant. The photo makes me see how beautiful things can be when viewed from a different perspective.” Another called the photo “engaging and mysterious.”

Runner-Up: Jennifer Creller, “Nap Time”

Editorial team members were impressed with Jennifer’s excellent candid shot, particularly its dynamic composition. One team member wrote, “The colors and composition of this photo are wonderful; the eye travels in a circle from the sleeping man, to the dog, and back up; very well done.”

Brown Walls

Recipient of Grand Prize Prose Award
Katrina Bennett • Academic Transfer

Four brown walls. Three purple lamps. Two beige couches. According to the degree on her grey desk, her name is Dr. Smith. She sits two clicks of her indigo computer chair above me. Her yellow legal pad rests on her black pants while her pink pen taps the page. She smiles, revealing straight white teeth accented by U.S.S.R. red lips. Her blue eyes attack my traitorous scarred knuckles demonstrating she already knows my secret. You are overweight, my green eyes retort. She inhales quickly—a precursor to the questions I know are coming. I immediately break eye contact. I glance at my tan hands with their red blemishes. My mind leaves the dark curtained room.

Her perfect, long blonde hair blows in the light breeze. She is sauntering toward me. I smile sweetly, hiding my jealousy of her coveted tan, slim body. I glance at my own bikini-clad self, then back at hers. Our matching red lifeguard swimsuits don't do anything to help my confidence. She places herself on one of the hard, wooden lifeguard chairs beside me. As she reaches down to grab our drinks, I catch a glimpse of the eyes of twenty boys staring at her chest. She hands me my Diet Coke, flipping her hair with purpose. Scanning the Country Club swimming pool, I search for one woman who does not look better than I do in a swimming suit. My 5-foot-8, 140-pound figure cannot compete, and I wrap my towel tighter around my stomach.

“Your mother is very concerned about you. She said your last doctor didn't get through to you.” I presume there must be some sort of class in psychology school that instructs all counselors to decorate their offices the same way—the various plants, papers strewn across the desk, an outdated fan, and most importantly, the sunken couch that screams, “You are not good enough to be at the same level as I am.” I detect a lack of pictures as I scrutinize the room. It reminds

me that I cannot be trusted with the knowledge of her family members. I suddenly become aware of the glassy look my eyes must have taken. I snap back to reality. "So now do you understand why it was important for her to call me and for you to be here?" I experience Kindergarten all over again. I am sitting back on the floor with my legs crossed, arm raised, hoping for that gold star.

"Uh huh," I manage to say convincingly enough.

"Good. Well, I'll see you in a week, and don't forget to do that homework."

I walk up to my boyfriend Ben's house at exactly 10:34 in the evening. I stride up the same steps I have been walking up for the last two years. He opens the door before I have the chance to knock.

"Katrina, we need to break up." It is a clear night, and the stars surrounding me are absolutely beautiful. I laugh. It is all too ironic.

"Katrina, we need to break up." It registers. My questions mirror his when I first told him the scars on my hands were actually teeth marks from my bulimia. When did this start? Why? Is it my fault? Does anyone else know? Will you please stop?

"I can't deal with your shit." I have the sudden impulse to run. My head snaps to each side, desperately searching for somewhere to go.

"What?" My mind keeps me rooted to the spot.

"This eating disorder and shit. Just leave." I feel my skin start to crawl, and I instinctively step backwards. I do not want Ben to catch my disease.

"Do you not love me anymore?" Blank stare. "Tell me you don't love me anymore, and I will leave." My eyes beg him to still care.

"I don't love you anymore."

"Well, honey, I think the way to fix your little problem is to find other ways to manage your stress and for you to take anti-depressants." The further I squish myself into the couch, the higher the counselor's voice becomes. It is a hot summer day, and the room is only economically air-conditioned. I nod and smile politely as she lists the litany of side effects I am already well aware of: esophageal problems, vocal

cord damage, stomach ulcers, osteoporosis, hair loss, digestive problems, and decreased body temperature, just to name a few.

“You understand this is a very bad thing, don’t you, honey?” Her eyes encourage my face to match hers. I humor her with a small smile. It’s likely my only escape. As I walk out the door, she calls, “I’ll see ya next week then, honey.” I stride quickly to my van to avoid wiping the smile off her face with my obvious retort.

I open my eyes and see blood. Damn it! I nicked the back of my throat with my nails again. I hear a knock on the Olive Garden bathroom door. I take a deep breath, flush the toilet, powder my face, and unwrap a stick of gum. I open the door and display a well-rehearsed fake smile to the woman waiting outside. Two more deep breaths and I am back at the table with my boyfriend of two months. He kisses me and tastes blood. “Bit my tongue,” I answer his eyes.

“What’s wrong, babe?” he coos sweetly, taking my hand.

I smile innocently and reply, “Nothing.” The concern in his face is enough to bring tears to my eyes. “I really am all right,” I reply sincerely. He raises his eyebrows unconvinced.

“You’ve been really distant lately.” I take my hand back and start to pick at my nails nervously. “Is it something I did?” His matter-of-fact tone surprises me.

“No. I’m just stressed.”

“Why, babe?” He reaches for my hand again, but I pull away. I do not want my disease to infect him.

“Second semester.”

“I know that’s not all. You can tell me anything. I already know something is wrong.” My mouth opens in betrayal to reveal my deepest secret while my brain screams warnings. Ready to confess the truth, I look at his striking blue eyes. I inhale slowly and feel the emotion etched all over my face.

“I slept with your best friend. Twice.” Relief spills over me as his face swarms with defeat, sadness, and anger. As he gets up to leave, I sink lower in my chair. My failed attempt to convince myself that I do not like him leaves black mascara streaks down my face. I pull my

legs tight to my chest as helplessness from a sudden realization flows over me. How is it easier for me to tell my best friend I cheated on him than it is to tell him I am bulimic?

* * *

My eyes scan the familiar, dark room searching for an escape. The air of the blue oscillating fan hits the leaves of the fake tree blowing them in a typical pattern. It then pushes aside the curtains to reveal a rusting yellow car. Finally, it lands on her and sends waves through her hair forcing me to focus on her face. Her lipstick has changed. It is now blood red.

“So, how is everything going, dear?” her dilated eyes encourage a response. The fan hits the Post-it notes on the desk curling them upward.

* * *

It is snowing. I can feel the cold air in my lungs. My head pounds as I force my legs to run each mile. Seven, eight, nine. By ten, I can feel every beat of my heart like a jackhammer in the ground. By eleven, all my extremities have gone numb. By twelve, I feel nothing. The knowledge of how many calories I have failed to throw up today keeps me going. It was my first time. I just waited too long, I tell myself. I need to wait ten minutes but no longer than one hour. I know this now. I collapse on my front porch in a mixture of sweat and snow. Thirteen miles. Two hours and twenty minutes of running. It is dark now. I lay unable to move, waiting for someone to open the front door. I hear the lock click. I quickly jump up to avoid the questions that pertain to why I am laying on the ground. I ring the icicles out of my hair and face my mother. Concern is pouring out of her eyes.

“Where were you? You told me you were going running. Why were you gone so long? It’s eleven at night. You have school tomorrow. Are you all right?”

I respond with a smile and say, “Yes, I’m fine. I’m training for that half marathon this summer.” My voice rises with each lie that comes out of my mouth. I feel her eyes on my back as I make my way to the shower. Closing the door, I pull out the white scale from under the sink. “You haven’t lost any weight, and you look fat!” it screams. I

step off the scale and pull back the shower curtain. Climbing in with my clothes on, I turn the faucet to hot. As the water pours over me, I look down at my disgusting body. I'll throw up everything tomorrow, I promise myself.

It was over. I was finally done. Six months of struggling, and now I was finally walking away. I push open the heavy glass door and leave the cool air conditioning. The warm breeze feels wonderful on my goose-bump-covered body. I brush up against the rusty yellow car I have been staring out the window at for months. My van waits mere moments away, and as I stride toward it, I take out my phone. Climbing in the driver's seat, I dial the only number I have on speed dial.

"Hello?"

"Mom? I wanted to call you and tell you I'm done."

"What do you mean, 'You're done?'" The apprehension in her voice only adds to my emotional state.

My voice involuntarily rises. "I mean I'm done. I'm not going back. She handed me a sheet to sign. Did you know about this?" Silence.

"Now, honey..."

"I thought those meetings were between her and me, not another way for you to spy on me! How about you just read my diary next time! It knows more, and it's free!" My voice has risen to inaudible levels.

"That sheet was just to allow her to let me know you are getting better," I hear my mother's voice plead. Click and dial tone.

My friend Tonya glances at me, then at the sign posted by the elevators. I follow her eyes to the "Eating Disorders Support Groups" poster.

"I am too fat to go to one of those," I respond. "Those stick-thin girls would laugh at me." She rolls her eyes as the silver doors open. We step on, and I push 1. It smells like the pizza I wish I would allow myself to have.

"Have you been taking your insulin?" I pose defensively looking at her hollow face.

“John is coming over tonight. Then I have to go get shit from my ex, so....” Her voice trails off to avoid the obvious no. The elevator jolts to the first floor where we step off and make our way to the cafeteria. I watch as Tonya scrutinizes each girl we walk past.

“That girl looks like a slut. I bet you she doesn’t eat. Did you see her hair?” Her obnoxious whispering sends glares in our direction. Reaching our destination, I grab the only blue tray and head straight to the salad bar. I force my eyes down to avoid the temptation of any food I have deemed bad. One piece of pie, one chicken leg, or one glass of milk will throw my brain into “binge and purge” mode. As she sits down beside me, I smile and am grateful to have someone to eat with. I have learned from experience what happens when a bulimic is placed alone with an endless supply of food.

The air conditioning hits me as I push open the heavy doors. Judgmental eyes follow each step I take to the elderly receptionist. Her horned-rimmed glasses do not notice me until I quietly clear my throat. She hands me a clipboard and pen without looking up or saying a word. It is 3:56 p.m. My appointment is at 4:00. I turn and scan the room for an apparently nonexistent empty chair. Leaning against a vacant portion of the wall, I begin to fill out my paperwork. Do you smoke? No. Do you drink? No. Have you taken drugs? No. Family history of heart disease? No. I listen as each name in the waiting room is called. Robotically, they collect their purses, place their magazines on the table, and stride after their beckoner. Finally, I hear a familiar collection of consonants and vowels. I place my black pen on the clipboard and shift my body weight off the wall. I quickly search for the source. I see no one. I hear my name again. More frantic now, my eyes dilate, and I look again. The source of the voice is standing in the doorway. It’s a he. When a girl makes an appointment with a university counselor because of an eating disorder, why would she be placed with a he? I fake a smile and follow the psychiatrist—the first psychiatrist I have made my own appointment with.

His office is different. Papers are strewn across every surface of the

room. Paintings by well-known Mexican artists boast his heritage. He directs me to sit on one of the two chairs in the room—a rolling office chair. Sitting on a matching surface, he pulls out a notebook. I nervously sway side to side on my chair. He reaches for my clipboard and hurriedly scans my answers.

“Bulimia is a way for women to deal with stress.” I begin to twirl my hair. “In order to fix the problem, we must fix the source of the stress. What are the main stress factors in your life?”

“Um, I don’t really know.” I pause and look down. My nails are shorter than they have ever been. I glance back up. He is staring at me. “I guess there was this one guy...”

“Yes, relationships can be the foundation of all aspects of our lives. You are a pretty girl, so I am sure you have no problem getting boys.” I lean back on my chair and cross my legs in an attempt to get comfortable. I prepare myself for the beginning of what I know will be a long lecture. “Failed relationships are one of the hardest issues college students face. I have this diagram that shows the way boys and girls bond.” He pulls out a crudely made picture book. My eyes begin to drift across the contents of his office. I abruptly lean forward and uncross my legs. I am determined to focus. “Here we have a boy who likes a girl, but she doesn’t like him. Now, here is an example of a boy who likes a girl that just wants to be friends. This one right here is the rarest: a boy likes a girl who likes him back. That all sounds simple, I know, but once this couple gets together, it takes even more work to keep the thing working.” I reach down and pick up my Diet Coke. If I’m going to do this, I need caffeine. “I’m sure you know all of this, though.” He looks down at my clipboard again. “It says here you are a journalism major.” I nod. I have begun to pick at my nails. “I bet that takes up a lot of your time. You’re probably working on a newspaper and trying to get internships for the summer. The school-work can be pretty grueling, I’ve heard. I wouldn’t know, of course, but that’s the rumor.” He laughs nervously. I meet his desperate eyes and force a small smile.

“Well, I think the first thing we need to do is talk about how you can deal with all these stressful things in your life in a healthy way.

Have you tried working out? There have been many studies done with completely positive results on the benefits of working out. I'm sure you already know that, though. Through my own research, I have also found that meditation can be very beneficial. Yoga is good. Journaling is positive, as well. All you need for that is a notebook and pen. I like to buy the leather notebooks at Barnes and Noble. One of my little splurges...."

The window is open, and I can feel the last days of summer heat on my face. There is a couple across the street walking hand in hand. I give up on my established concentration. They stop at the crosswalk. He leans down and kisses her cheek. She smiles up at him. The light changes, and they begin walking again. I follow her lover's gaze to two blond girls walking the opposite way. They giggle as one of them winks at him. He turns his head to watch them go.

"Here is my card. Same time next week?" I take the card without looking up and walk out.

* * *

The click and dial tone are frequent substitutes for goodbye between my younger sister and me. Too much time spent together over Christmas break strained our relationship.

"I have a secret for you," I tell her stealthily in hopes of rekindling our bond over first-rate gossip. I hear the slam of the back door and the rush of wind as she strides outside so as not to be overheard.

"Yes....," she replies enthusiastically.

"I got my tongue pierced!" I press the phone closer to my ear waiting for her enthusiasm. Silence. Something is wrong.

Disappointment and anger stream through the phone line as her emotions are suddenly put into one word.

"Why?"

"Because it looks cool," I animatedly reply, encouraging her excitement to match mine. Click and dial tone. Protecting my sister from the tainted truth is worth not calling her back. It has been one month since a piece of metal was shoved through my strongest muscle. It has been one month since blood has flowed from teeth marks on my hands. 🦷

Postcard from the Wrong Side of Anxiety

Recipient of Grand Prize Poetry Award
John Kuligowski • Academic Transfer

The brown dog is rolling across
the grass that waltzes in the breeze,
and a clink of bottles escapes
the window like laughter.

A hand touches your face, but it's
only the gentle smell of burning leaves;
you're shaking, waltzing in
your skin like the grass, rolling
like the brown dog. You'll live
without the pill. Life is a revelation,
not a terror, and yet the hand
on your cheek is withering. There
is no breeze now, but instead the
metallic sound of laughter
distends through your head.

Inside the dark's velocity, your hands
are mottled, your fingers tremble.
A ribbon of streetlight ties
together the knuckles of a tree and
a smear reflected by an empty
window. Your brain cries out to be
touched by names you cannot
pronounce. Every sound collapses
the ground beneath uneasy feet.

Life is a terror in the revelation
of dispelled chemicals.

Yucca Plant

Recipient of Grand Prize Artwork Award

Amy M. Salisbury • Academic Transfer



I patted the bridge of my nose with the beige-stained sponge that used to be white. I smoothed out the liquid concealer over my freckles. The damn specks ran across just my nose, but they were noticeable. I hated them. I was the only Mexican I knew with freckles. I must've gotten them from my father. I didn't know what he looked like, but I knew he wasn't Mexican. My mom, Lucy, and Grandma Zoila always told me to marry a Mexican man; they said white men didn't understand the meaning of family. I went on to apply my rose-colored lipstick. I had this process down to a science now. As I carefully applied my lipstick, my grandmother called out, "Susana, will you come help us in the kitchen?" I closed my compact mirror and stuffed everything into my make-up bag.

The kitchen was warm with the smell of fresh-baked sugar cookies and apple pie. Grandma Zoila was preparing tamales for our family's Christmas dinner. Her frost white hair was curled and short. It made her olive skin seem even warmer. Her brick-colored lips were frowned and rarely smiled anymore, but when they did, her dark eyes lit up. Her body reminded me of a lumberjack's. She was built like a strong woman, which matched her personality. She was stern and stubborn about her rules. She spread the dough across the cornhusks. I could never do it right. I always put too much or not enough, so they never tasted like hers. She didn't need my help. I walked over to the large dinner table where we would all be seated in a few hours.

I picked up the relish plate and started scattering pickles and olives around it. My mother was sitting at the other end of the table. I thought about giving her my make-up bag; she looked so washed out. Her dark hair and eyes stood out next to her dull, pale skin. She had hanging circles, from crying, under her coal-like eyes, and her body was made of skin and bone. There was nothing to her now. My grandpa, Joe, died in January, and nothing had been the same since. He had kept everyone in our family going, especially my mom. She

always said the only man she could trust was her daddy. He was also the only one I ever saw her talk to. They talked every day right up until the day he had his heart attack. We all knew his health wasn't the best, but no one expected him to leave that soon. This would be our first Christmas without him. My mother was looking around blankly at the table and the empty seats. I thought she was going to die right there. I wanted to walk over and push her down off the chair; she probably wouldn't even fight to get back up. It made me sick that she couldn't be strong for me or even herself. She just sat around and cried all the time at home, and she didn't say much to anyone anymore—not even to me. I got away with a lot because of that.

I came home every night at two or three in the morning. My mom didn't ask questions. I liked to go out with friends, a couple of girls from the cheer squad at school. I drank all the time. Parties were easy to find, even on school nights. We lived in a smaller town, Lincoln, Nebraska. It was a college town, so there was always a party going on somewhere, or at least some people hanging out and drinking. I got drunk on school nights a couple of times, but mostly I drank on weekends. Sometimes I met guys and didn't come home at all. I wasn't a slut or anything—just friendly. I never worried about getting in trouble over it. My mom didn't say anything to me, and she sure as hell wasn't going to tell my grandparents, who would have wrung my neck. Grandpa Joe was gone, and my mom didn't talk to Grandma Zoila enough to bring it up.

My grandma had her back to me while she worked over the stove. My mom was still staring at the table, oblivious to me and anything else. I snuck out of the kitchen and back into the bathroom. I locked the door behind me. I wanted to hide for the rest of the night in this cramped little room that was thick with old women's perfume and baby powder. I looked at my pink blackberry cell phone. I had a text from Jill, some bitch from my cheer squad.

“Hey hooker! Were partying 2night. u in?”

“Hell yeah! u get the vodka?”

I hit the send button and set my phone on the counter by the sink. I looked in the mirror and started fixing my hair. I adjusted the tight

sweater I was wearing and made sure my boobs looked good. I turned to the side and checked my butt. It looked good, too. I hated my body. Most girls would've killed for it, but I hated it. I was thin and in shape, very toned. I liked to wear heels to make my legs look longer and thinner, but I was too tall. When I wore heels, I was always slightly taller than my date. I hated it. I wished I was shorter. My phone buzzed across the counter top.

"We got vodka rum and gin. Gonna get u shit drunk! Hope ur rdy bitch!"

"K... cant wait. Ill txt u when im done here."

I took another look in the mirror. I looked pretty damn good. I unlocked the door and walked back to the living room. I pretended to text so that my little cousins wouldn't talk to me—I wanted to just hurry up and get this dinner over with. My mom would probably stay with my grandma tonight; they were both lonely. I missed Grandpa Joe, too. He was the only real man I'd known. My father left us when I was too young to remember him. He used to send me a birthday card every year with five dollars, but the cards stopped coming after my eleventh birthday. I never wanted to know him. I had Grandpa Joe growing up, and he was the best father I knew.

My grandmother's voice rang out, "Come eat!" The stampede of young cousins, aunts, and uncles went crowding into the small kitchen. I straggled in the back and waited for everyone else to find a seat around the old oval table. My uncle walked in behind me with four folding chairs in his arms. "Here, mija, sit down." I plopped down into the cold metal chair. I started to think about my Grandpa Joe. He called me "mija," too. It meant "baby girl" or "my daughter" in Spanish. I thought about how much I loved spending Christmas with him. He invited everyone in our family to his house each year. He would help my grandmother with small things for dinner, like relish trays and cheese and crackers. Then he sat in the living room with all the grandkids and watched holiday cartoons with us. Unlike my grandma, Grandpa Joe was always warm, and we did no wrong in his eyes. He spoiled each one of us with gifts and candy all year, but for Christmas he went all out. He used to spend every penny he had

on us. I know because I overheard my grandmother and him fighting about it once. He didn't have enough money to buy his medication because one of my cousins wanted a new bike. Since I was the first born grandchild, I could call my grandpa if I needed anything. I never abused that, like some of my spoiled cousins did. I wished I had called him more often, though. I could have been here spending more time with him. I thought about how much he would have loved to have been here tonight. He loved to eat Grandma Zoila's tamales on Christmas.

I picked up one of the paper plates and began to pile on the delicious meal my grandmother had prepared. Everyone started grabbing for the tamales. My grandmother made the best tamales. They were still steaming and wrapped up in cornhusks. I scooped a large serving of mashed potatoes, which were real, not that boxed stuff. Next I loaded up on fresh tortillas and some green bean casserole. The last thing I scooped up was the best—my grandmother's pork chops and chili. My uncle said grace, and we began to feast. I tore off a strip of tortilla and grabbed a chunk of pork chop with chili sauce. I shoved it into my mouth greedily. It was amazing. My taste buds instantly became alive with the flavor. I looked around at my family. Everyone was involved in their meal. The room was warm with the sound of utensils and chewing, but there wasn't much conversation, not even among the children. This was the only time I really wanted to be with my family. It was quiet, and the food was good. I finally felt at ease. When we were celebrating or grieving, we ate. We ate together and well.

After a slice of apple pie and plenty of sitting around, it was time to go to Christmas Mass. My entire family, except me, was piling into two cars. They were huddled so close it had to have been warm in there. I muttered under my breath, "I'll drive myself." I said it quietly so no one would notice and try to pull me in with them. One of my younger cousins heard me, and she came running up. At first I thought she was going to ask to ride with me, but instead she just handed me her scarf and disappeared back to her car. I must have looked as cold as I felt. My sweater was made for style, not comfort.

The red fibers were thin, and the wind cut through them easily. I wore a black knee-length skirt and high boots, too. Jill called them hooker boots. These were again for style, not comfort or warmth. I put the scarf on. It was rainbow-colored, and it had Dora the Explorer on it, but it was warm.

I got into my red Honda. It was a very nice car, especially for my family. It must have killed my mother and grandparents to buy it. I liked that it was nicer than most of my friends' cars. They always wanted me to drive. I pulled out my cigarettes, rolled down the window, and cranked up the heat as I backed out of the driveway.

My grandpa used to smoke, too. I remembered when I was young and he was in the hospital. He went in because he had shortness of breath. I had gone up to the hospital bed and thrown my arms around him. I trembled because I thought he was dying. He wiped the tears off my cheeks and smiled. His smile was warm and genuine; it lit up his whole face and made me feel like everything would be fine. He said, "Don't worry, mija, I'll be fine! I'm not going anywhere."

"Dad, the doctor says you need to stop smoking," my mom interrupted.

"Ay, he doesn't know."

"Dad, we don't want to keep coming back here and seeing you like this."

When he came home from the hospital, I was determined to do everything in my power to stop him from smoking. I snuck up into his room and stole the little box with the label Winston. I went downstairs and hid behind the couch. I had to have been younger than eight because it was my favorite hiding spot for hide-and-go-seek. I took his pack and dumped the cigarettes on the floor. I knew he was going to be mad at me. I could feel the hot tears roll down my cheeks. I was so mad. "Why won't he just stop smoking?" I thought. I tore up each individual cigarette and put the shreds back into the pack. Then I snuck back upstairs and put the pack back where he had left it. Pretty soon I heard him yelling. It was one of the only times I could even remember him yelling. He thought my grandma had done it. He was so mad. I watched from the base of the staircase as he

yelled. His face was normally a bright olive shade, but now it was red. It made the white in his salt and pepper hair stand out. I started crying and ran upstairs. "It was me! I'm sorry, Grandpa. I just don't want you to die!" I threw my arms around him. He didn't smoke a day after that. He would have been hurt to see me smoking now.

I flicked my cigarette out the window. I was at the church now. I sprayed some perfume on before I went inside, so my family wouldn't smell the smoke. I took a minute and stood in front of the church doors. I had been here about two years ago on my fifteenth birthday. We had a huge Quinceanera, which is a Mexican traditional celebration of a young woman's coming of age. I thought of my grandpa's smile and how overjoyed he looked. I had just finished Mass, and I was dressed in a big, poofy white dress with my tiara. Grandpa Joe had come out of the church and walked up to me. I was thanking all of my family for coming and hugging everyone. My grandpa came up to me with tears in his eyes and said, "You're growing up so fast. I remember the day you were born. I was so proud. I held you in my arms, and you were so small. I am so proud of you, mija." He kissed me on the top of my head, and I hugged him. Now I felt tears starting to form in my eyes. I tried not to think about him as I walked into the heavy front doors.

The church was packed and hot. A woman led everyone through the rosary while we waited for Mass to begin. Her voice was clear, and a quiet echo was bouncing off the walls. Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee.... I took the Dora scarf off quickly, so no one would see. My family was up front—in the front row, to be exact. The thing about a Catholic church was, when you were late, you sat in the front. The congregation filled in from the back to the front. I walked up the aisle. I didn't mind everyone seeing me. After all, I looked damn good that night.

I genuflected and knelt down next to Grandma Zoila. There was a very expensive Nativity set in front of the altar. It was made of porcelain and was painted with beautiful bright colors. I looked down at the baby in the sun-colored hay and the mother who stared lovingly at her newborn child. Then I looked at the father, Joseph. His clothes

were painted royal blue, and his hair was dark brown. He had a smile painted on his face. His smile was warm, just like my grandpa's. I never saw a happier looking statue. The statue looked proud to be a father, even though he knew the baby wasn't his. I thought of my own father, Grandpa Joe. He didn't have to become a father; neither did Joseph, but they both chose to do it. The Joseph in the Nativity set was poor but incredibly loving, like my grandpa. I looked at the scene from this first Christmas, and I thought of my grandpa's last Christmas.

He had given me a large box with gold wrapping paper. "Here, mija, this one's for you." He handed me the gift. I opened it carefully, undoing all of the tape first. I took my time not to tear the shining metallic paper. I untied the bow at the top and folded the paper instead of crumpling it. I loved receiving gifts, so I took my time and gave each one my full attention. I opened the white box slowly and picked out the royal blue tissue paper. I pulled out the large folded mound of soft, black leather. It was a brand new coat with fur. It must have cost quite a bit, especially for my grandpa. My grandma shot him a look.

"Susana, you need to give that back. Dad, that's too much," my mother started.

"Dejala. It's for my Susana. I'll spend my money how I want." He smiled then gave me a kiss on the top of my head. I hugged him and then stood up. I unfolded the coat carefully and put it on. It was gorgeous—knee-length with fur all around the trim and hooks like buttons down the front. It was soft, very thick, and I could smell the leather.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.... I looked back at the Nativity set and saw the Holy Family again. I remembered how important family was to my grandpa. He had always been there at holidays. In fact, he was there for me every day. He used to come pick me up in the mornings and drive me to school, and on Saturdays we would go do something fun. I remembered going to get hot menudo in the middle of a cold winter one morning. He bought me a big cup of steaming soup. It was the first time I had tried it.

He told me that it was made with tripe. I didn't know what that was, but I enjoyed it. Now that's all I ever wanted for breakfast on cold mornings. I wished my grandpa could take me to get some tomorrow morning. Our Father who art in heaven.... I bowed my head and suddenly, I felt hot tears falling. I couldn't stop thinking about my grandpa—all the things he had done for me. He was there for my dance recitals, birthdays, and especially the holidays. I looked around at the church and saw all of the Christmas decorations. They reminded me of the day I had my Quinceanera. It was in this same church.

Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.... I realized I was bawling now. I had knelt down and felt like I had collapsed. I couldn't stop crying. I could hear myself echoing in the church over all the hot people's voices. My grandma and mom picked me up and walked me to the bathroom. I still sobbed. I felt like I had lost it. I couldn't think about anything, and it suddenly didn't matter who saw me crying. I didn't care that my mascara was running down my face or that my sweater was stained with teardrops. I hugged my grandma and mom. They both had trails of tears down their cheeks. Grandma Zoila was bawling now, and the sound of it made my heart throb. I realized I was just as sad as they were. Hell, maybe I was worse. I just wanted to go home with them after Mass, and they were all that mattered now. We stood in the bathroom crying for a bit longer. I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, but it didn't matter now. 🙏

Rush to the Bus

Recipient of Runner-Up Poetry Award
Amy Keller • Academic Transfer

A glance at my wrist, glass frosts over
The ticking, tocking seconds,
Crunching, crushing cubes
Loud beneath my boot.

And the man ahead turns back.
Icicles coat his face, beard
Like an Everest guide, and he
Yells an encouragement,
Grabs my hand,
We run.

Under my shirt, a basketball
Soon to be a person
So safe and warm for now
Unlike us.

I bend an ear, sense the approach
Ice skating in haste,
And breathe fog.

We did it!
Rebels in uniform,
A stolen smooch,
A huddle close.

Then, up, up, away,
It carries me
Out the snow-clad window
I lift a hand, wave
And just smile.

Nap Time

Photograph

Recipient of Runner-Up Artwork Award

Jennifer Creller • Academic Transfer



Father, I Thank You

Jon Bradford • Business Administration/Marketing

When I was young, I always wanted to be like my father. I thought that he was everything a man should be. He and my mother divorced when I was two, so I have no memory of living with both of them. I would see him only every other weekend and for a two-week span in the summertime, but I loved every minute I could spend with my dad. My father was always working, and if he was not actually at work, he was welding in his garage, doing tedious chores on his ranch, or building some type of fence for his horses. He believed in working hard from when the sun came up until the sun went down, and you could plainly see that when you looked at him.

His hands were dirty most of the time from working outside. They were calloused and cracked, but when he would put his hands around me, they felt as soft as a blanket, and I knew I was safe. His five-foot, eight-inch body was always held up by a pair of worn-out cowboy boots. His blue Wrangler jeans were usually faded and accompanied by a few holes and grease stains. He had several big belt buckles that he had won when he was young and in the rodeo scene, and he wore them often. On his torso, a ripped white T-shirt lay underneath a snap button-up, long sleeve, Western-style over-shirt. His face seemed to always sport a five o'clock shadow, even if he had just shaved. His crooked smile shined through his grimy look and was there to send the feeling of comfort throughout my body. A black cowboy hat sat perched at the top of his brow and gave him the complete cowboy package.

I had always lived in our small town in Nebraska with my mother. Even though the small town had country written all over it, I was never really the country type. But every time I was with my dad, I would sacrifice my own feelings just so I could be with him. I believe that most young boys would do just about anything to enjoy some time with their father. My dad used to make every other weekend seem like Disneyland, even though he did not have much money. He worked as a manager at a railroad car maintenance shop, and I can

say that even today I do not know what he did there. Sometimes my mother would drop me off when he was working late, and I would run around the office, playing with whatever I could. All of his co-workers knew who I was, and I remember them coming in from the maintenance yard from time to time, covered in grease and looking dirtier than chimney sweeps. Hard hats hung from a rack in the back break room, and the 25 to 30-year-olds tried to keep their discussions about the long work day “G-rated” for my young ears.

When we would get to my father’s house, he would make my favorite spaghetti. It seemed like he would do everything in his power to make me happy. I loved being with my dad, and sometimes I would wonder what it would be like to live with him and not my mom. Of course, I could never have told her that. I cared about both of them so much and would find myself pondering what it would be like if they were still together. From sun up to sun down and beyond, my dad would play with me, cook my favorite foods, and let me watch the violent action movies that my mom never would. It was like time stood still for those three days that I was with him. When I looked at him, I felt so much compassion and admiration to be the type of man he was.

My father re-married when I was around the age of four. The woman he married had a son as well, and he was one year younger than I was. This was great for me because I could actually say I had a brother. Unfortunately, I saw him only as much as I saw my dad. We did make the best of it, though, and we would do everything together. I cannot remember when my dad and step-mom divorced because my only memories were that way. Before they divorced, my dad cared so much about her son that he legally adopted him. My step-brother had a deadbeat dad, and so my father felt it was the most important thing he could do for him. So, my step-brother and I soon would be on the same visitation schedule, and we would spend every other weekend with our dad.

Sometimes, when my step-brother and I would stay for our two-week period, we would take a trip to Martin, South Dakota, to see our grandmother. The drive there seemed like a trip on a jet because

we would laugh and play silly games in the back seat until we both fell asleep for the remainder of the trip. We rarely got to see much of my dad's side of the family, so when we got the chance to go to Grandma's house, we would soak it all in. From her famous French toast breakfast to her three-course lunches and dinners, we were never hungry at Grandma Dorothy's. My dad even used to tell me, "Grandma actually handmakes Dorothy Lynch salad dressing," and of course, I believed him. In the evenings, my cousins, step-brother, and I would run rampant through the house while the "grown-ups" would drink beer, share stories, and play cribbage.

As I got older, the times at my dad's were still good, but things started to become different. I was starting to find out who I wanted to become. I was starting to get more into urban hip-hop music and also started dressing with a hip-hop style. I just felt more comfortable with this lifestyle and related to the culture more than my surroundings. Sadly, I don't think I was the same person my father wanted me to be. He had a vision of me with my cowboy hat, boots, belt buckle, horse, and the whole works. I don't think he wanted to try to understand what I wanted to be; he just wanted me to be like him.

We would wake up early in the mornings, work on the ranch all day, eat dinner, and then he would fall asleep in the living room on his recliner while my step-brother and I stole cigarettes out of his packs. It seemed like the more I grew and the more rebellious I became, the more he tried to force his ways on me. My father would sometimes force me to try to ride a horse or make me wear certain clothes when I would go to his house, and I never really understood this. One time he said, "If you want to keep coming to see me, you will wear Wranglers and boots." I was certainly respectful of my dad, and there was no way I didn't want to go to his house, so I swallowed my pride and did what he said.

Later, I built up enough pride to tell him that if he made me wear those clothes, I would not come to see him anymore. I saw then that my dad actually cared about me. I saw that he was willing to let me be who I wanted to be and not force me to be someone I wasn't. I could read it like a book in his soft blue eyes that he really wanted

me to be a part of his life, and he wanted to be a part of mine. After that incident, the caring and compassion continued. He even coached one of my junior basketball leagues, and he put up a basketball hoop in his barn so that we could work on improving my skills. I soaked it all in like a sponge. From the way he would take his time to teach me moves, to the knowledge that he would give me about the game, it would seem things were back on track.

Going through the end of middle school, I would begin to see him less. I was involved in so many activities that it was tough to get to his house for a whole weekend. When I could, I would, though, and I still loved the way he would give me a hug, being so careful not to break the manly boundaries that we all set, but still full of life and love. By then, my dad had remarried again, and his new wife had two children of her own. Her two boys looked up to me and saw me as a hero. I never had someone look up to me the way they did, and I know I never appreciated that as much as I should have. Honestly, I envied them. They would spend all their time with MY dad. The whole time I was away with my mom, they were there with my dad. Sometimes when we were all there for the weekend, I would hear them slip out a, “Hey, Dad.” I should have been happy that my dad was being looked up to as a positive influence and father figure, but instead I noticed that it seemed like he enjoyed the presence of them more than me. They were into rodeos, horses, ranching, and being the cowboys my father wanted me to be. I felt like I had been put on the back burner and that they were slowly taking my place.

By the end of high school, I no longer went to my dad’s every other weekend or for two weeks in the summer. He was busy, I was busy, and it just didn’t work out. I would still go out there if I could, and I would still see part of the old flame between my father and me. It was like a match that was getting toward the end of the stick—it was trying hard but was about to go out without a moment’s notice. I honestly do not remember much of my time with my dad in those years. They almost seem like they did not happen.

When I was off to college, I felt as if I had not learned from my father what I needed to become a man. My mother had re-married,

as well, when I was eight years old, and her husband was more of a father to me than my own. I have always looked up to him for taking someone who was not his own and treating that person with so much compassion. But something was missing. My father would call me from time to time, and we would hardly talk, probably because we hardly had much in common anymore. He would tell me how much he loved me and missed me, but the words started to lack the meaning they once had. Soon the calls stopped. I did get a call one day out of the blue from him telling me that he was moving to South Dakota. I was confused on why he would leave his job and just move, but I knew he had family there. This was still shocking because it was out of nowhere. He would not call for quite some time, and then when he did, it was like all the things that I really wanted to say to him would get buried, and I would just yearn for his acceptance.

Shortly after he had said they were moving, my mom told me that he was on Box Butte County's "Most Wanted" for embezzlement from his employer. This was shocking, and I did not know how to take it because now I felt that he moved because he was on the run. They soon found him, and he was set to go on trial for his alleged crime. So I almost expected another call, and I got it. "I will be going to prison, son." I again did not know how to take this.

The only thing I could say was, "Did you do it?" He told me no, and I can't say that I believed him; something was telling me he was lying. He ended up going to prison in Lincoln, Nebraska, and just when I expected never to hear from him again, I got a letter.

In this letter, he didn't talk about how things had become distant between us; he only talked about how much he wanted to see me and how much he wanted me to come to get visitation. The letter was heartfelt, and I could sense he might want to make things right with me again. After much debate, I decided to write him back, and we continued to have a few back and forth letters before I finally decided it was time to go see him. In the last letter I wrote him, I told him he was now a grandfather; I had just had a son.

A few weeks later, I decided it would be a good surprise for him to see his grandson. I brought my son Kam in to see his granddad

for the first time in a prison common area. Not the best atmosphere if you ask me, but deep down, I cared about my dad and felt like he should see my son at least once. I thought this would make an impact on him, and he would open his eyes to see what he was missing. The first time my dad saw my son, I could see his eyes well up and felt the amazing warmth fill the room. It was like he was looking at me when I was that age. I continued writing my father and even brought my son a couple more times to see my dad. My father would write me regularly now and was always writing about how much he wanted to see me and spend time with me when he got out. I was led to actually believe he was trying to care.

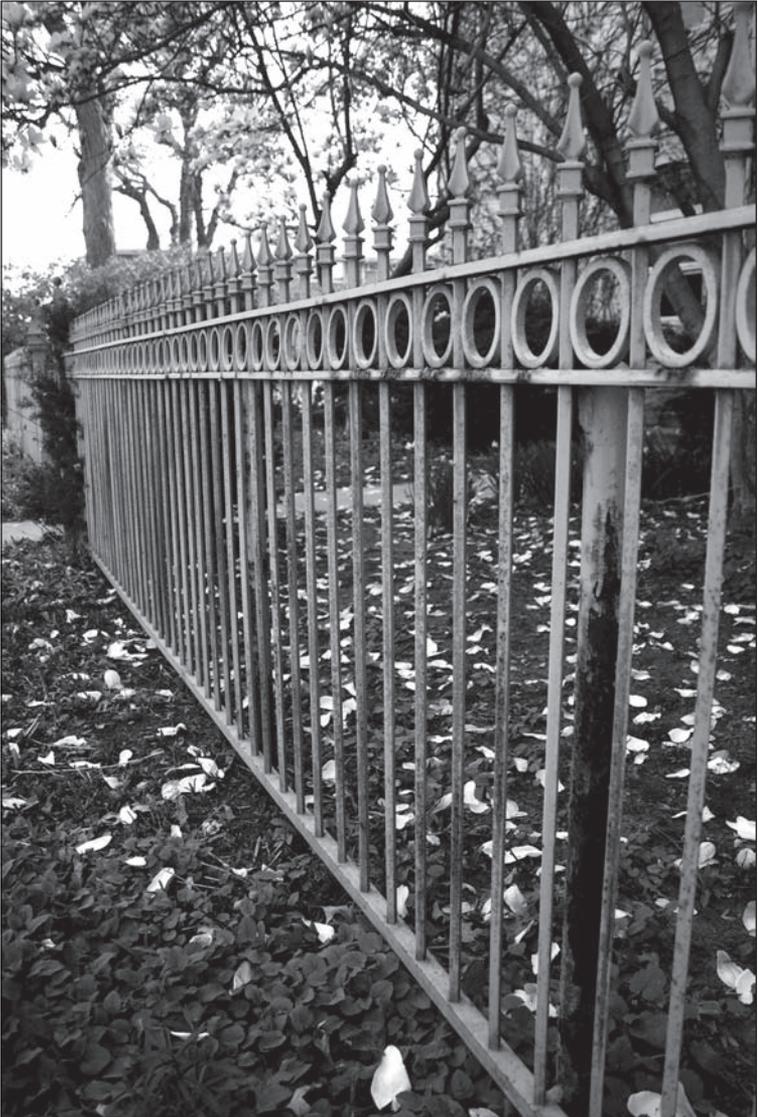
When he finally got out of prison, we never got a call. We never even got a letter. Once, or maybe twice, I got an email from him about how much he really wanted to see me and how much he wanted to come and stay with us and be a part of our life. I had told him that I was getting married, and we didn't get a response from him. Honestly, we never knew if he was coming or not. The day of the wedding, he showed up. He didn't say much, just gave us hugs and pretended that things were as normal as when I was young. The most let down I have ever felt came when we had just finished our speeches. He came to the dinner table in front where we were sitting and told me he was leaving. He said he had to get back to South Dakota to take care of his family. He hugged me and then quickly vanished from the room and from my life.

My mother said to me after the wedding, "He has always been running, and he will always push away those who love him." Since that day, I have not seen or heard from my real father; I have also had another son that he doesn't know about. I can't even call him "Father" anymore. The day my first son was born, I vowed to myself and my family that I would never run from my problems. I would never run from those who loved me, and I would always be the man for my children that he never could be. So for that, Father, I thank you. You have made me a better man. 🙏

Fence

Photograph

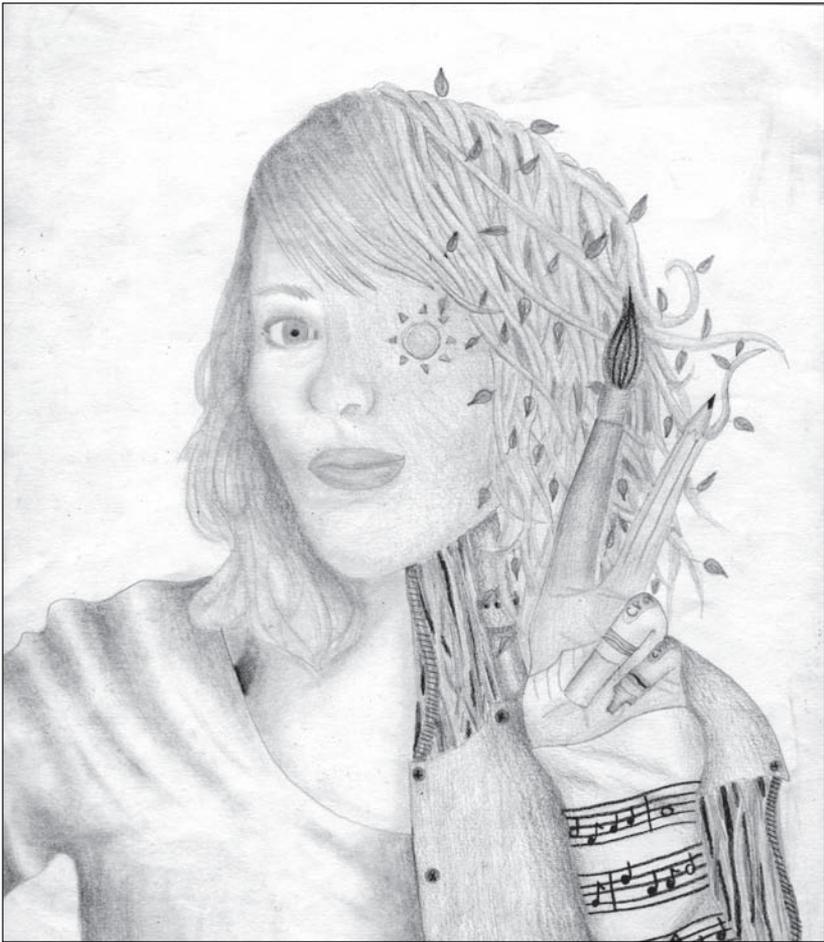
Aaron Brix • Graphic Design



Abstract Self-Portrait

Drawing

Brittni Wolff • Graphic Design



True Troubadour

Natalie Schwarz • Writing Center Tutor

On an endless search for the woman
to take his hand, he travels lone roads
with a suitcase and worn-out acoustic.
All he wants is a few acres of land,
a home built with his own hands,
a family and garden to grow.
He is a true troubadour, with no
place to call home, no one to call his,
and he'll drive the local girls crazy
with his wild eyes and mystery.
Wandering like Jesus through the desert,
forty days, forty nights; he doesn't know
whose life he's living, but there's no law
against having a good time. And when he
plays, he's at ease in the endless string
of small town bars with locals calling his name.

Ladybug Boneyard

Micro Photograph

Uriah Rittenhouse • Graphic Design



I decide to do the sticky trap thing. Uta had wanted to buy a cheap set of Victor snap traps—a dozen for a buck at the dollar store—but I convinced her that we should find a humane solution to our problem. I set one behind the kitchen door as soon as I get home, and within a half an hour, we've got a mouse. Uta and I are sitting down to take-out when we hear the *scritch, scritch, scritch*.

“Not my chopsticks,” she mumbles dryly from behind her carton of Mango and Coconut Sticky Rice, as if there is any doubt about the origin of the frantic scraping. Uta always orders Sticky Rice. It's a seasonal menu item, which means our lives revolve around two seasons of take-out: Sticky Rice Season and Not Sticky Rice Season. In the air by her ears, right smack-dab in sightline of the kitchen door, Uta circles the engraved set of chopsticks I gave her for our first anniversary. Her cheeks are stuffed with rice, much like my childhood Syrian hamster Sylvia, who routinely pocketed pale beige seeds into her cheek pouches.

It was the summer of 1984, and I lived my secret dream of being an Olympic gymnast vicariously through Sylvia. I would pull her out of her cage, set her on my water bed, and jam my fists into the watery bubbles at her sides, propelling her into the air. On a good launch, her double front layout rivaled that of Mary Lou. I clapped for her by flapping my tongue wide against the roof of my mouth. I twisted tiny American toothpick flags between my thumb and forefinger, singing “The Star Spangled Banner” while she sought refuge in my pillow-case. Sylvia's contribution to the games was a string of slobbery seed spewed across a corner square of my quilt.

“Earth to Bonnie. You gonna eat that?” Uta points her sticks at my own carton of Sticky Rice, which I never eat. I'm not sure why we have this farce—me ordering Sticky Rice for myself, pretending I want it, Uta swooping in to save the world from the waste of another uneaten carton. If not for her, who would eat it?

“The mouse!” I exclaim, before I can censor myself. She lifts her eyes from my carton. It’s rare for Uta to look up during a meal.

“Bonnie, the damn thing has been trying to get off the trap for about five minutes now. You just noticed?”

Tucked between the kitchen door and the wall, the mouse twitches spastically, belly sunk down into the viscous glue, back legs scrambling at the edge of the plastic tray. Standing up, I snatch my carton right off the top of the vintage green cracked ice Formica top dinette table we found at a flea market three years ago. I shake it at Uta.

“This is not for you. This is for the mouse.”

My heart is pounding. I know what I have to do. I have to free the mouse. I have to feed the mouse. Uta stares blankly at me. Can two seconds possibly be enough time for her to assess my situation? Are two seconds enough to comprehend the fiasco of hundreds of uneaten cartons spanning the sticky rice seasons of five years? Can the sweet and glutinous liberation rising in my chest, a thick, fermented, bubbly sensation, possibly travel from my side of the table to hers in just two seconds?

Two seconds.

She shrugs, scooting her chair back and gathering her empty cartons into the garbage.

“Okay. Whatever.”

I feel her fading behind me toward the living room. As she settles into her La-Z-Boy, the rustling of today’s paper momentarily merges with the scratching of the mouse, a sort of surround sound of creatures longing to be free.

I set the carton back on the table and walk to the mouse. I squat, not sure how to get him off the floor. The only part of him left unstuck is the tail and one of the back legs. I contemplate picking him up by the tail, but this seems cruel. I opt for a fork, poking at one side of the plastic tray to scoop it and the mouse onto a dustpan. I bump the kitchen door open with my hip, setting the dustpan on an old coffee table on the screened-in porch.

“It’s okay. Give me a second here, guy. Just a second, and you’ll be free.” I bring the carton of sticky rice out to the porch and set it in

front of the trap. The mouse is scrambling like crazy. Sitting down, I realize I have no idea how to get him off the trap.

The box the trap came in says nothing about what to do after you've successfully trapped the offending rodent or how to remove one if you change your mind. Don't they think of these things? Shouldn't they just expect that somebody someday might decide they don't really want to commit to this particular course of action?

"Bonnie!" Uta barks from the doorway, causing me to jump. My hand at my throat, I whip around to face her.

"You scared the crap out of me."

"It's your dad," she says, handing me the phone.

He laughs when I tell him I've caught a mouse on a sticky trap and don't know what to do next. "Well, go get a stick and hit it over the head. Don't make the poor thing suffer." The rest of the conversation is a blur as I picture myself repeatedly bludgeoning the small grey piece of life.

I hang up the phone, stare at the mouse. He's no longer twitching, but his ribcage expands and contracts like the leather pleated sides of a fireplace bellows. The eyes seem to intentionally ignore me. I appreciate his dignity. I am his captor, and he refuses to look me in the eye. I feel small.

In a whoosh, it's gone. The passion, the clarity, the determination, all of it, gone. Caught between action and inaction, I'm left with only an addict's shake. Perhaps it *is* best to put him out of his misery. I trudge past Uta, whose eyes likely don't shift anywhere near my direction, into our basement. I dig out a piece of broken two-by-four from where we tore down the wall between the dining room and the kitchen. It's my dad who taught me this, too, taught me about beams and bridging, cleats and cripple studs. I worked odd-job construction gigs with him during the summer of Sylvia, the summer of the Olympics, the summer that my mother disappeared. I kept him happy in the humid heartache of that season, balancing on a stack of two-by-fours, explaining to him that every beam routine must consist of two dance elements—a leap, jump or hop—a full turn on one foot, one series of two acrobatic skills, movement in two different

directions—“forward, sideways or backways, Pop”—and, finally, a dismount. I could do none of these things, of course, chubby and clumsy as I was, but my authority on the subject seemed to soothe him.

Maybe that’s why I’m here now on the porch with a two-by-four. I trust that his authority on the subject of mice will soothe me.

I brace myself, aim, and close my eyes the moment I whack the thing on the head. I scream when I make contact, but the mouse is not dead. Instead, it is scrambling faster on the trap. It squeaks a pitiful cry. I suddenly picture Hannibal Lecter, and all I can think is my life has become a movie called *Screaming of the Mice*. I breathe deeply and swing again. This time I hit too hard. There’s a bloody mess everywhere. I drop the two-by-four and whirl back against the wall. My chest fills with sobs, thick, sticky, glutinous globs of sorrow.

Shaking, I get out a brown paper bag from the pantry and cover the end of the two-by-four, which is now stuck in the trap. I take it to the backyard garbage can. Ironically, this is the first time in months that Uta has actually remembered to take the trash can out to the alley, so getting to the trash can requires crossing the narrow brownstone backyard, unlocking the back fence gate, and unraveling the chain that keeps the raccoons out of the trash can. This would be simple if it wasn’t for my neighbor’s Rat Terrier, cleverly named Nicodemus. Once disturbed, Nicodemus takes a bare minimum of forty-five minutes to quit barking. I creep stealthily through the gate, but the rattling of the can lid triggers his yapping. I can see his paws clawing through the fence slats, rodent-dog feet scrambling for their own kind of freedom.

I slump against the cold foundation and cry, which only eggs Nicodemus on. Between yips, I catch Uta, who is prone to absent-mindedly putting all of life’s worst moments to music, singing in the kitchen. She’s singing that horrid kid’s song about the green grass growing all around and around. I listen, and slowly realize she has shifted the lyrics to fit this terrible night. “...and on that stick / there was a trap / the stickiest trap / that you ever did see / and the mouse on the trap / and the trap on the stick / and now the mouse can’t eat her rice / so I will eat her rice.”

I wait for Uta's humming to fade into the living room, and then I go inside. On the porch, I crouch in front of the mouse mess, one hand over my mouth lest I should puke while cleaning up the blood stains. I scrub around a small square of clean table, a stenciled blood-free zone where my carton of sticky rice had been sitting. Enraged, I back away from the table, hands balled into fists inside my neon yellow rubber gloves.

The phone rings. Uta answers. As I enter the living room, she holds the phone out into the air. Sitting in her chair, she's got her laptop balanced along the perimeter of her crossed legs, right hand holding a spoon to her mouth. My white carton of sticky rice perches on top of the keyboard. The bottom edge is tinged with reddish-brown Pollock-style splatters.

"Your dad again," she says through the spoon.

The deed is done, I tell him, when he asks how it went. I watch Uta spoon another mouthful.

"That's my girl," he chuckles before hanging up. "That's my girl."

"Hey, check this out," Uta says as I pass the phone back to her. She rotates her laptop toward me, balancing it on her knees. "I just found this on YouTube. See, this guy puts his sticky trap in a bucket and just pours some vegetable oil all over the mouse. Presto, he's off the trap, just like that. Pretty freaking awesome, huh?"

She eats, and I taste nothing.

Coming To America

Hani Sharro Hadgi • Academic Transfer

Coming to America is a memory I will never forget. America gave me a chance to acquire an education and attain peace of mind. I was eight years old when I heard older gentlemen—my father, who was a respected individual because he owned a store and a car in a small town where not many business men owned many assets, and a couple of his friends—talking about going to America. They made it sound like paradise—American life and culture. I was still eight years old at a United Nation camp near Al-Hasaka, Syria, when my family's name was drafted to leave for America in 1997. It was the most exciting news my father had heard in years. It was the most exciting news I had heard in my life at that moment.

My family came to the United Nation camp called Maxaiume from a small town one mile north called Al-Howl, Syria. I remember, when I was nine years old, trying to write English letters and symbols to practice myself for the future. Before I came to America, all I heard on the news was America this, America that. I thought America was a new world, a place of freedom with grass, trees, buildings, cars, phones, girls—and money pouring down instead of rain. All these images would hit my mind in a flash when I would hear about America, and that was why I was so excited to hear I was going to America to experience this crazy dream.

Leaving Syria was a difficult process. My family and I had to meet with the American government at least twice a year for two years. Saddam Hussein was threatening all the surrounding areas by saying he was going to invade. The United Nation camp was close to the Iraqi border, and so it was defenseless against Iraqi military. We had to abandon our homes, leave our belongings behind, say good-bye to our loved ones, and rush onto the bus. I remember when I hopped in the white, minivan passenger-service car, my Uncle Kamal cried, “Ha Hannni! Don't forget us! Our hands will reach each other again one day.” I dropped my head to my seat and cried so much. I still cry every time I think about that moment.

From the city closest to the Iraqi border, Al-Hasaka, to the capitol of Syria, we rode on a city-size blue bus that I vomited in because it was the first time I had been on a trip that long. From Damascus, we flew into New York City, New York, and stayed at an astonishing red-brick hotel. I had never been in a place with service—people speaking differently and handing out free goods, such as candy and pop; I automatically think of *The Suite Life of Zach and Cody* from the Disney Channel when I remember that hotel. The hotel service provider gave my mother ten dishes of food covered with foil and ten cold, canned Dr. Pepper drinks.

When we got to our rooms, my father said, “Do not open the door on anyone because people steal each other’s goods in America.” I was scared. The Kurdish people we had talked to over the phone made New York City sound like a place of horror for us because we were new and didn’t know any better. As a family we sat around the brown hotel table eating the food from only one dish out of the ten dishes the hotel guest provider handed my mother, Jani. The dish was a round, foiled dish with rice and beans mixed and topped with sweet chicken and corn. Luckily, a family of ten was full due to the drowsiness that the airplanes made us feel, so we did not feel like eating as much. The other reason why a family of ten ate only one dish was because my mom told us that Americans eat only one time a day and receive food once every ten days. I look back and think that everything seemed like a movie. It was an astonishing moment in my life walking out of the New York City airport and into a skyscraping hotel in the world’s most powerful country.

That night, my eyes could not keep closed for five minutes because the airplanes above were so loud, sounding like, “*Whooshshshsh*.” The airport was only two miles from where we were, and every two or three minutes, I could hear a different plane taking off or landing down.

I was a young farm boy—always on the farm helping my parents execute work; we did not have phones or cell phones, but I always dreamed of holding one. I wanted to see how the hotel telephone operated because it was my first time seeing one with my own eyes. That night at 3:00 a.m., I dialed the digits 1, 2, 3, and I heard the operator

talk; I hung up right away with the fear that I had committed a crime. What if I had called an important individual and caused a huge mistake to happen because I dialed the numbers 1, 2, 3 on a telephone? I was wondering what was going to happen to me and my family.

The next day, we left for Dallas, Texas, where we rode in a train that went underground. What we were going through was a first-time experience. We had never been on planes, seen such skyscraping buildings, seen plentiful green grass, or carried a cell phone in our homelands, whether it was Iraq or Syria. My homeland didn't matter because neither granted me citizenship. Now, my mom cried, "We are lost in this unknown world."

From Dallas, a white American man named Steve, a cowboy with a round, white sombrero hat on his bald head, was going to take us to our new home. He had this nice southern accent and had a button-up, long-sleeve shirt tucked into tight, skinny blue jeans; he had big, wide-open blue eyes. Steve dropped us off at our new home in Amarillo, Texas, on September 22, 1999, at 2:00 in the afternoon.

In Amarillo, people were properly pleasant. As soon as I attended school, starting from third grade, I noticed that American teachers did not oppress students. In Syria, teachers used to punish certain students with religious differences. I remember once when the principal called my older brother Dani's name, but he did not go up and said that he heard "Hani" being called. I swallowed, and my throat felt tingly; I took a deep breath and headed to the front of the school. As soon as I moved close to the principal, he grabbed my hair and twisted me twice before banging my back against a concrete wall. When he noticed I was still okay and on my feet, he grabbed my right hand and almost snapped it off by pulling me so hard in the air and pushing me to the ground as if I was a soldier. Another time, I remember my teacher hit a four-by-four on my forehead because I scored my spelling test higher than the average Arabian.

I was proud of America, this beautiful new land, and I was happy they accepted me into their ways. I had never seen a city with pure green grass and trees everywhere; in Syria and Iraq, there was nothing special about the land. Everywhere I looked in Syria, I saw nothing

but little tornados, dry dessert, dead plants, and rarely any grass unless it was inside of a cared for garden. As time went on, I forgot the Arabic language and became more and more into American culture, from dressing like Americans to acting and talking as American boys do. Learning English was not difficult; all it required was time. I believe I mastered the English language in three years, but I didn't understand much until I reached high school.

Existence resembled cool and calm, as I felt no worries in the world. In 2001, I was ten years old; we moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, because we knew several people who lived with us at the United Nation Camp back in Syria. We were all trying to find each other and establish a new community in America and be a part of a towering, prominent, and powerful society.

Lincoln, Nebraska, is where I grew up and where most of my memories exist. I attended high school here, and I achieved my first real jobs—detasseling, telemarketing, and working at Fazoli's. Lincoln is the place I have had fun in and around, and will continue to do so. Today, it is 2010; a multitude of my progenies in that United Nation camp now lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, America. I am attending college and working at Southeast Community College, which is helping me live on a week-to-week or month-to-month basis. Today, I am living with my family because I can't afford living alone.

I believe every country has its ups and downs. For example, in America, food is almost endlessly available, but people have to work considerably hard for their money. In Syria, only three men owned a car, and my father was one of those men. In Syria, only three stores existed in our town, and my father was one of the men that owned one of those stores. Yet, nobody in all of the United Nation camp or in 100 miles of the surrounding area owned both a car and a store. That all changed—thanks to the Muslim militias that didn't want us living among them on their land. I believe land is God's land, and no one else's. I believe if an individual is a citizen of a state or country, then that citizen should be respected as the rest are and should have access to all living standards as all normal majority or minority citizens do. Citizens should not be rejected for what they believe but

accepted as who they are as diversified people.

I hope the militias are happy because I'm still frustrated and not satisfied with my job and living conditions, even for an individual that is living in America. Sometimes I think, "Why did my father take us away from our homeland and split us from the rest of the Yezidi world, never to be seen again?" Sometimes I cry, feeling lost, growing up in a distinguished world. Again, I accept the truth of the fact and cry, "Why!" Yet in my heart, I know it was for the better.

America is split into 50 mini-countries, yet in a land of so much power, weapons, and education, I can't find a suitable job. This reminds me of Iraq when Saddam was in control. The Iraqi economy was gaining money selling oil chains, but the citizens were dying with anger, stress, hunger, and pain. I remember we rarely had water to drink; my friends and I would go around the camp asking people to donate sugar, bread, or salt for the gods so they could send us at least 100 drops of rain. No matter how horrible Lincoln, NE, might be for me, I will never go back to my father or motherland because I have found my own homeland, a land that is free and accepts me for me.

When I was little, I believed in the American propaganda, propaganda such as it rains money in the States, and the government will give me a mansion, a first-class car, and a job. I grew up trying to follow that American dream and I will continue to do so. I now know that I am country-less, which is emphatically sad. My fatherland is Iraq, my motherland is Syria, yet neither country ever granted me citizenship. Syria and Iraq are not fond of me; they do not like my parents, and they do not like my culture and tradition. They never gave me apparatus besides hardship and pain. The government took away our land, food, and water and left us with nothing but little dust storms swirling around us in the middle of a hot and dry dessert. The unethical Iraqi and Syrian governments gave widespread punishment to me and my family; distinct from the traditional majority population, we were considered infidels.

I know now that I am birthday-less, considering I was born during the Iraq/Iran war, not to mention that my parents lost all the documentations of what day I was born. Today, I accept that fact

and try not to flourish my feelings. I feel joyful for others when they celebrate their birthdays, yet I feel remorseful for myself. My parents', my two older sisters', my older brother's, and my birthday are all on January 1. I have never celebrated a birthday in my life.

I can't see how anyone could blame me for being mad at the world in my situation. Yet again and again, I prove myself more smart and powerful by overcoming the odds and hanging in there. Today, I am a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. For a first generation in America, I speak fluent English and Yezidi, which is spoken by only one million people in the world. America is the first country that took me and my family in, gave us a home to live in, freedom, food, jobs, and most importantly, citizenship and education. That is why I appreciate the United States of America, and that is why I will never forget coming to America. 🙏

Asylum

Danul Patterson • Academic Transfer

I killed you a thousand times in a dream last night
Our love—fox-footed as a constrictor at hunt—
Squatted in your ventricles and seizing hold
Proceeded to strangle you to death, death, death
No sun for the cock to squawk at hoarsely—
Ten round silver nails biting at a fat black-board—
Dawn is black as pitch; a viscous vacuum
You have gone away, once more
Be quick. You are late, my little white hare
You slipped off into a honey-sweet slumber
On route sixty-six; your thermos had
Run empty of coffee an hour ago
Now, you are the figurehead to a big rig
Your apparition, a pallid-skinned Christ
Rap, tap, tapping at the door of that motel
An angry tempest at his back
There he waits, that Bates boy,
In the office for a juxtaposed spell
The water hits you, hot drops like a waterfall
Three sharp swishes of the blade and you're
Pushing up posies
Sunrise is at six p.m.
What succour,
You in my arms

Capitol Stairs

Photograph

Amy M. Salisbury • Academic Transfer



Moving On Up

Trevor N. Geary • Academic Transfer

Ain't it funny how time slips away?

As I closed the back door to my first apartment for what would be the last time, the wistful voice of the weathered Willie Nelson murmured in my head. Upon reflection, I realized it was funny how time slipped away.

I had spent the waning hours of that late December day thoroughly cleaning the apartment for my soon-to-be former landlord. Accompanying the arduous task of scouring every nook and cranny of the two bedroom residence was a pervading feeling of nostalgia. Every inch of that apartment held a memory; although most of them did not impact me, a few poignant experiences returned to my consciousness and reminded me of the lessons my starry-eyed teenage self had to learn on his own.

As I turned over the deadbolt to secure the back door, the bitter winter air shocked my chapped hands that earlier had pruned from incessantly mopping the wood floor in my roommate John's old room. Dark stains, formed from overturned chew-spit bottles, polka-dotted the light brown wood, and I had spent half an hour restoring the natural gleam of the floor. Chewing tobacco was the bonding agent John and I shared when our atypical friendship commenced two years earlier.

We were in the same introductory calculus class at the University of Nebraska our freshman year. Unfortunately, to satisfy an honors credit, we had to take a supplementary class with the lecture that enforced group studying of the homework assignments. John, a no-bull country boy who grew up eating giblets and digging ditches, realized with his quizzical mind, hardworking demeanor, and purposeful focus that college was his opportunity to have the world at his disposal, and he would not stand for some overly-peppy teacher's assistant wasting his time by forcing him to help other students learn material he already knew. We got along famously. Day after day, we worked through the homework assignments together, and our only dialogue

between the discharges of tobacco-saturated saliva into plastic Dr. Pepper bottles cradled in each of our laps was brief and to the point.

“What’d you get for number six?” I might have asked.

“X equals three pi over two,” John would respond.

“Yeah, me, too.”

While the semester progressed, our friendship did as well, and we decided by the end of our freshman year we would be roommates when he returned for classes the next fall.

Back at the apartment, I looked out from the top step of the backdoor stoop into the snow-covered yard, which during summer was merely a patch of crab grass and weeds leading up to a chain link fence that separated two apartment complexes. I had stood on that step hundreds of times during the course of my occupancy, and, like I had done every time before, I reached into my coat pocket, pulled out a pack of Marlboros, positioned a cigarette lightly between my pursed lips, and brought a bright orange flame to the tip to ignite the cherry. The back door of my apartment faced the front door of the complex across the fence. On countless occasions, my neighbor Juan, his brothers, or his friends would hop the fence and ask me for a nicotine fix, but there were two cigarettes I rolled on that stoop I would never forget.

On a muggy summer night around the haunting hour, I lay awake in my bed. Sleep was elusive, and I decided to have one last cigarette instead of trying to force myself to sleep. I went out onto the stoop, leaving my glasses on the nightstand, and commenced rolling myself a cigarette. Unbeknownst to me were two troubled youths hanging out across the fence. Unfortunately, due to my poor eyesight, I was unable to perceive these characters until they had hopped over the fence and were standing before me. I had conversed before with Juan about his association with gang members from Omaha. He was what was called a “delivery boy,” a person who delivered the products of the gang and collected money from buyers. Juan would receive packages of ice (methamphetamine) and green (marijuana) from someone from Omaha and distribute the drugs around Lincoln. I knew of his illegal dealings, but I never thought I would be face-to-face with his

Omaha connections. The two gangsters began bragging to me about how they had just held up a convenience store down the street, and they reeked of their plunder of alcohol.

“Yo! Roll me one of them,” one of the gangsters said to me.

“All right. I just gotta go in and grab some more tobacco,” I said, standing up.

“What? You a fucking narc?” he snapped at me. “You gonna go call the police, huh?”

“Look, here’s my phone,” I replied tactfully, placing my cell phone on the top step. “I just need to grab some more tobacco.”

“Yeah, well, we MS 13, and, if you a narc, we’d have our boys on you quick.”

“Hey, your business is yours. I’m just a college kid; that’s all I care about.”

As this exchange continued, I became so agitated that my shaking hands produced cigarettes rolled so tightly that they personified my own tenseness, and the usual calm feeling associated with smoking was replaced with apprehension. A few weeks later, I heard from Juan that those two guys had been shot by a rival gang after a drug deal went awry. Even though I had avoided a confrontation with those two, I would eventually have to undergo more squabbles and learn how to stand up for myself.

A heavy breeze brought me back to reality, and with my head down, I descended from the stoop and looked around at the ground surrounding the bottom step. So many random items had found their way to that step, whether placed there by my neighbors as a scare tactic or merely by chance, I will never know. I remember finding an old wooden cross, a blank video tape, a duffle bag full of clothes, and the creepiest of them all: a mutilated baby doll. I deluded myself into thinking these items were placed there for a reason, possibly as a calling to me by some spiritual source, but searching for the reasons and the calling only led to dead ends and wasted time and energy.

I made my way along the dugout sidewalk, which was bordered on either side by knee-high snow, turned the corner, passed behind the garage, and stepped into the alleyway where my car was parked. In

this frozen gravel passageway occurred the scene of one of my proudest moments.

Last November, I was strung out working at least sixty hours a week, and a string of bad luck had depleted the bankroll I was saving to get back into school. I lost my computer's hard drive to a virus, got into my first car wreck, and to top it all off, someone had tried to break into my apartment and then the subsequent night tried to jimmy the lock on my car door. Both attempts proved fruitless for the perpetrator, but I was left with a broken window and car door lock. I was sitting in the alleyway one afternoon with the parts of the car lock splayed out along the ground when Juan came sauntering up, obviously under the influence of some barbiturate substance.

"Can I get a cigarette?" he asked me.

"Dude, I don't have any cigarettes, and I got to get my car fixed before I go to work in like an hour," I replied exasperatedly.

He approached me with his arms spread wide and chest puffed out, and when our noses were finally inches away, he said with a cocked head, "What? You playa hatin'?"

Whether it was the stress of all I had undergone the past two months, the fact that I had never been in a fight, or that I was tired of being bullied by this pseudo-gang, I reacted with violence I didn't know I possessed. I centered my hands on the sternum of Juan's chest and pushed with all my might. Since this "playa" had been in more fights than Rocky, his response to my violence was swift and accurate. He swung wide and caught me just under my left eye with his clenched right fist. My head spun, but I stood my ground, and he simply sauntered back down the alleyway. I quickly gathered my tools, shut the car door with a bungee cord, and went to work an hour early so as not to allow Juan time to sober up or to gather reinforcements. I sported a shiner for about a week, but I never saw Juan again.

The lock on my car was now fixed, and the gears moved smoothly as I opened the door to the vehicle that was crammed with my possessions and slid into the leather driver seat. After I started my car, I sat staring at the only vista of the apartment I would ever have after this night. Before I drove off, I made one last phone call to my dad.

“I’m officially all moved out,” I said into the receiver of my cell phone. “Windstream’s going to start Internet service on the fourth, so I’ll be all set and ready to go when school starts.”

“That sounds good. So you’re moving on up,” my dad replied.

“Yeah, but looking back through the empty rooms, I remembered why I wanted to live here in the first place. It’s a nice place, just in a bad neighborhood.”

“I’m glad you’re finally getting out of that area.”

“Yeah, but I learned a lot from living here.”

“Oh, you’re just being overly-sentimental,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, well, it’s going to make a good story someday, and then we’ll see who’s being overly-sentimental,” I quipped.

For the past year and a half, I had gone through the rainbow of emotions of life in that apartment, and I had learned more in that short time than I had in the seventeen previous years of my life. From my roommate, I learned that though we had contradictory upbringings and personal habits, our shared goal of making something of ourselves could be achieved with an untiring work ethic; as he said: “There’s more than one way to skin a coyote.”

From my futile attempts at discovering the reasons why things happen, I learned nothing happens for a reason, life just happens, and finding the strength to roll with the punches is the only way to deal with the unpredictability of life.

Finally, from the disputes I underwent with my neighbors, I learned how and when to stick up for myself. I was finally ready to take control of my life and set my own course. College is credited with being the time in a person’s life when he learns the most but, as I discovered during my first experiment of living on my own, most of that learning is done outside the classroom. 🍷

Looking Up

Photograph

Aaron Brix • Graphic Design



Collie

Amy Keller • Academic Transfer

Books upon books
Filled my arms, past my chin,
'Til I could hardly see.

It was my fault.
I wanted it so badly,
Needed it, even.

So, a Sunday
When I should have played outside
I came here

To the home of funny smells
And strangers
And books—for free!

Arms full of tired,
I'd had enough;
I reached the front desk.

My card was cracked, worn,
But it was gold,
Or, better yet, candy
To the child me.

Dad shuddered
When he saw me coming,
And he knew what it meant.

Mom just said, "Good luck.
But don't expect too much....
You know he hates them."

I put them down,
A waterfall of pages
Drenching the dining table.

I had studied.
I was ready.
My speech was simple,
Entitled:
Ten reasons why
We need a dog.

Age eight, schooled in
Wonders of persuasive speaking,
My trophy bore a wet nose
And shaggy, smelly fur.

Now I turn to Astrid, only two
But all aglow with awe.
Oh, no! Déjà vu... she—

Plants a hug, then a kiss,
On its cold nose,
Reverently, joyously,
Then looks at me,
And giggling, whispers:
“Doggie!”

I Hear the Snow Coming

John Mayan • Academic Transfer

I hear the snow coming;
it is forecast on the radio.
Because my car has no heat,
I want to run to a very warm place.
I do not like snow,
and I want to run away from it.
I am not used to it.
My body doesn't want to be in the cool place for too long.
I want to go back to my birth place
so that I do not have to worry about cold.

Standing Parallel

Photograph

Mike Liedtke • Graphic Design



Wings in the Sky

Teresa Bissegger • Continuing Education

Wings of Gold

Flitter from the pink Zinnia to the Black-eyed Susan
Trying to find the right scent,
The right color.

He lands on my outstretched finger;
His wings tickle as I gently curl my fingers.
He doesn't try to leave,
and I know.

The feather-like wings take flight,
Circle through the air,
Brush the skin of my nose
Like a kiss.

Gone. Just disappeared.
Like magic in the air.
He always knows just when I need him most.
My butterfly, my Angel, my Dad.

My Neenie

Jennifer Creller • Academic Transfer

Charles Dickens once said, “Never close your lips to those to whom you have opened your heart.” My heart was certainly open to Neenie. I believe no man in the history of the human species has ever loved a woman more than I loved her. Mark Antony was never more humbled by the enthralling Cleopatra than I by my own queen. Why, compared to us, Romeo and Juliet suffered from a mere case of puppy love. Even the chronically depressed Poe couldn’t have been more devoted to his eternally lost Lenore than I was to my ever-present Neenie. After thirty-six years of marriage, I still gazed upon her with the adoring eyes of an adolescent boy in the smitten throes of his first crush. She was the essential fiber that constructed the tapestry of my life. But, with all due respect to that old sage Dickens, I could not bring myself to tell her how quickly those gossamer strands were unraveling.

* * *

Nina Rosenberg had captivated me from the moment her dusky green eyes had met my own ordinary brown orbs nearly four decades ago. I longed to touch the golden locks that flounced with her every step as she carried trays from the pickup window to the waiting tables, to encircle her neat little waist with my scrawny arms and pull her close to me, searching out a fluttering heartbeat to match my own. I wanted to bury my nose in the gentle scoop that lay between her delicate neck and elegant shoulder and breathe the essence of her skin into my lungs until they burst.

It wasn’t just her beauty that captured me, although there is no denying the effect her wonderfully full mouth, complete with a Marilyn-esque beauty mark, had on me. Her laugh, seeming to emanate from her toes and never disingenuous, had so mesmerized me on a number of occasions that I was only brought back to earth by the charred smell of the burgers burned while lost in my fantasy. She was equally kind to everyone, from the precocious little girl in her Sunday best to the crotchety old man in his tattered suit. It wasn’t unusual for Neenie to sit down at a booth and chat up the customers

as if she were serving tea in her living room rather than half-assed club sandwiches in a run-down cafe.

But what I loved most was her unexpected strength. I recall a time that a young lady shuffled into the diner behind her scruffy-looking boyfriend, head down, stringy brown hair hanging over her face like a dirty, wet curtain. Oh, boy, was he a mean looking S.O.B. You know the type: big, beefy arms bared by his muscle-tee; a permanent snarl on his face that would convince a rattlesnake to pursue less formidable prey; cold, dead eyes like shiny black marbles beneath a heavy brow. The girl couldn't have been much older than Neenie, who was 19 at the time, yet she had the demeanor of a woman more than twice her age. She scooted her feet across the dingy tiled floor like an old lady with arthritic hips. Over her nearly emaciated frame draped a faded army jacket that was three sizes too big. Her shoulders were hunched, as if at any moment someone would spring out of the shadows to grab her.

As Neenie headed over to the table to take their orders, the young lady made the mistake of lifting her face, momentarily forgetting the secret she was trying to keep hidden. They briefly locked eyes before she remembered how interesting the Formica table in front of her was and quickly went back to studying the intricacies of its surface. But in that fraction of a second, Neenie saw the puffy, purple ring around the girl's eye, and her inner lioness rose to the surface.

I watched from the kitchen window as Neenie leaned down and quietly spoke a few words to the young man. A momentary ripple of dumbfounded shock flashed across his face as he sat there, gaping at her. He first flushed pink, then red, then a mottled purplish color as shock was replaced by indignant rage. His ham-sized fists balled up on the table, knuckles turning white, the faded anchor tattoo on his forearm twitching madly.

Our typically chatty lunch crowd suddenly fell silent. Sensing the rapidly rising tension, all eyes turned to the drama unfolding before them. Jaws froze in mid-chew, forks hung suspended in the air; old men enjoying their cups of coffee at the counter turned slightly and peered warily over their shoulders. The young man slowly rose from

his seat, glaring menacingly at Neenie. As he took in a deep breath to unload a string of obscenities at the object of my obsession, I hurried out of the kitchen to defend her. Time seemed to slow down, hours passing between one heartbeat and the next. My legs struggled through layers of thick mud as I watched the degenerate's right fist begin to rise. I don't know what I thought I could do; the guy was half a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. I was a poet, after all, not a brawler. But I would be damned if I was going to stand by and do nothing to save Neenie from the fate already suffered by the girl who sat in the booth, still gazing at the tabletop and trembling.

My brave intentions, however, were all for naught. Two of our regulars, Andy and Mike, who happened to be off-duty policemen, had already flanked Neenie. Mike suggested to the young man that he find someplace else to satisfy his appetite, as Andy casually placed his hands on his hips, revealing the department-issued firearm he always carried underneath his jacket. The thug's eyes darted from Mike to Andy to the gun. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, he gave Neenie one final, deadly stare before grabbing his girlfriend's upper arm and yanking her to her feet. Neenie laid her hand on his arm and gently informed him that he would be leaving alone, her fiery eyes challenging him, daring him, to disagree. But the brute wisely realized that this was a battle best fought another day and stormed out. No sooner than the door had shut, time resumed its normal pace, and the noisy lunch crowd returned. I never did find out what Neenie said to that guy to set him off, but I know one thing: I loved that woman right then and there.

It was nearly three months after the "David & Goliath Incident" (as it came to be known) before this once shy, short-order cook of Charlie's Diner worked up the courage to ask the enchanting waitress out on a date. With that momentous first step taken, our mutual infatuation quickly blossomed into a deep romance, followed by promise rings and pledges of undying love. Oh, how happy my mother had been that I had found "a nice, Jewish girl" to settle down with. Mom was knee-deep in our Hebrew faith, so I understood the blessing she saw in Nina. I was an only child; my father had passed

away years before, so it was up to me to carry on the family tradition. But I couldn't have cared less who or what this goddess knelt to as her higher power, so long as she would have me. We were married in June of 1974, and the many years that followed had been blessedly simple with its normal ups and downs: the struggle of making a life on meager wages; the excitement of finally buying a home of our own; the devastating news that we would never have children; the joy of having friends and family near.

She was my "Neenie," and I couldn't help but smile every time she called me "Tootsie." We both adored Dustin Hoffman, and had worn out three VHS tapes of the movie that was my namesake before the advent of DVD's. We would cuddle on the couch, the old blanket her grandmother had knitted and given to us as a wedding gift spread over our laps, an overflowing bowl of popcorn (extra butter) playfully fought over. We'd laugh ourselves to tears over the cross-dressing Hoffman's antics. It was our regular Friday night ritual, a time when we could shake off the responsibilities of work and life and reconnect, hidden away in our own little nook of this infinite universe, even if only for a couple of hours.

We lived a modest life, hovering somewhere between comfortable and edge-of-broke, but we were blissfully happy just to have each other. My passion was writing, but it didn't put food on the table, so I worked a number of odd jobs in order to pay the bills. Neenie and I both worked to put her through beauty school, and she was eventually able to start her own salon out of our house. Between her steady clientele and my constantly shifting professions, we were able to eke out a living.

Everything changed, though, when mom passed away suddenly back in 1997. A frugal woman her whole life, I had mistaken her penny-pinching for a lack of means. It was then that I learned of how she had squirreled away the bulk of her earnings, obtained from years of secretarial work at Davis & Stein, a long-standing law firm in our community. The insurance money she received from my father's death had been stashed away, untouched, in savings and building interest upon interest over the years. Needless to say, she had left me a

considerable inheritance. I never spoke a word to anyone besides my Neenie as to the amount, and will not say it here, but it was sufficient enough for us to both retire before our fiftieth birthdays.

Following in Mom's footsteps, I invested the majority of the inheritance, spending only enough to pay off the mortgage and purchase a small trailer for travelling. When we were younger, Neenie and I had often dreamed of seeing the world outside of Long Island. We had kept a map pinned to the corkboard in the kitchen; over the years we marked with a pushpin the places we fantasized about seeing in that vague time period known to the have-nots as "someday." Now we could finally begin make all those dreams become reality. We visited some of the typical tourist spots, like the Grand Canyon and Old Faithful. We spent a week snuggled together in the mountains of Colorado, and ten days sunning on the beach in South Carolina. We saw the Space Needle in Seattle, and took pictures of the famed Alamo in Texas. One by one, all those "somedays" became "today."

Then about six years ago, Neenie said she wanted to go to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. I just laughed and shook my head at my silly gal. We were too old for that crowd, I'd say with a smirk. New Orleans was the place to be if you were young and virile, beautiful and nimble. She slapped my arm and pretended to be hurt at my insinuation that she wasn't young or beautiful. (I quickly assured her that she was both.) But it was tantamount to Spring Break in Cancun, I'd argued. Did she really want to spend her vacation around a bunch of drunk, twenty-something Neanderthals? Laughing at me, Neenie relented and we began scanning the travel magazines laid out before us.

With the idea of New Orleans temporarily shelved, we continued seeing places that we agreed were "appropriate" for our age. We took a week-long Alaskan cruise. We visited the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor in Oahu, Hawaii. We shopped until we dropped at the Mall of America and waved hello to the presidents of Mount Rushmore. But the next year, Neenie brought up Mardi Gras again. There was so much to see and do, she said; everyone was welcome. I was able to divert her attention to a lovely bed and breakfast in Maine that she had seen on some travel show on television. Once

again, Neenie agreed with just a hint of a sigh.

Six months after that conversation (March 11, 2006, to be exact), I learned I was dying. Pancreatic cancer, the doctor told me. No cure, he'd said, an apologetic look in his experienced eye. Too far along for treatment, he declared with practiced sympathy. I had about a year to live, if I made it that long. Right away, I knew that I couldn't tell Neenie. She had always been a fighter, and would not allow me to resign myself to fate. She would insist that I go to the best doctors in the country if she had to drag me kicking and screaming. We would enter the battle together, side by side, and she would kick cancer's ass. Of that I had no doubt, for she was a warrior of the likes I had never heard of or seen before, a modern-day Valkyrie maiden. But it would consume our lives, and that's not how I wanted Neenie to remember our last days together. I wanted to go out the way we had always lived: loving, laughing, and squeezing every ounce of joy out of this life that we could.

So I remained silent. I explained away my diminished appetite, thinner frame, and decrease in energy as a result of my old age, always with a laugh. When September rolled around that year and we were planning our next vacations, Neenie again brought up New Orleans. It was getting to be as regular as the rising and setting of the sun. I didn't immediately consent; no, that would have caused her ears to perk up. Like an old bloodhound, she would be on point and sniff out the wrongness of my sudden surrender. Instead, I engaged her in our usual, good-natured bickering over the destination for at least half an hour until, with a manufactured sigh, I finally agreed. Neenie leapt up from the table, knocking over a chair, and covered my face with kisses.

We didn't make it to New Orleans. By Thanksgiving, I had taken a turn for the worse, and could no longer keep the truth from Neenie. By Christmas, I was in the hospital for the long run. Neenie fought just as fiercely as I knew she would. I spent four arduous months in room 117, and she spent every frightening hour of it with me. She held my hand through the pains that ripped across my abdomen and around to my back. She held my head to her breast as I cried and told

her how sorry I was that I didn't tell her about my cancer in the first place. She held the little plastic puke bowl as my stomach rejected the bland hospital food I was encouraged to choke down, and made me laugh when she said all I needed was a greasy burger from Charlie's to feel right as rain again. She never cried, my warrior goddess, and for that I loved her even more than I thought I ever could. She was my strength, the fiercely glowing ember that sustained me in those dark times. I don't know how she did it.

* * *

We stepped out of the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport into the bright, spring-like weather that seemed to perk up specifically for Mardi Gras. Neenie looked absolutely stunning; her honey-blonde hair, now threaded with silver, glistened in the warm Louisiana sun. A cool breeze stirred up the light blue cotton dress she wore, weaving the skirt in and out of her still-slender legs. We headed towards the line of taxis waiting at the curb, and I slid into the backseat of one as Neenie directed the driver to the Hotel Monteleone. We weren't just going to Mardi Gras; we were staying at one of the best hotels in the heart of the French Quarter, the center of the jubilant festivities. After all the years I spent resisting Neenie, after all she went through for me, she deserved the very best that New Orleans had to offer.

As the cab pulled up to the entrance, the doorman immediately rushed over to pull the luggage from the trunk. Another opened the door as we approached, smiling at the beauty that passed before him. The grey lapels of his uniform were pressed to a crisp edge, the golden buttons gleaming like captured sunlight. The shiny black brim of his cap was so polished that it reflected the awning overhead as well as any mirror could. Neenie's wide eyes shimmered as she took in the beautiful French architecture of the lobby, warm and inviting in hues of amber and ochre and bronze. She marveled over the giant antique grandfather clock that towered in the center and delighted in the bright lights of the revolving Carousel Bar. The writer in me was humbled to be among the spirits of such great literary minds as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, whom the Monteleone

had once housed and who supposedly still roamed its halls. I never saw them, though.

After checking into the room, we headed to the streets to take in the sights and join in the fun. We shuffled up and down Bourbon Street, bopping along to whatever music happened to be pouring out of the clubs we passed. We stopped by Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo, a cluttered, ramshackle shop filled with skulls and rosaries and incense and all sorts of voodoo-ish items. I laughed as Neenie purchased a sparkling blue and gold necklace that promised to bring good fortune to the wearer. I didn't believe in all this voodoo stuff, but she seemed to be fascinated by it, so I kept my thoughts to myself. Saying anything out loud to her would have been pointless anyway.

Down on the Riverwalk, while Neenie nibbled on a sweet beignet, we watched the parade crews gathering together, the bright colors donned by members of various crews flashing and intertwining against the backdrop of the calm Mississippi. One crew member grabbed Neenie's hand and led her, laughing, into a group that was dancing along to some bouncy zydeco tune. Neenie clapped and spun and twirled and swung and giggled like the young girl I fell in love with so many years ago. When the song ended, she laughed and hugged those around her before we moved on, her face flush and alive with happiness. It warmed my soul to see her that way. It had been a long time coming.

We wandered back towards the Quarter, and ended up in Jackson Square. We ooh'd and ah'd over the artists' works that were hung on the fence surrounding the Square. Neenie was almost talked into having her fortune read, but wisely walked away with money still in hand, money that was better spent on the jugglers and musicians and other street performers that dotted the Square. In front of the towering St. Louis Cathedral, we sat on a bench together, silently soaking up the mingling sights and sounds around us. We were three years late getting here, true; but finally, after all those tumultuous months, we finally felt a sense of peace.

I'll never forget the image of her that day. The falling sun silhouetted her face, a sliver of light racing along the proud tilt of her

chin. A gentle wind blew a few strands of hair out and away from her head, dancing in the air. She tilted her head back ever so slightly, turning her weathered face up to the sun and breathing deeply with eyes closed. It struck me to see how much she had aged in the last few years, and I felt a pang of guilt as I realized that it was because of me. But I was sure that beneath all the fine lines that now creased her face, lines that had deepened not only with time but with grief, that fiery young waitress still resided. It might have been the light, but I swear I could see her shining through, and I knew that everything would finally be okay again.

It was the most breathtaking day I'd spent on this big, round ball known as Earth. As I scanned the Square, I saw that people were smiling, laughing, sharing in the good times together like the world's biggest family. Strangers became best friends, even if only for a few days. They were living, *truly* living, for the moment. I glanced over at Neenie as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye and glided down her cheek. Just one solitary tear, hanging precariously on the edge of her strong, beautiful jaw like a liquid diamond before splashing down on the back of the hand that rested in her lap. "Oh, Tootsie," she said, "It's so wonderful here...so beautiful. I don't know why you put this off for so long." She added lovingly, "You stubborn old fool." I had no voice to respond, so I just shrugged my shoulders and shook my head.

Then, in an almost-whisper, she said, "I only wish you could be here."
I only wished she knew that I was. 🍷

There's a Little Cowboy in All of Us

Photograph

Savana Riley • Early Childhood Education



The Miracle that Saved My Life

Sara Elizabeth Henrichs • Human Services

She's three-foot, four inches tall. She has my smooth, thin, sandy blonde hair. It's cut short, but when wet, hangs down close to her shoulders. She's currently weighing in at 32 pounds, my favorite number. She has the most beautiful bright blue eyes, and when you look into the innocence of them, you can't help but fall in love. She's got my cute button nose. The ultrasound proved it before she was even born. I often sit back and examine her as if I was watching a video from the past. Her smile brings joy, and her free spirit brings hope. She's an angel sent from a thousand prayers.

Sometimes, when you feel like you have nothing to live for anymore, God gives you a reason to live. I was young and uncontrollable. I was broken into a thousand pieces of shattered glass. I was severely abused by a man I thought I loved, and I was hopeless to my wit's end. I thought I was at the end of my road. I didn't care anymore. What was there to care about? In a matter of two years, I had ripped the book of my life into pieces. I betrayed the ones I loved and harmed anyone that came near me. I was so close to death that I was completely hollow inside. There was nothing left of me. I was addicted to meth, and I needed help. Somewhere in my heart, it was still beating—the hope, the perseverance, the desire to live. I needed something else. I needed a reason to continue trying—something to show me that God still did exist.

The reason came with 5:00 trips to the bathroom and uncontrollable urges to eat. I thought my answer was to stop using meth, but it was so much more than that. A gateway had been opened to a world full of unconditional love and completion.

When I found out I was pregnant, I didn't know what to think. I naturally went numb. I didn't know whether my life was going to get better or worse. I had to grow up really fast. I was a mom. There were things I needed to do for myself, and I did them because I had a reason to now.

Before I knew it, my dreams and ambitions all came tumbling back into my life. I was healthy and fresh. I was clean and sober. I was in one piece again with a brand new piece growing inside me. Everything I had lost I was now holding in the palm of my hand. I was free. I was determined. I was reborn with a new chance at life.

Naming a child was far more difficult than naming a new hamster. The little girl in the movie *My Girl* was such a fun, big-hearted, free-spirited little character, and I absolutely loved her. So, I named my daughter Vedah Alene. "Alene" is her great-grandma's name, and she's such a big hearted, funny, free-spirited little ball of joy bouncing in the center of my world; I just love her to pieces!

Being a mom has opened far more doors for me than I ever imagined it could. I experience feelings, thoughts, and emotions I never knew existed. My purpose in life is set in stone, as well as my love for her. She gives me hope and inspires me to set my goals high and reach past my limits. I'm amazed daily and know how lucky I am.

The same day that I found out I was having a girl, they told me my due date was July 26, 2006, which was the day I was to turn 20. I remember thinking that my odds were noticeably increasing in all aspects of my life.

Living with her is absolutely amazing. Watching a little "you" grow up in front of your eyes is life altering. Every day was the most important day of my life and still is. Every moment of those beautiful, bright blue eyes looking right into mine proves to me that I'm the luckiest person in the world.

We live together, breathe together, eat together, play together, and sleep together. You name it, we do it. Our hearts beat in sync. I complete her, and she completes me. She says things to me that make my heart hit the ceiling with joy. For a period of time, she made it a point to tell me hourly that I make her heart super happy. She scolds me and puts me in time-out. She's a goofball. She has my sense of humor and a contagious laugh. She has a smile that could light an entire field. She has the cutest little attitude to her, just the right amount at just the right time. She dances and sings like no one's watching her. She's invariably the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life.

Pancakes, oatmeal, French fries, and hot dogs are never turned down at my house. We made our first snowman last winter, and every summer she gets more and more fearless in the pool. She likes to have fun, and she makes it possible with whatever is put in front of her. She's creative and has the imagination of an all-star. She's kind, she's gentle, and she loves Jesus.

Her world is surrounded with people that love her. I don't know what she'd do without her grandma, her papa, and her adoring Aunt Carrie. They love her so deeply. As families get older, life moves on, but Vedah is the glue that holds us together. She leaves a trail of hope everywhere she goes. Everyone in her life is blessed. The relationship she has with them is so important to her, and you see it when her face lights up every time you even talk about them. Every weekend, the family spends time together doing laundry and playing games. We spend hours upon hours together laughing and playing. In the winter, we go sledding and have snow fights. In the summer, we ride bikes, we lounge around in the pool, and we run amuck in the yard. The weekends are something we look forward to in our family, a time to let loose and have fun.

Becoming a mom was the best thing that ever happened to me. Behind all the struggles and heartaches comes a lesson and a constant reminder of how lucky I am to be alive. At the end of every obstacle is a door leading to something new and exciting. If God had never given Vedah to me, I don't know where I'd be or if I'd even be alive. She's filled every dream I've ever had and inspires me daily to continue dreaming. She may only be three-and-a-half years old, but she's my rock, my guiding light into the adventures every year brings.

Next year will bring preschool, and I'm told the years begin to roll after that. I'm so excited to see the little person I created unfold into a beautiful young girl. I'm so proud to be her mother; she truly is an inspiration. I hope she fills her life with people that love and adore her. I hope she always keeps her dreams big and her worries small. I hope she lives her life to the fullest and with no regrets. My wish is for all her wishes to come true, for all her hopes and dreams to reach

above and beyond the stars. I, too, reached up to the stars, and when my prayers were answered, I named her Vedah. 🙏

Not on My Watch

Travis Koch • Electronic Systems Technology

The night air is filled with hate.
The smell of death lingers on the air
from past battles, both won and lost.
Although I sit at my post, I swim with thoughts of rest.
From the warm evening calling me for sleep
that enemy, who fears change, awaits my slumber.
Because he knows my routine, I wait for him.
Every sound, which tells me about his position, makes us aware
even though he believes his footsteps are silent.
If I closed my eyes, would he know, hear, or see me?
While the z-monster, who is my enemy's ally, calls to me,
My enemy is still unaware of me.
Dawn approaches, and rest is due; nevertheless, I grow impatient
from the smell of the chow hall in the air.
Even though I should stay patient, they stay ever mindful,
so I will say to them, "Not on my watch."

Los Diablo's

Natalie Schwarz • Writing Center Tutor

Driving down an Iowa highway,
we are passed by a motorcycle gang
of middle-aged men in matching jackets.
You catch the golden writing on their backs:
Los Diablo's.

We laugh to each other about the name
and how un-intimating they seem to us.

We catch up with them at our first stop and
smile to each other as we take their inventory
among the convenient wares in the road-side store.
One, with a graying beard, speaks and in a deep,
booming voice, he comments politely on the weather.

Black and Chrome

Photograph

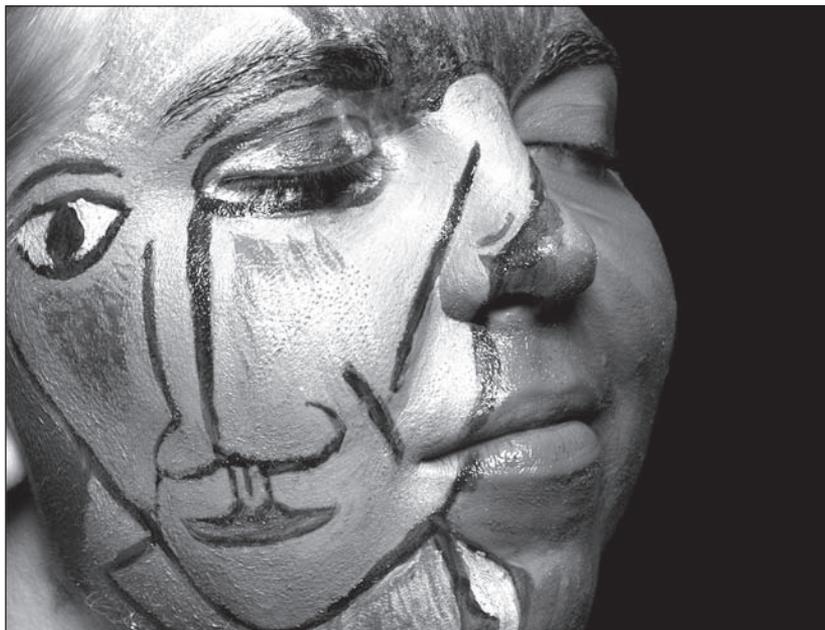
Jennifer Creller • Academic Transfer



Picasso Face

Photograph

Lydia Phillippe • Graphic Design



Modern Monsters

Elliot Newbold • Academic Transfer

I was in my twenties at the time. It was a dreary time of year, back-lit by the dead leaves of fall and a dying relationship. This particular relationship had been in its dying throes for far too long and was about to receive a fatal blow. Blessing in disguise, the end was nigh.

The day had been progressing smoothly. She had arrived at my place sometime in the early afternoon, and after some playful bickering, we agreed on a place to eat. Upon reaching our destination, we were seated and promptly ordered some burgers of the greasiest variety that our stomachs could tolerate. It was your average burger joint, a place that felt plastering random objects upon the walls offered a unique environment, which at one point must have been a viable strategy that evolved into the standard rather than the exception. There was nary an uncovered inch on these walls, and the waiter that had taken our order had the plastic smile that I had come to expect out of places such as these. We were no exception to the stereotype of the restaurant, either, just a boy and a girl on a date before whatever the night entailed. I caught myself inspecting her and tried to avert my gaze before I caught hers. She was a pretty girl with a slightly rounded face, a curvy figure, and the self-esteem to deny herself every compliment offered about any of her assets. I said something; she laughed. Typical interaction for us at this point. I looked at the table for a while, trying to muster the courage to tell her what I wanted to.

“Hey,” I said, still looking down at the table, “thank you.”

She looked up at me, a puzzled expression stamped on her face, and asked “For what?”

I blundered. Talking about how I felt was not my forte in life.

“For...everything. For supporting me through it all. Thank you for all the little things....” I proceeded to ramble on for a short while before I noticed that now she was staring at the table. It was my turn to ask, “What?”

“Nothing...,” she said, uncertainty ringing in her voice, “nothing.”

I politely dropped the inquiry, smiled, and suggested we go watch a movie. She agreed, and we were off.

In the car, discussion resumed as normal with her smiling and laughing as she was so prone to do. She was wearing a plaid purple shirt that day, though I was more intent on the cleavage that it contained than the actual shirt itself. Her clothing was more of a footnote than anything. Our relationship thus far was comparable to the restaurant-prepared meals that she was so fond of; there was a main course of sex and fighting, along with a side of emotional attachment. It was our meat and potatoes, with coleslaw thrown in as a sad attempt to remedy the lack of balance and nutrition offered by the rest of the meal.

We made it to our destination, the apartment of one of my friends. It was a crowded apartment and always seemed to have one more person around than it could comfortably hold, but it was more like home to me than the empty place I lived in. Most of this was due to the fact that the company kept in such a small space was irreplaceable, of the highest caliber one could want. There was also the matter of my resolve not to be seduced on this particular occasion, and being somewhere other than my place was almost a requirement for success in this goal. We started to watch a movie, something she had picked that I didn't care about. I paid as much attention as I could before wandering off due to boredom and frustration. Our taste in movies, music, and literature were almost polar opposites—a Venn diagram with nothing in the center. I loved grind-house horror movies, the cheap bloody schlock that instills a cringe response in most people. On the other hand, she enjoyed formulaic romantic comedies like the one she was currently watching and I was ignoring. Our musical tastes meshed poorly as well. I enjoyed emotionally charged melodic rock, whereas her preference lay in the happy, repetitive pop music. It rarely made sense to me why we were together. Despite all the differences, though, she kept me company and was more or less there for support when I needed it. I did my best for her as well, and we did care about each other to

whatever extent was necessary to keep us coming back to what we had. She was saying something, and I was spacing out again. This was a common occurrence between us, and she rolled her eyes at me as soon as she realized what was happening. Upon my request, she repeated her previous statement.

“Do you want to do something else? You look bored.”

I was bored, but I was loathed to admit it.

“I would love to play a board game if you are up for it,” I replied.

She was, and we quickly recruited some people to play with us. We cleared the cluttered table, set up the game, and proceeded to play. It was a nice tension reliever and brought some much needed focus to the evening. We finished the game of Risk and packed away the small plastic men to do battle again on another day. She decided at that point it was time for her to depart. We stopped at my place for a bit to regroup and so I could say goodbye properly. Little did I know at the time, this was the last time I would see her.

The next morning I had a message in my inbox. Opening it, my eyes were almost immediately drawn to the sentence that read, “I cheated on you six months ago....” Not that the rest said anything; it was the obligatory apologetic fluff one would expect from such a letter. There it was, her confession of the lie that had been slathered across the last leg of our journey together. I waited for the hammer to fall on my heart. Nothing came. Where was the feeling of betrayal, the anger and resentment? I tried to conjure up something, anything. I quickly inventoried the various ways that Hollywood had taught me to feel in said circumstance. The conclusion this led to was that I should be heartbroken but quickly empower myself to leave the sorry specimen of humanity. So where was it, this heartbreak and subsequent reinvention of myself? After a bit, I realized the onslaught of emotion wasn't going to show itself. At that point, fear settled in. My mental status was not cooperating with its societal counterparts. In an attempt to bring it in line with said counterparts, I did the next thing on the list that someone in my situation was expected to do and phoned a friend for an “urgent” discussion. The conversation that followed calmed me some, as I faked pain and

received sympathy. It would have made a perfect movie scene, minus the fact that I was lying about my emotions.

Next on the list was the confrontation. I called her, and she answered in tears.

“Hello?” she sniffled.

I quickly ran through a semi-prepared statement as though I was a prosecuting attorney.

“I... don't know exactly what to say. Obviously I am upset. I don't think what you did was acceptable by any means, but I also do not place the entirety of the blame on your shoulders. I could have been more concrete about what we had, and for that I am sorry. However, if we are going to continue being friends as you seem to desire, I need you to talk with someone. I cannot bear your emotional baggage by myself.”

“There isn't anything wrong with me, though!” she protested.

“Obviously there is, or this would never have happened,” I snapped back at her. “Look, I will give you some time to think about your decision, but I wanted you to know where I stood on the issue.”

She continued trying to contact me after that. I didn't know how to respond to her behavior. I had no real desire to speak with her, and yet telling her to leave me be somehow seemed rude. The conversations we held always led to the same question and response. I would request she seek some form of emotional support, and she would promptly refuse, being a subscriber to the idea that if she talked about and analyzed her emotions with a professional, she would be forever branded as clinically insane. I started to realize that there was a decision I was going to have to make, and that things were not going to be pretty or happy no matter what I did. We had our repetitive conversation one more time with the same outcome as always. I was through trying to help her help herself when she refused to accept my assistance. It just wasn't feasible. I called her with the intent of having our final conversation. No answer. I had to make my decision fast; did I leave a message, or did I let her think I was trying to contact her? I decided kindness be damned and left a message. It was over, and for whatever reason, it felt good.

I think that feeling good about the situation wound up bothering me the most throughout the entire sequence of events that occurred. Society tells you that when relationships come to an end, you are supposed to feel bad for whatever reason, especially if the person betrayed your trust in such a vile manner as this girl had. I was denying my society its right to vicariously live through myself and my emotions. It seemed so foreign and wrong, but at the same time, it didn't really matter because it felt good. I felt as though I had somehow been transformed into the antagonist in the story, the cold, heartless monster. I didn't care, but what monster does? I did what I had to do. 🧛

Cows

Hand-Colored Photograph

Desirae Bennett • Academic Transfer



Tales of an Eighth Year Nothing

Zachary Knipe • Academic Transfer/Business

As I purposefully traversed the twelve blocks separating my apartment from the University of Nebraska's City Campus, an unwelcome, but not at all unexpected sensation began to rattle me: anxiety. It was my first day back at the University, and I realized that it had somehow been years since I last stepped onto those hallowed grounds. I wondered when I had even last been to the campus art gallery. It must have been about 2003 when I was with my first and only blind date, a guy who after staring reverently for a few moments at a giant canvas of abstract-expressionism had announced to no one in particular, "I like this one 'cuz it's *big*." Had it really been five years? With each step closer to the campus came an incremental increase in my pulse rate. Maybe I was walking too briskly. Slow down. Don't traverse so purposefully.

The truth, I knew, was that I had avoided the campus without explicitly deciding to do so. For me, on that day, the campus represented all of the normal things: possibility, the future, personal growth; but it also represented the inverse: disappointment, undeveloped potential, failure. I had come to the University of Nebraska once before, nine years earlier, a National Merit Scholar with unused scholarship money in the bank, and after a few semesters of misstarts and rapidly vanishing motivation, left convinced that a university education would only stifle my nascent literary genius. Nine years and zero publications later, I was back, sure of my footing and ready for excellence. I had maturity and perspective to thank for my sure steps, but maturity, or to be more correct, the age that brought said maturity, cast me in an unfamiliar role: non-traditional student.

Prior to the first day of class, I had been contemplating my student status. At what age does a student become "non-traditional"? I was only 27. At the community college, 27 was middle of the pack, and the stray 19-year-olds who popped up in a class were considered anomalies, naïve little doe-eyed things to be tolerated, but never encouraged. No more than a dozen steps on university pavement

and I registered that a shift in norms had occurred: I was an outlier. My schoolmates were so small, so shiny, beaming, iridescent even. I scanned the crowd for the hardened, embittered faces that were a fixture at the community college, consolatory faces that seemed to say, “You think you’re running behind? *Please*. Try waiting until your youngest is in middle school.” I was disoriented. Where were the middle-aged women wheeling their books around in carry-on luggage? I needed a peer group. There were graduate students, of course, but their sanctimonious “you-and-I-are-the-same-age-but-I-will-have-my-PhD-before-you-even-finish-undergrad” expressions were far from comforting or sympathetic. It seemed that to make allies I would need to reach across the generational divide, relying on nothing more than natural good looks and effortless charm, of which I possessed neither.

Arriving at my first class of the day, I noted the uncertain look of one of my classmates as I failed to take my anticipated post at the lectern and instead sat down beside her. She regarded me with a skeptical, sideways stare, and I could tell she was running through the possibilities. If not a T.A., what was I? An Iraq veteran? A recovering crystal-meth addict, back on my feet and finally ready to believe in the power of *me*? Maybe I was just hopelessly stupid? We exchanged smiles and pleasant greetings, but I can’t remember what her name was, this in spite of our spending the rest of the semester in class together. I will never be good at remembering names, but this deficiency of mine is only exacerbated by the fact that 95% of Caucasian girls aged 18 to 22 are named Jessica, Ashley, Brittany or Kayla, or some slight variation on those four. My new acquaintance fell somewhere within this category.

After going over the syllabus and the usual first-day business, we were asked to tell the class a little bit about ourselves, an activity that I have always hated, primarily because I become overwhelmed with anxiety whenever I have to speak to a group of strangers, especially when I am the topic of discussion. When my turn arrived, I announced that I had taken time away from school to join the *workforce*, stressing this word in a way that implied I had done

something worthy of adulation, that unlike all of those seated before me I had ignored my selfish desires for an education and answered the call of civic duty, something they probably couldn't appreciate. *Workforce*, I felt, sounded more dignified than, "Well, after drifting around to different janitorial jobs for a couple of years, I finally settled on a gig processing urine, stool, and sputum samples at the local hospital. And now I'm here." In addition to the more general background information, our professor asked us to share what our eight-year-old selves had dreamed of being when we grew up. I said I had wanted to be a Thundercat, an answer which I thought to be creative, adorable, and ingratiating, but that I regretted almost instantly, realizing that most of my classmates were embryos or less when that beloved cartoon of my childhood was at its peak.

"What's a Thundercat?" asked Jessany, looking perplexed, but decidedly supportive.

Rather than simply explaining that *ThunderCats* was a popular cartoon of the late 1980s, I found myself describing in detail the various characters and signature plot-points—Cheetarah and her super-speed, Panthro, who you somehow knew would have been Black if he were human and not whatever it was that the ThunderCats were. At one point, I even pantomimed the raising of the hilt of the Sword of Omens to eye-level, so that the Eye of Thundera could give me "sight beyond sight" as it did for Lion-O, the ThunderCats' courageous leader. The more I spoke, it seemed, the more frightened the students became.

Someone, I thought, either inspired by the tenets of common human decency or out of a wholly selfish desire to save himself from my account of the regenerative powers of Mumm-Ra's sarcophagus, should have taken me by the shoulders and gently guided me into the hallway for some slow, deep-breathing, but I was clearly alone in this. I felt like the drunk girl at a party who spends the last two hours of the evening looking for her shoes, her friends preferring to laugh at her antics rather than give her a ride home or deposit her in a spare bedroom. I looked helplessly at Britjessilya, hoping for some calming encouragement, but she turned her eyes away immediately,

and I could tell she had come to a conclusion about my background: definitely a meth addict.

I realize, now as I did then, that most of my fears about my age or my inability to be reassimilated into undergraduate culture were pure imagination. Understanding this slowly helped me to feel more at ease in my new role, but not nearly as much as learning that there are clear advantages to being a non-trad, a fact borne out by my own experiences as well as by those of my non-traditional classmates. As students we are formidable, invested in and excited by our studies to an extent rarely seen in our younger counterparts. We spend our Saturday nights pouring over lecture notes and reading non-assigned textbooks, never imagining that our social lives have been in any way compromised. And if someone has questions about Reaganomics or the fall of the Berlin Wall, well, they know who to come to.

It turns out that a decade is not really the “generational divide” I had imagined it was, and now some of my best friends are little doe-eyed things who often surprise me with just how naïve they aren’t. They are fond of asking me if it was scary when the trains first came and I, in turn, enjoy explaining to them that their bodies will be going through some changes soon, but that it’s just part of growing up, and they shouldn’t be frightened. Every now and then I have to remind them, and myself, that 28 is far from old by any measure, but that it’s old enough to understand, and be grateful that, with each passing day we are not only a little bit older, but also a little bit wiser and better for wear. 🍷

Hallway

Photograph

Matt Ward • Graphic Design



Lessons

Daniel Cromer • Motorcycle, ATV, and
Personal Watercraft Technology

He's been gone for two years now, but I still see him. Every time I look in the mirror, I see a glimmer of my grandfather, just a hint of his spark looking back at me with my eyes. He was, and still is, one of the most important people to affect my life, and I'm still learning from him; I expect I will be learning from him when he's been gone for many more years.

I can look into my mind's eye and still see him as clearly as if he were in front of me, sitting in his worn swivel rocker from the 1970s, slipper-clad feet resting on the slightly threadbare patch he's worn in the fading green carpet over many years. The coffee table in front of him is piled high with books and magazines on every subject, from medicine to finances to geology until it can't hold any more; I'm sure it's worn a dent into the floor from all the years it's held that weight. The whole house around him is suffused with the subtle but distinct mustiness of old books and rocks, telling any who care to listen of this man's life outdoors among the things of the earth. I can still hear the familiar slow, measured cadence of his voice as he talks with me about science or mechanics or geology, the way his voice rises and falls as he gets deeper into a subject, the calm and measured way he poses questions to make me think through a concept more thoroughly. The overwhelming sense I get from him is one of peace, of acceptance of life and the world and the knowledge and faith to navigate its pitfalls with dexterity and grace. It's this peace and grace I've always envied and sought to learn myself.

My childhood was not an easy one. I grew up in a broken household with a drug-addled, borderline-lunatic for a father, enduring year after year of severe verbal and emotional abuse, and all through my childhood, my grandfather was my saving grace. He was the certainty in my life, the constant and immovable force for good that somehow balanced some of the pain

so I could survive and keep working forward, even when the world around me seemed as dark as a cloud of ash—when my own inner world closed in and threatened to self-destruct.

He was always there, always available, eternally patient, and seldom more than a phone call away. Despite my home life, I was an extremely curious child, taking apart anything and everything I could and building new things from the parts; I was always working on some crazy project or other. I would spend hours on the phone with him talking over plans and designs, slowly and unknowingly learning from him the art of painting a picture with words, the skill of visualizing an object with only a description. That was the way he taught, an understated way of phrasing things and posing problems that made you think and learn without even realizing you were learning. Only as I have grown older and now watched my own daughter grow have I realized how wise a man he truly was and what a gift his mentoring and example was.

My grandfather was really the only positive role model I could identify with as a child. At home, confrontations happened often and loudly with lots of swearing and bellowing and objects crashing against walls and floors. My grandfather, in contrast, seldom got angry and almost never raised his voice, giving his conversation more weight than many people's shouting. He never swore or insulted, preferring to state his feelings without attacking the other person. Without his example, I might never have known there was another way; Heaven knows I got enough practice shouting my problems down. Sadly, this example wasn't quite enough to counter what I was being taught at home, but at least I knew that somewhere out there people lived in peace, even if I wasn't able to.

Not everything with him was serious or intellectual, though. He knew how to have fun and taught me the joy he took in some of his favorite hobbies....

“Whuh-whuh-oh-whoa!!”

“Hang on, Grandpa! I've got you.” I grasped my grandfather's gnarled hand in mine, my young grip gentle but strong as iron, preventing him from tumbling into the river as the crumbling clay of the

bank threatened to give way.

“The bank down here’s kinda treacherous. Falls away the moment you step on it,” I said.

“No kidding, I just about took a dip there!” he replied.

We were scrambling (as much as an old man and a fat ten-year-old could) around the banks and gravel bars of the Little Nemaha River, hunting for agates (plain-looking stones that when cut, reveal vivid bands and rings of gorgeous color) on a field trip with the local rock club. To this day, I’m not quite sure how my grandfather made it down that steep, weed-choked not-quite-path, let alone how he climbed back up, but the memory will stick with me forever.

“Where should we look next?” I asked.

“Let’s try that one over there,” he replied. “I don’t think anybody’s been quite that far thataway just yet.”

“Sounds good to me!” was my only response as I hopped over to the next bar down. We clambered over and started searching, raking the stones on the surface, seeking a very pretty needle in this haystack of grays and reds and blacks and browns.

“Hey, I think I found one!” I shouted suddenly.

“What kind do you think it is?” I asked as I handed him the smooth, rounded nodule of white stone.

“Well, I’d guess this is a Honey Agate,” he said. “If you can get Roger to cut it for you, it’ll be a beautiful pale gold, hence the name....”

That was the first time I’d ever really gotten out into the field and truly found something somewhere wild, and even though it was small, it was the coolest thing in the world at that moment, and my grandfather was the coolest man alive. It was events like those that, though seldom due to his age and the crippling effects of arthritis, gave me the closest thing to a normal father-son relationship I would ever have.

Of course, there were bad days as well. As you might imagine, by the time I was eight or nine, I had serious issues; I developed a reputation for quite literally attacking my problems, especially at school, and I was often in trouble. By this point my sister had started showing signs of her own mental issues and enjoyed saying outrageous and

obnoxious things just to set me off. Still, even when I bellowed and raged about whatever had set me off most recently, my grandfather stayed calm and did his best to teach me better ways to handle my problems.

For instance, when I was about twelve, we had gone to my grandparents' house for a family event, and things had been going relatively well (as much as they could with an unexploded bomb and a lunatic wandering freely). Eventually, inevitably, we clashed about something or other and off went the fireworks, and I stormed off to the back porch to get away from the situation before it got even worse. My grandfather followed me out, and sat down on the creaking wooden bench beside me, waiting patiently until I had calmed down enough to start the conversation of my own accord....

"Why does she *always* have to be such a pain in the ass?" I asked heatedly.

"Well, for one thing it's because nine times out of ten, she gets the reaction she wants out of you," he replied evenly.

"Of *course* she gets a reaction out of me! Did you hear what she said to me?" I asked

"No, I didn't, but I think if you sit down and think about it for a minute, I doubt it matters much in the long run," he replied.

"So what if it matters in the long run! At this point, I'll have a heart attack long before the long run ever shows up!" I responded, rather more rudely than I probably realized.

"That may be," he replied, "but if that's the case, wouldn't you rather go worry about something more important while you wait for that? If I didn't have a long run to worry about, I think I'd personally be focused on making the most of what time I did have, rather than running around bellowing about my crazy sister's latest insult."

I paused and thought things over for a minute.

"Maybe you're right," I said, "but I still can't just force myself to let it go that easily!"

"You don't have to force yourself to let it go. Just think about it the way I suggested, and it'll let itself go," he replied.

I sat and thought for a while longer, and the longer I thought

about it, the less it seemed to matter. He was right. Why did I care about the ravings of my crazy sister? I knew she did it mostly to get attention, and I'd been feeding it all along.

"All right, I suppose you're right," I finally admitted.

"Good, then come back in and have some more dessert and forget about this nonsense," he replied....

Teaching moments like this were fairly common when I was with my grandfather, and though I may not have understood then, I do now: my grandfather was doing for me what my father and mother could not. He was providing a foundation, giving me the tools or at least the knowledge of them to help me forge my own way in life. He knew my path would be hard and lonely, but he also saw some spark within me that no one else did. He looked at me and knew the strength buried in my battered soul and did what he could to help it grow and unfurl through his lessons. 🙏

Grandpa's Chair

Photograph

Amy M. Salisbury • Academic Transfer



Orb Weaver and Prey

Photograph

Jacob Linderholm • Academic Transfer



Hangin' with the Felons

Alex Cordry • Computer Information Technology

It is time for me to spend ten hours with the felons again. Putting on my uniform helps get my mind in the right place for work. I hop into my pick-up and take the twenty-minute drive out to the Lincoln Correctional Center. Although “Lincoln” is in the title of the place, it is outside the city limits. I soon have cornfields all around me, and then there is the prison. The place is both intriguing and uninteresting. Set far back from the road, the building seems to jump out at me from the surrounding cornfields. I arrive at the place where I spend forty or more hours of my week.

As I turn into the drive, there are at least two sets of eyes watching me on the monitors. The guards recognize my truck, but they still keep an eye on me. I drive along the double-fence, twelve-foot high, electrified, razor-wire-on-top signs stating, “DO NOT APPROACH. TOWER PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO USE DEADLY FORCE.” I turn around the last curve hoping to find a parking spot close to the entrance. First shift starts at 6:00 a.m., but I start work at 9:00, so usually, I am relegated to parking at the far end of the lot.

I head toward the main entrance. The place was obviously built with function in mind over aesthetics. The building is squat and sprawling. The sense of security is clear. The color palette is industrial gray—old, neglected, industrial gray. The building sits silent and ominous. It appears as if it has all the time in the world. People and things may come and go, but this building seems to say, “Don’t worry; I will always be here.” Time is what this building is all about.

A line of delivery trucks waits to enter the institution. I wave to Borzi, manning the wire gate. He controls all vehicle traffic that enters the institution. One truck goes in at a time; everyone waits for the truck in front to finish its business and leave before the next one goes in. Security positions are supposed to rotate every three months, yet Borzi is at the wire gate day after day, month after month. I walk past the wire gate and continue toward the front door.

The front door is an odd combination of chrome handles on industrial gray frames. Saying “hi” to the correctional officer manning the front desk, I set my lunch box on the belt to get X-rayed. While the CO is irradiating my lunch, I log myself in. Now that we are both sure there is no contraband inside my ham and cheese sandwich, I clock in. With a beep and the flash of a green light, KRONOS lets me know that I am now on state time.

With a sharp snap, I take two chits off my key clip to trade for my keys and radio. There is a small metallic clink as I toss them into the teller drawer. The voices of the people in Central Control sound tinny as they say “good morning” through the intercom. I wouldn’t hear them at all without the intercom behind inch-thick glass. These are the people who watched me drive into the parking lot. They are able to watch me wherever I roam within the institution. Now they pass my keys and radio to me through the drawer. The ring is full and heavy with keys. With a snap, I clip them onto my belt where the chits had been just seconds before. The radio doesn’t feel that heavy, but after ten hours, the weight grows. I walk to door one and wait for them to let me into the institution. When I hear a deep buzz, I push my way through. Once door one is closed, I pass through door two, accompanied by another buzz. I head on to the next door. No buzzer on this one—just a small light to let me know it is open. After thirty feet and three locked doors, I am swallowed by the building. Inside the institution, the colors turn from gray to browns and yellows, old and peeling. The air in the halls is thick and stagnant. Everything is closed up tight with no chance to generate a breeze to clear the air.

As I walk in, I can hear the murmur of activity in the kitchen, my destination. I stop at another locked door, but I have the key to this one. I snap the keys off my belt and flip to the correct key. I step into the kitchen office and lock the door behind me. This is the eye of the hurricane that is the institution’s kitchen. In here, it is quiet, calm, and relaxing. Past the next door is noise, chaos, and stress. I say hello to the two managers who have desks in the office. My name isn’t on a desk in here; my job is on the other side of that door. I take my time, squeezing my lunch into the fridge and strapping on the radio. I twist

the knob on the radio, and a high-pitched beep lets me know that it's working. My radio becomes the constant background noise in my day. A loud knock on the door draws my attention. I have only been here a couple of minutes, and an inmate is already demanding my attention.

I unlock the door and step onto the kitchen floor. Immediately, I am surrounded by smells, noise, and activity. I take a second to take it all in and get a sense of what is going on. To my left, there are crews of inmates dressed in kitchen whites working on today's meals. To my right, the dish crew, dressed in khakis, trying to finish the dishes from breakfast. It appears to be chaos, but everything going on has purpose. I turn my attention to the inmate that had to speak to me so urgently. He is dressed in his state-issued khakis and boots. He has been working in the hot and humid dish room, and sweat runs from his face. I ask him what he needs, and he quickly states, "Hey, Alex, tell the blue suit that I am done and can go back to my unit."

"You know, I just walked in the door. You need to go talk to Jodi and ask her if you can go." I am about five minutes into my shift, and I am already annoyed.

"Come on, man! You know she don't like me. Just tell the CO I can go!" I just shrug and send him off to talk to the person currently running the floor. The inmate feigns anger at my unwillingness to help him. "Alex, I thought we was better than that." The inmate heads off into the kitchen; whether he will go talk to Jodi remains to be seen. So starts my day on the floor of the kitchen.

I walk though the cavernous kitchen, peeking at what each crew is working on. As I pass the lead cook, I double-check with him how the lunch meal is coming along. We discuss how much we have and decide we should have plenty. When preparing a meal for 900 people, we have to make enough, and enough is a lot. After a quick chat about last night's ballgame, I continue my tour of the kitchen.

The lead prep cook comes to me with a crisis. The inmate cannot just explain the problem, so we head to the walk-in cooler so he can show me the issue. I remove my keys and quickly flip to the proper key to unlock the cooler door. With as much drama as the inmate can muster, he shows me that we have a single 50-pound bag of onions. After

staring at my blank expression for a moment, he finally explains the prep crew needs to clean and dice 75 pounds for tomorrow. I tell him that the produce truck was in line at the wire gate, and he will have his onions within the next hour or so. Yet another emergency averted.

I stop by the storeroom to let the inmates working there know that the produce truck was in line at the gate. The three inmates sitting in the cool, dim, dry storage room start to stir as though I woke them. As I walk away, I hear a vague complaint about slaving in the kitchen.

As I pass the diet room, the inmate working there flags me down. I open the door and stick my head in to ask what he needs. The inmate reminds me he has group in the afternoon and someone else will be working his supper shift. I make note of the change in my head.

My day goes by at a rapid pace. We serve and clean up lunch, then do it all over again for supper. Inmates arrive in the kitchen, perform their jobs, and depart only to be replaced by another set of inmates. Each group brings its own noise, activity, and demands on my attention. I joke and laugh with some, disagree and argue with others. The kitchen is seldom empty, and I savor any downtime between groups of inmates.

Finally, at the end of the day, the kitchen is quiet. All the inmates have left the kitchen. The kitchen is spotless, and the lights are off. I retrace my morning steps to leave the institution. I wait for the light on the inner door, and then the deep, guttural buzz of doors one and two. There's a clank as my radio and keys go into the drawer and two petite clinks as my chits are returned to me. KRONOS beeps to let me know that I have been released from state time, for now. The CO X-rays my empty lunch box as I log myself out, and I am out the door.

My truck sits alone at the far end of the deserted parking lot. Borzi has abandoned the wire gate for the day, but he will be there in the morning, as always. As I make the long walk, I take in the quiet surroundings. The block walls and chain-link fence are as they were when I arrived. The building looms silently behind me letting me know that it will still be here tomorrow. From here, it seems as though nothing changes inside this place. 🍄

Portal

Photograph

Jeremy Bishop • Academic Transfer



Tracks

Photograph

Laura Drawbaugh • Visual Publications



Just One More Day

Sarah Yoakum • Business Administration

As my bedroom fills with the warmth of the morning light, I feel the sun shining vibrantly upon my face. I roll over in bed. “Just five more minutes,” I think. I soon begin to smell the sweet, aromatic scent of my favorite coffee, “Jamaican Me Crazy.” It’s early in the morning, so I ever so quietly get out of bed. I don’t want to wake up the “Sleeping Giant.” I stagger with my eyes only open enough to not walk into walls or to trip over the toys left behind from my children playing the day before. I let my nostrils guide me to the kitchen where I hear the last gurgles of the coffee. The welcome aroma opens my eyes slightly to the glorious morning. I open the cupboard doors, ever so quietly. I grab my favorite cup—a large caramel brown cup that I bought at the flea market. It’s my favorite because it’s light-weight, holds lots of coffee, and has a round shape I can hold in my hand. I close the cupboard ever so gently by holding my hand on the inside corner until it closes on my hand. I quietly place my cup on the counter next to the coffee maker. I fill my cup and add my creamer—a lot of it. I love extremely strong coffee with creamer; I don’t care for what I call “American Coffee,” the coffee that looks and tastes like dirty dish water. My coffee is bold, robust, and so dark I can’t see the bottom of my cup until the last drop. With my coffee cup filled, I am ready to enjoy my morning.

I head outside to the deck with my coffee and my blanket. When I sit down in an old plastic chair, snuggle up in my blanket, and put my feet on the worn-out foot rest, I keep my eyes closed to ensure I enjoy every moment. I can feel the cool morning spring breeze across my face, and I clutch the bottom of the cup to warm my hands as I leisurely sip my coffee. I can smell the sweet fragrance of my jasmine bush and the dew on the grass. I can hear “God’s Orchestra,” a performance that is blissful and beautifully synchronized, to serenade anyone’s soul. The birds are singing beautifully. The baby birds are chirping high above me. The wind blows through the tree with its

branches swaying slightly, and I can hear the sounds of water swishing back and forth from the sprinklers. As I sit, I am reminded of my many past memories, and as I continue to sit so peacefully, the sun begins to warm my face. The birds begin to sing a bit louder, saying, “Good Morning, world,” and my soul is elated, as I enjoy the best part of my day. My kids are still sleeping peacefully in their beds, but more importantly, the giant is still asleep. I am alone with God, completely at peace.

I open my eyes to the sound of a squirrel chattering back at a bird, and I can see as I look up in the tree momma bird back in her nest feeding her babies. I watch as other squirrels run around, but when I look down at the base of our tree, I can see a poor squirrel being tormented by an ornery but beautiful cardinal. The squirrel chatters, as if to say, “Go away!,” but the bird squawks at the squirrel as he swoops like a hornet. The squirrel scurries away quickly, and he heads across the street for safety in another tree.

I find myself thinking how life is; it is always the small things that make us run away—so often running away from our own dreams. Our parents tell us that we are “dim-witted,” and we continue on in our lives thinking we are stupid; our classmates say we are “chubby,” and the rest of our lives we think, “I am fat and ugly.” How did those small words change my universe? What did I become? Who is this person I no longer recognize? Why did my life turn out this way? My thoughts, racing faster than my heart is pounding, make it so that I can no longer hear the beautiful orchestra; I can hear only the racing of my dismal, foreboding thoughts of my life.

How did I end up in this abusive marriage? What has my life become? What happened to my dreams? Do I matter to anyone? If I tell people what is really happening to me, will they believe me, or will they just say I am crazy? Since, I have been told it’s all in my imagination, how can I think these thoughts? “He is the nicest man,” my grandma would say. So would my grandma understand the hell I am living in and, as a devoted Catholic, would she be ashamed of me? After all, he’s never hit me, excluding the one time when he grabbed me around my neck and threatened to kill me.

“It is okay,” I would tell myself. “It is okay because my daughters are small, and they haven’t seen anything.” Or did they see him grab me? If only I could tell someone; but he is a deacon in the church, and that would ruin his position. I think, “Does anyone love me?” And the other time, was that my fault? I should have just kept my mouth shut; he only grabbed my arms that time when he threatened to kill me. My bruises from his hands went away after two weeks. I think to myself, “If I leave, will anyone ever love me?” My thoughts become like my coffee—dark, cold, and bitter. I tell myself I can hold on—just one more day of walking on eggshells, one more day of lying to the world about what type of person he really is. One day he just might say, “Sorry.” One day he might see that I am worth loving. One day....

I begin to hear the pitter patter of my daughters’ footsteps in the kitchen, and I think to myself that I need to hurry because they will slam the cupboard and wake the sleeping giant. I run towards the door just in time to hear, “BLAMM!” The cupboard door slammed shut, and it is too late, the giant is awake. I hear his thumps as he walks down the hallway. I tell my daughters a quick good morning so that he doesn’t see me hug my own children. I feel pain piercing my soul as my daughters run to Saturday morning cartoons without a care in the world. I quickly grab his favorite coffee cup and fill it to the brim (just in time to hand it to him), and I smile at him with love and admiration saying, “Good morning, honey!”

As he sips his coffee, I hope that coffee and a smile can save the morning of waking the sleeping giant. Just one more day. Just one more day. ☺

Late Show

Natalie Schwarz • Writing Center Tutor

We exit the theater after midnight
into wintry cold. Our breath, like ghosts,
appears in the air and disappears
like said apparitions. We walk against
the night's wind, follow the sounds
of talking, traffic, the echoes of bass
that come from a band as they play
their last set at the bar on the corner.
We make jokes about your one-horse town
and how in the city we only cross the street
when the light changes.

Driving down dark, empty streets,
I see red and blue lights flashing ahead.
I know what to expect, since you called,
but I'm still fearful of the wreckage;
fearful to see what you walked away from,
fearful to know how lucky you are.

Several cruisers line the intersection
and there sits the shell of your truck:
metal twisted, headlight missing,
broken glass glittering in the streetlights.
You stand aside from the scene: calm, displaced.
I don't know what happened.
I just looked down, then....

You're mad at yourself; mad at everything.
I try to be calm and rational, but I really want
to yell at you for not paying attention;
yell at you for yet another wrecked vehicle.
But when I see your face, I want to cry, take your hand,
thank God you're okay.

Scuttlebum

Photograph

Mark Burkitt • Graphic Design



Hidden Strength

Emily Danekas • Academic Transfer

Four years ago, I was attacked in my apartment in Lincoln. I wasn't sure if I was going to make it out alive.

On that day in May, when I was eighteen, I answered the door and found a tall, slender man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in all black wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood up over his head. Gloves covered his hands, which held a gun pointed at my head. A white bandana was tied around his face, exposing only his eyes. He pushed his way inside my apartment, locking the door behind him.

Living in Lincoln was a new and exciting adventure for me and my best friend Jill. I was a student at the College of Hair Design on 11th and M downtown and nearing the halfway point in the program. Jill attended Southeast Community College and was about to finish her first year. We grew up together in Milford, just twenty-five minutes west on Interstate 80. People would ask us occasionally if we were sisters. We shared the same brown hair and brown eyes and went everywhere together. Jill had a knack for decorating, so she enjoyed coming up with fun ideas to make our first apartment special. We ended up with a hot pink and black theme that covered our entire apartment from top to bottom. The kitchen table was always set nicely to display the pink silverware and matching plates. There was a feeling of pride as we made our home away from home warm and inviting.

My mind ran wild with thoughts of what was going to happen to me. I found myself lying face down on the living room floor. All I could see were feet pacing rapidly back and forth. Coins jingled out of my purse onto the floor, every last penny taken. My entire body was trembling. The man grabbed my arm and pulled me up to my feet. The next thing I knew my hands were tied behind my back, the cord digging into my wrists. He returned me to the same position on the floor. I knew this was not going to end well for me if I didn't try to do something; I transformed into a different person in a matter of seconds. I found confidence in myself that I could change what was happening.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I asked.

He hadn't spoken a single word to me yet, and that did not change, even when I started talking to him.

"Please, you can take anything in here you want. Just let me go!" I pleaded.

I received an answer when he dropped a bullet out of the gun and onto the floor, just inches from my face. He bent down to my level on the floor and looked me right in the eyes then down at the bullet and back to me. We shared a few seconds of terrifying eye contact, and the bullet returned to the gun. Just a few moments later, he grabbed my arm again and dragged me back to the hallway. Lifting my legs to walk felt like I was carrying bricks in my shoes. Each step was harder than the last.

The man searched through our bedrooms, leaving me in the hallway. I fought and managed to untie my hands, keeping them behind my back so he wouldn't notice. He kept looking outside through my bedroom window, leaving the vertical blinds out of order and disheveled. A tight burning sensation suddenly came over my neck. I realized there was a rope or cord of some kind constricting, getting tighter and tighter by the second. Instantly, I began breathing rapidly, my heart pounding out of my chest. My arms flew from behind my back to my neck and started clawing, trying to rip the cord from my neck. He had too tight of a hold! All I could do was scratch at my neck. I began screaming at the top of my lungs with the few breaths I had left. All of a sudden, we heard a noise.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

"Emily! Emily!" the voice shouted.

My friend Kurtis and I had known each other for just a short while. We met on a Sunday at church and became friends instantly. Kurtis was a fun-loving, shaggy, brown-haired Canadian. In the summer, any day the rain wasn't falling was heaven for this motorcycle fanatic. He had taken me on my first ride just the night before.

The noise startled both the man and me. I felt him loosen his grip the slightest bit, and I took off running for the door. I scrambled to unlock it, my hands flying all over the place.

“Kurtis, there’s a man! He’s coming!” were the only words I could find.

“Run, Emily! Just go! Run!” he screamed.

We scrambled out of the building, running as fast as we could down three flights of stairs, passing a woman standing at the mail boxes. I was running, fumbling with the cord that was still tied around my neck. Kurtis ran into Normal Boulevard, east of 40th Street, and flagged down a police officer that happened to be driving by. In a few minutes, there were police cars swarming Kurtis and me. There were questions thrown at us by many different officers. I sat on the side of the road, waiting for this nightmare to end. Pictures of my neck and wrists were taken, followed by more questions.

Later that evening, the man who attacked me was caught. The police noticed him walking around outside the building and questioned him. The officers had me identify him right there in the parking lot, face to face. Police cars surrounded us from all over. Flashing lights filled the sunset. Many people were standing on their front porches staring, like there was a movie playing in front of their eyes. Officers were holding him by the car, handcuffed. He was my neighbor from across the hall. He was sentenced to eight years in prison.

The details from that day are as clear to me now as they were four years ago. I can close my eyes and relive every moment all over again. I revisited the apartment only once to gather a few items of clothing—my family was kind enough to move me out while I was at school. There are days I question why this had to happen. One particular September day, at my apartment on Meridian Drive, I found myself trying to take the trash out, but not being able to open the door to leave. Small reminders like this come up often. I don’t let them ruin my day anymore. Learning how to live with the flashbacks and emotions is my goal at the moment. New obstacles will present themselves, and I am ready to take them on as they come. 🍀

Fly, Birdie, Fly

Photograph

Laura Drawbaugh • Visual Publications



Splat

Photograph

Laura Drawbaugh • Visual Publications



Kurt Cobain

Stipple Drawing

Casey Carbon • Graphic Design



Oliver is my older brother. He is one who is constantly being weighed down by the psychological baggage of his adolescent years. He is of average height and very skinny; he claims to not enjoy food, yet sometimes I catch him standing in front of the open refrigerator at 1:00 a.m., enjoying the pleasures of a salty piece of cheese or leftovers from the dinner he missed five hours prior. Atop his head is a large, dark, pubescent afro saturated with the stench of old, stale cigarettes. He wears modest clothing—never a name brand, never too bright a color. He covers his face with dark sunglasses and a thin beard with a fluctuating length that is always an indication of his mental state. He is intelligent, and while it is apparent to all those around him, his self-perception is still tainted by his unrelenting insecurity. He stays up late at night playing chess and writing brilliantly witty and unique pieces, pieces I couldn't dream of creating even in my most lucid hour. My brother is one who claims to seek reality and truth, yet most of his time is spent in unreality and illusion.

A few nights ago, after I confronted my brother about something he had done earlier that had angered me, he left, then returned to me sobbing a few minutes later. Earlier we had invited our girlfriends over for dinner, and throughout the night, I could tell there was something looming below his conscious, and it was only a matter of time before it would spill out of him. My brother can always count on me to endure his confused, emotionally overwhelmed monologues about what is on his mind, despite knowing full well how I agonize over it. He told me a story of an exchange he had between him and our father several years ago that had been troubling him. Our father, outraged over his son's incompetence and irresponsibility, spat in my brother's face as he told my brother he hated him and pushed him out the front door. As my brother recited his story, I imagined the look of anger on our father's face—his wrinkled brow, saliva spraying from his mouth, the skin on his forehead pulled tight, and his snarling nostrils like black holes with wrinkles that connected the corners

of his nose with the corners of his mouth. My brother, devastated and expelled from his home, confided in his friend Sam, who offered him a place to stay with him and his family. My brother sat quietly with them at their dinner table and joined them for church the following morning, despite my brother's tremendous aversion to spiritual practice. Sometime during the second day of his stay, Sam's father received a phone call from our father who explained why my brother had been kicked out of our house. I don't know what was said, but I do know it was enough for Sam's father to ask my brother to leave. Now unwelcome in two homes, my brother left with a shattered soul and turned to the one thing that always offered him comfort in times of stress; he ventured over to an old girlfriend's house where he would spend the rest of his evening stoned.

Everyone enjoyed my brother's company when he was a child. He was popular among his peers, and teachers liked him. When my parents were challenged by my disciplinary woes, they could rely on my brother to maintain his good behavior and charm. He was quiet and discovered a love of reading at a very young age. He and our father would spend evenings reading together, discussing the content of a book and defining its underlying moral. They respected one another and shared a tight bond; I knew our father trusted him. Throughout his early education, he would receive exemplary marks, and his teachers would tell our parents what a delight he was to have in class. He was well liked by his classmates, and some would go so far as to consider him legendary. I would often encounter an old classmate of his approaching me, thrilled to see Oliver, disappointed to find that I was only his little brother. But it didn't bother me; I was proud to be mistaken for someone I regarded so highly. He was a mere twenty months older than I was, yet I still looked up to him as any younger brother would. He offered me ideas and showed me the ways of the older kids, the ones we all admired and emulated as children. He told me what masturbation was when no one else would and explained sexual euphemisms and curse words I didn't understand. He was my urban dictionary and a mentor of sorts.

It had come time for my brother to attend high school. He didn't follow his classmates to East High in Lincoln; instead, he applied to a prestigious boarding school in Omaha known as Mt. Michael. He was accepted, and I watched as my brother, the one who had been around since the day I was born, suddenly vanished. While my brother was away, he discovered marijuana. Why the altered state appealed to him so greatly was, and still is, unknown to me; maybe being away from his family and friends forced him to discover a new mechanism by which to cope, and marijuana was quick, easy, and accessible. But this new pastime, while it may have offered him some entertainment and relief from the daily stresses of life, made him no longer the charming, responsible child he once was; instead, inferiority colored his self-perception, and when he came home, his words were few. As time at Mt. Michael went on, the ground below my brother's feet began to crumble. His grades fell, and he stained his record with his newfound rebellion. One day, my parents received a phone call from the dean informing them that my brother and a group of kids had pummeled a classmate in the locker room, and he was being considered for expulsion. My parents, realizing the inevitability of teenage rebellion, fought to dissuade the dean from expelling their son. They found success and quickly forgave my brother, but this incident only marked the beginning of a rebellion quite different than we expected.

While my brother was away, our family moved into a new house we had been designing in the prior months. My brother resisted, arguing that we were all happy in the old house and that a new house would only complicate our lives; yet, we had all committed ourselves, and moving was inevitable. The house was large and prominently placed at the end of the sixth hole at Highmark Golf Course in the southeastern corner of Lincoln. The front of the house stood tall and cast an ominous shadow over our corner. My brother's and my bedrooms were connected by a loft, so late at night I could detect his dreary presence—his eraser scratching away and the long, dull, and lifeless melodies of Radiohead droning in the background. When my brother returned from his first year, he decided he would no longer attend Mt. Michael. He returned to a new house in a new

neighborhood with no familiar place to call home.

In our time away, my brother and I had become quite close. As time went on, he would come to me more and more to discuss philosophy and ponder existence. We were allies; we would look out for one another and take the blame for each other's mistakes whenever one or the other was on our parents' proverbial radar. But as high school carried on, my brother seemed to fade away from all those around him except me. People would often find me in the halls of East High to ask where my brother had been and when he was coming back; I never had an answer for them. He started to spend a majority of his time smoking pot and cigarettes; it was evident he was trying to escape what he considered to be the perils of existence. What one would view as an obstacle to be overcome, he would view as another indication of his inadequacy. He would stay up all night drawing intricate and bizarre surreal sketches then sleep well into the afternoon of the following day. He stopped attending class and had long ago quit working on homework. He started to become angry and would scold my parents when they would ask him to contribute to our family's discussions. My brother no longer had any interest in spending time with our family or his friends; his art consumed him while the world melted away.

One day, I went into the coat closet to grab a CD when something in the far corner caught my eye. The closet was roughly five by eight feet; it was dimly lit, and all three walls were lined with coats. I glanced down and noticed a long dark mass masked by the curtain of coats. I examined it closely before realizing it was a body wedged up against the corner facing the wall. I suspected that a homeless man had entered my house and was in search of a place to sleep, or that one of my brother's friends had had a bit too much to drink and in his drunken stupor, had discovered what seemed to be a reasonable place to lie down. Then finally, I turned on the light and immediately realized that the lifeless body wedged in the dark corner veiled by the curtain of coats belonged to my brother.

I froze there for a short while, realizing how I had greatly overlooked the magnitude of my brother's plight. I called his name a couple of times and tried to evoke a response, but he lay there perfectly still. I ran up the stairs to my father's office and told him what I had discovered. My father opened the closet door, grabbed my brother, dragged him to the couch, and asked him what he had done. When he didn't answer, my father yelled into his face and struck him across the cheek. My mother burst into tears and screamed. My brother was unable to hold his head straight on his neck; his eyes rolled backward, and his body was limp. His large pupils and his slow, faint pulse told us there was a large clump of medication dissolving in the acidity of his stomach, spreading through his veins to the far corners of his rag-doll body—diluting his mind and his strength with a pungent toxin. I left my house before our father would inevitably force my brother to expel the contents of his stomach. I don't remember why I left or where I went, but I do remember that I discovered my brother unconscious several times after that, and in every instance, I told my father, and then I left.

For the next few months, my brother would be in and out of psychiatric institutions and receive a variety of diagnoses and medications. He told his doctors he heard voices and saw a little gnome at the corner of his desk during class although later he would confess to me these were lies. My brother seemed to wish he could spend every moment in an altered state. He would take strange drugs that would disassociate him for days. My parents and I watched in horror as my brother broke himself down further and further until the pieces had become so small, they were like shattered glass—unmappable and impossible to return to their original state. It was as if my brother had come into possession of a large and complicated puzzle, a puzzle that when pieced together would form a portrait of novelty and beauty. But instead of assembling this puzzle, he would cut each piece down to a smaller size. Eventually, the pieces become so small that the mere notion of reconstruction would be enough to paralyze even the most patient of souls. It is from there where my brother had to begin his reparations.

After tens of thousands of dollars were spent on my brother's medications and treatments, our father's business began to fail. I would, on occasion, discover our father, devastated by the colossal failure of both his business and his family, pinning my brother against a wall with his fist cocked threatening to kick him out of the house if he came home stoned another time; I was always the one that had to shove him off. I was my brother's only ally in our home. I was the one to let him back in the house after our father had locked him out, and I was the one to hide him from my parents if I knew he was too stoned to reveal himself. But I could only assist so much before helping became hurting.

Several years later, our father has moved to another state, our house has been taken from us by the bank, and my brother is living in a small apartment with my mother who is working full-time to pay off her debt. My brother, finally attempting to resolve his conflicts, is attending classes and struggling to find a job. He no longer spends his time stoned; now it is spent late at night pondering his worth and where his life will lead. He believes he will die alone, and his shame haunts him at every turn. But he and I are still allies, as we always will be.

A week after my brother had been kicked out of our house, my father, broken down by his failed fatherhood, approached my brother, who had returned and was sitting on the couch. My father's bloodshot eyes stared into my brother's stoned, hollow eyes and a tear rolled down my father's cheek. He reached over and gently placed his hand on my brother's face as he said, "I only wanted a son I could be proud of." 🙏

Spiral

Macro Photograph

Aaron Brix • Graphic Design



The World's Youngest Conqueror

Marc Otero • Academic Transfer

At a young age, you conquered half of the world,
Leaving only your name for them to remember,
Eyes opening when they hear your trumpets;
Xenophobia ran through their blood.
And the weird part about this is we share the same name;
Never thought about that, did you?
Don't doubt me when I say I know who you really are,
Especially when I could lead you to your downfall.
Rather than raising your sword, listen to my story.

You are...

The oldest of your family, but the obnoxious one.
Hovering over your siblings makes you feel tough
Except when your mom gets on you.

So...

Gather round, little boy, who will soon be a man.
Raise your baseball glove and enjoy being young.
Every day is a new day,
Alexander Quinn;
The rest of the world is at your feet.

Scotty – Almost 3

Pencil Drawing

Mark Burkitt • Graphic Design



Just One Drop

Photograph

Mike Liedtke • Graphic Design



The Not So Magic Bullet

Kiley Blanc • Academic Transfer

Late-night infomercials are an enthralling wasteland of advertising. After the network and cable channels are tucked into bed, infomercials of all shapes and varieties come out to roam across our glowing boxes. Some offer items we didn't know we needed, such as bifocals that allow us to see "in HD." Others offer things we might need in the early hours of the morning like a new, space-age mattress so we can finally get to sleep. Others offer all that we need in life, though. Up late one night, I became entranced by the infomercial for the Magic Bullet, which appeared as a blender, although in actuality, the Magic Bullet bestowed the most important qualities we humans know: time, money, and love.

The Magic Bullet infomercial is set up to look like just another morning in someone's kitchen. Husband and wife are behind the clean marble countertop while the sun shines through the bay windows and neighbors stop by to say hello. Events take an interesting turn when breakfast time rolls around, though. With the Magic Bullet, the husband begins dicing ham and onions while the wife grinds coffee and whips up scrambled eggs. One can tell they are in their element. The guests sit in flabbergasted amazement, but before they can pick their jaws off the spotless countertop, the husband and wife move on to making lunch, snacks, beverages, and finally, dinner. After it's all over, the guests sit back and remark how the Magic Bullet could be used to easily slice and dice anything, every day, for the rest of their lives; they further free-associate about how it will free up so much of their day, while saving them money, and, of course, earning the love and respect of a grateful, well-fed family.

I saw this infomercial a few years ago; it stuck with me over time, and when I recently opened my birthday gift from a friend, I found myself staring down at a Magic Bullet basic set. I thought to myself, "I knew this would happen eventually." Over time, I feel I have hazarded enough Magic Bullet usage to justify evaluating it honestly. It's time I sort out the claims about the so-called Magic Bullet, its overall

effectiveness, its value, as well as how it compares to claims made about saving time and money and earning love.

After pulling the Magic Bullet out of the box and shaking off its Styrofoam sarcophagus, I put it on my own laminate countertop and pondered what to make first to test its overall effectiveness. Delicious salsa? A healthful smoothie? I decided on coffee, as freshly ground whole beans make a great cup. I dumped the beans in with the flat-blade attachment, per the directions, and pushed the hard plastic bubble down on the “power base.” The sound that filled my apartment could have woken the dead. It was like a 747 taking off in my kitchen. After fifteen to twenty excruciating seconds, I took the dome off, unscrewed the lid, and dumped the grounds in the filter. There were entire, ungrounded beans still in the mix. The Bullet wasn’t off to a good start. This would be symbolic of what was to come. One expects the Magic Bullet, a blender, to fulfill certain expectations of a blender, like being able to blend what you put into it. The Bullet failed repeatedly in this expectation. The Bullet, after extensive use, was unable to accomplish basic blender tasks like chopping onions or garlic or crushing ice in smoothies. Coupled with its grating volume, the Magic Bullet failed in overall effectiveness and left me with big chunks of onion and full pieces of ice.

The Magic Bullet infomercial kept its cost hidden until near the end of the program, only to reveal that for three easy payments of \$33.33, one could have his or her own “countertop magician.” The version advertised was a bit more tricked out than the one I received as a gift. The full, advertised set included items such as a juicer attachment, as well as a full-size blender attachment. My version, which one can pick up at the local Target or Wal-Mart, retails at around \$40, a lot for my friend to spend on me. In light of the previous overall effectiveness findings, spending nearly \$100 on a blender seems like a terrible value, if not extravagant. Neither did the basic set prove itself a value, as it seemed to be what you’d expect for a \$40 blender: flawed.

It was especially interesting to note how the Magic Bullet stacked up against the numerous claims it made on the infomercial, especially

with regard to time. The husband and wife duo were incessantly counting out the few seconds it took to make anything in the Bullet. Smoothies were prepared “in less time than it takes to say it,” which means five seconds. They also claimed the coffee could be made in less than ten seconds; from my own research, I know this isn’t true. They also claimed it would save on clean-up time, but the Bullet just meant far more dishes, which didn’t save me time at all. The Bullet, unfortunately, didn’t effectively accomplish any of the tasks I tested in times they claimed in the infomercial. Thus, in regard to the expectation that the Bullet would give me more time, just the opposite was true.

The Magic Bullet also claimed to save money in the long run. The way they went about it in the infomercial was sly, though. Actors in the infomercial free-associated about how with the Magic Bullet, they wouldn’t need to spend money eating out anymore. While on the surface this may be true, that sort of argument could be made for any amount of eating at home—the more a family eats at home, the less money they’ll spend. So the question really boils down to: will the Bullet make you want to eat at home more frequently? From previous anecdotal evidence, one might be able to predict that the answer is no. I drove through Burger King and ordered just as many pizzas after receiving the Bullet as I did before. So, as far as saving money by enticing me to eat at home more, the Magic Bullet again didn’t measure up.

Finally is the claim subtly made by the infomercial that the Magic Bullet will win the affection of those dear to you. A woman sitting at the counter commented out of nowhere that her kids would love the Magic Bullet because it made vegetables more edible, and they wouldn’t fight with her so much. In truth, the one time I did make smoothies for my roommates and went the extra Bullet mile by putting them in the blender-mugs with the color-coded covers that shielded the threads; it went over well. It wasn’t because of the deliciousness of the smoothies, though; they were still highly mediocre. Instead, it was because of the spectacle of watching the Magic Bullet perform and fail miserably. Later on in its life, I took time to blend other items, such as paper clips and cellophane wrapping. It didn’t do

well with these tasks, either, but anyone who saw it didn't care. When my countertop magician finally bit the bullet blending a bouncy ball, I was saddened. While it had not been a serviceable blender, it certainly was a novelty I appreciated having around, and it was one less source of entertainment for my apartment. Thus, as far as winning the affection of those around you, the Magic Bullet had a funny way of fulfilling this claim.

The Magic Bullet was a terrible blender, and while it possessed entertainment value, it certainly wasn't a bargain. It took more time to make food than it would by any other means, and it didn't save me money. Yet, in the long run, I don't regret owning the Bullet. We had some enjoyable times with the Magic Bullet, and maybe that's what infomercials are truly about. 🍷

Jaeger

Photograph

Nany Hagler-Vujovic • Humanities Co-Chair



Pinecone

Macro Photograph

Jacqueline Parks • Graphic Design



What Jeremy Paslawski Believes

Jeremy Paslawski • Criminal Justice

I believe in fairies. Is that really so strange? Over thirty percent of Americans believe in ghosts, and two-thirds of us believe in space aliens. Perhaps my belief comes from a child-like desire to have the fantastic be real. Perhaps it comes from my family's Eastern European origins. I think my belief stems from experiences.

My great-grandparents were poor Polish and Russian farmers who migrated to Detroit and Canada over 100 years ago. All but one died before I was born, but "Grandma Berry" lived until I was in my twenties. She told us stories about fairies and spirits from the old country. When I was a small boy, I was probably the only kid in class who was terrified of Baba Yaga.

Hearing stories was only the seed of faith, though; experience has been the fertilizer. I have seen fairies. So have my brothers and my wife.

My earliest encounter with fairies took place when I was about seven years old. I was playing in a copse of trees near my school when I saw a small man with a red hat. It was a brief sighting but a terrifying one. I thought it might be a bloodthirsty redcap. I ran home and told my mother who listened carefully and went to work on warding him off.

More recently, I was reading a book on Irish fairy folk when a passage caught my eye. The book said that good spirits often take the form of small animals in distress to test the kindness of people who interest them. That night, my wife (my fiancée at the time) and I were walking home when we saw the strangest sight; a fat toad had gotten his head stuck in a crack in the sidewalk. This toad was especially out of place because we were in the middle of town with very little toad-friendly habitat to speak of. The two of us tried to think of a way to free the toad from his predicament without damaging his eyes, and eventually, we decided to spit on his head. A moment later, he popped out of the crack, looking rather embarrassed and grateful. My wife and I turned to walk away, telling the poor toad to be more careful. Suddenly, the streetlights went out. A moment later, they came

on, but Mr. Toad had vanished.

Later that same year, some friends of ours took us to the “haunted” ruins of an old orphanage for troubled children. Graffiti covered the buildings. The sounds of laughter from children long since gone echoed through the dark corridors.

It was two or three in the morning, and we were trespassing. We found a room with Satanic artwork adorning one wall and Christian graffiti on the other. In the middle of the room was a kitchen stove. We took a couple of pictures when a robin flew out of the stove and landed on my shoulder. He stayed there and let me pet him for a while. After a few moments, he hopped down and looked at me from a few feet away. I followed him until he flew out a window. When we looked out the window, we saw flashlights. It was the police! They had seen our camera flashes and were coming to investigate. Because of that bird, we had seen the police just in time to hide. As a flashlight beam passed over the tree we were hiding under, a robin sang. He had saved us.

I realize that sometimes a singing bird is just that, a bird. Sometimes a bubble of light hovering in your living room is “swamp gas.” Perhaps the prayers that God answers are just coincidences, and not heavenly assistance. Maybe, just maybe, the occasional toad is actually a tiny sprite.

Believing in fairies has not affected my life very much, I look for them in fields or near still water, and I toss spilled salt over my shoulder to drive them off. I would say that it has made no difference at all, but when my daughter was born, we named her Lily Fae in their honor. 🧚

Deep at Work

Photograph

Emilio Franso • Academic Transfer



Wildfire

Photograph

Hiliary Cary • Academic Transfer/Photojournalism



April Showers in September

Danul Patterson • Academic Transfer

What lips my lips have kissed and where and why
I have long since forgotten
And what bull-heavy heads have hung on my pillow 'til daybreak
When rigid Ra beckons men to their myriad servitudes
I cannot remember now
A tempest is raging tonight, and it is laden with phantoms
Purple-grey contusions conjoined in a crude fashion to mirror a cloud
Soon those ravenous hounds will be at my windowpane
Glut, glut, glut each and every one of them after an old meat
Alone... and for a long time past
On nights like this loneliness is a lily-white chill
To be alone is to be lost in the velveteen veil
That obscures your visions of gay lads at play in poppy fields in May
To be alone, what a sweet poison; an acrimonious pill
March on little soldiers in your red coats

Open Tulips

Photograph

Michelle Brinkman • Human Services



Just One More Time

Debra M. Lamprecht • Associate Degree, Nursing

My father was a stocky, 5'10", steel-grey haired man who had led a rather sad life. He was born February 19, 1912, in Cleveland, Ohio, to parents that immigrated from Germany. His parents both died when he was a small boy, and his family of twelve children were split up and sent different ways.

He spent most of his childhood living with different families and in boys' homes. He quit school at sixteen and started working at the steel mill in Cleveland, Ohio. He met my mother, and they married after knowing each other for only two weeks. They remained married until his death 36 years later.

Dad died of cancer when I was 20. I have many memories of him, some happy and some sad. My first memory of my father was of his singing along with the *Lawrence Welk Show*. I recall sitting on his lap and listening to his deep voice. He was cuddling me, and I could feel the vibrations of his deep voice rumbling in his chest. My dad liked to sing and whistle and often did.

My dad ran a gas station in Neola, Iowa, from the time I was two years old until I was nine. The station was open from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. six days a week. Needless to say, I didn't see much of Dad except for Sundays, and when he was home, he was tired and often grouchy. Sometimes, my mother and I would walk down to the station to visit him even though I was afraid of going. The station was across a busy highway. A set of railroad tracks ran behind it, and the noise of the moving trains scared me. A few years prior to our moving to Neola, an elderly lady had been hit and killed by a train at the crossing by the station.

On Sundays, my mother, my older sister Sherry, and I would walk the block to the Presbyterian church for services. Dad was always tired and would never go along. When we returned, Sherry and I would change to play clothes and head outside. We were always quick to disappear, so we wouldn't disturb Dad with our noise. Although he could be tender and caring, he was always tired from working so hard

and could be quick tempered.

I had a real fear of irritating my dad. I recall one Sunday, Sherry and I were playing under the dining room table. We were chasing each other through the maze of chair legs and giggling. Dad was disturbed by the noise and brought out his belt to spank us.

Even though my dad was harsh, he also had a soft side. One evening, my mother was at her bridge club, and my dad was at home watching us. I woke up with a tummy ache and vomited all over my bed. Dad carried me into the bathroom, cleaned me up, and carried me back to the couch. He held me on his lap and let me watch a Western with him until Mom got home.

My mother was a stickler about having us in bed early and always retired to her room after we were down for the night. On Sunday night after everyone was in bed, Dad would sit in his chair in the living room and watch boxing. My bedroom door opened into the living room; Dad's chair was located right next to my bedroom door. After everyone else had gone to bed, I would crawl out, lie down alongside Dad's chair, and watch boxing. When the boxing match was over, I would creep back to my bed and go to sleep. I thought I was getting away with something until years later when Dad asked me if I remembered doing that. I was shocked because he had never said a word at the time.

When I was nine, we moved from Neola, Iowa, to Wahoo, Nebraska. Dad purchased the Mobile Oil station in Wahoo and had a new home built for our family. Dad lived in a boarding house in Wahoo while our house was being built and drove home to Neola on Sundays. Mom, Sherry, and I lived in Neola until our home there was sold. Dad was excited about owning a new house, and several times, the whole family rode to Wahoo to see how the construction was progressing. Twice, Dad and I went to Wahoo alone, and when we did, we would always stop and eat breakfast at the Fairview Café. This one-on-one time with my dad made me feel special.

When I was in the sixth grade, my dad sold the Mobile Oil station and was hired as a mechanic by General Dynamics. He traveled to different missile sites, repairing missiles. After a year of working

for General Dynamics, Dad decided to open his own business and bought Pantorium Cleaners, a dry cleaning establishment in Wahoo. The dry cleaning business was open six days a week, but Dad was much more relaxed than he had been. Dad would be home every night after work by 5:15, and I would greet him at the door to take his thermos. He would put on his slippers and wash up for supper. We would all sit down to eat and discuss the day's events. These were some of my favorite times, as my parents seemed to listen intently to what their teenage daughter had to say. Dad and Mom ran this business until he became ill in 1972.

As I got older, Sunday mornings were a particularly special time for me. I would wake up and get the Sunday *World-Herald* from the front porch. I would take the paper in to my dad and stretch out on his bed with my head in the crook of his arm. We would read the paper together, front to back. I didn't like the sports page, so Dad would set aside that section for last. When the sports page came out, I knew that our one-on-one time was over.

Life continued this way until I graduated from high school in 1969 and married my high school sweetheart in 1970 at the age of eighteen. For the next two years, I spent many more happy times with my dad. I thought the bottom fell out of my world when he was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1972.

The first few months of his illness were good ones, but there were few good times as his cancer progressed, and he became weaker. I watched my wonderful father waste away from a 210-pound man to a 100-pound invalid.

My dad passed away, with his hand in mine, on July 7, 1972, at only 60 years of age. I was 20 and six months pregnant with my first child, Jason William Givens. Jason's middle name, William, is in memory of my father, William Phillip Rupp. Dad has been gone now for 37 years, and there is still emptiness within me that no one else has been able to fill. At times, I miss him immensely, and I long to talk to him just one more time. 🙏

Water Spigot

Photograph

Amy M. Salisbury • Academic Transfer



The Human “Being” in the Written Word

Lynn Saffer • Adjunct English Instructor

Oscar Wilde, in his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, published in 1895, wrote: “Women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy.” What Wilde failed to observe was that women also become like their aunts—and their grandmothers. Well, at least that is true on my mother’s side of the family.

My grandmother, Emma, loved to write. In her shortened earthly life, she passed onto her five daughters (my mother and aunts) perhaps unknowingly and without trying, perhaps genetically, her love of the written word, the beauty of writing, the power of language through her creative writings and the significance of communicating through her letter writing. Not only was she concerned with the content of her letters to friends and family, but she also took extra effort to create a pleasant environment for her words by cutting out and pasting pretty, delicate flowers from garden magazines onto colored sheets of paper. Needless to say, the grammar and spelling were flawless, her handwriting exquisite.

In my lifetime, I have met no other person (although I am sure he/she exists) whose family is quite as enthralled (my adult children call it *obsessed*) with words, the belief in the significance of writing, the process, even the physical entities that comprise a letter—the stationery, the type of pen and color of ink, the stamp, the return address label, even the stickers that seal the envelope.

During my “growing-up” years, receiving cards and letters from my aunts and grandmother on my birthday was normal, in fact, expected. One of the things I liked best was knowing that the letter was written just for me. Call it what you want: egocentrism, self-absorption, a thirst for attention.... Today, I still enjoy finding a “real” letter in my mailbox (although a rare occurrence in this new century). I do admit I appreciate the efficiency of e-mail and my cell phone texting/calling abilities. However, an e-mail is too easy to delete, our phone calls too easy to forget. Personal writing links us to the person we are writing, shows who we are, our humanness, our vulnerability, our soul.... At

least, it should.

The women in this family not only write well stylistically, but they all have artistic handwriting (though I regret I was not granted that trait). Also, and most importantly, you can be assured that they will read what you write to them—and respond. But, of course, isn't that why we write? To me, there are few experiences more disheartening than pouring out my soul, divulging a secret, sharing a joy, a sorrow, sending personal thoughts and not receiving a response.

I treasure a writing piece from a former student who wrote: “When you responded to my writing, you responded to my soul. No one ever let me write what I know. They made me write what they knew. And that’s why I hated writing. You helped me take a risk and write what my heart thinks.”

When I really want to reach someone’s heart, I write to them. In times of sadness, in times of happiness, in times of everyday happenings, the written word lasts beyond our human days. My “memory books” contain letters, cards, messages from special persons, and most recently, messages written by my husband to my children—before he died. They are words to read and reread, cry over, laugh over.

The written word lasts beyond our human days.

Because we had to move and uproot our family twice in nine years, leaving behind people who had been an intricate part of our lives, writing became a sort of lifeline for me—if only through the cursed yearly Christmas letter.

Writing connects us.

People don't always listen to what you have to say, but I have discovered they “listen” to what you write. Most recently, I felt power in my writing when I wrote a column for a newspaper discussing the emotions and experiences my family and I went through as my husband lay dying from a brain tumor. How could I have known a few paragraphs would have such an effect and healing power for so many?

So, Mr. Wilde, the tragedy is not that we become like our mothers (and aunts and grandmothers). The real misfortune is that we often fail to appreciate the familial ties that bond us and to recognize our natural, inherent gifts we have received from them. This writing is

dedicated to my mother and her sisters, and the person who began it all—my grandmother, Emma. Her legacy—the love of writing—lives through those of us she left behind. 🍷

Waterfall

Photograph

Emilio Franso • Academic Transfer



Needle and Thread

Britnie Naprstek • Academic Transfer

“PAY ATTENTION TO THE ROAD BEFORE YOU KILL YOURSELF!” My head snapped up, and my eyes refocused themselves at the road before me. I gripped the steering wheel tightly, swerving back onto the road. I shook my head as I realized that the voice that yelled at me was none other than my own inside of my head. If I kept this up, I would end up killing myself, or worse, killing someone else. I then thought about what had me so messed up—that one fateful day where I lost the one that I truly loved with all my heart. I never thought a break-up would tear me up like this. Focusing on the road, my mind wandered back in time to the day my heart was torn from my chest.

I remember the irony of the day. Although it was January, the weather was sunny with a warm breeze, and there were puffs of soft white clouds and a light blue sky in the background. The weather didn't foreshadow the dark event that would soon unfurl itself. I was riding in the passenger side of my lover's PT Cruiser. Often, I would chuckle to myself about the vehicle. I always thought it was a ridiculous looking vehicle. The front of the vehicle looked like a normal car, while the back looked like it was from a small van. “Like a van rear-ended a car,” I would always say. My best friend Erin and I would always joke that it had a “big ass.” But the last time I made a comment about the vehicle to my lover, I got the silent treatment, so I kept my mouth shut. We were on our way to Wal-Mart, for what reason; I cannot remember. We roamed around Wal-Mart until we got bored and went back out to the Cruiser. We got back into the car, and the one that I had always considered my true love sat with a somber look on her face. We sat for what seemed like hours until she began to speak.

I cannot remember what all was said, but my love talked of how we were having a lot of arguments lately and how things didn't seem like they used to be. My palms began to sweat, and I could feel the heat of the sun bearing down on me, something I hadn't noticed until now. My heart sank deep into my chest when she said something along the

lines of, "I'm not sure I feel the same way anymore."

My mind was so jumbled that I couldn't remember the exact words. I couldn't bear to look at her eyes, so I kept looking out the passenger window. I would not be able to hold myself together if I had to look into her soft and mesmerizing eyes. I started to cry; the tears were hot, and they began to soak the top of my shirt. I couldn't believe this was happening; I didn't want to believe this was happening. I kept aching for all this to be just a bad dream, something that I would wake up from and breathe a sigh of relief and laugh about later.

My head started to spin, and I felt sick to my stomach. She kept talking, and every so often she would ask me to say something, anything, just not to sit there and say nothing. But what could I say? I was in total shock as to what was happening. I never thought I would see this day; we seemed so good together. Although I didn't know what to say, there was a voice screaming and bellowing at me to speak up, to not let her go, and to say something to make her stay, but I couldn't get the words out. I had choked on what to say while my mind was furiously trying to come up with something. I look back now and realize that there was so much I could have said, should have said. One thing I remember saying was, "It's up to you; I want you to do whatever makes you happy." I look back, and I can't believe I just seemed to let her go, that I seemed to push her away with those words. I had never meant to push her away; I just wanted her to see that I truly cared about her happiness. I guess I had hoped she wouldn't want to leave if she saw how much I cared.

Finally, once she had said everything she could think of, she begged me to look at her. I was afraid to, afraid to see her gorgeous face with her adorable freckles and the soft curls in her hair. I thought to myself, "I'm in love with this girl. How can she expect me to look at her while our relationship is hanging by a thread?" My throat felt like I had cotton shoved in it; I could hardly breathe as I tried to comprehend what was happening. My vision seemed to go blurry as my hands felt numb. Once I felt I had gained some composure, I finally turned her way.

I slowly turned my head while keeping my eyes lowered. I gradually raised my head and looked into her delicate eyes. I saw that her

eyes were filled with tears as well. She had placed her smooth hand upon my cheek as I heard her velvety voice say, "Please promise me something."

I nodded as I replied, "Yes?"

"Promise me you won't do anything to hurt yourself."

With tear-filled eyes, I sputtered out, "I...I...promise I won't hurt myself."

I've kept that promise to this day, in fact. I could never break my promise to her, no matter how depressed I got.

She placed her hand on mine and squeezed it lightly as she started up the PT Cruiser to take me back to the Explorer that I had left at IHOP. The drive back seemed far too short. I didn't want to leave; I didn't want to think that the love of my life, the one I loved with every ounce of my being, had just broken up with me. Now to some, nearly nine months in a relationship isn't that long; to others, it's a lifetime.

I had never been in love with someone before, and now that I had finally found the one that made me the most happy, she was leaving me? I couldn't bear it. There had to be some mistake; I refused to believe this was the end! This wasn't happening, no...it couldn't. A never-ending black hole of confusion and disbelief swirled around in my mind. I felt numb. I felt many emotions. I was angry with her; I was angry with myself; no, I wasn't angry with her, or maybe I was? Oh, such contradicting thoughts and feelings! I thought my brain was going to implode on itself with all these thoughts.

On my way back to my vehicle, she kept her hand on mine, lightly squeezing it. By that motion, I could tell it wasn't easy for her, either. I could tell she herself didn't want to believe that what we had was over for good. The short ride was soon over, and we were sitting next to my Explorer. I looked at her one last time as she made me promise again that I wouldn't cause myself any harm. I made that promise again with every intention to keep it. I took one last look at the beauty I had once called my own; I couldn't keep from crying. I slowly unbuckled my seat belt and opened the door. I could feel her tear-filled eyes watching me as I got into my vehicle.

I can't remember if I was the first one to drive away or not; all I

remember is the searing pain I felt in my chest. I drove through the traffic on my way home with dark thoughts racing through my head. I kept thinking that if I just moved the steering wheel to the left slightly, I could get in a head-on collision with a passing semi. And if I was lucky, it would kill me and get rid of this pain. There was something that kept me from doing so. Whether it was my ex-lover or God himself, I didn't know until I thought about the promise I made to her; that's when I realized it was both her and God.

I made it home and, luckily, no one was there. I didn't want to have to explain why my eyes were bloodshot and my face was drenched with tears. I ran into my room and grabbed the huge teddy bear that I had gotten her for Valentine's Day. I hugged it tightly and cried into the bear as my physical pain began to mix with my emotional and mental pain. The pain felt unbearable, and I yearned for peace of mind, but I knew no such thing was going to happen soon.

I felt so much pain I thought that it would literally kill me. I had a splitting headache while my throat was on fire. My eyes burned, and my vision was blurred. My hands were shaking. Hell, my whole body quivered from the tears I shed. I felt as though my heart was ripped from my chest, and I was left to bleed out and die. It felt like there was a razor-sharp blade carving into my heart, slashing and hacking at it until there was nothing but strips of my once whole heart. I felt as though someone had their hand closed tightly around my throat and wouldn't let go. A dark feeling passed through me, like there was a demon of some sort, mocking and haunting me. I remember reaching out with my hand into the thin air, perhaps to fight back at the demon that had its wretched claws around my throat.

I was gasping for air as I crawled to the floor, trying to get to the bathroom. What was happening to me? Surely a break-up couldn't affect me like this...or could it? I always thought of myself as a person who had a lot of love to give. I guess this is what happens when I give it all to one person. I never realized how much she meant to me, how much I wanted her to be by my side and tell me everything was going to be okay. She was my world, and now that she was gone, my world seemed to be spinning violently out of control. I finally made it to

the bathroom, and I took some pain killers to ease my headache. My legs...what was wrong? I couldn't stand; why weren't they working? I tried to stand myself up, but my knees gave out, so I crawled back to my room and got into bed. I had hoped that maybe if I could fall asleep, I would be able to gain some control of my body. The last thing I remember was gripping the giant teddy bear tightly as my vision faded into a dark abyss.

I blinked and shook my head, realizing that the dark memory was no longer in my vision and that I was sitting in my driveway. I didn't even remember the drive home; I just remember how the heart-wrenching memory surrounded me. It's the present day, six, nearly seven months later, and yet this won't go away. I can't comprehend why I can't get over it. It should be over by now, I should have moved on by now. But I can't. Why is that? I've had plenty of time to let the pain go, but something in me won't let me forget and move on. I've tried so hard, and yet I can still feel my emotions from that day. My love for my ex burns in my veins; she is a part of me no matter what. She influenced me, made me take a hard look at myself. She helped make me into the person I am today, and I cannot thank her enough for all that she has done for me. She will never be far from my mind; she left her mark in my heart. I told her that she would always hold a special place in my heart. It still holds true, even to this day.

I get out of my car and walk into the house toward my bedroom. I then walk into my room and shut the door tight and slip off my shoes. I go and lie down on the bed, as I think about her once again. Then, I take out my needle and thread and attempt once again to sew my heart back together so maybe it would work right again. Maybe this time I'll get the stitching done right, and my heart will finally be fixed, but not completely, for there will always be those scars on my heart. So here I go again—are you ready, heart? I've got my needle and thread. Let's go to work. 🧵

Hollywood Hogs and Hot Dogs

Uriah Rittenhouse • Graphic Design

And if it pleases your highness
I've something to relate
It's silly asking for seconds
When you've yet to clean your plate

I'll take one of everything—she bleats
Especially since it's free
Oh, darling—fat may equal happy
but won't win note-a-rye-it-e

No Account

Megan Vertz • Academic Transfer

The cold blade withdrew from the left side of my gut as quickly as it had entered from the right. I didn't feel any pain due to shock. A small whimper escaped from behind my throat. Staggering backwards a few unsteady steps, I stumbled over a fresh plant in the ground. Poor plant. At least I had lived my life before I died; it barely had a chance to sprout. Hands that previously pleaded to my assailant now tenderly felt their way to the unforgiving wound. Warm liquid coated my palms. Blood. Of course there would be blood; the surrealism of the moment fooled my brain. This was not happening. I followed the hunter for nearly a year, observing her calm mannerisms, witnessing the speed and grace with which she delivered death. Dancing across my vision, flashbacks intertwined and meshed with the present.

* * *

Inviting insects to fulfill their pollinating duty, a cherry tree's blossoms unfurled in an array of white and pink. Below, in the slightly cooler shade, a woman sat. She delicately, yet somehow forcefully, peeled the protective rind from an orange. Once its dimpled protective armor lay in ruins, she began to savor the sweet and slightly tart flesh of the fruit. This is how I first saw the hunter.

* * *

Curling into a pathetic, quivering ball, I desperately tried to hug my severed organs together. Questions raced through my head; one question kept interrupting the countless others: "Why?" She knew. Why didn't she tell me? Anger swept through me. She knew. Why did she let this obsession of mine get this far? Confusion replaced the anger. She knew. Why didn't I see this coming? Regret mixed with the sting of arrogance overtook me. She knew. Why did she wait this long? Repulsion for her crept onto my face. "You knew!" I weakly spat at her. Still struggling to tighten my embrace on my strewn open mid-section, my eyes searched her face.

* * *

Advancing at a direct and purposeful pace, a group composed of three men approached the raven-haired beauty. Of the three males, one appeared to possess a working brain. He was of comparatively medium build, but still rather bulky compared to most men. The largest of the three looked like his muscles entered puberty at the young age of seven and kept developing, stealing all the strength from his now, obviously, withered mind. The third resembled a rat, his sharp features giving an anxious and more instinctual visage. His eyes never seemed to stop moving, apparently taking in any movement that could be construed as a threat.

Before I could so much as gasp, my brain registered what would happen to her if no one intervened. Fear and a protective emotion I had never experienced surged through me. Like a gust of wind, she stood on her feet; the half eaten orange coated in earth rested between exposed roots of the cherry tree. Hidden from my view while she ate, a weapon must have lain within easy reach of her. Now, nestled within her hands, the blade clearly readied for a strike at the medium of the trio.

My eyes did not register which party moved first, but the scenario ended sooner than I could hope to imagine. The larger of the three lay face down; from that distance, I could not tell if he continued to breathe. Howling, the rat clutched his right shoulder, blood trickling from between his white-knuckled hand and the wound underneath. Eyes growing wide, the apparent leader said four words before he spun on his heel to head the opposite direction: “The stories are true.” This was how I first saw the hunter engage in a fight.

* * *

Pain ravaged through my body, setting up a permanent residence within my stomach where the bitter blade left its calling card. Occasionally, the pain would take a sudden sabbatical to my lungs, now laboring more than usual due to my struggling heart. I realized how absurd I had been for never considering my heart, my life enabler—beating dutifully and regularly, fulfilling its own life’s agenda all the while supplying life to me. I began to pity my heart, frantically

fighting to continue pushing nutrients and oxygen to my entire body. I desperately wanted to assure my companion it wasn't letting me down. I, foolishly, was the one that failed. How did I deceive myself into thinking the adept hunter hadn't noticed me? Sheer stupidity. Comprehending my own ignorance made me want to cradle my heart in my hands and defend it from its own laborious efforts. It needed rest. I wanted to offer it the greatest and most permanent rest I could give; however, that honor laid in the capable hands of the hunter.

* * *

Sipping alcohol at a local pub is a great way to listen to community gossip. There I picked out the gentle tone of the woman from the incoherent shouts of drunks. Like a lowly ant foraging for edibles to sustain himself, I searched for the hunter's voice. Where she went, I went. Orbiting unseen around her became my life's only goal. Overhearing an exchange between her and whatever parasite paid for her assistance indicated her next mark. Death would soon appear and erase the target's existence from this world. Luck didn't have a large role to play in said target's life. He earned the death accord, even if he did not deserve such a poetic delivery or such an enchanting deliverer. An emotion similar to jealousy erupted in me. Why should such a low-life warrant the attention of the magnanimous lady when my heart's desire to even speak with her went unfulfilled? This was how my fixation with the hunter first started.

* * *

As with most hunts, the olive-skinned creature left whichever inn she slept at to locate her aim. Rising exuberantly, the near full moon lit the town and the trail to the outskirts of a small wooded area. Anxiously, I followed several yards behind the hunter. Tonight, I didn't know whom she hunted. Ignoring the quickening beats of my heart, I entered the bark-encrusted wall of trees.

Dimly burning, an orange glow indicated the place the hunter intended to wait for her quarry. Speaking almost inaudibly, she began to rise from beside the fire. Was she speaking to her victim? Did he run? Was he already lying in a heap of his own blood and mangled flesh? Turning her gaze upon the target, she saw clearly whom she

intended to attack that evening. The object of her hunt stood, transfixed by her eyes, listening to his ever-increasing heartbeat.

Flashing from light to dark in the shadows created by the moon's rays and the surrounding trees' jagged branches, the hunter walked towards me. Dark shapes jumped across her as she strode forward; a fear-inducing grimace played at the corners of her mouth. The world froze in her deep gaze; she had never made eye contact with me before that moment.

The hunter spoke with such abhorrent disdain that I almost felt guilty for making the tone of her honey-soft voice alter to this disgusted tenor. "You have been a coward, a spineless coward. In life there are decisions to make, and from what I deduce, the only decision you made in the last few months has been to hide and watch me. Never revealing, never introducing, never assisting. You hide like Death hides from his unsuspecting next soul. Opportunities flew past with not even so much as a consideration from you. Once, you made me feel supernal, a goddess amongst mortals. Why else would such a proficient tracker invest so much of his fragile life in the sole pursuit of following me? This has been the longest I allowed anyone to be near me. Now, because of your lack of human interaction, I feel like discarded rubbish not fit for your shoe to even step upon. Instead of changing my habits to make this self-loathing disappear, I'm going to abolish the source emitting this disgust. That source is you."

That was how the hunter first addressed me and sent her death bringer in my unprotected flesh.

* * *

At last recognizing its futile effort, my exasperated heart began to slow. My eyes finally blinked away the memories and clung to the present. Her hair blowing in a mild spring breeze, the hunter turned to leave. Ignoring the ache in my chest, I croaked, "Stay. Please." As if by a decree from a deity above, she paused. Looking upon my striking killer while my body left the world would be a salvation of sorts.

The hunter glanced over her shoulder and said, "We might have become companions, perhaps even friends, but you're dead. My line of work is not amongst the dead; it is laced with those about to die."

Those were the last words I heard before I vacated the living land, but not the last sounds. I heard the rustling of new leaves in trees, the crackling of a smoldering fire, and the sobs of an individual whose heart was breaking as it was dying. ³ ❶

Dancing People

Phip Ross • English Instructor

On rare but certain occasions, like when the house is quiet and asleep or vacant, and when a song is between my ears and seeping into my appendages, I dance.

Like no other. Neither pretty nor interesting, I imagine, it's a helluva good time and more than natural. Letting the music fill me. I fling arms, crash imaginary cymbals, pound the floor with my feet to the rhythm. Beyond this, I'm not sure what else I do as I release and graft my spirit to a melody.

We've all got a little music in us somewhere, and when it comes out in one form or another, it's a release or expression. A lift-off from the here and now to a weightless flight.

For two weeks in July, the World War II Memorial Library in NYC and the National Writing Project accepted my friend Corey from Michigan and I to participate with about 20 other teachers in a seminar on how to teach the Holocaust. It was an amazing two weeks of writing, sharing, listening to survivors, and exploring the city, something I'd never done. One participant called it an immersion experience, one where all of us rural teachers could feel a dizzying array of newness of people, culture, food, and transportation. Even though many of us had at least visited the city before, it was at times almost disorienting and something like an immigrant experience.

* * *

When Corey brought up dancing outside the Apollo Theater on Amateur Night, I was thinking already about how nice it would be to dance in NYC with the folks in our seminar on teaching the Holocaust. I knew I could use the release. Corey had seen me dance several years before. I am still not sure why he brought it up, but he said that when I dance, it makes him feel good. I laughed and we went inside with about 22 others in our group and joined the crowd being seated in the famed theater.

Before I explain the evening, a memory came creeping back from my past two days after the Apollo experience. About 17 years ago,

I showed up for a pickup game of basketball on the intersection of Normal Boulevard and South Street in Lincoln, Nebraska. Two concrete public courts fit into the northwest corner of the intersection. I'd seen folks playing basketball and wanted to try it, anxious for some exercise and some competition. I was also curious if I could just hang with them. Most of all, I wanted to join new people—people who at least looked different than me. I wanted to see if I could practice what I preached to myself about a personal integration policy, an affirmative action plan that sought to break down differences.

I was nervous when I showed up about whether I'd get to play, would I be able to contribute to my team, and whether or not my skin color would be an issue. I would possibly be the only white guy playing. I was afraid. I've never written about this experience and have put it aside but never forgotten it. When players gathered to shoot for teams at one end of the court that afternoon, I did feel the sharp glances that put me further on guard. Soon, however, I was put on a team and play began. I thought that if I just played well the sport would put us on equal footing as players in the game.

After only about five minutes, I had been hustling up and down the court and boxing out on rebounds against the player I was matched against. I sensed his frustration and should've down-shifted a gear, but my metabolism and determination to play well kept me working hard. On the next missed shot, I went up for a rebound and when I came down, I felt hands over my shoulders throw me to the ground. I rolled over the hot cement and jumped up to face my opponent who began throwing his fists at me. I spun away but was surrounded and began taking punches from a couple other players. I did not fight back; my senses to allude led me to dodge, buckle, and move. I was the prey in the middle of a pack, so wherever I spun and turned, they were there. I couldn't believe what was happening. Hatred spilled from around me and licked at my back and stomach. My shirt was torn and hung over one shoulder.

It lasted maybe 30 seconds when one of the bigger players stepped in front of one of the attackers and shouted at him to knock it off. This savior looked at me, and I saw the distress in his eyes at the

violence that had erupted so suddenly. I knew I could trust him. His eyes didn't have the bile of anger filling them.

"You better go," he said and walked me to the chain link gate as he watched over his back.

In the parking lot, my shock turned to anger, and I stopped. "No, no, you can't go back there," he said. I surveyed my body. I could feel nothing but my inner body shaking, my hope in the Other crumbling. This was supposed to be my act of courage to reach out and act the way I felt, that people had to step out of their comfort zones to bridge divides. To think that there was no color divide. It was a traumatic disaster, of course, re-shaping my idealistic philosophies into depressing pragmatism.

This was a long time ago. I don't carry any bitterness with me from it. I never did, but I do carry a suspicion of how a group can work against the individual, turning one person into a target. One fleeting thought last week was that I could be the target of a public kind of scorn again. You see, within about 20 minutes of the start of the show at the Apollo Theater last week, I was picked out of the crowd of several thousand to join five others in a dance contest on stage. Did I say this was the Apollo Theater, one of the most famous clubs in the country almost exclusively affiliated with African-American performers? Ella Fitzgerald. Billy Holiday. James Brown. Michael Jackson. Stevie Wonder. That place. On stage, waiting my turn to dance by myself. In the spotlight, on stage. One white guy. From Nebraska.

I watched the first dancer, an older man, maybe 50 or so, in a fine tan suit find his groove, smooth and stylish. Next, a woman, was introduced, a bit more modest in her dance but a lovely grace and rhythm melded with the music.

I had no idea what songs the stage band was playing, but hip-hop beats. I clapped a little, tried a modest sway, trying not to draw attention to myself and hide the nerves that were twitching all over my body.

A younger woman, maybe still a teenager, in jeans and T-shirt, jiggled and shimmied and swung around to face the drummer and made her bootie quake as the crowd came un-hinged.

This was all quite the build up for the next contestant.

I told the MC my name. “And where you from Ph-Phip?”
“Nebraska.”

He turned to the audience. “Oh, you’re going to like this,” he said smiling.

The band was ready for the only Caucasian on the stage with “Play that Funky Music, White Boy.”

I was afraid. Would my trembling legs find the music? Did the audience want me to fail?

I remember facing the drummer and cracking the imaginary cymbals with my swinging right hand as the drummer punched his real cymbal. I found the rhythm, like my body usually does in the dark. Once the spotlight knocked me square in the eyeballs, yet it didn’t throw me off my feet. The music took possession and I didn’t fight it.

When the band stopped, my heart was pounding louder. The MC looked at me like, “You’re pretty freaky, but you’re all right.”

* * *

I’m not suggesting that the Apollo experience offers any kind of redemption. I’m not even all that clear about the connection of the two stories yet. Obviously, both involve a group of African Americans and me somewhere in the middle, so to speak. And both were completely two different experiences. Is one call and the other response? The fact that I piece them together may be more pedagogy than profound insight.

“There is no plot line in the bewildering complexity of our lives but that which we make and find for ourselves. By articulating experience, we reclaim it for ourselves. Writing allows us to turn the chaos into something beautiful, to frame selected moments in our lives, to uncover and to celebrate the organizing patterns of our existence.”

Lucy Calkins has always spoken to me, telling me to rub two stories together and then maybe another.... Maybe about the evening I went into a synagogue feeling voyeuristic tourist, gawking at someone’s sacred and found myself a part of that place, embraced, smiled upon. I’m not giving up gathering and rubbing despite the darkness that can shade the world, so cold and cruel and lonely. I feel it lurking here at my heels so often in my day-to-day. Sometimes I feel that

Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world in *The Road* is a symbol for the world we're already living in and defined by George Bataille: "We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death." This is the idea gnashing in my worst moments and one I entertain. Not today though. I believe the significance of my voice is small in the grandeur and agony of our place. More importantly, there is an "our" and an "us." We all take our punches, and sometimes we get to dance.

Every death is our death. 🙏

Shoe Shine

Photograph

Jennifer Creller • Academic Transfer



Our Contributors

Katrina Bennett (“Brown Walls”): Katrina is in the process of earning a history degree, but she has no idea how she’ll use it. Still, she spends most of her time watching the History Channel. She also loves to read books over and over again, and *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Harry Potter* are her guilty pleasures. She admits to spending too much time looking for new music and too much money adding music note tattoos to her back.

Desirae Bennett (“Cows”): Desirae’s brother was the one who encouraged her to stop the car and take her photo of the bull with white-tipped horns. Desirae is 18 and lives at SCC’s Beatrice campus. Her family recently moved to Falls City, NE, from Tomah, WI. Desirae is a lifeguard at the Falls City Aquatic Center and a waitress at the Mutt and Jeff Drive-In during the summer.

Jeremy Bishop (“Portal”): Jeremy is a non-traditional student and filmmaker with a passion for music and photography. He’s recently become part of Unsaid Productions, an independent film production company that believes in asking questions, pushing the limit, and practicing non-conformity. When Jeremy was a child, his grandmother threw a rock at him and crushed his eye, so he now has a glass eye; he regrets he’s never been able to view a 3-D movie. Jeremy says his life hasn’t been great, but “you move on and forward. Then you make movies.” For telling him about *Illuminations*, Jeremy credits Mr. Nielsen, “who rocks!”

Teresa Bissegger (“Wings in the Sky”): Teresa loves bike riding, exercising, “junking,” and acting silly. She wrote her poem, “Wings in the Sky,” to honor her dad who passed away 11 years ago and to describe the feelings she has whenever butterflies are around.

Kiley Blanc (“The Not So Magic Bullet”): Kiley says her full name is Kiley Gay Blanc, and in case you were wondering, her middle name came from her godmother. She has seven brothers and sisters and grew up with a dad who was a Major in the military. She has spent the majority of her 18 years living overseas in Okinawa, Japan. She’s attending SCC so she can transfer to a nursing school and become a midwife. She’s obsessed with babies and thinks the birthing process is amazing.

Jon Bradford (“Father, I Thank You”): Jon says he wrote his essay, “Father, I Thank You,” because he had a lot of feelings bottled up that he needed to get out. He’s married and has two boys, Kamryn and Nolyn. He says his family is his world, and he’s lucky to be living in it. A Business Administration/Marketing student, his goal is to work for a music label in the marketing and advertising department or, possibly, to scout talent. Jon’s been writing, producing, and performing hip-hop music for the past four years and has performed with such groups as 2 Live Crew.

Michelle Brinkman (“Open Tulips”): Michelle is a student in SCC’s Human Services program. She enjoys both photography and writing and says she’s “just a busy college student who works two jobs.”

Aaron Brix (“Fence,” “Looking Up,” “Spiral”): Aaron is a student in Milford’s Graphic Design program. His photo, “Fence,” was taken in Lincoln’s capitol area, where Aaron saw a rusty iron fence beneath blossoming trees. “Looking Up,” was taken in a courtyard area in a building in downtown Lincoln. Aaron says, “The light coming in from the windows was really dramatic.” “Spiral” is a stunning macro shot.

Mark Burkitt (“Scotty—Almost 3,” “Scuttlebum”): When asked to draw a metaphor for death for a class assignment, Mark rendered his drawing from a photo of his son Scott, who died in an auto accident at the age of 17. Mark’s son Aiden has a pet hermit crab that is the star of “Scuttlebum.” Mark says taking the photo required a lot of patience, as the crab was reluctant to emerge from his shell because of the bright light.

Casey Carbon (“Kurt Cobain”): Casey created his stipple drawing of Kurt Cobain to reflect his “undying love and appreciation for the king of grunge and the legacy he left behind as one of the most interesting, iconic, and tormented musicians.” Casey calls himself a “somewhat confident artist and thinker” who shares his soul with “the shadow of laziness and self-deprecation.” He says he loves love, and when life gets to be too much, he turns to rock and roll.

Hiliary Cary (“Wildfire”): Hiliary is in the Academic Transfer program and hopes to major in photojournalism. She loves taking photos and being with family. She’s open-minded and loves being outdoors to see what beautiful things she can find. “Wildfire” is a photo of her magnolia tree that she says is so beautiful when it blooms.

Alex Cordry (“Hangin’ with the Felons”): When writing “Hangin’ with the Felons” about his job at the Lincoln Correctional Center, Alex tried to contrast how the seemingly unchanging outside compared with the constant change inside. Alex is married and has eight children. He retired from the Army Reserve in 2007 and is attending SCC thanks to the Post 9/11 GI Bill. His oldest daughter will soon be attending college, and Alex is enjoying helping her explore her college options.

Ashley Cornelsen (“Mija”): Ashley says she’s studying nursing, but writing is a passion and a great way for her to relax. She particularly loves writing fiction. Her story, “Mija,” was inspired by her love for fiction and her grandfather’s death.

Daniel Cromer (“Lessons”): Daniel says he’s a person of deep emotions and self-analysis. He enjoys a number of hobbies, including reading, writing, artistic metalwork, and working on all things electronic and mechanical. A student in SCC’s motorcycle program, he hopes to apply his artistic and mechanical talents to his work and eventually open his own shop.

Jennifer Creller (“Black and Chrome,” “My Neenie,” “Nap Time,” “Shoe Shine”): Jennifer originally started school with a journalism degree in mind, but now she’s thinking about switching to an English degree and teaching instead. She loves reading and writing, and Zora Neale Hurston became her favorite author after reading “Sweat” in a Modern Fiction class at SCC. Jennifer loves New Orleans and hopes to make it her home within the next couple of years. Her fictional story, “My Neenie,” was inspired by a photograph she took of an older couple dancing in the street at Mardi Gras in 2009.

Emily Danekas (“Hidden Strength”): Emily says writing “Hidden Strength” helped her cope with a tough event and served as a form of therapy. Emily has never been able to pass on mint-chip ice cream topped with chocolate chips. She also loves to read Jodi Picoult novels. Almost every night at 10:00, she enjoys a bowl of popcorn and watches *House Hunters* or *Deal or No Deal*. She thinks HGTV may be the best network ever created.

Laura Drawbaugh (“Fly, Birdie, Fly,” “Splat,” “Tracks”): Laura says photography has become one of her favorite things to do. She loves using Photoshop and taking pictures of totally random things. “Fly, Birdie, Fly” was taken in an alley in downtown Lincoln as was “Splat.” In a more natural vein, “Tracks” was a winter shot.

Emilio Franso (“Deep at Work,” “Waterfall”): Emilio is in SCC’s Academic Transfer program. He hopes people do all they can to preserve and uphold parks, including Lincoln’s Sunken Gardens, where he takes many of his photos.

Kara Gall (“Caught”): Kara isn’t known for sharing her Mango and Coconut Sticky Rice or for bludgeoning mice. An English instructor at Southeast Community College, she hadn’t completed a short story since grad school until the latest *Illuminations* deadline inspired her to reconnect to this genre. She’s thrilled to have barreled through a six-year attack of writer’s block. Kara’s writing has appeared in the books *Why We Ride: Women Writers on the Horses In Their Lives*, *Women Who Eat, Breeder: Stories from the New Generation of Mothers*, and *ReGeneration*.

Trevor N. Geary (“Moving On Up”): Trevor says he’s living the college dream: work and school. He wrote his essay, “Moving On Up,” to help make sense of changes in his life. In his free time, he enjoys listening to blues music, playing and watching soccer, playing guitar and piano, and doing mechanical work.

Hani Sharro Hadgi (“Coming to America”): Hani says he enjoyed writing his personal narrative, “Coming to America,” and feels increased confidence in his writing and in pursuing his goals. He is looking forward to a “future of bright stars” and says there’s nothing like a creative imagination.

Nancy Hagler-Vujovic (“Jaeger”): Nancy’s photo reflects the love she has for her dogs; she takes lots of pictures of them in an attempt to capture their unique personalities. She first became a dog lover 13 years ago when she adopted a pug, Miss Emily Rae. This led to the adoption of Frida Kahlo, followed by Fen, Joy Jane, Maia, YaYa, and Holly. She currently has four dogs and two cats that bring joy and comedy to her life. Nancy serves as SCC’s Humanities Co-Chair.

Sara Elizabeth Henrichs (“The Miracle that Saved My Life”): Sara says her essay tells the most meaningful story of her life, and every word comes from the deepest part of her heart. A 23-year-old single mother, Sara has a wonderful support network in her family. She has a beautiful 4-year-old daughter named Vedah Alene. Sara is fun and outgoing, adventurous, and creative. She’s fought and won many battles to become the person she is today, and she loves Jesus.

Amy Keller (“Collie,” “Rush to the Bus”): Amy enjoys writing songs, singing, and playing her guitar in coffee houses, as well as drawing and writing. She also loves spending time with her two-year-old daughter and her husband. Amy drinks lots of coffee and reads cozy mysteries and books about sociological issues. Her heroes are Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Mary Wollstonecraft. Catch her music at her website, www.pixiepetunia.com.

Zachary Knipe (“Tales of an Eighth Year Nothing”): Zachary was writing a “personal statement” essay for a law school application when he realized the persona he was constructing didn’t ring true. He scrapped that essay and wrote “Tales of an Eighth Year Nothing” instead, which he feels is a more “honest and accurate” portrayal of himself. Zachary loves art, humorous art, and artful humor. He very much like surprises (the gift kind) and very much dislikes surprises (the scary kind). He’s studied Spanish for a couple of years and lived in Mexico City last summer while attending classes at the national university.

Travis Koch (“Not on My Watch”): Travis wrote his poem to share an experience he had when he was serving in Iraq. He is a husband and the father of three-year-old twin boys. He served nine years in the Army and three tours in Iraq. In his free time, he loves spending time with his family, and he enjoys playing video games.

John Kuligowski (“Postcard from the Wrong Side of Anxiety”): John lives with his wife and two children in Lincoln and is currently enrolled in SCC’s Academic Transfer program. He plans to major in English. In a perfect world, he would be allowed to write all day and get a Ph.D. in semiotics. “Also,” he says, “there wouldn’t be any war or hunger. Yeah, that sounds about right.” John wrote his chilling poem about “the near cosmic paranoia and terror that comes with stopping a medication that is meant to regulate depression and anxiety.”

Debra M. Lamprecht (“Just One More Time”): Debra wrote her essay about still missing her father 37 years after his death. Currently a Health Licensing Specialist, she is working on her Associate’s degree in nursing. One of her favorite quotes is from Anatole France: “Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.”

Mike Liedtke (“Just One Drop,” “Standing Parallel”): Mike had experimented with water droplet photos in the past, but had yet to capture the perfect shot. He accomplished that with “Just One Drop.” “Standing Parallel” was a senior portrait he did for a friend. Mike loves photography, music, art, and snowboarding. He says he owes all his talents to his Savior Jesus. He’s currently in SCC’s Graphic Design program.

Jacob Linderholm (“Orb Weaver and Prey”): Jacob says he’s determined but modest, judicious yet caring. He loves nature and the beauty inherent in the outdoors.

John Mayan (“I Hear the Snow Coming”): John’s poem, “I Hear the Snow Coming,” portrays a simple sentiment that serves as a metaphor for the desire to return to the comfort of the womb. John is from southern Sudan and moved to the United States 14 years ago. He’s currently in the Academic Transfer program.

Britnie Naprstek (“Needle and Thread”): Britnie says she began writing her narrative, “Needle and Thread,” as a way of releasing her feelings about a break-up. It wasn’t until later that she thought about how alone people feel when they’re in pain, and it was that realization that inspired her to submit her essay to *Illuminations*. Britnie says she’s a very random person who loves being with friends. She’s always up for meeting new people; all in all, she says, she’s just a typical college student eager to see the world around her.

Elliot Newbold (“Modern Monsters”): Elliot says he wrote his essay as a testament to how he felt soon after splitting ways with his ex. He enjoys, among other things, reading, writing, and biking. Elliot has a large rabbit named Dinosaur, Jr., Majestic who makes him smile every day.

Mark Otero (“World’s Youngest Conqueror”): Mark loves to write and listen to poetry in any free time he has. He’s also a huge music lover, and when he’s not listening to new music, he’s playing the drum set. He loves to play sports and is very sociable. He’s originally from Lexington, NE, but he’s lived in Lincoln for two years and loves it.

Alejandro Pages (“Oliver”): Alejandro says a pivotal interaction with his brother inspired his moving essay, “Oliver.” In the process of writing the essay, Alejandro developed a more concrete understanding of the struggles his brother endures. Alejandro is currently a student in the Academic Transfer program.

Jacqueline Parks (“Pinecone”): Jacqueline was interested in photographing a pinecone with a macro lens because of its unique form. She says she’s “your average teenage girl” who is a perfectionist. She has never consumed alcohol and never plans to. She enjoys dance, which she’s participated in from the age of three to eighteen.

Jeremy Paslawski (“What Jeremy Paslawski Believes”): Jeremy thinks it’s the belief in magic that keeps us young. His essay betrays his belief in fairies, which he knows are real. Jeremy spent much of his youth trying unsuccessfully to be kidnapped. As a child in Detroit, he proved himself to be far more obnoxious than those around him, and he often had black eyes to prove it. Now Jeremy spends his time avoiding work, his family, and all responsibility so he can play table-top war games.

Danul Patterson (“April Showers in September,” “Asylum”): Danul can often be found pouring over a thesaurus in preparation for his next writing project. He’s also fond of reading Raymond Carver, Sylvia Plath, and Colette. His poem, “April Showers in September,” started as a reflection on his past romances, while “Asylum” was sparked by his witnessing a friend waiting anxiously for her “bel ami” to come home.

Lydia Phillippe (“Picasso Face”): Lydia painted Picasso’s portrait on her model’s face to create her creative photo. Lydia loves graphic design, photography, and anything creative. She also loves, loves, loves Starbucks!

Uriah Rittenhouse (“Hollywood Hogs and Hot Dogs,” “Ladybug Boneyard”): A student in the Graphic Design program on the Milford campus, Uriah was inspired to write his poem, “Hollywood Hogs and Hot Dogs” after contemplating American culture. In regards to himself, Uriah says, “Don’t ask me to describe myself; it would be like asking me to lasso a wisp of smoke.”

Phip Ross (“Dancing People”): Philip teaches English at SCC. He has two daughters in college and a son who’s in high school. He enjoys fishing, tennis, crossword puzzles, and napping when golf is on TV.

Lynn Saffer (“The Human ‘Being’ in the Written Word”): Lynn’s essay, inspired by her late grandmother, originally appeared as a newspaper column on Mother’s Day. Married for 28 years until her husband died, Lynn has recently remarried. She says her greatest joy and success is found in her three, bright, independent children: Jessica, an RN, Ryan, an electrical engineering doctoral student at Stanford University, and Brandon, a pre-med/Spanish major at Benedictine college. Lynn is also passionate about music and has directed youth choirs in churches throughout Nebraska.

Amy M. Salisbury (“Capitol Stairs,” “Grandpa’s Chair,” “Water Spigot,” “Yucca Plant”): Amy is 20 and recently graduated from SCC’s Graphic Design program. She is currently an intern at Sandhills Publishing where she creates and maintains websites. Her passion is photography and traveling. Amy grew up in a small town in northwestern Nebraska.

Natalie Schwarz (“Late Show,” “Los Diablo’s,” “True Troubadour,” “Wreck”): Natalie Schwarz is a writing tutor in the MAC at SCC. She received her Master’s degree in Creative Writing in 2009. Her writing is influenced by her surroundings, including nature, people, and the beauty of daily life. She enjoys reading and writing poetry, photographing everything, and listening to her husband play the ukulele.

Megan Vertz (“No Account”): Megan says her creative story, “No Account,” had been rattling around in her brain for a while, but she didn’t finish it until an assignment forced her to focus. Megan says she makes awesome homemade pies, she’s silly, and she has the best facial expressions. Ever.

Matt Ward (“Hallway”): Matt took his photo of a glass-roofed hall for a class assignment. He is currently in Milford’s Graphic Design program.

Brittini Wolff (“Abstract Self-Portrait”): Brittini has lived in Nebraska all her life. She grew up on a farm that butchered cattle; however, she’s now a vegetarian. She’s also afraid of water and spiders and gets extremely excited for food. Her drawing was a project completed for an art class.

Sarah Yoakum (“Just One More Day”): Sarah was motivated to write her essay by her personal experience of living in an abusive relationship. She wrote “Just One More Day” on the first anniversary death of her friend Crystal who was murdered by her husband. Sarah hopes her own story creates the opportunity for others to share their stories or to get help. She left her husband after nearly 25 years of marriage and is now the single mother of three daughters, ages 19, 17, and 15. She also has grown foster daughters, 23 and 24. After earning her Associate’s degree in Business from SCC, Sarah hopes to find a job where she can help others.



Southeast Community College

illuminations