
Alchemist Review

2009



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table of contents

fiction

Feeling the Growth of an Unborn Child page 23

Travis Genenbacher

Failed Divinity page 31

Mary Colligan

The Fallow Words Unspoken page 41

Christopher Heisserer

non-fiction

Go-Going Home: A Moving Memoir page 5

Caron Tate

Something About Sam page 13

Shana Stine

Forced March page 45

David Amerson

academic essay

Manifestation of the Immaterial Departure from Substance page 55

Dushan P.W. Yovovich

poetry

Winter Sun page 2

Lola L. Lucas

Starfly page 4

Faisal Nsour

Dandelions page 12

Faisal Nsour

Last of My Line	page 21
<i>Lola L. Lucas</i>	
In the Kitchen	page 27
<i>Katie Luchtefeld</i>	
Love, the fickle little bitch	page 28
<i>Emily Martin</i>	
Spam	page 29
<i>Lola L. Lucas</i>	
California Fires	page 39
<i>Caron Tate</i>	
Just a Blink of It	page 53
<i>Christopher Heisserer</i>	

artwork

Winter's Beauty	page 3
<i>Colten Bradford</i>	
At the Docks	page 10
<i>Colten Bradford</i>	
Down the Deserted Track	page 11
<i>Colten Bradford</i>	
Falling Down	page 22
<i>Teresa Downard</i>	
Venture	page 30
<i>Teresa Downard</i>	
Drop	page 40
<i>Teresa Downard</i>	
Human-Communication	page 54
<i>Nicole Shutt</i>	
River Glass with Bridge Dana Thomas House	page 62
<i>Daniel Rosenkranz</i>	

The Alchemist Review 2009
dedicated to the memory of Gary Haddock,
alchemist extraordinaire
(November 21st, 1941-December 25th 2008)



message from the editor

Dear *Alchemist* Reader,

I address you as such because this year in our call for submissions we played with the metaphor in our journal's name. The editorial team decided that the alchemical nature of the work we treasure is lost in the sea of language in which we all swim. I truly mean this: we are fish; language is water. Furthermore, writers are alchemists. They convert black marks on white space into ephemeral images, feelings, and ideas. But I think there is alchemy in the act of reading as well. After all, half the magic occurs between the reader's ears. Writers, therefore, need your mind to conjure holograms from a spatial and temporal distance. You, the reader, co-create the art you consume. You, too, are an alchemist.

And, of course, the greatest alchemist is the force of life. I am constantly amazed by the cosmic thread that links all existence across space and time. Once again this thread exerted its will over the work found in *The Alchemist Review*. Places for human manipulation were intentionally scarce: Independent blind jury groups debated and recommended content, and the editorial team made final choices based on quality and balance. When we saw what remained, it struck us that the various pieces cohered quite well—issues of regeneration came to the fore.

Lola L. Lucas begins the thread with a stark image, and Faisal Nsour lets out the string a little more. Colten Bradford's photo of a train rail adds some perspective to the notion of a line, leading us to the questions of relation and procreation which link the stories and poems that follow. And never is there an easy answer. Problems of truth, trust, redemption, and even sanity pull the cord taut; then it snaps with the biting irony of a pair of poems. What follows is a progressive deterioration that ends, in Dushan P.W. Yovovich's paradox of separation and connectivity.

These artists, alchemists that they are, have occupied my mind since the beginning of the editorial process. Their characters have followed me through the winter. I've treaded the topographical and psychological landscapes they imbedded in my brain with their writings, drawings, and photographs. Now I pass these alchemically induced experiences on to you. I hope you are in some way transformed, and that you never forget you are of a species of alchemists.

All the best,

Michael Gammon, Editor
The Alchemist Review (2009)

The Winter Sun

Lola L. Lucas

The winter sun rises
White and milky as a cataract
And staggers over the horizon
Bleary-eyed, knotting a belt of ice
Over a robe of gray clouds.



Winter's Beauty - Colten Bradford

Starfly

Faisal Nsour

The small kite floated up last night.

The faint stars above
like fish frozen
in a shimmer.
I looked up
into a great black ocean.

The purple kite faded.
I couldn't see my son's
purple kite. He used to fly
it on Sunday afternoons,
warm in the summer.
I dropped it
into the great black ocean.

I heard the sharp wind
snapping at the nylon
wings. I felt the strong tugs
on the curved white string,
urging me out
into the cold black ocean.

Somewhere I heard
The kite crash down.

Purple looks so much like the night.

Go-Going Home: A Moving Memoir

Caron Tate

Maybe it was my huge extended family that made me feel like I could create a family anywhere. Why not in a nude dancing club? After all, a family is what? Some people who spend time together, care about each other most of the time, get along some of the time, and have a place they all think of as “home.” Go-go clubs can be like that.

I wasn’t go-go dancing for that reason, though; it was all about the money and my plan. And say what you want, taking off your clothes for money can pay really, really well. Now the customers may have tipped the white girls who couldn’t dance five times as much, but on a good night, I could easily go home with \$100 or more on top of my salary. Back in the 1970s, that was nothing to sneeze at.

I won’t pretend I was a typical dancer. That means I had a high school diploma, a couple of years of college, no tattoos, no needle track marks or bruises, and I didn’t drink, smoke, or have to lie about my age. Go-go dancing was the only way I knew of at the time where almost anybody could make a lot of money with no training, no real dancing ability or great costumes, no education, and no people skills. Me, I could dance, sew, and talk to people, so I was already way out in front of the crowd. Most of the clubs were topless, and small as my top was, I thought I could handle taking it off if the money was right.

I was different for another reason: I had a plan. I was dancing to act. I know how that sounds. Like I was stupid enough to think that in Washington, DC on a tiny stage in a dark little club, I’d get “discovered” by a big Hollywood producer who happened to be in town shooting a movie and would shout, “That girl! I want her!!” But it was nothing like that.

My plan was this: I would start modeling first (I was already doing a little club and church program type modeling on weekends), so I needed my days free to try for professional level jobs. Then, I’d use the modeling money to help support the acting until I had enough income from both to not do other kinds of work.

It sounds crazy naïve and foolishly ambitious, but by the night of the Experience, my now two-year-old plan was well under way. I modeled or rehearsed for plays during the day and danced at night. Then, when the plays opened, I’d dance during the day and do the show at night. Some of the plays paid a little, like five or ten dollars a show, during the actual productions, but none paid for the rehearsal period.

Back then, the go-go clubs pretty much were ex-jazz clubs. Most were tiny, dark, smoky (you could smoke in bars and restaurants back then) with little crammed-together tables that often sported table cloths that would scare you if you saw them in the light. The “stages” tended to be painted wooden boxes with

tables, the choice “orchestra” seats, so close that customers could reach out and touch a dancer if such a thing were legal. Oh, they could put tips in our garters, but some clubs were so strict they only let men put them in our hands. There were a few of those other clubs with lap dances, and drugs, and active back rooms, but they usually didn’t last. They were always in the news when they got raided or shut down.

Contrary to what movies show these days, with long catwalks and poles everywhere, those boxes were only a couple of feet high and just wide enough to dance on. And unlike current depictions, there were no special effects like waterfalls or smoke machines, and almost none of the dancers looked like models or porn stars. Most were ordinary girls with no skills who had had the kind of experiences in their personal lives that allowed them to take off their clothes in front of strangers. I guess skill-wise and childhood experience-wise, I did fit in.

On the night of the Experience, I was working at the Fireplace on the corner of 22nd and P. I had left behind the lower paying black-owned clubs and moved “up” to the white-owned clubs near Dupont Circle which was about a ten minute drive from the Whitehouse. I had plenty of cheap costumes, some I’d made, like my yellow hot pants and halter top with gold trim or the black sequined bikini. Sometimes, I’d wear makeup and change wigs when I changed costumes—the men seemed to love the fact that I had short, straight hair one set and a huge afro the next—but mostly sweatiness dictated a little mascara and lipstick and my hair pulled back.

I’d start my sets in three or more inch heels, but most of the time I was barefoot. Customers didn’t care, that wasn’t what they were looking at. White clubs meant more money and better tips (and total nudity), and because I actually showed up every shift and was never drunk, high, or in a fight with a boyfriend or girlfriend that disrupted the evening, I had a kind of job security.

So I started to form a family. Back then, there was no TV theme song about going to a bar where “everybody knows your name,” but Fireplace customers would have understood that. For a lot of men, their local go-go bar was their neighborhood pub. They knew they could no more take home the dancers (to their waiting wives!) than they could the waitresses from their favorite restaurants, but for the price of a drink or two, they could sit and talk to us forty minutes of every hour.

I heard about problems with wives, and kids, and bosses—dreams for the future, regrets about the past. I listened, sympathized, empathized: the way you try to do with any family member. I suggested they share some of this with wives or girlfriends. One said what many thought, “I can’t talk to her about this. I can’t talk to her the way I talk to you.”

Most of the regulars weren’t married men with problems; they just enjoyed hanging out and having a drink. Uncle A.D., who looked and acted so much like a couple of my actual uncles that he “became” my uncle after a while, was a

middle-aged painter without many real family ties. His funny line, after covering his eyes with a shocked expression and slightly separated fingers, was always, "I wasn't lookin' baby, but you did a *good job!*" A.D. had a quirky little dance that he'd do sometimes where he moved from the waist up to the beat of the music while swinging one arm like a pendulum. I started imitating him from the box and after a while, there were certain songs when the whole bar, including Hank the bartender, would break out into "the A.D."

Hank looked like Popeye the Sailor man. He had big arms, tattoos, empty spaces where some of his teeth should have been, and a crowd control device that might be properly called a shillelagh, but all I know is it was a length of satin smooth wood with a gnarly knot at the top and a leather strap so you wouldn't lose it when knocking heads. I only saw Hank leap across the bar holding it a few times, but from my hiding place under the table, I couldn't say what happened next.

The thousands of hours I spent listening to men tell their stories and share their hopes and dreams taught me more about men in general than had the entire twenty-seven years before. For the first time I understood, or at least witnessed, that thing that makes men confide in prostitutes in a different way than they will in friends or loved ones. Somehow seeing my naked body week after week made them feel comfortable baring their souls. No, actually, I *didn't* completely understand it, but I accepted it.

The other (almost all white) dancers were like sisters that I had nothing in common with but our familial connection. We shared the same "home," but not much else. They were the underage (or underage-looking) teen dropouts; the edgy, tattooed types supporting their black boyfriends; and the occasional anomalous bootstraps girl putting herself through college the hard way. So I guess that would make me the nerdy, bookworm sister always reading or writing between sets.

When we weren't dancing, we were hanging with our favorite regulars, or, in the other girls' cases, whoever was buying the drinks. We got along most of the time, never fought over boyfriends because of our completely disparate taste in men (except one time when a very, very young dancer thought that I was after her former pimp boyfriend, Bob, but he and I were just friends), and never really got to know each other. I suppose we were more like foster-siblings—me being the one who never got adopted. They came and went and I stayed and stayed.

Not surprising then, with my Uncle A.D., cousins Hank and the regulars, and all my flawed, fascinating sisters around, I thought of those two guys Bobby Zee and Thammich as family, too. I saw them all the time; they hung out, laughed, and partied right along with everyone else. They were fun. They were part of the Fireplace. Part of home.

Both were black, but they were the complete odd couple. Thammich, at about 5'4" tall and about the same wide, was not the smarter of the two. He didn't really get why people would chuckle when he placed his standard order, "Gimme a

thoda and a ham thammich.” Bobby Zee wasn’t extremely tall, but he towered over Thammich. His russet brown skin and striking green eyes should have made him a hit with the girls, but the few times I saw him with someone, I would only see the girl that one time. Didn’t matter to me, he was cute, but at twenty or twenty-one, he was way too young to be interesting.

I didn’t have a car at the time, so now and then I’d catch a ride home with someone. One night, for the first time, it happened to be Bobby Zee and Thammich. It was no big deal. We were talking, laughing, hanging out as we had so many times before. At some point, I must have mentioned that I took cabs back and forth, or maybe they’d already observed that, from watching me and listening carefully.

At any rate, when they offered, I accepted without a second thought. I packed my costumes and shoes into my bag and we walked out onto P Street. Bobby Zee said he had to get something from his apartment across the street, so we walked there, and I told them I’d wait outside. “Naw, come on up, it’ll only be a minute,” Bobby Zee said.

“No, I’ll wait.”

More forcefully, “Just come on up. It’s not gonna take long.”

“No. I’ll wait here.” Thammich, who suddenly found the sidewalk fascinatingly attractive, stayed strangely quiet. Now why I didn’t take my bag and hail a cab at that point, I don’t know. But it was three in the morning after all, and these were my brothers. They probably just wanted me to hang out longer, but I was just too tired for more drinks and chitchat.

It was when Bobby Zee kept insisting that I finally began to sense something wrong. Without any warning, he went from insistent to furious. “I just asked you to come upstairs for a minute! What’s the fucking big deal?!” With that, he snatched my bag and ran into his building. Thammich hesitated, but he ran in behind Bobby. And I, I followed. At three in the morning with almost no one on the street, I ran into the darkened apartment building to kick two men’s asses.

And that’s when it happened. I had run halfway up the first flight of stairs when I first started to feel the resistance. It was subtle at first. I almost felt like I’d instantaneously put on a few extra pounds. For some reason, it was a little harder to go up the stairs.

I heard Bobby Zee and Thammich continuing to run up the stairs. They were almost to the third floor when Bobby Zee leaned over the railing and taunted me, “If you want your bag, come and get it!” When I rounded the corner and started for the second floor, the feeling became more than heaviness: I was being pushed backward. Something I couldn’t see was trying to stop me from climbing the stairs. How can I explain the dreamlike feeling of trying to lift one foot after the other when my legs were like concrete blocks trying to walk in jello?

Every step I took became harder and harder. But I was *going* up those steps, dammit! It was when it became so hard to go up that I had to pull myself up

using the hand railing that I first heard it: "Go back." That voice was joined by a chorus of others as I stupidly kept pulling, "Go back, go back. *Go back!*" For one brief instant, as I pulled and strained, barely able to move, I thought I saw a group of people, one behind the other or one beside? inside of? the other, all pushing. Pushing me backward. And at last I regained my senses. I turned around and went down the steps.

Each step was easier than the last. I was running by the time I reached the street. I went straight to the nearest pay phone and called 911. As I was telling them what happened, Thammich emerged slowly and sheepishly from the building.

"You can tell your friend I'm calling the police right now!" I yelled.

Thammich disappeared back into the building and emerged with my bag in short order. He dropped it with a mumbled, "Sorry," and walked away. Bobby Zee must have been just inside the door, because he came out right behind him. He threw me a look dripping with disgust and as he walked past me spat out, "Wasn't nobody gonna *rape* you." Which was the first time such a possibility entered my mind.

I only saw Bobby Zee a few times after that. He didn't actually live in that building, and he would leave the club as soon as I started my shift. I don't know if he and Thammich stayed friends, because I never saw Thammich again. Maybe he was a little smarter than I thought.

I guess if these two were family, they were like the crazy cousins you don't want to talk about. Maybe I should have told someone what happened, but I never did. The way I saw it, those two losers taught me something. Because of them, I knew truly, concretely what I'd always suspected: My family was larger and more present—even if unseen—than I'd ever realized. And they were looking out for me.



At the Docks - Colten Bradford



Dandelions

Faisal Nsour

In the big house they shared
for thirty seven years I found
them in the kitchen, abandoned,
in the oak breadbox he made
for their wedding day.
Small, but full of bread crumbs, mouse droppings,
and blued memories of grabbing hands
and careless forgetting words left stale
like constant apparitions of small pleasures.

The notes in blue ink on yellow paper
fading slowly in the secret drawer
I found when I was twelve, the one
beneath the breadbox door.
Yellow tongues, rolled up and silent.

Beside the breadbox,
a time struck photo of their younger faces
framed in hurried conversations,
dusted with old flour
and dried up crumbles of her breakfast

butter biscuits. In the back door
two knots stared through the dark kitchen,
two black eyes. I covered them and pushed through.

Beyond the breadbox,
in the garden, young
copper green tomatoes hung
thick on tender low vines in
rich dark earth and fragrant.
By the open rusted gate,

spring dandelions.

Something about Sam

Shana Stine

"Ain't no one want to hear your story 'less you been a drug addict or a prostitute," he tells me.

I disagree, silently. *Not every story is about drug addicts. Just because I wasn't a prostitute doesn't mean I don't have a story to tell.* There is something about him that scares me, but I struggle to pinpoint the cause. Maybe it's the way he commands a space without needing words or actions. Or maybe it's the way he wears his denim baseball hat, low and tight, warning people to keep their distance. It's obvious that he hates this place.

I had seen him at the Springfield Overflow Shelter before, but I had yet to learn his name. There was something about him, something uncertain but certainly sinister, that made me keep my distance. Everything about him screamed, "Leave me alone!" Even the other homeless people didn't approach him. His rough black face was scarred from something...acne maybe? I couldn't tell. I'm not familiar with black faces.

I had helped at the homeless shelter and Washington Street Mission since September, but there were several people with whom I had never spoken. He was one of them.

It was mid-March and my last night helping at the Overflow Shelter for the season, and I was busy running around the Salvation Army doing the usual tasks – cleaning up the kitchen, directing people to the showers, and keeping an eye on fellow student volunteers. I was in charge of the shower list for the night, and it was my job to keep the showers going smoothly – ten minutes per shower with the next person on the list ready to go. It reminded me of my years in junior high softball, my teammates yelling, "Who's in the batter's box? Who's on deck?" Same concept. Just smellier.

We were halfway through the shower list, and I was trying to find the next person on the list, Jerry. I didn't know a Jerry, so I started asking around.

I turned to the scary guy, "Are you taking a shower here tonight?"

"I don't ever take showers here. Never been on that list. You should know that by now."

Well, alright. "I guess that's true. Do you know who Jerry is?" I ask him.

"I don't know no Jerry."

I move on quickly, anxious to get out of this uncomfortable conversation.

I enter the fellowship hall where mattresses are lined up on the floor. Fifty people will sleep in here tonight. Most are already lying down, some watching

TV and others reading.

I yell over the TV, "The next person for the shower is Jerry. Is Jerry in here?"

A short bearded man waves to me and starts collecting his things. "You have a few minutes before it's your turn to shower," I tell him. "Come on back when you're ready."

I walk out of the room and into the hallway. The scary guy is still there, all alone. No book. No radio. He's just sitting there, purposefully ignoring the other people. *Why does he sit alone?*

Any other night I would have kept walking. *There is something about him...* I contemplate stopping... I don't. I walk back to the showers and tell the other volunteers that Jerry is on his way. And then, surprising myself, I hand over the shower list to another volunteer and walk away, leaving the showers and heading straight to the hallway, back to scary one. *It's my last night. If I don't talk to him now, I never will.* I enter the hallway and walk to the fellowship hall doorway, pretending to check on tonight's guests. Really I'm just buying time, contemplating how this conversation will start...how it will end...and if I even want to get involved.

I turn to him and ask, "Do you ever watch TV with the rest of them?"

"No, I'd rather not."

"When do you go to bed?"

"After they do."

His sentences are short, but his expression keeps speaking. There is something broken in his eyes, something the baseball hat can't hide. I continue. "Can I ask what your name is?"

"Sam."

I reach out my hand. He takes the bait. "I'm Shana," I say as I shake his calloused hand. They remind me of my Papa's, overworked and swollen.

I have a curiosity that refuses to go away until it's scratched. *What is Sam's story? Why is he here? Why does he sit alone? What is this internal conflict – he seems to hate company and yet desire it?* I want to know, want to hear his story, get a glimpse of his past so that I can understand his present. So, I sit down. Right there, on the floor, beside his brown metal chair.

The man who barely speaks, starts talking.

"Do you go to school here?" he asks me.

"Yeah, to UIS."

"What are you studying?"

"Religion and Social Justice."

That answer always elicits a response, especially in this crowd. I sometimes wish my answer had a little less baggage attached to it. *If only I were an English major...* Like everyone else who hears what I'm studying, Sam provided his own input.

"I hate church. Bunch of hypocrites."

"You're right. I've met a lot myself," I tell him. I could take the conversation in a different direction – I could defend the Church, I could throw in Scripture, I could tell Sam that he should give church another try... I could say any number of things. ...but I don't. I'm learning that sometimes the best thing to do is to shut up and listen. I'd heard the most amazing stories in this place. Take Tom for example, a former drag queen who stabbed a child molester and was proud of it. Or Don, who went from business leader to drug addict. I had celebrated with Josh on his 42nd day sober. I even met a UIS graduate here. *It's amazing what you can hear when you stop making noise.* Homeless people tell the most fascinating stories. I'm not sure if they're all true, but they are definitely entertaining. I keep quiet and let Sam continue.

"What do you want to be when you're older?" he asks.

"A teacher. I want to speak and write about Jesus and the poor, about problems in the Church, about brokenness."

This catches him off guard.

"I want to speak, too. Someday."

He continues, "But you see, I got experience. You know what I'm sayin'. You don't have that. You ain't been on the streets, you know. You ain't no prostitute. No drug user. Ain't nobody want to hear your story. Nobody at all."

Part of me wants to defend myself. *I DO have a story to tell, dang it! Just because I didn't mess up my life doesn't mean I have a bad story!* I'm fighting off anger, desperately wanting to list off all the topics I have a "right" to speak about. *I've played with orphans in Africa. I've FED them. I hang out with you homeless people. I feed them, you, too! I've seen stuff. I've been places you'll never go. I know the stories of poverty, of homelessness. They may not be my own, but at least I've cared enough to sit down and listen to them! How dare you mock me when I'm HERE. At a homeless shelter! My insides are ready to explode. How dare YOU tell ME what I can't do. You don't even know me!* My thoughts are frantic and confused. I'm pissed at Sam and yet strangely angry with myself. I can't believe these thoughts are going through my head. I feel like a pompous rich kid. *Sam offended me, yes, but who am I? Where did this "better-than-thou" attitude come from?* I go from angry and selfish to guilty and humbled within seconds. Somehow I manage to keep my composure. I sit there and take it. He goes on a few more minutes, finally switching to a different target – the other homeless people.

"You see, everyone is in here for a reason. Everybody has something going on."

"Like what?" I ask.

Using his fingers, he starts listing. "Self-pity, anger, abandonment, loneliness..." He names a few others, but my thoughts are racing and I lose focus. *Why does he talk about homeless people as if he isn't in the group himself? Surely he can relate to the list...*

“Which one are you?” I ask.

With only a short hesitation, he answers, “I’m abandoned.”

How do I respond to that? ...I don’t.

He continues, “I’ve been in and out of jail for the last thirty years.”

My eyes must have given me away, he continues. “You’d be afraid of me if I told you want I done.”

I still want to know, but I definitely don’t ask now.

“I did some bad things. Gang stuff, too.” He leans in, “I was the gang leader.”

Raising his hand and whispering into my ear, he says, “Black Warriors.”

Whoa. I am sitting beside a prison gang leader, by myself, in a very lonely hallway... With all things considered, I should have been scared out of my mind.

Something has happened to me. I am hit with the realization that I am not who I once was. I would have never had the courage to talk with homeless people a year ago, let alone sit beside a former gang leader and strike up a conversation about drugs, prison, and church. *Where did this courage come from? When did this happen?*

I start thinking about everything that happened in the last year – my trip to Mexico to replace a shack with a home, my adventures in Africa with orphans and dirty water, my new love for homeless people and the dozens of stories they have told me, the thrill and stress of starting a non-profit project for kids in Kenya... It had been a full year, and somewhere along the way I had made some drastic changes to my faith. In the back of my mind I knew I was different, but it was only as I sat with Sam that I began to grasp what it was and how it had forever changed my life.

I stopped believing that God was “safe.” *God is good, not safe.* I had missed this somewhere along the way. Sunday School Jesus, the one on the felt board with all the paper sheep, had flowing hair and a spotless white robe. He was happy, clean, and careful. The older I got the more questions I had. *Why isn’t Church Jesus matching up with Bible Jesus? If he’s hanging out with the sick and poor all the time, I really doubt he’s clean and careful.* When Jesus tells me to love the poor, then I need to go where they are. I guarantee it’s not the cleanest and safest place in town. He tells us to visit the imprisoned in prison. Why was I waiting for a safer option?

I guess sometime during the past year I had completely rejected the “Safe Gospel.” I had seen the change after Mexico...I was amazed at how different I was after Africa...but it was while I was sitting here with Sam that I finally understood the depth of my decision. *I stopped choosing safety and my life has been completely transformed because of it.*

I focused back on the conversation, still intrigued by his “abandoned” comment from before.

“Do you have any family?”

"I have two kids – a girl and a boy – but I haven't been in their lives."

"Why don't you go see them, now that you're out of jail?" I ask.

"I feel guilty. I wasn't there when they needed me."

Suddenly Sam isn't as tough as I thought he was. *Sam hurts.*

"My momma is here in town, just a couple blocks away, but I don't visit."

"Why not?" I ask.

"She hasn't seen me in thirty years. Now she's sick. Lookin' like a vegetable. I can't see her now."

I'm blown away. *Your mom is in town, just a few blocks away, and you don't visit her? You haven't seen her in THIRTY years?* By this time, I'm struggling to keep my thoughts silent. *I don't care if he is scary and a "Black Warrior" gang leader.* With a courage that was certainly not my own, I speak. "Sam, you need to see your mom."

"I can't. I took a son from her, you know. I can't face that. I'm guilty of stealin'. I'm afraid of going back. I wasn't here when she needed me. Wasn't here when she was healthy. Now she's dyin' and I'm afraid of seeing her like this. I can't face it, got a fear, you know."

"Maybe it's not about you, Sam. Maybe this is about your mom really needing to see her son. This should be about her, not about you."

"I know. But I can't see her now. Especially when she's sick. I can't do that to her, you know. Her body can't handle the emotion of me coming back."

"Wouldn't that be a good way to go? Dying from being too happy?"

"I hear you, but I'm not ready."

"Okay. I hope you're ready soon."

One of the other student volunteers approached us.

"The showers are done and we're ready to go."

I stand up and dust the dirt off my jeans. "Thanks for talking with me, Sam."

"Thanks for sitting with me."

"I volunteer at Washington Street Mission, too, so maybe I'll see you there sometime?"

"Yeah, I go there. What days do you volunteer?"

"Wednesdays."

"Okay. I'll see then," he says with a slight smile.

"Okay."

I reach out my hand and he shakes it. I turn to walk away, but stop.

"Hey Sam," I start, pausing to look him in the face. "You're not abandoned."

He quietly nods. "I know."

I saw Sam two weeks later at Washington Street Mission, again sitting by himself. I sat down with him, wondering if he'd be as open and honest with me

this time. He was. Our conversation surprised me.

"I got a job."

"Really? That's great, Sam! Where?"

"Salvation Army. I do some cleaning for them. 10-4pm."

"Wow. That's great news!"

"Yeah. They want me to move downstairs, but I don't want to. I want to work myself out of here. Save up for my own place. A lot of these people don't do nothing, don't better themselves. But not me, I'm smart. I can get out."

Then the conversation took an unexpected route,

"I have issues with happiness," he admits. "I look for it in all the wrong places. I need to figure some stuff out. ...like spiritual things. I went to church last week."

He continued talking, admitting that he had a long way to go before he figured out happiness, but that knowing God had something to do with it. *Amazing.*

Nine-thirty rolled around and my friends and I had to leave. I said goodbye to Sam and my other homeless friends and headed towards the car. "See you next week, Sam!"

As I entered the Mission the following week, this time with a box of donated clothes, I saw Sam right away. He was there as promised, sitting at the same table with the same blue denim hat. I took the clothes to the back room and headed for the kitchen. I spent the first half hour doing my usual routine, pouring coffee and striking up conversations about the weather, the night at the shelter, and the importance of coffee.

There were plenty of volunteers, so I dropped off the coffee pots and headed out to Sam's table. I sat down at the chair beside him, and like the two times before, our conversation was far from typical.

"You know, there's a reason that we're talking today. You didn't come to the mission so that we could talk. You came to the mission to drop-off clothes."

Actually, I really did come to hang-out with you and the other homeless people. It just so happens that I also brought clothes today. I don't tell him this; I let him continue.

"There's a reason that we're talking. Either you need to hear from me or I need to hear something from you. There's a reason people are in my life encouraging me."

This is going well.

"We all come from a woman's vagina."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Did he just say 'vagina'?! Was that necessary?!

"All of us come from our momma's vagina."

Do you have to use that word?! Can't we use womb or belly or something? At least while we're at the mission?

"There's a reason. We're born. A reason we come out vaginas...."

Is it just me or he is yelling the word vagina? Sam continues, but I'm so shocked about the vagina thing that I miss out completely on whatever point he's trying to make. *I'd ask him to repeat it, but I'm afraid he'll throw in the word 'penis.'* I just nod and go with it, hoping that the other volunteers and church people aren't listening.

He changes to a different topic. *Thank God.*

"I know that I need to see my mom. I just need to address this fear stuff. It's all in my head, you know. Fear is a mental thing. But I need to see her."

I respond gently, "You're working on a short timetable, so I hope you address your fear soon."

"Yeah... I'm learning to take down barriers. I put up blocks. Distance myself from others. Don't let no one in. Don't like to be vulnerable, you know what I'm sayin'?"

I nod. *Please, God, don't let his mother die while he's still learning.*

"There's a reason that people like you are coming into my life. They tell me things, encourage me, give me strength. Tell me what I need to hear."

We continue talking for a few minutes, but soon it's 9:45 and Sam needs to leave for his job at the Salvation Army.

"See you next week, Shana."

"Yup. See you then."

Off he goes. *I wonder what we'll talk about next week?* I don't know, but I hope it's not vaginas.

I went to the shelter last night, but Sam wasn't there. It felt incomplete. Empty. There are other people I could talk with – Drunk Jim, Sober Josh, Drag Queen Tom – but there is something about Sam that I can't get away from. Maybe it's the way he wears his hat, slightly upward and loose, inviting me to have a seat. Maybe it's the way he speaks, painful and honest. Or the way he offends me. I need that.

Sam spoke into my life in a way I never expected. I guess he's a speaker after all.

I wish I could finish this by saying that Sam finally saw his mother, ending the thirty-year cycle of guilt. I wish I could say that he got his own place where his kids visit and laugh. I can't. I don't know if he has or ever will. Maybe, someday. Maybe soon.



Last of My Line

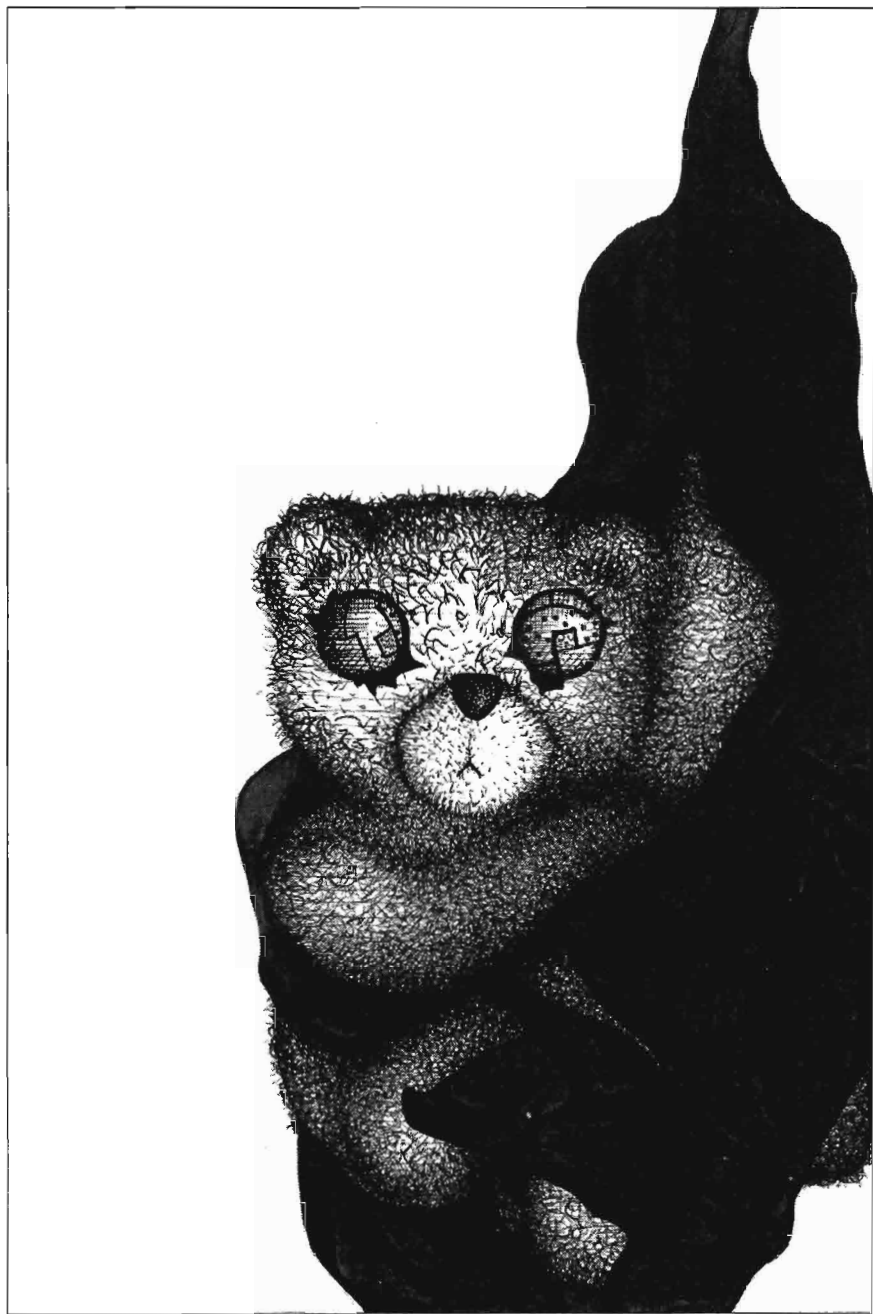
Lola L. Lucas

Beans are cooking hour after hour on the stove—
It would smell like Mamaw's house except
There's no fatback or ham hocks.

It's not until I'm stirring the cornbread mix
To bake in her cast iron skillet
That I add too much moisture and salt
When I realize this ritual
Will not bring her back to the table.

It's been a dozen years.
Still I sit down on the floor
With her shabby little thrift shop bowl,
The one she used for brown beans,
And I hold it to me and sob.

Mom's been gone, what? So far
Twenty months. Upstairs her purse
Is in a plastic bin, waiting.
I don't know how long it will be
Until I have the nerve to open it.
Not tonight, no,
Not tonight.



Feeling the Growth of an Unborn Child

Travis Genenbacher

Very nervous am I! Some call me mad, some call me immoral, but those do not know me. I tell my story in order to tell the truth of my condition. The disease had heightened all my senses, but the sense of touch increased the greatest. The slightest breeze seemed a gust. A slight touch a slap. But the sense of touch was not all bad. Pleasure had increased to a level I could never have dreamt. While with a man, the pleasure he granted me took me to a world of diamonds and gold. A world full of colors I had not known existed and hope bound aplenty. This is what led me to my occupation. Some called me a lady of the night. Others a harlot. But I was simply satisfying a need that had become an addiction. The problem was when the pleasure left I was less than I had been before. So I entered my profession with all my heart. . . and body.

However, my occupation had its downfalls. I had prepared myself for the diseases I could contract, but I was not prepared for what happened. The child that had started growing within me was becoming unbearable. The kicking was a blow to the stomach on a daily basis. When I was in the throws of pleasure, a simple twitch from the spurn inside me would knock me out of the diamond encrusted world back into the real world. No, I say. It knocked me past the real world into a world of grime and muck. Into a world where everything was grey and it seemed all hope lost. I was unable to experience the feelings to which I had become addicted. This problem needed to be solved. There was only one way to do that. Now, do not misunderstand my intentions. I would have been ecstatic to become a mother, but the inability to enjoy pleasure was not a sufferable sacrifice—the kicking pre-human was easier.

Now do not think me mad. Madmen know nothing. Great pains were taken in planning the solution to my problem. I had heard through others' tellings of women losing their pregnancies due to falls on their midsections. I spent many a day recording the schedule of the inhuman being tormenting my life. I had discovered between the hours of 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. was the tormentor's favorite torture time. I took great care to assure I was awake and prepared by 8 a.m. every morning. For three days, however, the callous affliction didn't apply the pressure that had been such a burden. My hopes that I could soon once again enjoy pleasure had arisen. But the fourth day proved to be a renewal of energy for the torture device implanted by a random man. The three days off must have interrupted the demon's schedule, for I was awakened at 7 a.m. by a punch to the midsection. I almost forgot how difficult it was to operate in that grey hopeless world.

I knew the time had come to end my suffering. As I lay on my meager cot, I slowly inched my way closer to the edge. A millimeter at a time. Every movement

a provocation that took me to the grey world I so loathed. As I crept closer to the fatal fall, the torture increased. But I prevailed. The unperson seemed to sense its eminent demise and fought for its life. The pain I was subjected to was a curse from the lord of the underworld. How could anyone call me mad? I was simply protecting myself from the anguish being inflicted upon me. I knew there was only one option at this point, so I persevered. The throbbing was causing me to scream out in excruciation on every pulse beat. The burden in my belly had evolved a heart, beating in time with my own. The pulse alone was causing me a constant ache—no, not an ache but anguish. Anguish that took me to the lackluster land of grey. I was losing my sense of the real world. I had forgotten the glimmer of the diamond encrusted land. I could only focus on the evil inside me.

In order to free myself, I gathered all the strength I had left and flung myself over the edge. The fall onto my obtrusive abdomen seemed to satiate my need. The pulsating throb was weakening. After several hopeful minutes, the pain had lessened to such an extent that I was now into the real world of dull colors, but the presence of color was welcomed by my senses. A glimmer of hope was returning to my soul and I felt renewed. I had ridded myself of the blasphemy some call a blessing. How could you call such a burden a blessing? How could you blame me for retaining my freedom? How could you call someone with such a clear mind mad? After the ordeal I had just endured, some rest was well deserved. As I lay down to sleep, images of the glinting gold world filled my mind. I planned my next night of, hopefully, plentiful pleasure.

When I awoke, the sun was setting. It was time for me to begin my night of enjoyment. I put on my usual uniform and headed to the streets. Ready for a night of sunshine and gold-paved roads. I began to stroll the streets in search of the first customer of the night. Who would be the man to give me what I needed in search of what he wanted? Then I spotted him, the man of my dreams! He was short, stout, and balding, but his clothes poorly hid what was beneath the surface, below the belt. I was to be reinitiated into the business by a quite capable teacher. As I finished negotiating merchandise and cost with my first pleasure giver, my heart leapt at the soon to come gratification. He walked me into the nearest alley and pressed my body against the brick wall of the local tavern. It felt as if my bones would be crushed as I was bombarded against the barricade that separated us from the raucous crowd drunkenly jeering on the other side. However, the thought of the soon to come fulfillment loaded my thoughts. As he began what he thought was to be only his pleasure, well that is all he cared about anyway, I once again felt the throbbing from my mid-section. I feared the worst, but continued in hopes the growing ache was only a remnant of the former occupant. However, as I continued with my performance, the pain multiplied until it overcame my being.

I cried out hysterically while my once pleasure giver became a fearful voyeur. My former customer took a step back and watched as I became wild with panic. What was happening? How could this be? I had destroyed the tormentor! Hadn't

I? Was it only hope that led me to believe that instead of fact? I had to end the suffering. The fleeting footsteps alone let me know my audience had fled in fright. The rest of my senses were trapped in a grimy world from which I desperately needed to escape. My eyes could only see darkness and grime. My nostrils only smelled the acrid scent of decaying flesh. My taste buds took in the acidic, coppery taste of blood. My ears only perceived screams and wails seeming to come straight from the Underworld. As I rummaged on the dirt-covered ground frantically grasping for relief, a bar fight escaped the confining barrier that had been dividing us and crashed into the alley through a mud-stained window. A constable had come to my assistance, believing the brawlers to be the base of my fright. Why could he not understand that my pain was originating from inside my abdomen, not the dangers of the dark, dank alley?

The enforcer of peace set me aside as an effort to protect my supposed safety while he attempted to subdue the scuffle taking place not three yards from my pain ridden remains. Somehow in my haze, I had managed to find a dagger of broken glass. Paying me no mind, the gathering crowd was focused on the not unusual battle taking place outside the establishment that serves to bring out the fight in its clientele. One of the brawlers dropped a bottle of whiskey in the struggle, apparently trying to use it as a weapon. I, however, used it as a sedative. I grasped the dust-covered jug and put it to my lips. The burning down my throat was nothing compared to the throbbing and lurching from my abdomen. The demon inside me, resurrected from the untimely demise I thrust upon it, must have sensed my panic because it started writhing and fighting the confines of my stomach. The alcohol must have begun to burn the child as it had done my throat. I prayed that the searing liquid would take the child's life away as it was soon to do with the losing brawler from the tavern. I could not settle with hopes and prayers, however. I had to take matters into my own hands! Then the streetlamp caught a clear portion of the fragmented window in my hand, reminding me of the discovery I had made in my haze. The glint of the glass gave me an inspiration. All eyes turned to me as I cried out that I had found the answer! I set down the bottle of poison and held the shard in both my hands. I resolved that if I could not have the pleasure I so desperately craved with the child inside me, and I could not rid myself of the child, then I would not live with the child. I had to destroy that which had destroyed my life! I had to! Don't you understand? What other option did I have? A gasp escaped the lungs of all my voyeurs as I plummeted the dagger substitute through the lining of my abdomen into the hollow cave that once imprisoned the source of my misery. The heartbeat was dying. The life leaving the body. I had finally freed myself! Now tell me, could a madman, or woman, have freed themselves from such torture?



In the Kitchen

Katie Luchtefeld

She hates the
fake red bricks
plastered to the walls

the way they cling tightly
to the flour and the grease
that come their way

dirt filled crevices between
creamy-green tiles on the floor
make her crazy

the creak of the heavy
oven door
followed by the death-rattle
thud
it makes
when she opens it
makes her grimace

she cries, "I'd rather be dead"
than try and fit one more dusty can
on top of faded shelf paper

as Grandmother walks in
Mother sighs
wipes a hand across her sweaty brow
and lies,
"everything's fine"

Love, the fickle little bitch

Emily Martin

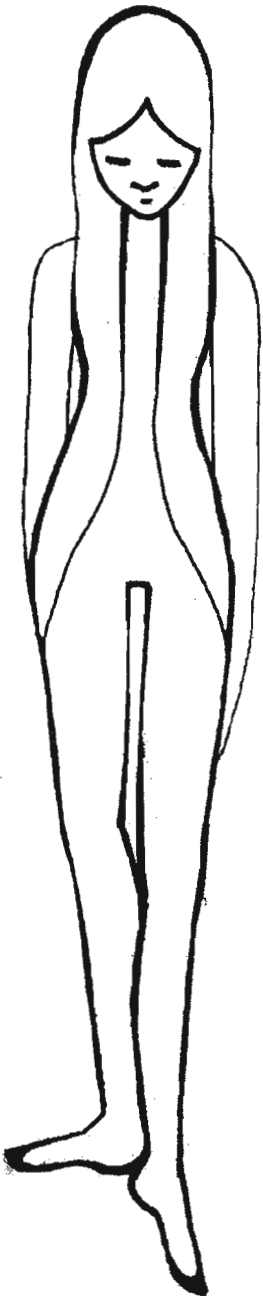
Never is it appropriate or
well-suited for an occasion.
It just loiters in a corner, crevice or clavicle -
waiting to be let in.
Smelling
(I am pretty sure)
smelling vile like meat that is not meant to be eaten.
Until a portion is baked as pie,
inside a sweet sugar crust,
and set temptingly by a window.
Let one bite of it remind you:
love is a fickle little bitch.

Spam

Lola L. Lucas

A colossus, the God of Spam
Wades from an ocean of debt,
Hugely priapic,
A prescription bottle in one hand,
Casino winnings in the other,
A replica Rolex
Straining around his manhood.

“Turn your trouser mouse
Into a monster shlong,” he bellows,
And the earth moves and shakes—
Gaia herself yet another satisfied lover.



Failed Divinity

Mary Colligan

"Blossoms. White blossoms, and petals, as if they're falling down the sides of the cake," Amy suggested. "A waterfall of blossoms."

Outside the window, along the sidewalk and next to the curb of the busy street, she watched the blossoms fall off a cherry tree as she spoke. They floated and whirled in the wind as if they were utterly without will, desire, destination, or care; "but," she thought, "I know better."

"Perfect! Oh, I love the idea!" her customer exclaimed, following Amy's gaze, spotting the tree. "The perfect image of new beginnings!"

"Some of the blossoms could have a slight touch of color: pink, or blue maybe, or something to match your bridesmaid's dresses...." Amy suggested.

Her customer gushed again, thrilled with the idea of matching blossoms, then said, "That reminds me: for the dessert tray, I'd love to have divinity! Gobs and gobs of divinity! Can you make the divinity match my bridesmaid's dresses too?"

Amy nodded but leaned forward across the table where she and her customer were sitting. It was a round table placed in front of the shop window, a window with white lace curtains and a valence of gossamer netting festooned with white silk roses trailing long, shell-pink ribbons. It was the perfect frame for the bakery-slash-café that she worked in, located on the middle of a trendy street lined with trendy boutiques and equally trendy specialty shops that catered to the carefree. The location was more of a boulevard, really, lined with sidewalks bordered by cherry trees set equidistantly into the turf along the side of the road beside which expensive automobiles parked and waited for the showers of seemingly obligatory blossoms.

She looked seriously at the customer - a young Miss Stacy Bender wearing a suit that labeled her a business professional on her lunch hour, a soon to be a Misses Somebody - and said, "We charge extra for divinity."

This was not a problem for Miss Bender.

After she closed up shop that evening, Amy was drawn again to the tree and went to stand beside it on the fashionable sidewalk. Something inside her, some inflatable sort of emptiness, grew until she could feel it buck against the surface of her skin from her head to her toes. She reached out and plucked a small bunch of blossoms from the tree and looked for a moment at the setting sun and saw, with her artist's eye, how it turned the white of the cherry blossoms into warm drops of crème brûlée, or into the blushing cheek of a baby, depending on the bend of the petal and the brush of the wind, depending on the random touch of light, and depending on the angle at which she held the flowers against their backdrop.

She could paint this on Miss Bender's cake; she was a wiz with an airbrush. Every day she sprayed gel colors onto Keith's culinary creations – Keith was the owner of the shop – and turned them into anything a customer desired.

"Anything you want," she'd say when they asked what she could do with her airbrush.

She often felt as if she were the canvas, not the cake: a pastry harlot, complaisantly letting the customers have their way with her.

Amy strolled to the parking lot behind her building thinking that everything was blank, everything was empty, and everything was waiting for an Artist. Everyone longed for a Great-Manipulator-of-the-Brush-of-Life to come along and make out of their lives a masterpiece, while they passively accept each jab, stroke, and swipe of the brush. She used to wait. She had emptied herself and passively waited... followed all the rules for waiting... but nothing had happened.

The emptiness burst through a seam in her skin somewhere, and she felt it begin to hiss out like air from a leaky tire.

"I should go jump in a lake," she thought, "and hold my breath underwater, and feel for the leak. I could go to work tomorrow morning and ask Keith to patch it with frosting and then I could paint it with my air brush. Purple. Like a bruise."

She clutched the sprig of blossoms between her teeth as she dug in her purse for her keys, and once inside her car, she placed the flowers on the passenger seat beside her.

"Poor things," she whispered, seeing how they were already wilting. "I've killed you." She seemed to hear them hissing air at her, and a sudden, vague memory of a woman glided before her like a ghost, like the petal of a blossom too close to her eyes to focus upon. Once upon a time, in a faraway land, she had thought she was a work of art and that she possessed a Destiny and to get there all she had to do was follow the map.

* * *

The chapel was filled with white flowers. She looked up briefly from where she laid face-down on the hard, wood floor with its musty smell of dust and the rubber from her sisters' sandals. The beads of her Rosary, attached to her thick, leather belt, dug into her stomach as she peeked past the rim of her white veil. She lay her head back down and listened to Mother Superior remind her that she was supposed to die to self and to the world. In a moment she would get up and kneel and place her folded hands on her superior's lap, and there, with the Bishop looking down upon her from the enclosure window, she would make her first vows. She wasn't afraid. A greater Power, some captivating Force outside herself, had lured her to this enclosed garden and It would be faithful to her, she was sure. She would give herself to this Something-Greater-Than-Herself, greater than Life, than the World, and then that's what she would become.

* * *

When she got into her car the next morning, Amy glanced at the wilted flowers. The petals were browning at the edges, but as soon as she sat down and shut her door she smelled their scent: light, like the barest touch of a subtle perfume, like a dab of fragrance on her neck, on the pulse of her arteries, just enough for the smell to throb into life with each beat of her heart. She wondered if she had a smell, dead as she was, or maybe she was only smashed, bruised, leaking oil, hissing air.

She started the car and drove a mile before she lowered her window and threw the flowers out, avoiding looking at them, not wanting to see the rust, the soiled rims of their petals, the blight that she had set upon them.

At the bakery, Keith was already at work. He was standing in front of a mixer, his pony tail tucked neatly into a hairnet.

"God," he said, glancing at her and clucking his tongue. "You look like hell."

Amy threw her purse under a counter and walked over to the bulletin board where Keith normally tacked the orders for baked goods, mostly cakes. Specialty cakes that Keith baked and she decorated.

"Okay, ignore me," Keith shrugged. "The truth's written all over your face anyway. It was another wild night of drinking and carousing."

Amy didn't respond but glanced at her reflection in a window: blond hair neatly combed, her eyebrow rings removed, her thick coat of mascara washed off, her peaches-and-cream skin devoid of foundation or rouge so that her freckles showed instead. Yet there were dark circles under her eyes and her skin was puffy, pale, and her eyes empty. She had weird eyes: pale blue, almost white, highly unlikely eyes, eyes like looking into a mirror that reflected nothing.

Keith turned off his mixer. "I got a start on the cupcakes for the Wilson birthday party, and oh, before I forget, I took this message off the answering machine when I came in this morning."

Amy took the note Keith passed to her. "Miss Bender wants pale yellow highlights on her divinity," she sighed, waving the note.

"We charge extra for divinity," Keith replied.

"One hundred pieces of pale yellow divinity," Amy sighed again.

Keith looked at her. "You don't sound too excited about that..."

Amy crumpled up the phone message and walked to the garbage can where she threw it away and stared at it. "I hate making divinity."

"Then I'll make it," he answered.

She turned to face him. "One of these times it will fail. Everything fails eventually."

Keith started prattling inanities and stupid clichés - winners never quit - until she hissed even louder, so she walked out of the kitchen and into the front of the shop where she stared out the window.

"I'm not worried," she called back to him. "I'll make Miss Bender's divinity. I'll make it if I have to make it a million times."

* * *

The day after her profession, the flowers – her bridal flowers, arranged in vases throughout the chapel – were still lovely. The tuberoses, especially, filled the monastery choir with a rich scent. During Evening Prayer she thought that she would draw the tuberoses – later, when she returned to her cell. She had a pad of paper and some artist pencils given to her for her use, so that she could practice her drawing. So she studied the graceful arches of the flowers on their stems and committed their shapes to her memory. Their waxen petals reflected the red glow of the tabernacle lamp from their surfaces; each seemed to bleed a drop of blood. Beauty was like that, she thought, it was like a drop of blood shed by the Artist, a revelation of her own fate, a breadcrumb on a path laid out for her to follow. All I have to do, she thought, is shed self and follow the trail of Beauty to my destiny.

* * *

“Oh my god, you aren’t going to spray them one at a time?” Keith gasped.

“Yes, I am. I want them to be perfect.”

Amy turned on her air brush, which she’d filled with a special mix of lemon-yellow gel paint, made especially for bakers – pale yellow, just the lightest touch of morning sunshine.

“But there are one hundred of them!”

“Are you worried?”

“Worried? Good Lord, I have a headache thinking of you painting each one separately like that. Why don’t you put ten of them on the turntable, and then spray them while they turn? Then you’ll be done in just ten batches.”

“I want them to be perfect,” Amy said again, and carefully sprayed her first candy. The color was just right, and she was careful not to spray the entire piece of candy; rather, she dusted the folds and valleys of each divinity with color, leaving the peaks white as if they were little sun-kissed mountains capped with snow.

The petals on the cake were just as divine. Miss Bender came in that afternoon after picking up her gown at a bridal shop down the street, “Just to take a peek,” and when Amy led her back into the kitchen to see her work of art, Miss Bender was thrilled with everything.

“Oh, Amy, would you like to see my veil? I had it made specially, and I got the idea from you! Wait here!” Miss Bender said.

Amy followed her client out of the kitchen and stood in the window of the shop while Keith rang up another customer behind her.

When Miss Bender came back she was carrying a large box. She set it down on the table and lifted the cardboard lid.

“Isn’t it breathtaking!” she asked, raising the veil from its box, swishing out the long, delicate folds of white gauze and chiffon that floated slowly to rest layer upon layer in a perfectly arranged spray. Dotting the airy folds were flower petals in various hues of light yellow, ranging from the barest cream to just a hint of lemon. On each petal a crystal dew-drop reflected the splendourous array of whites and creams and rays of sun.

Amy gasped at the confection, as melting as her candy, as light as a cloud upon which to float up to heaven: it was an Assumption, this veil, a conveyance to the sky, to eternity. Keith ran up from the cash register and flew into an ecstasy as he admired it, and he and Miss Bender gushed inanities for a few minutes while Amy stood and stared. At last she smiled at Miss Bender.

"It's beautiful. I'm sure you'll look beautiful wearing it."

"I still can't believe I'm getting married tomorrow!" Miss Bender squeaked, hugging herself, closing her eyes and clicking the heels of her designer shoes together like Dorothy lost in Oz, thinking that she'd get her wish and then all would be well.

That old lie, Amy thought.

But she continued to smile at the excited bride-to-be. "It'll be a day you'll never forget. If I don't get a chance to talk to you tomorrow, I want to wish you and your fiancé every happiness!" Amy said.

Miss Bender beamed. "It's corny, I know, but I used to think finding someone like Bob was impossible. I never thought I'd ever meet anyone who was just like the other part of me. I feel so blessed!"

Keith fingered the veil gently and sighed, "I'd give anything to be in your shoes," but Amy couldn't take her eyes from Miss Bender. "Anything you want," glistened in the young bride's eyes with the eagerness of a crack whore for a fix.

When she stood in the shop window and watched Miss Bender walk away, she fought to breathe. She steadied herself with a hand on the table as all the air leaked out and she became a limp plastic sack, ready to glide to the floor in graceful folds where Keith could come along and slip on her and fall on his ass.

If he did, she would turn to him where they lay on the floor and say to him, "Miss Bender doesn't know herself, you know."

* * *

She didn't think abandonment should be like this. Rules everywhere and eyes watching in case she broke one, and the limitless power of the Eternal constrained to strict conformity and analyzed prayer and Nights of the Senses, Nights of the Soul, and Interior Mansions of spiritual growth through which one progressed, step by step, after first getting the permission to progress from Mother Superior, of course. Yet she lie on the chapel floor on the day she renewed her vows one year after first making them, and she told herself, "I will do this." All hope of sanity depended on the promised award of freedom once she conformed, once she forced herself to follow all the directions.

A few days later, Mother pulled her aside to reprimand her.

She'd been observed eating with her fork in her left hand, a mortal sin in a world where any deviation from any norm could spawn a second Inquisition. She defended herself, a mortal sin in a world where possessing a will could land you on the other side of the cloister wall, and she defended herself because she suddenly realized that becoming a right-handed fork wielder would change nothing; all

outcomes would remain the same.

"It won't change me," she told Mother.

"Now Sister," Mother scolded, "I know you better than you know yourself."

Her ears rang with these words as she stumbled away, into the garden where it was spring, where blossoms were falling onto the meditation path. She walked blindly, her eyes opening like the sky, whitening like clouds, like falling blossoms.

"That can't be true," she thought. She looked down but there was no longer a path under her sandaled feet, and suddenly she knew she'd have to make a choice.

* * *

Keith was in the front of the shop talking to Cathy Wilson, one of the regulars. He'd be up there a long time with her, talking about the latest novel in the vampire series to which they were both addicted. The only thing left to do for the Bender wedding was to load the divinity and the layers of the cake onto the truck, and Amy told Keith not to worry about helping her with this job.

"I can load the car," she told him. "Then I'll drive to the reception hall and assemble the cake there."

"Sure, go ahead," Keith called to her from the front of the shop.

"But don't you think," she heard Cathy say to him, "that the vampire desires Cecily because she has such a fiery personality?"

Vampires never desire inanities, Amy thought as she strode to the pantry and took out her gel colors. She mixed them together quickly in the kitchen, anxiously, looking back over her shoulder and wondering irritably what the loud, pulsing noise in the shop could possibly be, and then she realized that it wasn't coming from the shop. Her hands shook and she spilled water and powder and made a mess on her counter. For a moment she stared at the way her hands throbbed in a rhythmic way, as if someone – she pictured a dirty, sweating little boy – had attached the nozzle of a bicycle air pump to a valve on some part of her body, perhaps on one of her heels, and had begun to pump hard upon the piston. She heard a whoosh, and then there was a pause, followed by another whoosh. Whoosh, pause: he kept pumping.

The color she mixed was brown: blight, rust, rot.

* * *

"You'll always be in our prayers," they told her when she left them. Her parents brought her a wig and some of her old clothing to wear. Mother Superior opened the enclosure door and she walked out. There was nothing in front of her, just the concrete sidewalk that led to the parking lot.

She followed it with her parents and didn't look back. She didn't cry. The crying came when she realized that she'd done all she could and failed anyway; when she understood that she'd never been recognized by Something outside herself, Something that wanted her for a Special Purpose, Something that knew

her so well that she could entrust her life to this Thing, that she could pull her will from her heart and place it upon the Wind and know, with certainty, that all would be well. Now she was at peace with knowing that she had to blaze a trail, perhaps many, but at least there wasn't a destiny to worry about anymore or any rules that amounted to a hill of beans.

* * *

She poured the brown gel into her airbrush color housing, and with her throbbing hands she turned the power on to her pump and aimed the nozzle of the airbrush at Miss Bender's divinity and sprayed. She did the cake next.

After she delivered them to the reception hall she went home and began packing. The next morning she phoned Keith, who began to cry but fired her before she had a chance to quit. She enrolled in an art degree program at the state university.

She sat in the front row in her classes and did well. Class after class, she watched her skills grow. She went from drawing to ceramics, from watercolor to oil.

One of her pieces took first place at an art show; that was two years after her graduation. It was oil on canvas: cherry blossoms, as if blown onto the gesso, as if untouched by a brush but rather set adrift to land gently within the frame. It was an expressionist piece with impressionist touches, and it not only won, it sold. She stood proudly beside it wearing loud colors, and her blond hair was spiked, there were rings in her eyebrows, and mascara rimmed her weird, pale blue eyes.

One of the judges came up to her and said, "There's pathos in this painting that makes it come strangely alive with feeling...with emotion... It's the petals... They possess a curious kind of design, as if they're being meddled with purposefully even though they look like they're blowing on a breeze... The brown edges on some of the petals add to an intriguing yet disturbing quality..." He smiled at his description and then at Amy, and all the while a current of air rushed from his pecker and brushed against her thigh.

"Why does it disturb you?" Amy asked him.

He was a former art teacher of hers from the university from which she'd graduated and they'd had sex several times in a couple places on campus; quick couplings in the Art Department, although she knew he'd been a little more sentimental about those encounters than she had been, what with his middle-aged self doubt and his penile desire for self confirmation, as if he believed it could be given to him by a portion of his anatomy or someone outside of himself.

"Because it suggests death...destruction..." he answered after a few moments, "but most of all it's this..."

With his index finger he traced a pattern on the canvas. "It's this odd vacancy, this lack of color in any of these places. At first I thought it was just negative space, but it's not. There's a woman's face here, looking out, as if she's there, but yet not there..."

He looked at Amy and their eyes met. He studied her with that old sentimentality and then said, "It's the connection between the two, between this woman who appears and disappears from the painting, and the stained petals," he remarked. The air kept brushing against her thigh.

Still looking into Amy's eyes he asked, "Who is she?"

Amy looked at her painting. The woman looked back with knowing eyes.

* * *

She only ever had temporary vows, because they had to be renewed once each year for seven years before they became "perpetual." That was the rule. The day the Bishop dispensed them, she realized fully and for the first time that she had to have been several different kinds of stupid to have ever thought she could get anywhere without a will.

"And why seven years until perpetual vows?" she pondered for a long time, wondering what made "seven" such a magic number. It may have only taken her four years, but perhaps there were slackers in places like these who needed a whole seven years to lose self. Seven years to conform. Seven years to become inane. Seven years to go insane, ad perpetuum.

So the Bishop signed his name on the bottom of her dispensation and in a moment her promises were washed away as if they had never existed, all because she'd made a choice.

Powerful thing: choices, she thought...

On the day she left, Mother Superior stood in front of her in the vestibule and unlocked the enclosure door. On the other side of the door her parents were waiting to take her away.

She tapped Mother on the shoulder. A pale face, unlined, ageless, and mysterious, the face of a virgin, turned and looked at her. They stood and silently gazed at each other for a moment.

Then Amy asked her superior, "Do you know me now?"

* * *

"She's Reality," Amy answered him, "Good old Reality."

Then she smiled at the judge, her former teacher of art, and walked away with her first-place ribbon and a check for a thousand bucks.

California Fires

Caron Tate

Silent white ash of
sheets and sofas walls
and cows trees
rabbits and baby bottles
settles

on my car

I drive away remembering that
we once thought we had
a future
together

And now I
cough up
 memories

other people's
and
mine



Drop - Teresa Downard

The Fallow Words Unspoken

Christopher Heisserer

Jack, son of Jack, son of Jack, son of Jacques, let the smoky air of the fire blow over him. The animals were sold, the chickens in another roost. The ground was hard. The sky was soft and dully gray. The great flame stirred, acorns popping in the heat, though he wasn't close enough to feel the flame. His mind was miles away, in a graveyard in Sündhofen of Alsace, where his ancestors were from.

He was alone. The smoke was thick, much like his memory, and he sat in the midst of it. Unflinching. Refusing to cough. The forest behind his house shifted slightly in the chill wind of early autumn. The sun was set, and only a glow grew from the horizon to the west, soft and inviting, and the stars poked one or two from between clouds above.

He felt invited, and as the wind picked up, his hand finally came up to his face to block the smoke. Peach tones tried to warm his bony frame, and they did somewhat. They reminded him of the dark days his ancestors survived: the plague, the crusades, the darkness of dark that resonated through him. He wondered if his ancestors had seen the same sunset a hundred years ago. Two hundred.

Unknown to the rest of the world, in his great-great-great grandfather's pocket a handful of pumpkin seeds and grain made the trip from his homeland, a special breed that had grown only on his farm. The patch had survived two hundred years, here on this foreign place, the great gourds growing thick and lumpy from the nourished soil. They were behind him and before him, their stems dying in a slow return to dirt.

Jack stood silently, wondering what had become of this farm. The ground was fallow, and no hands churned the soil and planted the seeds. Only last year's pollinated seeds sprouted once more, and the pumpkins grew wild and then died, rotting away to nothing. He felt an obligation to the place, though he didn't have the heart to change it. Any of it.

A great graveyard stretched beyond the forest, although Jack had never been there. He only had thoughts for Sündhofen, and he missed the fields there, the great gravestones and quiet forests of exotic-but-familiar trees, where his ancestors came from. The memories were imagined, of course; he had never gone to France. A darkness fell over his eyes, the unnoticed moon hiding behind a cloud, and he stared toward the forest.

He was partial to oak and maple. Hickory was burning in the flame: what his brother had been fond of. He remembered his brother's fall, staring in the fire, and he once more contemplated the way of life.

The night-sounds were encompassing, the creatures of autumn growing restless. Coyotes howled lonesomely, an owl tried its turn at whistling, failing

miserably, and crickets chirped desperately for mates. Time was growing short for all of them, Jack knew. For him, too. The winter would come, the frost would come, the snow would come, and everything would become quiet and covered in white. Wood would split, rags would tatter and fray in the chill wind, and all the clothing of the woods would disappear to time and death.

Yet they would continue to rebirth. His father never had children: he couldn't. The result of a childhood battle with cancer, he was left not-quite-a-man, as he had repeated to his wife in his shameful bedroom. Yet his father was still a strong man, during the day. It was the nighttime that turned him weak and small, as all things against the flicker of shadow and flame.

He practiced at farming for a while, milking cows and selling wheat to the nearby towns. He couldn't keep enough money to survive, so he began growing other things: pumpkins, squash, oats and barley. He had given distilling a try, even though he knew nothing about it and made a terrible mess of it. The ground was saturated with memories and dying things.

Jack imagined he could feel the warmth from the fire.

His father grew delirious with age, with his wife comforting him and caring for the man with silent gestures and futile movements that constituted a love so deep Jack could not describe it. They humbled him with their seasons, with her stoic steadfastness that perpetuated a desperate love: he was a good man. He had been a good man. Yet, lack of food and nobody tending to the farm pushed his wife to painful decisions. She rented acres out to others who tended it for her and paid her a percent of the proceeds. Jack's father ran them off, from time to time, confused why strangers were taking care of his property.

The fire had died down to embers, yet still Jack stayed. There was nothing for him elsewhere. It was a slow death, this existence, and he understood why so many people believed in a deeper meaning, in God. Yet, even though he believed, he could never make it to Heaven. He had lived a pious life, a strong life, yet his sins of omission had banked on his shoulders like crows in the field. He was silent when a voice was needed most. He was quiet when he saw thieves. Did not visit his father when he was dying in his bed. Not even once, when the man was so near.

Yes, his father went to heaven. He was a good man.

His shoulders sagged from years of avoiding the truth, the reality of it all.

His father died early last year, in the midsummer months. They buried him in the graveyard nearby. Jack did not attend the funeral. His father's wife would not even look at Jack, upon returning. Silence stretched to silence, and she took her life beside the mailbox with six red roses in hand before the first snow, never speaking to him again.

She did not go to heaven. Yet, she had been a good woman. A better woman than most.

Jack's head sagged low, the wind blowing hard. He turned away from it, his

unbuttoned shirt flapping, and his gaze followed the line of pumpkins. The dark silhouettes marked the only legacy his family had to pass on: a pocketful of seeds was his only heritage, and his only inheritance. Jack returned to the graveyard in Sündhofen, a place his father had spoken of often when he was younger. His father had wanted to escape this place, this prison of changing landscape and forgotten words, a foreign soil with foreign spirits and dreams. The legends of this place were forgotten, he had said to Jack, the ground no longer willing to give up its great secrets. He had told Jack he would take him with him, if he went. Joked about packing him up in a suitcase he used with his nicest suit. They would never know.

The man did not own a suit. But nonetheless, Jack had understood. They had shared a special bond, Jack and his father. Little was said between them as they had worked. His brother was the same way. Yet he had fallen, too. It was meditation that his father embraced. Perhaps it was silent prayer for peace and comfort, for a break from this dismal place. Although the new season will bring green, and life, and renewal, and God will see it fit to grow a new world from this forgotten patch of land. Jack knew his father struggled, and had wished he could do more for the man.

Remembering his father, Jack prayed the same way his father had: silently, and to the sky with his face toward stars. The winds died down, the owl still screeched. The coyotes had moved on, and the crickets, in the gathering cold, settled down to warm themselves. The pumpkins were like his followers, if he ever would have chosen any. They sat silently contrite as he prayed his prayer to the sky, their heads in the dirt and his raised high.

His prayer was bitter, though, for he knew he would not enter heaven. There would not be something more for him past this life, no great divine. Only fire and ash. How he wished he could have joined his ancestors in Sündhofen, in the woods, and among the graves. But he never would.

He could not.

Without people to tend with him and share the burden of loss, Jack's brother grew weak and fell. This family, it seemed, was too caught up in the working of the land, on the survival, on themselves, to care about each other. Jack included. The weight of the world was too much for his brother, and he fell. They were the salt of the earth, the sweat and toil of survival. They stood stark and stolen, representatives of another time, of another place. And his brother fell.

Then there was only one. And his life was waning. No one tended the crops now. No one plucked the pumpkins and sent them to town. No one clipped the grass or dug furrows. No one created anything. No one but God. Jack left the tending to the bigger world. He could only watch on as shades passed through the land into the graveyard beyond. They bowed their heads to him as they passed, the mark-less thousands who died before he came to this place. In reverence, he bowed his head too, a gust pushing at his back.

There, Jack saw. These are this land's secrets.

All that was left of the place was Jack, his pumpkins, and the fire. A strong wind blew, and the scarecrow joined his forgotten brother in the embers. A flare rose high, his sallow sewn sagging bag of a face slowly burning apart, the maple arms lighting fastest to his shirt-tails. The oak stick took the longest to ignite, being thick and strong.

The man that made the fire returned later to finish the yard work, only to see it had taken care of itself.

Forced March

David Amerson

It's the summer of 2003. I am detached from my parent unit and given orders to report to the third infantry regiment for a deployment to South Korea. Apparently the "grunts," a name of both affection and derision for infantrymen, need a "comm bitch," a term of derision only, for people that deal with radios, such as me.

The infantry are always distrustful, and usually hostile towards outsiders. At this time in my career, I had the paltry rank of lance corporal, which meant I had no position to protect myself against the harangues of the grunts. I spent the build-up to deployment subjected to more than a fair share of "bitch-work," which involved running errands, performing menial tasks, and cleaning...constantly cleaning.

In the Marines nothing is ever clean enough, and everything requires constant janitorial attention. Humvees, comm gear, weapons, floors, walls, roofs, ceilings, furniture, officer's offices, pissers, shitters, and sinks were in a perpetual need of scrubbing, sweeping, and polishing. The days passed slow and meanly, exercise in the morning, clean all day, bear the brunt of the Okinawan tropical clime, sweat, toil, atrophy. All day, everyday. Sleep is the only respite.

Like all things Marine though, the days may pass slow, but the weeks and months peel fast. I soon find myself in Korea; Camp Mujuk, Pohang to be exact. Not that it really matters, the only difference in my plight is that now I'm performing menial tasks in a "field environment," which is another way to say there is no running water or electricity, and our officers also don't have to deal with the pretense of providing us with adequate shelter or comfort.

The terrain of South Korea bears a striking resemblance to Midwestern America, albeit with subtle differences in the flora, the smells, and the hills. Everywhere there were hills, and while such variances in elevation make for beautiful pictures, I can't help but think that sooner or later I'm going to be forced to climb those fuckers.

That time comes soon, as I am told that my company (90 Marines) will be subjected to a forced march the next day. A forced march is just as bad as it sounds, the activity basically consists of cramming every piece of gear and ammo you have into your pack and vest, and walking with your weapons for miles and miles at a pace determined by someone else, usually an overzealous colonel who is out to boost his ego by proving that he "still has it."

I go back to my living area, which is a seven foot by four foot area of dirt that can fit my sleeping bag and pack, and prepare my gear for the next day.

I awake the next morning, about an hour before I am supposed to. I don't wear a watch so I figure it to be roughly 0300. I have to pee. I am sore, naked and sweaty: sore from filling sandbags the previous afternoon, naked in order to generate more body heat in my lined sleeping bag, and sweaty from the effectiveness of such a technique. I briefly consider just holding it, that maybe it's not worth the effort to put on my clothes, well, at least my underwear and boots, and go use the field trench.

I can't hold it. The contrast in temperature between the air and my sleeping bag compels me to get fully dressed. I trudge off to the trench, weaving between other sleeping bags, trying not to disturb the nightmares of the poor, dumb grunts. I find the trench, unbutton my fly, and relieve myself of this temporary misery.

As I return to my sleeping bag, another Marine on sentry duty, a grunt, stops me, holds his middle and index finger up to his mouth and asks, "Hey dog, can I bum a smoke?" I am usually pretty generous with my cigarettes, but while out in the field, where there is no place to purchase another pack, the request takes on a certain gravitas. Something about the way the way the grunt asks appeals to my better angels and I give it to him, drawing another from the pack for myself.

"Can I get a light?" he asks.

"Shit, man, do you need a lung and a habit too?" I ask as I fish around in my pocket for my zippo. I light mine first then toss it to him.

He lights it, and out of the corner of his mouth grumbles, "Fuck man, can you believe we gotta do that hump today, I heard it's gonna be like goddamn thirty miles."

I get aggravated by this; I like surprises, especially when it involves something bad. I'd rather the pain come on slowly, rather than set out on something I know from the beginning is going to be shitty.

"You're the comm guy, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Shit man, I wish I could do some shit like that. This grunt shit sucks." I guessed it didn't dawn on him that I was doing the exact same "shit" that he was doing in Korea. He continued, "It's supposed to rain today, too. The hump was originally scheduled for Sunday, but the division chaplain had the colonel move it up to today. He didn't want it to interfere with his 'services.' I tell you what, if I was the colonel I would've told him to go shove his bible up his dick hole. Hell, the colonel probably agreed with the motherfucker, all those goddamn lifers are holy rollers. Scares the shit out of me, people that think they got some damn whorehouse in the clouds to go to after they die are the ones that have to decide if I'm going to die or not. I'd rather have someone that knows that this is the only one we got."

I was struck at first, not by his thoughts, which were pragmatic as all the thoughts of embattled youth tend to be. I was struck by the faux pas of talking about death. While politicians, rednecks, and National Guardsmen often spew

their overwrought bravado, talking about "taking a bullet for their country," it is considered bad form in the Marines to talk about such things.

I put out my cigarette and walked back to my sleeping bag. A few of the others were beginning to rise, their wristwatches blaring out their digital death knells. I took off my boots so that I could put on a sock lining and apply deodorant to my feet, in order to prevent blistering. I put my boots back on, lace them up tight, roll up my sleeping bag and lash it to the bottom of my pack.

Sitting on the pack, I apply my camouflage paint. I rub my fingers against the hardened, colored oil; black paint on the light parts of my face, such as my cheeks and forehead, and green paint on the dark parts of my face such as my neck, under my nose and around my eyes. I work the oil in slowly, pretending that I'm being massaged. I can feel the paint fill my pores, assuring me of discomforts to come.

I walk to the chow tent to get my breakfast, today's menu, fuck, every day's menu is brown eggs and a Snickers bar. Brown eggs, technically "Southwestern eggs," are supposed to replicate the taste of an omelet with salsa, but really it tastes like what I imagine Styrofoam tastes like. I inhale it and save my Snickers for later.

An hour passes, and a sergeant yells, "Form it up!" Everyone in camp musters together and gets into formation, two long lines. My pack is tight and heavy against my lower back, but I'm not yet strained. I take a deep breath and await the dreaded command.

"Leftttt....face!"

"Forward march!"

"Route step...march!"

We begin down the road. The dust kicked up by the formation sticks to my camouflage oil. I take another deep breath, focus on the pack of the person in front of me, mutter a "fuck" under my breath and the torture session begins. I look over and see the same Marine from that morning, the smoke beggar, and I can't help but think maybe he was onto something about God.

We are only about a half-hour into the march, and I start growing uncomfortable. My gas mask carrier strapped to my belt and right hip is a bit too loose, and it is beginning to rub me sore. The sun has cracked the horizon, and my helmet liner is growing hot as sweat pellets race toward the pink parts of my eye. The metal buckle of the strap on my rifle clatters against the trigger guard since I forgot to "make it tactical" by taping it for silence, and the noise is tiresome.

Even more tiresome though is the singing cadence being called out with only a semblance of rhythm by some sergeant walking between the two rows of men. Whenever Marines are running in formation or on a forced march, they usually will "call cadence," the familiar rhymes and ditties popularized by war movies. This always struck me as odd in that, besides the absurdity of grown men having

organized and mandated sing-alongs, it seemed to fly in the face of the much vaunted answer to every question about training: "We're doing it to prepare for combat."

We tape our gear, carry ammo, keep on the look out for imaginary enemies and even clog our pores with camo-paint, but for some reason we still sing to each other while marching. Countless hours on patrols, in vehicle convoys, and on guard duty, all in silence, but when running or marching, we sing.

I rarely participate in the call-and-repeat of the cadence singing if I can help it. The breath and concentration is best spent on other matters.

"You can keep your army khaki...."

"You can keep your army khaki."

"And your navy blue...."

"And your navy blue."

"I've got a new breed of fighting man..."

"I've got a new breed of fighting man."

"To introduce to you!"

"To introduce to you."

"His uniform is different, his uniform is green.,,"

"His uniform is different, his uniform is green."

"The Germans called him Devildog"

"The Germans called him Devildog"

"His real name is Marine!"

"His real name is Marine!"

The singing goes on around me, and my mind wanders again. I think about everything and nothing, as long as it's *something* to distract me from the growing pain in my thighs and lower back. My mind is a jumble, a stew of a young, wasted life.

"I don't love you anymore."

"You'll never amount to anything."

"You're too dumb."

"I have breast cancer."

These thoughts depress me, and I try to replay movies in my head. My head, that is beginning now to chafe against my sweat guard; my head that begins to throb from the constant muffled sound distorted by my helmet. My head, that won't let me run though the best scenes in "Rocky," but rather is forcing me to conjure up demons.

"Sinful."

"Wasteful."

"Forceful."

"Brutish."

"Pussy."

"Lazy-ass."

When you're a Marine, mental fatigue often sets in before physical fatigue. Endless push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, up-down's, steam-engines, sprints, stretched muscles, sweat and sore bones, can all prepare your body for much, but no matter how much "mental training" and "character building" the Marines do to build up your mind, it is still a weak mind. No strong mind would have led its host to this point, on a damned dusty dirt trail in South Korea, toting all this guilt, all this pain. The goal of Marine Corps training is to build the body, but to destroy the mind. This is as important to combat as marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat. It is absolutely essential to gut the soul of the person to bring out the Marine—and who cares if they're a void once they go back home?

Not that the physical fatigue isn't palpable. We've been marching for three hours, and I lost my estimate of distance long ago. Mile 10, Mile 15, Mile 100, what does it matter? You just set your eyes to the ground and keep moving your hips forward. I can't see my face, but I can tell by looking at the faces of the people around me that the camo-paint has retreated from my scalp and smeared into one black mob.

The fall-outs begin to pass. Falling out is when you can't keep up with the pace of a run or march and you begin to slowly linger behind. This is regarded as a highly disgraceful act, and yet most marches usually drop about 10% of the participants. I look over and see a young, black male, no older than nineteen, struggling to keep pace. He is failing. The Marines around me mutter encouragement:

"Let's go man, catch up."

"Come on dog, it ain't nothing but a thang."

"Suck it up."

Pretty soon a sergeant sees him and starts verbally abusing him. In all the runs and marches I've participated in, I have never seen this tact work. The sergeant's harangue, colored with every curse word imaginable, continues on as the young boy falls further and further behind, until I can't hear the sergeant anymore among the boot-steps and cadence singing.

My inner thigh and crotch begin to feel sensitive. I reach down and touch myself and quickly recoil my hand. I recognize the pain and realize I have rubbed myself raw; this is a somewhat common occurrence during extended activities. At the next break, I drop my pack and walk into the nearest bush. I lean my rifle against a tree and dropping my pants and boxers to the ground, I look at my undercarriage. My thighs and balls are red, and throbbing as the sweat streams into them. The cool air feels good though and I pour water onto the affected areas. This condition is caused by the underwear rubbing against the skin, so I take out my ka-bar knife and use the serrated bottom, designed to tear the flesh out of an enemy's neck, and cut through the waste band and seams of my boxers, pulling them away from my skin and throwing them into the brush.

I briefly consider joining the boxers, simply hiding in the bush until the column of Marines leaves. These thoughts are common and normal and have filled the days since I joined. The thought is juvenile, the quickest and easiest way out of the Marines, so the axiom goes, is to just shut up and do your time. I pull my pants up, button them, then walk with my head down back to the column, eager to shut up and do my time.

I put my body armor back on, then my web vest, then I heave my pack onto my back and buckle the support belt. I no longer entertain illusions about escaping my plight, and I prepare to stare at the pack of the man in front of me and move one thigh then the next forward.

The march continues, I assume the break marks the half-way point, but who knows. It's not like the colonel is familiar with the land, nor am I for that matter. This makes the task rather easier, if I knew how far away we were from the end I may grow discouraged.

The dust kicks up, and the cadence resumes. My mind wanders as the fallouts begin to pass by. Again, I think of God. Up to my time in the Marines I never had a reason to doubt the existence of such a being. It would be neat and tidy to say that I grew smarter or wiser, and therefore disregarded the idea of God. This would be a lie. I very much wanted to believe that He was there, but how could I? It's easy to believe sitting in a warm home in the states, things become muddled when you are overseas and forced into medieval servitude. The old saying goes: "There are no atheists in foxholes." Whoever wrote that obviously never spent much time near a foxhole, or confronted the empty desolation that is a youth spent soldiering.

"Sinful."

"Wasteful."

"Stupid."

I often think of my friends back home. When I talk to them, they tell me stories of college keg parties, random sexual encounters, and psycho-tropic substances. I seem to prefer these stories, even if they fill me with envy, compared to most of the other drivel that comes from America: patriotic bumper stickers, yellow ribbons, tiny American flags. Nothing makes most Marines sicker, some upper middle class housewife, or her accountant husband, talking to each other about how brave and courageous our troops are. But the troops are only loved in the abstract, from a distance. These same people would shudder at the thought of their daughter dating a Marine, or their son becoming one. And while I enjoy my college friend's stories, I know that they'll never enjoy mine, or be able to understand me on any but the most superficial of levels. They, like the accountant and his wife with the bumper stickers, can never conceive what it is like to have no control over one's life, what it's like to carry a rifle and have a mind full of murderous skills, what it's like to march.

The march continues. Up steep hills, down steep hills. My head hurts, my

knees hurt, my feet hurt, my balls hurt. Everything hurts and no matter how many times I am subjected to forced marches, it will always hurt. There is no preparation for this, and I imagine having to perform this in combat, marching to a fight, and marching away.

I look down at my rifle. My M-16. My mind wanders to suicide, how easy it would be. I could rack a round, release the safety and swing the muzzle into my mouth in less than 3 seconds, ending this nightmare. I imagine the round blasting out the back of my skull and probably my helmet, my head turning to a veil of pink mist and pieces of meat. I could pull that trigger, be done with this and all subsequent marches, be done with the Marines, be done with unfaithful girlfriends, be done with my mother's cancer. I could release a round into my hand in less than three seconds and I would be out of Korea, and sure my mom would be sad, but she would have my insurance for her medical bills, and I'd be out of the Marines and I would finally know if there was a God or not.

The pain is everywhere. It is inside, in and out, my stomach cramps, my temples throb and I feel like I'm slipping to insanity. This is what happens when you build the body, but destroy the mind. This is as important to combat as marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat. It is absolutely essential to gut the soul of the person to bring out the Marine, and I realize that I am now gutted. There will be no respite, there is no home.

I begin to feel dizzy, yet my thighs keep pushing me forward. The First Sergeant yells "Gas, gas, gas!" which is the command to don and clear our gas masks, another little torment to "maximize" our training experience. The Marines around me grumble and curse, but I am dizzy. I grab the mask out of the carrier attached to my thigh, strap it around my skull, cover the intake and clear the air out of the mask by blowing hard, then releasing my hand and inhaling deeply. I am grateful for air that is not full of dust, but the mask warps my vision and lengthens and deepens all the sounds around me. I can only hear muffles, and it is very hot.

I can only hear my breath now, moving in and out of the filter. I see a road-guard pass behind me. Road guards are Marines that walk ten yards ahead and behind the column, wearing a fluorescent orange vest, and stop traffic while the column crosses intersections. The First Sergeant yells, "Give me that fucking vest!"

The Marine takes it off and hands it to the First Sergeant, who then yells to him "Get the fuck out of my face!" Scanning the column, the first sergeant sees me.

"Comm fag!"

"Yes, First Sergeant..."

"Wear this, and get your ass up to the front."

"Aye, First Sergeant."

I jog to the front of the column and continue the march as a road guard,

sprinting to each intersection, pausing briefly until traffic is stopped, then running back to the front of the column. This is a nominally different if not more miserable experience than simply marching.

Hours pass, and the sun reaches its zenith and begins to wane. I can't feel my feet anymore, my thighs are throbbing and I can still feel blood trickling down my thigh.

"God, where the fuck are you?"

What the hell am I asking? What have I done to deserve any intervention in my misery? Life is shit, my body is broke, my mind is a stew.

We crest the hill, then the next, then the next. I feel like a bag of meat, and I don't know what's keeping my thighs moving. Physical stamina? A weak soul?

The colonel decides to quicken our pace to a run. Me and the other road-guard follow suit, and as we un-sling our rifles and hold them in our off hand, we begin to move one thigh in front of the other and move up the hill. My lungs tighten and for one minute, for one brief minute, I forget it all, no more girlfriends, no more Marines, no more cancer, no more goddamned bloody balls. I pump my arms back and forth, lean forward and race to the top.

And then it was there. As I round the top of a hill, I see our camp at the bottom. It is done. It is over.

Relief washes over me. I have brief fantasies of beer and cigarettes and sleep, but there is no beer for miles, I'm almost out of cigarettes, and there is never enough time for sleep.

An hour later I am in a field shower, really just a hose with several spigots draped over two by fours. I let the water wash over me and, though my legs are numb like jelly, the water still stings my thighs. I feel no God, no redemption. The levee has broke.

I dry off, wrap my towel around my waist and walk to my pile of clothes. I dress myself and open my pack of cigarettes, drawing one out. I light it, draw in the smoke and push it out. For a moment I am content, happy.

I feel happy to be done, but I know I am a fool for feeling this way. There is no more rest, there is no more peace, and now, there is no more God. I left him in a bush by the side of the road.

There is no finish, I am never done. Twenty-eight miles down, millions to go.

Just a Blink of It

Christopher Heisserer

Michael, mind extraordinaire
Sat down in a cafe with nothing more
Than a shawl dangling about his waist
And a hat-more in his hand than his head.
"For certain," he spoke, holding his hat
Holding his menu upside down, "Moments,
These, in gesture, must all come from love."
He pondered his words, and wrote them
Down on a napkin with the tong of a fork
(Carefully did he write, for words-
Mere tears on the fabric of cleanliness.)
He thought the thought, and wondered
If should he place those upon the paper
As well.

Time stood beside him, waited on his whim,
And he ordered a leather watch, then ordered
Angelfood cake, and finally, when the waiter
Returned, ordered him to sit and dine with him.
Michael, after a remark on how fanatical
People must be to name dessert after dying dreams,
Shot the shit with Time,
And Time, the bore he is, remarked only on how
Michael liked his watch,
How Michael liked his cloth,
And how Michael liked his napkin.

"Soften the discussion, oh brother,"
He finalized, "Peace be with the man
Who eats his cake with the same utensil
Of which his dreams are placed."
Holding up the fork to the window,
The sun blinded Time in its reflection,
And before he could blink,
Michael was gone.
With the words scratched in Time's napkin-
"Just a Blink of It."



Human Communication - Nicole Shutt

Manifestation of the Immaterial Departure from Substance

Dushan P.W. Yovovich

“...one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one’s own ever-shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from the personal life into the world of objective perception and thought.”

- Albert Einstein

“Our work is never over.”

- Daft Punk’s *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger*

Some say humans are set apart from other species by our foresight. The ability to hypothesize the outcome of any event, action or scenario is the opportunity to learn from others’ mistakes, and to avoid learning “the hard way.” This does a great deal for self-preservation, and as we become increasingly apt at organizing and communicating causes and effects, we have the ability to simulate increasingly complicated scenarios and act accordingly. This paper will argue that technology, particularly the internet or the networking of technology, is the epitome of the collective consciousness and is an evolutionary trait humans are recreating in a tangible and pliable method. I will also discuss possibilities of how this evolution will change us and the world around us, what will determine its final outcome, and how seedlings of these changes are already visible in today’s culture.

Our progress in foresight aptitude is both created by and shown in our media. With every development in media and communication, so is developed our security as a species as we reflect deeper into what it means to live, and to live well. Effects of media coverage range from exposing and fighting human rights violations to announcing recalls of dangerous products (Metzl 706). With such thorough security in our own physical well-being, we are able to delve into cognitive subtleties of life such as lifestyle, art, cuisine, entertainment. These are all luxuries afforded our species by development. However, as occupations become increasingly cognition-based and specialized, an individual’s ability to independently sustain one’s physical self decreases. Society’s inhabitants become increasingly dependent on each other. For example, an artist would be nowhere without an art-appreciating community to financially support the artist in buying food, shelter, and other necessities.

The human body and mind have progressed to a tipping point where physical evolution no longer keeps up with mental evolution. That is to say, the speed at which genes evolve is now slower than the evolution of ideas or “memes,” a term coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to describe spread of cultural ideas in terms of genetics. The result of this shift is the creation of an increasingly tangible and essential “noosphere.”

Teilhard de Chardin prophesied [in the early 20th century] that our current phase of being, in which individual humans live independent lives, would eventually be replaced with something else – something more collective and more spiritual, something focused on information and consciousness rather than material being. He coined the word noosphere or mind sphere to refer to the globe-encircling web of thought and information that he thought would arise at the end of our current phase of being. (Goertzel 328)

With the increased ability to share specializations globally through our ever-evolving noosphere, it becomes easier to find supporters for an individual’s specialization. All one needs to do nowadays is to propagate an idea, or a meme, to create a career for oneself. For example, The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is an online community that spawned from an open letter written to the Kansas School Board. The letter argued that if intelligent design is taught in biology classes as an alternative theory to evolution, then so should the teachings of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Pastafarianism, as it is called by some, maintains that God is made of spaghetti and meatballs and that the diminishing pirate population directly correlates to the global warming crisis. This meme, which Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear described as one of the “top ten most effectual internet memes”—by admittedly “popular appropriations of the word meme as a word to describe particular infectious phenomena,” (Knobel 199) has not only gained the attention of thousands, but members as well, and claims to have “raised in excess of \$100k towards the world’s first voyaging Pirate Ship Church, open to all Pastafarians.” (Henderson November 2009)

This kind of success is possible, for better or worse, because of the internet culture that comes as a result of the internet’s ability to broadcast any individual’s presentation globally for any user to enjoy. Taking this convenience a step further, the World Wide Web’s organizational prowess allows websites to bring personalized information of interest to the user, who hardly exerts any effort at all. With programs like RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) websites can ask once what a user is interested in, and then bring her continually updated summaries of what is available; search-sites like Google now have intricate systems of browsing that bring search results, as well as links and advertisements that not only relate to the search-phrase, but is also based on information about

the user (geographical location, past searches, other websites you've visited) that it glances off of her signal and from its database. Though subtle in their usage, these abilities flirt with invasion of privacy on an intimately personal level as our identity information is increasingly digitized. This speaks to how effectively the internet can bring users what they want.

Like Teilhard de Chardin predicted, the globalization of communication doesn't only affect business, or the way goods are distributed; it affects culture, the way ideas move and evolve, religion, and even the way people move. As the internet pervades every aspect of daily life, it becomes an immaterial parallel dimension for a new kind of building block for life. This noospherical internet mimics and reflects our physical world, and thus acts as a stage in which memes can be more fully realized as cultural genes. It gives them the equivalent to a bodily world in which they can combine and replicate, interact, travel, be born into and die out of. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, uses the term "meme" to describe the basic building block of culture as a zoologist would use "gene" to describe the basic building block of species. "These fast-evolving new genes, or memes, include cultural products such as religious beliefs, political convictions, pop culture fads, or virtually anything else that can get passed on by imitation" (Dougherty 88). The World Wide Web serves as a meme-pool. "It is still in its infancy," Dawkins writes, "still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already achieving its evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind" (Dawkins 192).

It would seem that memes differ from genes in that memes are socially constructed while genes represent a more essentialist entity, but perhaps this is due to the youthfulness of the phenomena. Dawkins says man is merely a vessel for the propagation of genes (from this idea comes the title of his book). The meme-pool is limited by our ability to retain memes, and in this way we are again vessels for propagation. In order for memes to evolve, they must spend time at the forefront of our minds combining with other memes, and thus they compete for our attention through "radio and television time, billboard space, newspaper column-inches, and library shelf-space" (Dawkins 211-12). However, as software and technology matures, they become more capable of storing, organizing, presenting and even re-editing; memes are simultaneously integrated into daily life and given physical characteristics, as in the case of TGarden Responsive Media Spaces (Chin 441).

A TGarden is a responsive media environment, a room in which people can shape projected sound and video as they move. Upon entering a TGarden space, each visitor—called a player—is asked to choose a costume from a set of garments designed to estrange the body from its habitual movement and identity. An assistant dresses the player, strapping wireless sensors on the player's chest and arm.

The player is then led into a dark space illuminated only by video projected from 5 meters above onto the floor, a space filled with sound already in a residual motion. The assistant tells the player only to listen as she moves to understand what effect bodily motion has on the ambient media. As the player moves, her gestures and movement across the floor perturb the field of sound, modifying existing sound and introducing new patterns. The room's own autonomous processes generate a musical "cantus firmus," and each player effectively carries into the room another voice, but one that is semiautonomous, parameterized by gesture and by the state of the software system. The synthesized video projected onto the floor provides a visual topography for the player to navigate. In some instances, objects appear projected onto the floor, but always transforming semiautonomously according to the movements of the players. (Chin 441)

Though this technology may not be of much practical use in its current state, it certainly speaks towards interesting possibilities, and raises a few questions. For example, why is the user suited up to estrange her from normal motion? Perhaps merely to draw the user's focus to how specific motion affects the field of data, but more importantly it is to integrate the special manifestation of data into the motion of the user. The user must be born again into a data-body. As this technology evolves to become more utilitarian, and less cumbersome to use (requiring a special room, outfit and sensors) users will have to be comfortable with this new body of motion – they will have to be comfortable dancing with the bodies given to the data they are manipulating. As we find the shapes common between the way people can move within the TGarden and way the data morphs in response we can again start increasing the complexity and articulation of the input and output data, and thus evolve our memes in a physical manner. As we've discovered with computers, technologies like this can be assimilated into and useful in all aspects of daily life. It will only be a matter of time until we manage our iPhones, locate ourselves on the GPS, or change the song on our soundtrack for walking down the street by dancing our commands to the machines.

People's usage of the internet ranges everywhere from planning their days via online-correspondence and calendars to maintaining their financial standing; from downloading media on religious and spiritual practices to entertainment and sports; from keeping in touch with family to making new friends and even finding future spouses with online-communities. All of this is done swiftly, efficiently, and even absent-mindedly (by the user's perspective). With the convenience of technologies like smart phones and wireless internet, people can do things like text or email a house-mate instead of getting up and walking into the next room. The internet is easier than walking and talking.

So what does this mean for the way we live? "Robotist Hans Moravec...

envisioned that humans will eventually 'download' themselves onto computers and will lead bodiless digital lives"(Goertzel 310). The post-humanist argument suggests that just as humanism replaced God with the belief that man is the measure of righteousness, so will machines replace men as judges of aptitude, "for even as man turned himself into god, he increasingly began to resemble machine"(Dougherty 85). These prophecies of bodiless lives, bionic people and machine-like standards seem a distant and unrealistic future. Likely in a literal sense, we will never become singularly digital entities, but already we have begun to practice with data-bodies.

Online role-playing games like Second Life and World of Warcraft allow players to create an online character. These characters have bodily needs of food and sleep, economic needs, social lives, and even careers. There are economic structures where a player can work and trade for money— money that can be used in the game for food, material objects such as clothes, a car, or even a house, or illegally traded for real money. There is more than enough programming to have a daily life and a career.

What is the role of the human body to the population of gamers who spend more time in the digital world than otherwise? William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* was an early descriptor of the possibilities of a virtually materialized internet universe - cyberspace. In his novel, the main character, Case, is a professional computer hacker who's given a neurotoxin, leaving him unable to log into the brain-computer interface for cyberspace.

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh" (Gibson 6). Even after his fall from digital grace he uses digital language to describe his consequently formed drug addiction. "... In some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the matrix. Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see [the city] as a field of data, the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties. Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market... (Gibson 7)

It becomes especially clear that the body's place in modern America is being neglected when one considers simultaneous aesthetic obsession with the body and the rise in obesity, postural problems and chronic pain. We spend our days sitting, maintaining a nearly fetal position whether we're at home sleeping, eating dinner

or watching TV, driving to work, sitting at a computer or even using exercise machines. In comparison to the world we live in, the body has become stagnant and unchanging; if you're lucky, it's a pretty accessory. We are slowly trying to phase out the body. Like the industrial era, which gave us a technological and economic boom, its usefulness seems largely to have come and gone.

Similarly, it is becoming clear that our way of automated mass-production of food and food services combined with the sedentary lifestyle of living-in-the-mind is insufficient for sustaining a healthy populace, or even a healthy environment. Earth is not capable of providing the fuel necessary to run our bodies externally through machines. We are already over-drawing resources as we plunge further into our addiction to technology. In the midst of an oil crisis, which has caused wars, economic debts and pollution, we haven't let up on our driving or consumption, but rather are looking for alternative fuels. Like a cigarette addict we are scrambling to find an alternative, a patch, so that we don't fill our lungs with carcinogens but can still appease that craving.

The industrial era is over, and it is being replaced by an era of information and technology. While the humanist struggle represented the battle between divinity and earthliness, the post-humanist struggle will be organic versus machinic, personal versus automated, environmental versus corporate, animal versus machine, nature versus nurture. The race will be run by technology in alternative fuel production and a culture of holism, people who believe in the human body as a cog in the earthly machine. Though I doubt that one of these perspectives will win over the other entirely, just as neither God nor man yielded at the inception of humanism, it does seem that our society will be rearranged into a dichotomy of dependence on the earth, and independence of the earth. Theoretically equally sustainable, the earth-dependent will give back to the environment as much as they take, and the earth-independent won't effect it at all. These two worlds will be on different spheres of life, be it literally or metaphorically. One may be a virtual reality or just a life enshrouded in technology, but the majority of what will be considered life for the earth-independent will be founded on a different set of interactions than that for the earth-dependent. What will these interactions look like? A dance with immaterial objects? A static, motionless mind-game? How we develop and go about these changes is as wholly unpredictable as what and how the next technology will sprout new life. Perhaps as we brave the continuous onslaught of new technology we should reflect, and remember the proficiency and sustainability of the human body as a machine. To an evolutionist, it may not have been our first, and it's starting to look as though it may not be our last.

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River Glass with Bridge Dana Thomas House - Danny Rosenkranz

author/artist biographies – in their own words

David Amerson graduated from UIS in 2008 with a BA in English. He is a veteran of the United States Marine Corps and a survivor of catholic school, both of which left him with a big chip on his shoulder. David plans to attend law school, but until then is realizing that an English degree doesn't go too far in a poor job market. He would like to thank Tena, Donna, Ethan, and the rest of the English Department for classing up the joint.

Colten Bradford is from a small town in Illinois called Vermont. He is a freshman in the Honors program at UIS, and, as of now, is undecided about a major and what to do with the rest of his life. He is really interested in photography and may make that his career.

Mary Colligan lives in Peoria, Illinois with her award-winning husband of twenty-two years and her two super-tight teenage sons. Mary has been active in *The Alchemist Review* blind jury and the Verbal Arts Festival during her two years at UIS, and she enjoys any opportunity to participate in and support the arts. She will be graduating in the spring of 2009 from the Online English Degree Program, an event that has been many years in the making (it probably shouldn't take fifteen years to get a degree). She plans to throw a huge party with tents, tiki torches, mojito cocktails, a Caribbean kettle band, all her loud Italian relatives, her husband's theater friends with their penchant for improvisation, those friends of her own who have hung in there through years of neglect, all the distinguished authors in this issue of the *Alchemist Review*, everyone she's ever met or harassed on Blackboard, all the faculty of the English Department, and anyone else who wants to come, too.

Melissa K. Conrad has been passionate about photography for about three years now and has taken multiple darkroom and digital classes to help develop her skills as an artist. Currently she takes pictures as a hobby. She majors in Communications and minors in Visual Arts (photography concentration) at UIS.

Teresa Downard is an online Mathematical Sciences major. She is twenty-five, married, and has two boys.

Travis Genenbacher is an English major and Women Gender Studies Minor. He will graduate after the fall semester in 2009. He is twenty-one years old and resides in Springfield, Illinois after being raised outside of Quincy, Illinois.

Christopher Heisserer writes flashes of life with a romantic slant, while delving into the psychological aspects most take for granted. His poetry has found its way into a university-wide bi-annual anthology called *Collage* printed through Millikin University. He believes he brings a fresh look to the perspectives he's writing about. He was also active in the Herscher Project, a small group of dedicated writers working toward publication in anthologies. He currently lives in Springfield, Illinois and is currently an English Major at the University of Illinois.

Lola L. Lucas has been an adjunct faculty member at UIS since 1996. Her first book, *At Home in the Park: Loving a Neighborhood Back to Life*, is a collection of her

columns about life in Springfield and (hint, hint) it's available in the faculty works area of the campus bookstore. She's also an occasional book reviewer for the *Illinois Times* and stringer for *The Ale Street News*. Passions: kaleidoscopes, tarot, SF&F, standard poodles and husband Kevin. Ambition: to hear her poems read on *The Writer's Almanac* by Garrison Keillor.

Katie Luchtefeld is a first year English Master's student. She is thrilled to be a TA at the Center for Teaching and Learning where she facilitates tutoring appointments and works with English 101 classes. Katie did her undergraduate work at Eastern Illinois University where she received a double BA in Theatre and English. She spent four years working backstage in opera before heading back to school at UIS.

Emily Martin is not really a poet.

Faisal Nsour is an online student in the management information systems program at UIS. He lives in Fremont, CA.

Danny Rosenkranz has a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Georgia. He has a passion for being out in nature which inspires him, as do people. He volunteered on organic farms in England and Costa Rica with the WWOOF program (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). He also volunteered with the sea turtle project La Tortuga Feliz in Costa Rica. Currently he is a graduate student in Environmental Studies at UIS.

Niki Shutt is a Communications major who will graduate in May 2009 with a BA. She will be getting married the following August.

Shana Stine is in her senior year as a Liberal Studies major. She is the founder and director of Jump for Joel (jumpforjoel.org), an organization that feeds and educates kids in Kenya.

Caron Tate is an online English major and spring 2009 will be her fourth semester at UIS. Since beginning short story writing a few years ago, her stories and poems have been published in *Takahe* (New Zealand), *The Alchemist Review*, *Voices*, and one was recently accepted for publication in the Sigma Tau Delta journal *Rectangle* (2009). Her literary essay work was also featured as part of the first UIS Webposium. She wishes to thank Drs. Cordell and Dong for the huge improvement in her writing skills. She finds it amazing how scholarly writing can impact creative writing.

Dushan P.W. Yovovich is the twenty-year-old son of Bozidar and Noël Yovovich. Dushan's father is a mathematician turned writer, and his mother is an engineer-minded artist and metal smith. Stemming from the responsibility of passing on the Yovovich heritage comes a student of interdisciplinarity, holistic perspective, and the pursuit of sustainable healthfulness. Dushan has spent his efforts toward said goals through environmental restoration of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) in the Mojave desert, working as an organic farmer in Vermont, urban landscaping in Chicago, and most recently as a student of the University of Illinois at Springfield. He is a fan of self-propagating electromagnetic waves and SET the card game.



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