


2006

et cetera

Marshall University

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*et cetera.*

*marshall university's creative arts annual*



2006



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*marshall university's  
creative arts annual*

2006

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*Et Cetera* is an annual creative arts magazine that publishes the work of current Marshall University (Huntington, WV) students. *Et Cetera* is free to all Marshall University students through on-campus distribution and through online publication at the URL below. Inquiries about submitting or purchasing can be directed to the following address:

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## **acknowledgements:**

The Et Cetera Literary Guild would like to thank the M.U. English department faculty and staff, and the staff of the Java Joint, as well as all who contributed submissions and helped in their own way to allow us to reach our goal. Additionally, we're indebted to all area businesses who helped support the production of this issue through their generous contributions and donations to our fundraising efforts. Special thanks goes to Dr. Chris Green, Christy Ford, Kathleen Cutler, and Josh Iddings, without whom the printing of this issue would not have been possible.



## from the editor:

Months ago I started a note to introduce this 2006 issue of *Et Cetera*, and reading it now, the tone was so far removed from the work and fun of this endeavor, it feels anachronistic next to the prospect of the finished magazine. We began with the assumption that *Et Cetera's* goal was to showcase the best of what was offered by the student body of Marshall University, and, as in the past, I think we've succeeded. However, in some ways we vastly underestimated the work it would take to do so.

At the beginning of the Fall 2005 semester, several former editors of *Et Cetera* came together with focus, intent on seeing the magazine put back into print. For the last three years, the lack of a budget has prevented *Et Cetera* from being published physically, and while online publication is an increasingly legitimate form, especially for periodical publications, all of us who dedicated ourselves to this project wanted to see it manifested in something more substantial. When Jonathan Greene, founder and editor of Gnomon Press, was asked at a recent lecture for his opinion on the future of publication, rather than attempting to prognosticate his entire response was simply "Well, I hope it's not thee-book."

Obviously, the benefits of online or electronic publication are numerous: cheaper, easier to distribute, potentially wider readership, easier to design, edit and maintain, etc. Yet despite these advantages, readers still hunger for the physical feel of paper pages. You can't



mark up an e-book with underlining or marginalia. And how do you throw one in your pocket or pack to carry with you between stops? (Although there are pocket size e-book readers now... as long as you go indoors to read it so the backlight isn't washed out in the sun, and you have your batteries, and maybe a case to protect it, a NC adapter for the office, be sure not to lose your stylus, or whatever, etc). Likewise, how can you dog-ear an e-page? But perhaps most importantly - one of the truest tests for book lovers - an e-book can't **smell** like a real book. Like that new-car smell, there's something olfactually satisfying about flipping through a book fresh from the printer, whether off the shelf or out of a box.

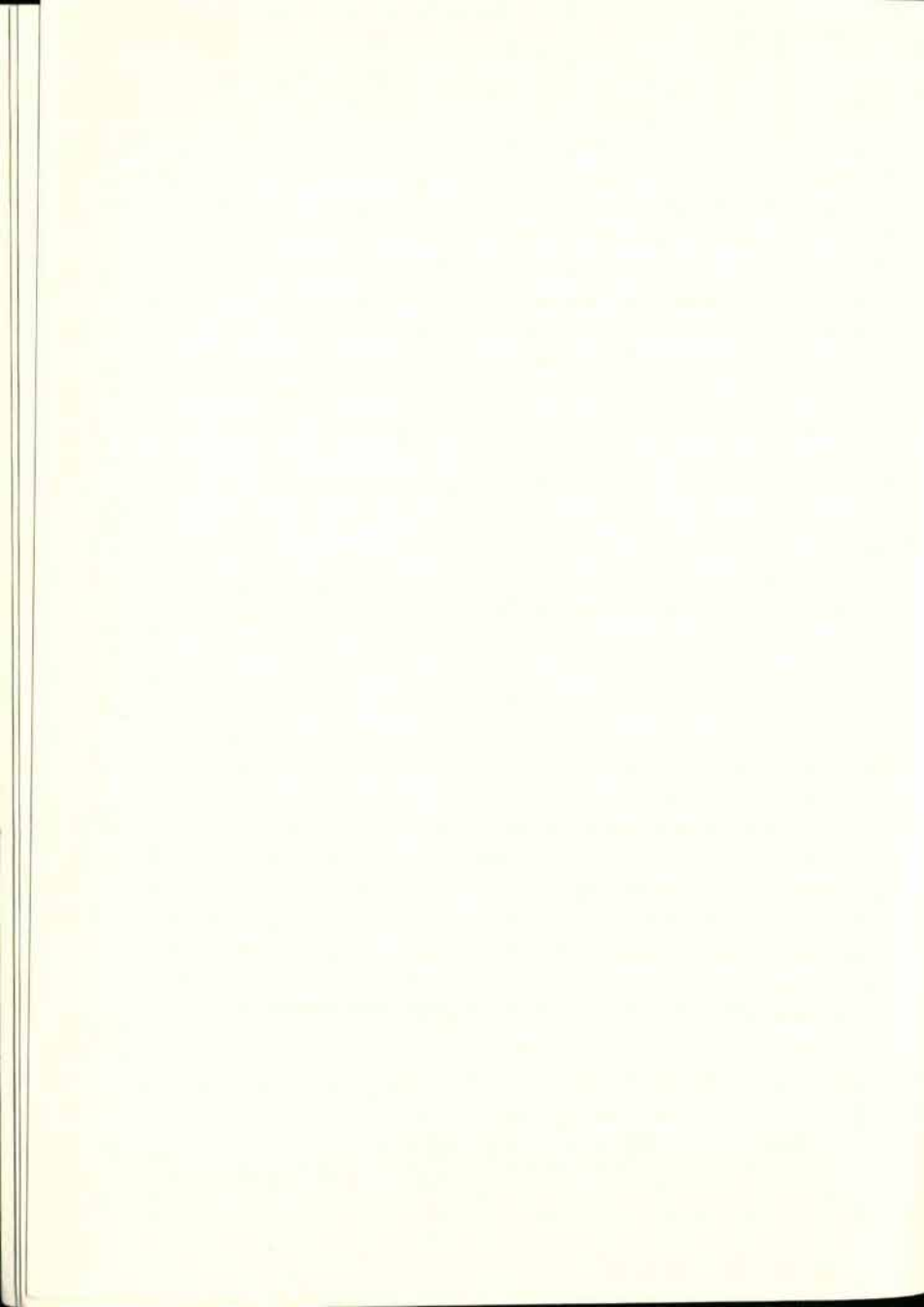
So, we resolved this year to see *Et Cetera* back in print and would settle for nothing less than a professional quality publication. If we were determined to do it right, the sentiment ran, then we were going to go all-out.

This thinking spawned peripheral goals associated with the idea of a professional journal. One of the first steps of the journal's production was to apply for an ISSN, something which hadn't been sought in the past and which now is displayed prominently on the back cover and masthead. With an ISSN (and retail price) we've also resolved to place the magazine in a few independent bookstores around the West Virginia-Ohio-Kentucky region, with the hopes that increased visibility will open doors for greater recognition of Marshall's talented writers and artists, leading to more opportunities for greater distribution and larger print runs in the future. Indeed, much of the work put into *Et Cetera* this year has been preparatory, setting the stage for what we hope will be an increased scope and role in the future.

However, as much work as is put into the production of the magazine itself, it must be kept in mind that the physical publication is only a frame for the content, and with this issue of *Et Cetera*, we came to some decisions as to what we value in terms of the kinds of

submissions, and the submission process in general. We wanted to showcase the incredible variety of voices sounding throughout the Marshall community, giving a stage to some that might otherwise be lost in preferential treatment that values specific, comfortably familiar tones and themes. As we decided to try to reach out to more of the Marshall University student body, however, we realized that the four categories currently, and historically, featured in *Et Cetera-short* fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and fine art-limited the publication in ways that were incongruous with this goal. So we devised the ill-fared "Etc." category. Ill-fared because we didn't receive enough submissions for this category to be realized in this 2006 issue; had it been, our hopes were to see everything from musical compositions to plays (or portions of, at least) to critical thought/analysis essays all published together—a judging nightmare, to be sure, but an eclectic collection to show that creativity *can't*, by its very nature, be so narrowly limited. Perhaps for the future...

In the end, it simply comes down to a love of creative expression, in all its forms, and the hard work of those who dedicated themselves to the creation of a vehicle to display it to others. *just take a look*, is all we're saying with this thing, *just open it up---one poem, a little bit of one of the stories, maybe even just browse the art work*. We're easy to please, really, because truly this isn't our work (even if some of it is). It's the work of the community we belong to and are proud to be a part of, and we want you to see in it what we already know to be there. Of course, this isn't to discount the hard work of everyone who helped produce this issue, or the tremendous support we've received along the way. It's just that sometimes we want to scream *LOOK AT US*, and here in your hands is finally something to look at again.



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# Short Fiction

## **Wolf Pack**

by **Joshua Mattern**

[Ist Place]

N o b o d y really liked Babe Wiesetty.

I suppose his name had something to do with it. Where we all grew up, a little steel town in the northwest part of Nebraska, the name Babe meant nothing to us. Most of us probably hadn't even heard of the baseball player who made it famous. We thought our friend was named after a candy bar. Or that his father, upon seeing his infant son lying in the hospital bed, had mistakenly thought the boy was in fact a girl, and named him (or her) accordingly. But even that didn't make much sense, either, for, even if you thought you had a girl, why would you name her Babe? Surely, you were just asking for her to grow up to be an ugly hag and lend the name a bitter taste of irony.

What's odd about the whole thing is that had he been named Mario, after an athlete from a sport team we did know a lot about, nobody would have raised a brow. Nobody would have made fun of him, called him "Super Mario."

Yes, his name did have a little to do with it, but I'd be a fool, or an outright liar, if I said that I didn't play a part in it, as well.

## Short Fiction

Joshua Mattern

Before the 7th grade, life was surreal. There's really no other word to describe it. Oh, of course, we didn't see it as such back then. But years later, especially while immersed in the state-sanctioned terrorism chat is called public high school, though we would, all of us, look back on those elementary school years with a bit of fond remembrance, there would also be present disheveled disbelief that we ever let such a life go. Before they filled a building half the size of our elementary school with twice as many kids and called it junior high, actions meant nothing. You could pee your pants in public, and no one would care—as happened with Jack Medley, who, 5 years later, threw for 465 yards, 3 touchdowns and no interceptions in the state championship game. You could attend a sleepover and begin to spontaneously cry in the middle of the night, waking up your host's parents, and then tell them that you were homesick, even though home was only half a block away, and nobody rolled their eyes—as happened with Stevie Blackman, who, as of the telling of this story, leads his Republican counterpart for the job of Nebraska State Treasurer by 15 percentage points.

Before the 7th grade, you were everyone's friend. You had no choice. It was irresponsible to actively torment the kid who sat behind you in first period and to your left for the rest of the school day, who rode the same school bus, whose father worked the same shift at the same factory, who lived two houses away and whose mother frequently borrowed your father's snow blower. They swam in your pool in the summer when your parents weren't home, because they knew the neighbors wouldn't tell. You stole Cokes from their fridge when they weren't home, because you knew their parents left the kitchen door unlocked. We were, unintentionally, of course, a miniature Marxist community.



But with junior high came capitalism.

Junior high turned us into something resembling a giant wolf pack, with each of us destined to play a specific role in a system that depended upon each and every part for the whole machine to work properly. The Alpha, being the most vital to the survival of the community, was chosen first, and chosen easily: Jack Medley, the aforementioned future hero of New London South High School in the winter of 1997. With his chiseled face, clear blue eyes and short, ink-black hair, he didn't even have to compete for the job of the Alpha. It was rather wrapped up in red paper with a bow stuck on top and presented to him.

Robert Perrington was our Beta. He was shorter than Jack, fatter than Jack, uglier than Jack, stupider than Jack, and, really, nobody liked him at all. But in a field hockey game the season before last, Robert, who went to Petry Elementary on the other side of the county, caught a nasty shoulder check from Jack, and responded by swinging his stick (like a baseball bat, I would have said at the time, had I any knowledge of that game) at Jack, breaking his nose and knocking out two teeth. Jack never played hockey again. But it was the very next year that he began playing football, and so it wasn't a completely unfortunate turn of events in the long run. And though we couldn't give the job of leader to Robert simply for breaking Jack's face, we also knew it was an act that couldn't be completely ignored, and so an uneasy alliance was struck between the two of them in junior high.

From there on down the line and through the Greek alphabet, our roles were assigned, acknowledged and accepted. What we lacked, though, was an Omega, someone to take the brunt of our ceasing, someone to be our whipping boy. We needed someone to

torture. We needed a victim.

Babe Wiesetty's fate was not sealed at the outset; though, on account of his name, he was definitely in the running for the job. But he had competition, as well. Stevie Blackman, of course, was part of the race. Jack called him a fag for always wearing button-up shirts and khaki pants. And there was another kid, Ridley Myers, a thin as a rail veritable albino with pale white skin and gray eyes, who really was gay, though none of us figured it out until high school, his parents until he graduated, and Ridley himself until he was divorced and 22 years old. And of course, there was me. I was picked on, even in elementary school, for being too skinny and for wearing my hair in a ponytail. I retaliated by having sex with a senior girl when I was in the 10th grade, beating Jack by a good 9 months.

But it was music that worried me the most. I played the piano, was actually pretty good at it, actually got really good at it in years to come. Morn made me start taking lessons when I was 6, and the only way I agreed was if she promised to never tell anyone. Peeing your pants is an isolated incident, a moment in time, a blip on the map of childhood-it happens, and then is gone. But knowing how to play the piano is a continual mark of shame, something that can never, ever go away. Even if you stop actually playing, you still know how to play, and so you still are marked. I would be a leper among the people of Moses.

I hid my talent well. Or, rather, I thought I hid it well. But it wasn't 2 weeks into the 7th grade that I was walking down the hallway, on my way to 2nd period, when I heard someone mutter the words, "Keyboard boy."

I spun around, horrified that someone had learned my secret,

and in that moment I was prepared to kill whoever it was on the spot, so desperate was I to escape the potential and, indeed, imminent, ridicule of my classmates, the scorn of Jack and the others. But the holder of my secret had already disappeared into the anonymity of the hallway. I didn't give chase, knowing it would be a useless act. I ducked my head down, continued about my way, and told myself that I was hearing things, that my secret was still safe.

For a month or so nothing else happened. Then Stevie took himself out of the race by making out with Susan Kaufman in the girls' bathroom one day, thus proving his heterosexuality and eliminating any reason for him to play the part of Omega. Shortly thereafter Ridley Myers came to school one morning with a black eye. When someone asked how he had gotten it, he admitted that his father had hit him when Ridley attempted to step in between the drunken patriarch and his frightened wife. Overhearing this, Robert Perrington began to laugh. A fiery rage came over Ridley's ghostly face, and with a war cry that I heard in my dreams that following night, he leapt upon Robert and began raining furious blows down upon him. Even the teacher who soon came to break up the fight was at first too stunned to intervene. Everyone acknowledged that had Robert had ample time to prepare himself for a one-on-one bout, Ridley would not have stood a chance; that fact notwithstanding, he was still afforded a certain amount of respect for having the guts to attack Robert, no matter the circumstances surrounding the act.

The role of bottom feeder, of whipping boy, of Omega, was between me and Babe Wiesetty. Aside from the piano playing, I had no real talents. I wasn't particularly attractive. My parents weren't rich. I wasn't funny. I wasn't strong. And it was on account of

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Joshua Mattern

my mediocrity that I was in danger of becoming the Omega. But that very same mediocrity could very well be, I reasoned, my saving grace: you are punished for being extraordinary, not mediocre.

Seventh period, Social Studies, was my last class of the day, and after that final bell rang on a Tuesday in November, I was walking across the school parking lot toward the great line of school buses when I noticed the staring. A lot of kids I recognized, a lot more that I did not, were shooting me Aeering glances, then hurriedly looking away when I caught their eyes. I got on the school bus feeling a bit nervous, bur not too ill-at-ease. The whole ride to my stop, I went over in my mind everything of consequence chat I had done recently, trying to recall if I had stepped out of line in any way, had made my self a potential target, bur nothing came to me. Then, chinking about the fact that it was Tuesday, the day that my mother drove me to piano lessons at rthe community college, my heart fell from my chest and landed in my shoes: someone had told my secret.

The bus pulled to a stop, and I stood f'rom my sear, feeling ill as I walked down the aisle. They were still staring, I noticed, but now, there was also whispering. Whatever was going to happen, if something was going to happen, was coming soon.

I got off the bus, rook a few steps and heard Babe behind me. "Hey, fag."

I turned around, and saw Babe standing in the middle of a pack of kids from our neighborhood. His pointed nose and arched eye-brows normally aided in the creation of a harmless-looking character, but today those features looked menacing and evil.

"Going to play your piano, fag boy?" he asked. An unnatural sneer hung on his face.

As I scared-there was nothing else I could do - I noticed his lip quivering, and his face began to turn red. "I'm talking to you, fag," he said.

His eyes were clouding over. If I could keep him talking, I reasoned, he would soon begin to cry, and this would be over.

But he began to walk toward me. Though his legs noticeably shook, he still feigned confidence with his stride, and he finally stood right in front of me, his eyes staring into mine. He reached out his hand, shoved me in my shoulder. "Come on," he said.

"Fuck you, Kike," I said.

The scarlet drained out of his face, and he looked paler than Ridley Myers ever had. His lip, just barely quivering before, now began to tremble. He cocked his head to the side and, in that quiet moment shared between the two of us, a barely-noticeable nod of his head acknowledged my victory.

"Fucking Kike!" someone yelled, laughing, and before I knew what was happening, Babe had been shoved to the ground. I should have stayed around, enjoyed the spoils of my victory, but I suddenly felt like I was going to vomit, so I turned around and began my way home, walking very slowly at first. By the time I was a block away from chem, I had broken into a full sprint.

And so, like wolves did we live. To everyone outside our pack, we seemed to be nothing more than heartless savages, preying on the weak, within and without our own numbers. But there was an order, a very strict order, that governed us, and by it we abided rigidly. And though we snapped and snarled at each other, as each of us depended, in one way or another, on the other, true harm was never caused. Blood could and did spill, rears could and did fall, but scars were never to be left. None, anyway, that could be seen.

And that which is invisible may well not exist at all.

In March, the ridiculously-tided summer league began for the county field hockey team, and every day a er school for a week, 20 or so of us would walk from the bus stop up to the park for pre-season tryouts.

Robert Perrington, long known as the most dangerous forward any of us had ever seen play, was initially seen as having a lock on a starting job. And when we found chat the rumors of Jack hanging up his stick were completely true, there was no doubt whatsoever. Bue something happened.

Babe, who had been the backup forward-behind Jack-on our 11-and-under team, was a competent player, but no one would ever go so far as to call him an athlete. At these tryouts, though, something greater than his self took possession of his body, and forced it to play hockey more fluidly and with more skill than any of us had ever seen, in anyone, including in Jack. When the coach had us run sprints, Babe finished first. When we took turns at runs of 20 thirty-yard shots, Babe made 17, 15, and, on his last turn, 19 of 20.

Stevie, Ridley, Robert and I walked home together from tryouts on Thursday, and it was Stevie who finally said, "I've never seen anyone play like chat."

Robert, walking in front of the rest of us, said nothing, and he didn't turn around, either.

Ridley nodded his head in agreement with Stevie. I said, "He must have been practicing," and, though I didn't dare say so, I felt strangely happy for him.

Ridley, who was horrible at hockey and had nothing to lose one way or the ocher, was the one to say what we all were thinking. "I

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### *Wolf Pack*

wonder if he'll be the attacker."

Attacker, in hockey, is another word for forward. The way we used the words, though, forwards are those who play the position when the attacker, the true forward, is sick, gets hurt, or is grounded.

Robert had been quiet, and strangely civil, up to this point, listening to the conversation about Babe's blossoming skill without a single cross word. But at hearing Babe's name mentioned in the same breath as the attacker position, he stopped walking and spun around. "No," he said. "That's my job." His eyes were wide, and sweat was beaded up and ready to fall from his forehead. Truly, he looked like a wild animal. A wolf.

Ridley, with courage I could only dream of having, put a hand on Robert's shoulder and said, "Let's just see what happens."

For a moment, I thought Robert was going to punch him, and I winced in anticipation of the blow. But Robert finally shrugged and said, "Guess we'll have to."

On Friday, we found out that Babe was named starting forward.

"This can't happen," Robert said, while we were walking home that day. He didn't sound angry, as he had the day before, but panicked, frantic. Afraid. "That's my job," he said, just as he had done the day before, but this time it sounded more like a prayer than a declaration.

We walked on in silence a while, and Stevie said, "What if he didn't play?"

"What do you mean?" Robert asked. "You think we should hurt him?"

Stevie looked surprised at this suggestion. "No, I mean ... what if he just decided not to play?"

Robert said, "Why wouldn't he play?"

Stevie shrugged and said, "He's a Jew, right? We'll buy him off. Tell him we'll pay him to not play."

Tfelt dizzy. "No," I said. "We can't do chat. That's ridiculous. He's good. We want him on the team."

Robert looked at me with a challenging, yet subtle, ferocity. "Who asked you, Tom?"

Just like in hockey, just like in a wolf pack, though roles had been assigned, they easily could change. Upward mobility, of course, was impossible. But one could fall down the ladder at the breeze caused by the slightest whisper from a higher figure.

"Nobody," I said, after a minute.

"I can give 20 bucks," Stevie said.

"I got 25 or so at home," Ridley said.

Robert said, "I can throw in about 20," and then, looking at me, "What about you, Tom?"

"I don't know," I mumbled.

"Ha!" Robert laughed, "Don't know how much money you got, you must be loaded then, right? You can pay for it all yourself then, right? Right?"

I swallowed, forcing the vomit back down into my stomach. "I don't know," I said, nearly whispering. "Maybe 20."

The smile Robert shot me said, Your life is in my hands. Then he turned back toward Stevie and said, "So that's over 80 bucks. Hell, I'd quit for 80 dollars." He turned back to me and nodded. "And I'm nor even a dumb fucking Jew."

He held his stare, but said nothing further.

Real practice began the following Monday, right after school, and lasted until 5. When coach blew the last whistle, Stevie, Ridley



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and I stood together while Robert jogged across the field to where Babe stood, alone, waiting for his dad to pick him up. They were too far away for us to hear anything, but we saw Robert's hands gesturing as he explained the idea. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out the money we had all put together, and held it out toward Babe.

Babe didn't even glance at it. He threw his bag over his shoulder and walked right past Robert.

Ridley whispered into my ear, "That was a dumb move. A real dumb move."

The next day at school, Robert wouldn't talk to anybody. I had 1st period with him, and the entire hour he kept the palms of his hands pressed firmly against his desk, and his eyes stared straight ahead at the wall. I'm not even sure if he blinked.

Lunch was after 4th period. Robert, Stevie, Ridley and I joined Jack at a table in a corner of the cafeteria. Nothing, at first, was said about hockey, or the exchange that had taken place between Robert and Babe-or, rather, the exchange that hadn't taken place. But 10 minutes into the lunch period, Babe walked by our table to dump his tray, and for a flash of a moment, he locked eyes with Robert, before continuing past.

After he had gone, Jack punched Robert lightly on the arm and said, "That's your new attacker, isn't it?" he asked, smiling. He didn't know about what had happened the day before. "Man," Jack said "and after the trouble I went to to give you my job."

Robert only said, "That's a nice jacket," pointing at the light blue windbreaker that Babe was wearing. He followed Babe with his eyes as Babe walked through the cafeteria, out the set of double doors and onto the playground. He waited a moment longer, wear-

ing the same look on his face that he had worn on Friday, when he looked at me after I said we shouldn't try to buy Babe off. Then, as if ignited by a mechanism none of us could see, he leapt to his feet and began walking, determination and purpose in his stride, toward the doors, toward the playground, toward Babe.

Those of us left behind, we finished our lunch. The others were done before me, and headed outside to the playground. We were allotted 30 minutes every day for lunch; whatever time was left over after we were done eating, we were allowed to spend it outside, shooting basketball at the hoops that had no nets, or sitting on the stone block that held the Aagpole, set in the middle of the playground. None of us were good at basketball, at all, and so, amusing as this pathetic lack of talent was to us, we usually hurried through lunch on nice days, so that we could spend as much of the period as possible pretending that we knew how to play, and ridiculing each other at every inevitable foul-up that occurred in the course of our pathetic games.

This day, though, as I watched the others wander out the doors to the playground, I felt like taking my time. I don't know why, really. I wasn't particularly hungry, and it was one of the nicest days we had yet that spring. Still, though, something kept me in that cafeteria much longer than [ normally would have stayed. Even after I had eaten everything on my tray - an act that, itself, was rare - I sat a moment, alone, silent, staring at... I don't know what.

Then, with a sigh, I rose from the table. I walked toward the doors. As I got closer, and could see outside through the windows on the doors, I could see a small crowd, 6 or 7 people, gathered around the Aagpole. I was curious, but not concerned.

I walked outside. The teacher on playground duty stood by the

door, and he gave me a nod as I walked past. Something rose in my stomach as I walked toward the crowd at the Aagpole, something that had festering there for a long time, something I had repeatedly choked back down into my throat, every time I thought it was going to gag me.

In the middle of the crowd chat had gathered-which was slowly growing larger-stood Robert and Babe. Babe had his back pressed against the Aagpole. His face was contorted into an unnatural-looking smile, and was as red as a ripened tomato. Robert's hands hung at his sides, his fingers shaking and, as I got closer, I could see his eyes screeched wide with something I had never associated with him: fear.

Babe, I soon could see, had taken off his windbreaker, and had it draped around his shoulders. Around his neck. It was around his neck.

I was maybe 10 feet away when I saw that the windbreaker was tied around his neck. And it wasn't a smile that I saw on his face. He was struggling to breathe. He was suffocating. As the shade of scarlet on his face continued to deepen, his mouth hung open, his lips stretched wide. He began making a gurgling sound, something chat sounded like someone gargling mouthwash in a soundproof room where the door has been left slightly ajar.

Then, in a single moment, his face went from red to blue, and he closed his mouth. His arms fell to his sides and his eyes, though they did not close, glazed over and scared at something far off in the distance.

Calmly, I had never felt such a calmness before, I walked up to Robert and said, "What did you do?"

He looked at me, shook his head slowly, and opened his mouth,

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Joshua Mattern

but no words came out. I looked back up at Babe. Why, I wondered, was nobody helping him?

The world lost all sound. I felt something brush by me, grazing me on the shoulder. I turned, and saw the teacher who had been standing by the cafeteria door leap up to the block that held the Aagpole. He was shouting something. I could not hear this, only see it on his face. His eyes were crazed, enraged, terrified, as he struggled to free Babe from the windbreaker noose.

A moment passed, and the teacher, at a loss, finally just tore at the fabric of the windbreaker, and the great tearing sound that erupted is what made the world audible again.

With the windbreaker loose, Babe fell forward, onto Robert, who jumped backward, as if repulsed, as if worried about catching some sort of disease.

The teacher grabbed Babe in one arm, and with the other shoved Robert, hard, out of the way. Robert stumbled back, then sat down on the ground.

"He'll be okay," I heard the teacher say, and then, "Somebody go inside and call an ambulance. He'll be okay. He's okay."

I walked over to Robert, looked down at him, and said again, "What did you do?"

His head turned upward, and when his eyes met mine, they were filled with tears. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

After this episode, I fully expected to become the Omega, anticipated and, indeed, resigned myself to what I was sure would be my new role. As I said, falling down a ladder is no great accomplishment. But the whole dynamic, the whole pack, just sort of dissolved, after that day. I remember walking home after school, remember Mom and Dad asking me what was wrong. I

## Short Fiction

### *ll?'o!f Pack*

remember Dad said something about my always forgetting to do the dishes, and then I threw a butter knife at the window. And I remember chat he came into my bedroom and I was lying on the Roor. I woke up a little while later, and Mom was standing over me. She said I hyperventilated, and while they were crying to calm me down, I just passed out.

I remember people coming  $\alpha$  school, how we were all called out of classes, one by one, taken into the counselor's office, and told to talk about what we may have been feeling. I remember that I had nothing much to say.

I remember chat after I was done in the counselor's office, I walked out into the hallway and passed Jack, who was on his way in. He was smiling, but it was an odd sort of smile, the kind of smile someone wears when giving into one's true emotion would cause the heart to implode and the brain to collapse.

Jack Medley, now chat I'm thinking about it, he played three years of football at Rutgers, until a knee injury ended his career. He now does high school sports commentary for the local news.

And Ridley Myers got married when he was 22. He sent invitations to all of us,  $\alpha$  me,  $\alpha$  Stevie, to Jack, even to Robert. When his wife left him, he did cocaine and slept with a man named Scott.

Stevie Blackman, if the polls mean anything, will likely be Nebraska's next Stace Treasurer. I saw him out at a bar one night, and after 3 beers he said he wanted to be governor someday. After 7, he mentioned the presidency. We both did a shot of vodka, and chen ~~he~~ cried, and I held him in my arms, said, "It wasn't our fault, man.

Robert Perrington, after high school, worked at the steel factory where his father worked. He worked the same shift that his father

## Short Fiction

Joshua ifattern

worked. His father died of lymphoma at the age of 52. Robert Perrington shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun two weeks later.

I saw the funeral notice in the newspaper, and decided to attend, for a reason I cannot explain. Jack came to Robert's funeral, and so did Babe's father. Nobody else that I knew was there. I suppose it was mostly family members. Jack shook my hand, after the funeral, after the Robert's family had all boarded the caravan out to the graveyard. Babe's father, when he noticed me, approached me. I was surprised that after all this time he recognized me, and I put out my hand, but he put his in his pockets. He said, his voice sounding more annoyed than angry, "I can't believe you've got the nerve."

I said, "What do you mean?"

And I really meant it, too. It had been 10 years since that day on the playground, and though I thought about it every day, I never once, not once, wondered if Babe's family held us responsible. Sure, I imagined their grief. I imagined the look on Babe's father's face when he answered the phone. I knew they hurt. I knew, could see it in my mind, that there were many nights, following that day, when they could not sleep. I knew they did not sleep, because I did not sleep, and as I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling fan, I could almost hear their sobs. It was either my own mind collapsing, or God's punishment for what part I had played in the whole matter.

But I didn't think that they blamed us. How could they? I didn't blame us.

And so I said to Babe's father, "What do you mean?"

He looked at me a moment, and the expression on his face was the same that Babe had worn the day I called him a kike, the

day I sent the pendulum swinging back in his direction. The day I clamped my teeth firmly around his throat, not leering go until he stopped breathing.

His pupils contracted, and what little white I could see in his eyes became streaked with red, then filtered through a thin layer of unfallen tears. "You really don't know," he said, declaring it, not asking it, not doubting it.

I shook my head, more, though, to fight off the feeling creepin into my ears, where I knew it was coming to nest, to fester, to birth and spread. "No," I said. "No."

He inhaled deeply through his nose, let the air Aow out through his mouth, and said, "I remember a day, my son came home and asked me what a kike was."

My heart began to bear our against my chest. I thought I heard a rib crack.

Babe's father said, "I got the phone. I was going to call your parents. And Babe said ... he told me not to. And when I asked him why, he said that it wasn't your fault."

I thought, It was an accident.

I played the piano, I thought. I played rhe piano.

I killed one of my own.

Babe's father closed his eyes tightly, as if trying to force the memory out of rus mind forever. Then, for the first rime since I approached him, he took his hands out of his pockets, clasped the fingers together as if in prayer and put them up to his chin. He said, so softly I could barely hear him, so softly I couldn't be sure if it were him speaking, or the buried dead that surrounded me on all sides, "He wasn't Jewish. We aren't Jewish. My father..." he started, but his voice trailed off. He opened his eyes, looked into

## Short Fiction

Joshua Mattern

mine, shook his head and turned, walked away forever.

Babe Wiesetty's brain hemorrhaged on the way to the hospital, and he died. Robert said it was an accident, and none of us said otherwise. I, myself, couldn't say otherwise, because I wasn't there when it happened. And for not being there, for not knowing, for not being able to tell anyone, one way or the other, what happened that day . . . for that I thank God.

One of the first songs I ever learned to play was Pachelbel's Canon in D. I played it at a recital, one week after Babe died. It wasn't any sort of sentimental choice on my part; it was simply what I had happened to be working on at the time. I've played it so many times since then that I don't even need the sheet music to be in front of me. Now, I just sit at the piano and play, my eyes closed, my fingers dancing. It sounds beautiful and terrifying, like a pack of wolves howling up at Midwestern full moon.



**Selections from** *Miss Helen Sue's School of Modeling and Fine Graces*

by **Angela Hunt**  
[2nd Place]

**Shrimping Poodles**

"**T**he pageant interview is the most important segment of the pageant, after swimsuit, evening gown, and talent, because you get a lot of points from it," Helen Sue explains.

"But I thought that interview counted for the most points?" I ask.

"That's what I said," says Helen Sue.

I'm sitting in the middle of Helen Sue's School of Modeling and Fine Graces, on what may be the most uncomfortable chair ever made. It's one of those wooden high-back ones you might find in someone's dining room, except that Helen Sue has painted it pink. I feel like I've been in this chair for hours.

"Now, do you know how to sit?" Helen Sue asks.

"I am sitting," I say. What a weird question for her to ask.

"Well, I know that. I may not be as young as I used to, but I'm not blind. Are you familiar with the interview sit?"

"r guess not."

"Just hop on up and I'll show you in a jiffy," Helen Sue says, placing Little Fred the poodle down at her side.

I stand up and let her take my place. She sits perched on the end of that pink chair, slightly turned to the left, with the balls of her feet on the ground and her heels high and together in the air. She placed the tips of her fingers to her knees. With the crazy smile on her face added to it all, it is indeed a sight to behold.

"Now you try," Helen Sue says, as she leaps up. Sometimes she seems to have just a little too much energy.

I take my place in the chair. I try to twist my body slightly to the left, as she did, and I can feel my left butt cheek start to ache. I put my knees together, push the balls of my feet into the floor and try to lift my heels high in the air.

Then I feel the licking.

I look down and Fred the poodle is going at my toes with his slimy little pink tongue. If Mom had let me wear my tennis shoes like I wanted to, this wouldn't have happened, but she had to demand that I wear these horrible open-toed stilettos.

I try to push him away with my feet as gently as I can, but he just keeps coming at my toes like he's on the same pageant diet I am. I can feel his rough, wet tongue sliding between my toes.

"Alexis, stop that twidgeting. The judges will think you're one of those kids with that twitchy syndrome," Helen Sue says, as if she doesn't see what her little annoying dog is doing to me.

"But Helen Sue, Little Fred is -"

"Now don't go blaming Little Fred for your fidgety fidgets. As a pageant contestant you must be prepared for whatever the good Lord throws at you. But remember," Helen Sue says as she bends down to pick up Little Fred, "not every bump in the road to pag-

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helm SueL*

eant queendom will be as cute as Little Fred here."

I stare at Helen Sue as she stands there in front of me, patting Little Fred on the head, over and over again. Each time she pats him his eyes close- pat, close, pat close. He is such a strange and irritating thing.

"We'll just have to move on to something else for now. I can see that the interview sit is not working for you today," Helen Sue decides.

"But Helen Sue, if you just hold Little Fred so he can't lick my toes . . ."

"Alexis," Helen Sue says, with a look of patience, "It just takes some girls a little longer to get the hang of things. You'll get it someday."

Helen Sue turns and takes Fred over to his bed.

"I hope," I hear her say to Little Fred under her breath.

She turns and makes her way back to me.

"Well honey, what should we work on now?" Helen Sue asks.

Before I have the chance to tell her how I think I might just have to stop for the day, since, of course, it is going to take me so long to catch on to everything, she begins her next lesson: Eye Contact.

"Now, you need to remember to keep eye contact with all the judges at all times," Helen Sue explains.

"But how can I do that? How can I keep eye contact with every judge all the time?" I ask. It seems like a legitimate question to me.

"You look at the judge that is asking the question."

"But then I wouldn't be keeping eye contact with all the judges," I say.

Helen Sue looks at me with this confused look on her face.

"Well, honey, you can't keep eye contact with all the judges at the same time. That's impossible."

I can tell this is going to be a really long session.

### **Beached Whales Are Yummy**

Peeing Grandma stinks.

I mean, I know that she normally smells pretty bad, but this is different.

"It'll be really fast," I hear mom say.

"No, no, I can do it myself," Peeing Grandma responds. I can **tell** she is starting to get really angry at Morn.

"No, you need to let me help you," Mom says. She is in Peeing Grandma's room, trying to convince her that she needs help washing her old lady ass.

Lately Mom has been buying Peeing Grandma everything she wants- and because Peeing Grandma has such a sweet tooth, it's mostly been trans fat upon trans fat- basically everything Morn won't let me eat. Anyway, I guess Peeing Grandma gained a few pounds and can't reach her behind to wash it.

Because Morn is currently occupied with Peeing Grandma, I **focus** my attention on trying to sneak some ice cream from the freezer. Mom has been a total stickler on this stupid diet, and **ing** Peeing Grandma usually helps me out by being difficult with Mom.

"I'm not a baby," I hear Peeing Grandma say.

"I know you're not a baby. I never said you were."

"You treat me like a baby."

Sigh.

I open up the freezer and find that Morn has taped two new

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helen Sue's..*

pictures in there. Mom says that this is a great "dieting" technique, but I bet she got the idea from some skeletal thirteen year-old on one of those awful websites.

Mom thinks we both need to lose another twenty pounds. She can be pretty stupid sometimes.

One of the pictures is captioned to a carton of ice cream. It is a black and white image of a beached whale. Ha.

The other picture is captioned to Peeing Grandma's box of corn dogs. It looks like a snapshot from some sort of family reunion- and I mean a BIG family reunion. I wonder how she went about finding that picture. What'd she do- go to GOOGLE and type in "lots of fat people?" Jeeze. I regret having taught her anything about computers.

I pick the beached whale and close the freezer. As I grab a spoon out of the drawer I can still hear them going back and forth in Peeing Grandma's room.

"You are going to smell like a baby if you don't let me help you."

"I don't smell like a baby," Peeing Grandma says.

"You've got to let me help you."

"I can wash myself just fine."

"If you can wash yourself just fine, maybe you should actually wash yourself."

"I can wash myself just fine . . . "

Oh my gosh- this conversation is never going to end. Bue . . . maybe that is a good thing. If Mom is busy with Peeing Grandma, she can't harass me about the pageant.

Peeing Grandma really does stink though.

I used to think that the old person urine smell might just be the

worst smell in the world, but I was wrong. The worst smell in the world is old person pee coupled with old person ass-funk.

Whatever.

fu long as I didn't have to clean her ass I didn't really care. If she wants to smell like crap- fine. I'll just try my best to avoid her. I'll change her name from Peeing Grandma to Stinky-Ass Grandma- it all comes from basically the same place anyway.

I start across the hallway to my room with the ice-cream. I'm almost past stinkville when I hear her.

"Alexis, remember what happens to fat people. That could be you if you eat any of Grandma Martin's ice-cream," Mom yells.

What? They don't get to be pageant queens? Too bad.

I go in my room and sit down on my bed. I'm glad I grabbed Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey. Not only does it taste good- it has a great name. I put a big spoonful of it into my mouth.

This is for you, Mom- a little chunky monkey of a daughter. You'd like that wouldn't you?

### **Dr. Phil the Love Pill**

Mom has started stalking this psychiatrist named Dr. Phillip Murdock. Dr. Phil- what a joke. And not only that- Mom has decided that I should go see him for my problems. Can you believe that? Mom thinks I have problems?

It's ridiculous.

I mean, she's the one who constantly reminds me how crappy a person's life will be if they gain five pounds, and I am on my way to see lover boy for advice on my mental issues.

I know she just wants to find herself a rich doctor to buy her

## Short Fiction

*Mrs Helen Sue's...*

everything and anything she wanes.

Maybe he can buy her a new daughter.

Mom and I walk into the building where his office is, and get on this elevator which smells like a cross between Peeing Grandma and chicken nuggets. It's a weird and disgusting combination. I feel like barfing all over Mom's new pink suede jacket.

His office is only on the fifth floor, but it feels like we must be going to the 500th floor for how long it is taking us. I just want the doors to open. She starts whistling.

I hate it when she whistles.

She does it whenever she gets nervous, but she would never admit that. She whistles as she pulls her compact and lipstick out of her pink Louis Vuitton purse. She whistles as she reapplies several layers of lipstick. She whistles as she places her make-up back in her purse and zips it back up. She is whistling as the elevator finally makes it to the fifth floor. The doors open and the whistling stops.

She makes fun of people who whistle in public.

She looks at me, smiles, and says, "This is what we want, remember- to sort out all of our problems and be happy?"

I don't say anything.

I especially don't tell her that she has a big glob of red lipstick on her top front right tooth.

Dr. Phil, a.k.a. Lover Boy's face is orange- like he's been spending too much time in those fake tan spray booths. His teeth are white- maybe a little too white. They seem to give off this unnatural glow every time smiles.

He smiles too much.

I mean, aren't I supposed to be disturbed or something? Why is

he so happy about chat? But I know it has nothing to do with chat. It all has to do with my mother's cleavage bursting out of her pink cashmere sweater.

Men are stupid.

He talks to my mother, like I'm not even there.

I can tell I am being used by both of them.

### The Stance

"Now Alexis, do you see how Darrell keeps his front foot pointed straight ahead? Now honey, I want you to look at Darrell closely and cry to copy him, okay?" says Helen Sue.

I look at Helen Sue's son Darrell, up on the catwalk, right hand on his hip, left arm gracefully placed behind his left hip. He is wearing a tight black shirt with "Drama Queen" written out in rhinestones. I wonder if he's ever taken dance classes. He is pretty graceful- and he's really good at this whole standing around thing (even if he is mad about Helen Sue taking him away from Ellen).

Today we are working on something Helen Sue calls "The Stance." For some reason, I guess I am not reaching my full "Stance" potential. Truthfully, I don't even know why my little pose isn't good enough. It's just standing there, looking pretty . . . except that actually, I guess it isn't. It's like some secret weapon of the pageant queens; get "The Seance" right and the world belongs to you. No one can resist "The Stance." I wonder what would happen if Little Fred became an expert at "The Stance?" Would the pageant world then belong to a little, annoying poodle? Hmm. I bet it wouldn't change much in the pageant world. This whole thing seems like something conceived by a bunch of poodle brains- and



## Short Fiction

*Miss Helen Sue's..*

probably dyed pink poodles to be exact. Pink poodles wich-  
"Alexis!"

My eyes snap into focus and Helen Sue has her face so close that I'm afraid her nasty makeup might rub-off on me. She keeps snapping her fingers and saying my name.

"Alexis!" she says again. Snap, Snap.

"What?" I say, as I cake a seep back from her.

"You're acting like you're someplace else, honey," Helen Sue says, "Are you daydreaming about Leif Garret again?"

"Mocher, normal people don't even know who Leif Garret is," Darrell says, caking a seat on the edge of the platform.

"Who?" Darrell's right. I have no idea who Helen Sue is talking about, "No, Helen Sue, I was, uh, visualizing my "Seance"- I was trying to perfect it," I say.

"You weren't daydreaming about Leif Garret?" Helen Sue asks, with a look of doubt written across her face.

"I definitely wasn't daydreaming about . . ." Darrell is crying to mouth the name to me, "Leave, Lee, oh Leif whatever-his-name-is."

"Well then, honey, step up on the catwalk and show us your scuff," Helen Sue says, patting me on the back.

Darrell helps me up onto the catwalk and says, "You're hoc, Alexis, you'll be a natural at all chis, don't worry." He seeps off the platform. "Bue I've got to get back to Ellen now- she's interviewing Orlando Bloom today!"

"Oh yeah?" I say, "He is pretty hoc."

"I know, right?" Darrell says, and as he makes his way back to the little office area, pare of me wonders why exactly he had a perfected "Seance." Bue then again, it's Darrell, and . . . well I don't know. Darrell is just Darrell. Nothing ever really surprises me about

him.

"Now, Alexis- don't be afraid. The catwalk is where you show the world what the good Lord gave you- and lucky for you, he gave you a lot more than some people," Helen Sue says. "Now let's see your walk and Stance."

I try to walk to the back of the catwalk as gracefully as I can. I'm almost there when I take a bad step and I feel my left foot start to twist in the stiletto.

Ouch.

I'm okay . . . I can do this. I mean, stupid girls do this all the time.

I turn, smile and then start my walk towards Helen Sue. I make it to the end of the catwalk and try to contort myself into "The Stance": right foot pointed straight ahead, left foot at an angle behind the right foot, hands gracefully at my hips. It hurts so bad- I HATE high heels. I should murder whoever invented them.

The front door opens and she comes in; two shopping bags swinging on either side of her.

"The pageant stance," Mom says, as she walks towards us, "Oh honey, I'm so proud of you- doing the pageant stance- it's so great!" She puts the bags down and starts to clap her hands excitedly.

I fear what's in those bags.

"Now Honey, just stick out your boobies a little bit more and . . ." Helen Sue starts to say, when mom interrupts her.

The clapping has stopped.

"But don't let your stomach sag, Alexis- you don't want to look fat."

"Yeah, cause seriously Alexis, you are so fac," Darrell says, as he

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helen Sue L*

makes his way over to mom and Helen Sue.

"No more Ellen?" I ask Darrell.

"She already interviewed him and I missed it," Darrell says, and then mouthing, thanks to her, gesturing toward Helen Sue.

"Ok, sweeties, now we need to get back on track," Helen Sue says, "We have a lot to do before the pageant."

"Maybe you two just need to chill out a little bit," he says, pointing at mom and Helen Sue with his right hand, his left hand on his hip. "Alexis is hot- I don't know what you're so worried about."

"She just doesn't understand how tough the competition is going to be. The girls will be beautiful and poised and she's . . . well, she's rough, obviously," Mom says, "Maybe it was too much to even think she could compete in a beauty pageant."

"Honey, I don't know about that- I mean, don't you think she's made a lot of progress the past few days? And look at her now, doing the The Stance," Helen Sue says, patting my foot.

"She's just missing something," Mom says.

"What is that, honey?" Helen Sue asks her.

"The desire to accomplish anything," Mom says, looking straight at me.

"Mom, I've been trying the best I can," I say, with my hands on both hips.

"Yeah, I mean, she can do 'The Stance.' What more could a mother want?" Darrell says.

Mom cums and gives him The Look. I had never seen her give The Look to anyone else before. It's scary from all perspectives. But, you know, it's actually kind of nice having people around for once who talk back to Mom (besides Peeing Grandma, of course), and

## Short Fiction

Angela Hunt

who don't drool all over her and pretend that she's some movie star (Like Dr. Phil, the Love Pill).

"Well, anyway, I have to go over to Betty's Beauty Bonanza, all right?" Darrell asks.

"But Darrell, what if I need you here? You know my old hips won't twist into the pageant stance like they used to." Helen Sue asks. Oh, I doubt that.

"Mom, seriously- I really need to go. Have you seen my hair lately? It's repulsive," Darrell says, touching his frizzy fro.

It does look kind of bad- kind of like he just spent the last hour playing 'stick the finger in the electric socket' over and over again.

"Well, all right honey." Helen Sue says. "Do you need some money?"

"Mom, I have my own money," Darrell says, looking slightly embarrassed, as he makes his exit.

My feet are killing me. I have no idea how I can possibly stay in these shoes for an entire pageant. I wish Darrell hadn't left me- Helen Sue never really has the balls to stand up to mom on her own.

I can feel the headache coming on. Is it from all the pink? Helen Sue's School of Modeling and Fine Graces has a way of doing that to me sometimes . . . or maybe it is Helen Sue's perfume- I don't know. Maybe it's the way Mom is looking at me- with her twisted crazy mixture of approval and disgust all rolled into one.

"Can I please sit down for a minute? These shoes are really hurting my feet," I say.

"Alexis, no," Mom says. "Don't you want to perfect your stance?"

"Mom, seriously, my ankles are going to give out if I don't-"

## Short Fiction

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"Mom, seriously, my ankles are going to give out if I don't-"

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helen SueL*

"You'll stay up there till you get it right. You've got to get this right or you'll never make the cut," Mom says.

But I don't want to make the cut. I just want it all to be over. I want to be myself- whoever that is.

"Helen Sue, please tell Mom that . . . "

"Honey, she's right. The stance is one of the most important things you will do during a pageant. Maybe if you just pushed your little boobies out a little more--" Helen Sue says.

"And sucked in that stomach--"

"But don't look like you're sucking it in--"

"Straighten that front foot--"

"You know, she always does seem to have a problem with that front foot--"

### **A Banquet of Pills and Candy**

"Where are my pills? I need my pills," I hear Stinky-Ass Grandma yell from her room.

Don't we all? Maybe we should all just sit down to a giant pill banquet and have at it. What a fun trio that would be: Mom, Stinky-Ass Grandma and me.

"I need my pills. It's time for my pills," Stinky-Ass Grandma continues.

As I start on my hundredth round of crunches, I think about how she's become so obsessed with her medication lately. Stinky-Ass Grandma used to be in charge of dispensing her own pills, but Mom recently figured out that Stinky-Ass Grandma forgets when she's taken her pills and then takes some more . . . and then some more. Now Mom gives Stinky-Ass Grandma her pills once in the

morning and once in the evening to make sure she doesn't overdose herself.

"Somebody bring me my pills!" Stinky-Ass Grandma roars. And when I say roar, I mean ROAR. She must have some good lungs hidden in there under all those layers of fat. And I always thought she was only good for spreading her smell of nasty fortune throughout our house.

Maybe it would be better for all of us if we just let her be in charge of her own pills again. And if there was an accident and she overdosed- no, no, no. Stop thinking that.

Alexis is a Bad Person.

"Where are you? Come in here . . . Come here, I need my pills," Stinky-Ass Grandma pleads.

I don't want to have to go in there. I can barely breathe as it is when I pass her room. But she is starting to drive me insane- or more insane at lease. (I think Mom has driven me most of the way there). I stop doing the crunches Mom has been demanding that I do and start to stand up, but Mom's exercise meter must have kicked in, because she is suddenly in my face. (How does she do that?)

"No you don't- you still have half an hour of abdominal work left. Remember what Helen Sue said about physical fitness?"

I have a flashback of Helen Sue in my mind: pink velvet stretch panes, her hideous sequined tops that are always too short to cover her roll of stomach fat- my fitness guru.

"You do remember, don't you?" Mom asks.

"Being fat is bad?" I say. It basically all comes down to that anyway, right?

From across the house I hear Stinky-Ass Grandma still carrying on



*Miu Helen Sues..*

about her pills.

"I need my pills. Where are my pills? I need my pills now!" She yells.

"I think Stinky-Ass Grandma needs her fix," I say.

"Alexis, that isn't funny."

"It's true though. You know she stinks. I thought it fit her well."

"I wasn't talking about her name. I was talking about your sarcasm regarding the pills," she says, and then turns and scares down the hallway. Halfway down she turns back.

"Thirty more minutes of abdominals, Alexis" she says, and then continues on her way to Stinky-Ass Grandma's room for yet another confrontation.

I pull a Snickers bar out from the stash under the bed.

### ***Just a Little Booby Magic***

The makeshift dressing room of the pageant is insane. Girls and mothers are everywhere, just like in the lobby, except that now they are all crushed together like primped, annoying sardines in a can. As I walk in, I am almost knocked out by the intensity of the hairspray smell in the room. I feel my lungs scare to reject the air, and as I try to cover my mouth I am hit in the side of the head by ... I don't even know.

"What the ... ?"

I turn towards what I believe may have been the take-off point of whatever just tried to knock me out when I am knocked to the ground by one of the mothers.

"Watch Our!" the mother says.

I watch as the mother bends down and starts inspecting the floor closely.

## Short Fiction

Angela Hunt

"Did you see where it went?" the mother asks- or rather yells.

I think she is yelling at me.

"Sorry? I don't know what you're talking about?" I respond.

The mother looks like she might punch me. I think I am starting to develop a strong fear towards mothers.

"The duct tape!" the mother screams.

Yes, the mother is definitely yelling at me. No one else in the room seems to take any notice of this insane woman on all fours. The woman is scaring straight at me, as if I'm the reason the duct tape has magically disappeared.

Wait.

Could I have been hit in the head by a flying roll of duct tape? Huh. I probably am the reason why the duct tape failed to make it to its final destination.

I start to look where I think the duct tape may have rolled off to after bouncing off my head. Then questions start pouring in: Why is there even duct tape in this dressing room for me to look for? Why does this mother want the duct tape so badly? Should I want duct tape this badly? Is duct tape magical and perhaps more deadly than "The Seance?"

That's when I see it.

It's resting between a giant can of hairspray and a box that contains. . . I think it contains a pair of boobs.

"I found it," I say to the mother. I point towards the roll.

She doesn't even say thank you. She just pushes me aside and crawls towards the roll. I cry to stand up but am once again knocked over by a passing mother. Then I see this hand coming towards me through the mess of the hairspray.

I take it.

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helen SueL*

The hand belongs to a girl who looks about my age.

"Thanks," I say to the girl. I didn't even know that there *were* nice people at these things.

"That's Mrs. Morris," the girl says, pointing towards the mother who knocked *me* over in the first place. The mother is over in the corner of the room with a blonde girl who must be her daughter. The girl looks like she could be no older than thirteen. "Her daughter Stacey is as about as flat as a pancake. No wonder she was getting so worked up about the duct tape."

"I still don't understand. Why the duct tape?" I ask her.

"You're new, aren't you? I guess I should have assumed that by the way you got knocked down so fast by a mother, but you know, you are pretty old to be starting out."

"I'm only seventeen," I say, "I never really thought that was old, exactly."

"Well I'm fifteen, and this is my twelfth year doing this," the girl says.

"Really?"

"Sure," she says. "Most of us have been around that long. But don't worry- Anna and Wendi both got fat this year, and I heard Susie got herself knocked up, so you might have a chance."

"Uh, thanks, I guess," I start to put my make-up kit down on the counter next to her.

"No, there isn't enough room- sorry," the girl says, as she places a fake eyelash across her left eyelid. "You have to get here early to get the good spots."

I start to make my way through the jungle of mothers and daughters in search of another empty spot in the dressing room. There aren't many.

"Hey, new girl, what's your name?" the girl asks.

"Alexis. What's yours?" I ask.

"Oh, you'll hear it when I'm announced as the winner," the girl says, and then turns towards the mirror again. She looks like she is about to set her long black hair on fire. I really think her hair is **starting** to smoke from the heat of the curling iron.

So much for nice, sane people.

I suddenly stare to fear that we all might blow up in this crazy hair spray/ curling iron induced inferno.

I push through and find a spot between what looks like a five-year-old and a fifty-year-old; both of whom are plastering foundation on their faces. I put my make-up kit on the counter and sit down on a stool.

For some reason, I feel so . . . I don't know . . . blank. I stare at **myself** in the mirror.

I'm an empty canvas.

The lighting brings out my freckles. You know, I never even **really** noticed that I had freckles before.

Mom hates freckles. She says that they are premature age marks.

I think about what that girl said about me being old. Maybe I **am** old. I had never even thought about that before.

I grab my container of foundation and twist the cap off. I put the foundation on my make-up sponge and watch as my freckles magically disappear into a sea of perfect, light beige skin.

In the mirrors I can see Helen Sue's shape coming towards me.

"Alexis, honey, I forgot to give you your duct tape," Helen Sue says.

I put the foundation down and turn to her.

"Helen Sue, I don't even know what I'm supposed to do with **duct** tape."

## Short Fiction

*Miss Helm S11eL*

"Sweetie, don't you remember?" Helen Sue gently nudges the five-year old over and takes a seat on the stool next to me. "Duct tape helps you achieve a little boob magic is all."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

But then I see Mrs. Morris. Stacey, her half-naked daughter is leaning forward, clutching her teeny little breasts in her hands. Mrs. Morris has pulled out the roll of duct tape, and begins to tap up her chest from underneath, starting right under the armpit. It turned into a sick sort of smiley face.

Stacey stands back up and our eyes catch.

I look away, embarrassed.

## Existi-Mart

by Suzanne Samples

[3rd Place]

**L**u sits outside the Existi-Mart and jangles a Styrofoam cup that contains four dimes and two pennies. He pulls his tattered toboggan over his ears and stuffs some of his stringy hair in the hat. Today, he thinks. Today is colder than yesterday. The grey and endless sky stretches out above him like the hard, unforgiving pavement that extends past his foot. A little girl dressed in pink overalls and matching pink tennis shoes walks up to him and pees his arm with her so chubby hand. Nice man, she says. Lou grins, revealing rotting teeth that haven't been brushed in over five years. I love you, nice man. You're nice. The wind blows slightly: a zephyr. The little girl's sparkly sapphire eyes look directly through Lou's; his eyes might be brown-or maybe they are just covered with a film of dirt like the rest of his body. Maybe his eyes are hazel, even green. Lou can't remember. The little girl grasps his filthy pane leg with her plump fingers and giggles as her golden ringlets dance beside her cheek before falling to her neck and touching her shoulders like light fluffy snowflakes. She moves closer to him, puckers her rosy mouth, and moves toward Lou's cheek. Lou inhales; she smells

## Short Fiction

### *Existi-Marl*

like powder and mashed peaches. He closes his eyes and thinks that perhaps, this little girl is an angel. No one has come close to couching him since before he left for the war. Bue before the little girl descends into his lap, her mother notices and jerks the coddler away. Don't touch that disgusting old drunk, she demands. He is not like us.

The length of the red traffic light annoys Steven and his stomach growls uncharacteristically; he never eats breakfast and can't remember the last time he felt hungry before his lunch hour. He caps his fingers on the leather steering wheel, runs a hand through his silver-streaked hair, and mentally reviews the day's schedule: meet with the advertising team at 8, go over the proposal with Ron at 10:30, a quick lunch with Kathryn at 12, conference call at 1, and, of course, paperwork until he finishes. Just a day like any other day. His breath smells like burnt coffee and his neck aches. Steven doesn't remember how he ended up 53 years old, working 10 to 12 hours a day, and acquiring no wife or children. He suspects that his parents think he is a homosexual. Is he? He doesn't think so. He hasn't had much time to think about it. The morning radio hoses discuss the 100th anniversary of the hamburger. Steven swears that he can smell charcoal burning, even though his windows are shut and no one should be barbecuing during a mid-November morning. Plastic wrapped cheese slices, however, didn't make an appearance until the 30's, the woman announces with a high-pitched nasal laugh. The light changes to green and Steven checks the time before pressing the gas pedal: 7:20 AM. He cuts his silver Mercedes in front of a minivan and figures, what the hell. I'm the boss. Who will care if I'm 15 minutes late?

## Short Fiction

Suzanne Samples

Caroline takes one last drag from the clove cigarette and relishes its citrus taste. It reminds her of eating an orange without the sticky mess. She throws it out the window of her turtle green '95 Subaru Impreza, named Sparky because the gas tank once caught on fire at a gas station when she pulled off the cap. Static electricity, the firemen said. No one was hurt, even Sparky came away unscathed. Her friend Amber was in the bathroom the entire time and missed everything. Caroline pulls Sparky into an open spot and smiles into the rearview mirror. When she notices the crescent shaped brown stain on her left central incisor, Caroline immediately thinks of her mother. I don't know how you got that stain, her mother said the last time she visited. You don't smoke...do you drink tea? You need to start drinking your tea through a straw. I'll ask Dr. Byron if he knows of any good whitening treatments. I would kill my mother if I knew that no one would ever find out, Caroline thinks. She waits until "I'm Not Sleeping" by the Counting Crows finishes on the CD player before she turns off Sparky and tries to remember what she came to Existi-Mart for. Granola bars? No. Swiss cheese? No. Tampons? Maybe. She picks up her cell phone from the passenger seat: No Missed Calls. He found someone else, she concludes. That girl he works with. It's got to be her. He doesn't like the poem I sent him. Spraying it with "Moonlight Path" from Bach & Body Works was too much. Too obvious. Maybe he doesn't understand the poem's metaphorical nature. Maybe he is simpler than that. Maybe he likes blondes. Maybe he likes tall girls. Maybe he likes girls with bigger breasts and smaller thighs. What does that girl look like? She's got to be a blonde. A skinny blonde. A tall skinny blonde. Tall skinny blondes always



## Short Fiction

### *Existi-Mart*

get the guys, even the ones who claim they aren't superficial. Maybe... maybe he likes men. Maybe he is dead. Maybe he just hares me. Caroline finds a piece of cinnamon gum in her bag and chews it hard, so hard she can feel the roots in her gums start to move and crack.

Kim can't always keep up with her two year old daughter; so when she sees her little girl trying to kiss the homeless drunk sitting outside of the Existi-Mart, Kim barely jerks her away in time. This, in turn, makes Kim drop her cell phone and cut off the conversation that she is having with her best friend, Lori, whom she has not spoken to in weeks. Kim scoops up Lily. You can't touch people like that, Lil! That man has dirty, dirty germs, she scolds. Remember what I told you about germs? Now you're going to get sick...and so will Mommy. Kim wants to take Lily home and give her a bath, but then she will not have time to cook dinner, vacuum the floor, and watch Passions and Dr. Phil before Bret comes home. I want you to get excited about your life! Dr. Phil tells her through the television set everyday at four. You need to do something for you! So Kim frequenrly purchases makeup at the Clinque counter, gets her hair cut and colored at a pricey salon, and buys beauty magazines like they are the world's last copies of the Bible. If she doesn't feel beautiful on the inside, at least she does not look like a stay-at-home-mom whose husband only cares if she makes dinner every night and love to him at least once a week. Kim puts Lily down and checks her reflection in the glass before walking through the automatic doors. She smoothes her bleach blonde hair and sucks in her belly; she'd read in last month's Glamour that doing so automatically makes one appear five pounds lighter. With Lily

## Short Fiction

Suzanne Samples

staring up at her, Kim blocks the doorway and reapplies her new red lipstick. I'll call Lori back tonight, she thinks...or tomorrow. She'll understand.

Lou drifts off; his chin falls to his chest and he shivers in the cold. His left leg aches, as if someone is pressing their fingers **through** his skin, squeezing and twisting his muscles and nerves **before** ripping them completely out of his leg sinew by sinew and **cell** by cell. Lou rakes a breach, but instead of air he inhales mud **through** his nostrils. He coughs and feels the mud rise up in his **throat**, but nothing comes out. He hears screams, screams of men, **screams** of his friends, his brothers. Squeals he cannot get out of his head. The mud remains in his throat, thick and suffocating. He chokes. Margaret, he attempts to mumble. Margaret, Margaret, I'm coming home. Please wait for me, my love. Will you still love me when they take my leg off? Will you? He hears men calling his name, but he can't answer. He pounds a fist to his chest; the mud rises, he can taste chunky and pungent clods of dirt in his mouth, but some still clogs his throat. Everything looks like a **blurry** mush of brown and green, like something served at a mess hall. A man jerks his arm and pulls him across the rocky ground. Lou can't stand, he can't close his mouth, he cannot answer the man. He points to his leg and tries to cry out, but suddenly it's **Margaret** who pulls him out of the trench with her soft lotioned hands. I can still love you without my leg, Margie, he tries to say. Please don't leave me. Can you hear me? I love you. She scoops **up** him and kicks his leg over and over. He tries to cry out in **pain** but can't. She kicks it harder and harder and harder **it** completely falls off. Lou vomits brown chunks all over her

## Short Fiction

*Exisli-Marl*

arm. He takes a breath of air and cries out: Margie, it's still me. Don't you recognize me?

Steven blows his horn at a lady whose daughter he nearly runs over with his Mercedes. God, what is it with people these days not watching their kids? he thinks, glad that he has never had to deal with any children. His sister has three, and they are messy and intolerable ninety-nine percent of the time. Steven pulls into a space, nearly missing a grocery cart. Dammit, he mutters. This is a bad idea. But his stomach continues to growl, and it feels like an empty hole that keeps expanding and expanding until it fills his entire body. 7:35 AM. These places are open 24 hours right? Steven questions. He is not entirely sure. Maria takes care of the grocery shopping; he pays her to do so. Too much. I should cut back, he considers. He once caught her snoozing in his leather recliner while a soap opera blared through the television. She doesn't love you like I do, Julian! Steven heard. She just wastes your money! I love you. You are my soulmate. He turned off the television and shook Maria. Remember, Maria? he chastised. I told you I was coming home for lunch today. I told you to have it ready before I got home. Steven rolls his eyes thinking about her. Damn good for nothing Mexican woman. He gets out of the car and locks it with the press of a button on his keychain. It beeps. His stomach growls. He hopes that this will not take too long. The wind blows his tie, but Steven does not feel cold. He puts his keys in his pocket and strides through the parking lot, his Italian leather shoes clicking across the cement. A man like Steven Lewis does not need a coat.

Caroline thinks that when she drives back to her dorm room,

she will take her only copy of the poem and burn it in the bathroom sink so she won't have to remind herself that she gave him a scented copy. He probably showed the tall skinny blonde girl he works with, she figures. They probably laughed at it, probably made some comment like Aww... how sweet! Someone has a crush on you! The blonde skinny girl wouldn't understand that he and Caroline are part of something bigger than Airtation and first dates; they are bigger than the universe. So you want to see a movie tonight? Caroline imagines the blonde skinny girl asking him as she Aips her blonde hair with her skinny hand. Pick me up at 7? Sounds great! Caroline misses him. She misses the way that the corner of his left eye is slightly more crinkl-ed than the right; she misses the way the sides of his mouth turn down and pull his lips into a permanent frown. She wonders if he noticed the stain on her tooth or the way her right ear is significantly smaller than her left. He probably thinks that it makes her terribly unattractive, just like her mother thinks. She misses the way he called her Caro-leen, like the old Whiskeytown song. He would never call her anything again, she knew this for sure. She blew it because she writes poetry and has brown hair and a Aat chest. And big thighs. He would date the blonde skinny girl he works with, marry her. ...he would eventually impregnate her and they would have beautiful blonde haired big breasted daughters with skinny thighs and names like Melissa, Stephanie, and Jessica. Caroline thinks that after she goes in Existi-Mart, she will drive to where he works and stop in to say hello. No, she rationalizes. I will see her there with him and then I will cry and make a big scene in front of everyone. I can't do that. Caroline thinks of sending him a text message: I Miss. You. She stops in the parking lot to type it on her cell phone keypad. No.

## Short Fiction

*Existi-Mart*

I can't give in, she thinks. I've called him this morning, last night, and yesterday morning. He's with her. I have an eight page paper due in Psychology this afternoon. Caroline puts her cell phone back in her pocket and finds a nickel and a quarter. She throws the nickel into a homeless man's cup before she walks through the automatic doors. Margie? the homeless man mutters as the nickel lands and clinks against the other coins. No, Caroline, she whispers. Caro-leen. She saves the quarter; she'll need it later for the washing machines.

Kim lifts up Lily to wash her hands in the Existi-Mart bathroom. God, she thinks. We might come out of here dirtier than we came in. Torn toilet paper stained with brown shoe marks litters the floor. The bathroom hosts the lingering odor of liquid pink soap and fresh bowel movements that couldn't wait until home. Don't touch the sink, Lil, Kim demands. That's why the water comes out automatically. So we don't have to touch the dirty things. Germs. Kim looks at her face in the mirror as she holds her daughter. Through her thick foundation, she sees that makeup has caked in between the crow's feet surrounding her eyes. I'm only 29! she thinks. Not even 30 yet. Those wrinkles shouldn't be here. Nor yet. Kim sees the beginning of dark roots growing from her scalp. She rotates her head slightly; nose, still in good shape. Kim likes her nose - not a bump in it and only slightly upturned. She smiles and notices red lipstick smeared across her front teeth. Horrified, Kim puts Lily down. Surely no one has noticed, she hopes. Stay there, Lil. Don't touch anything. Dirty. She wipes the lipstick off her teeth and gingerly pulls a paper towel from the holder. I've got to get out of here before I start to smell like this place, she

## Short Fiction

Suzanne Samples

whispers. Now. A brunette in her early 20's walks in the bathroom by herself and Kim thinks, Wow. Alone. That girl is young, beautiful, and all alone. What I wouldn't do for a day like that. Kim hopes that the new issue of Cosmo has hit the shelves; she suddenly can't remember why she came to Existi-Mart in the first place. Lily? Kim calls. Do you have Mommy's list? Didn't I give it to you in the car and tell you to hold on to it for me? Lily? Where are you?

None of them pay attention to the announcement: Broken Hearts, Aisle Four. Buy one get seven for free. That's right, seven. For free. Offer only good today, folks. Get them while you can. Overstock. Need to go. Immediately.

They wander aimlessly about, none of them sure why they came. They never end up buying what they intended to buy. Not usually.

Cans of Greed, sorry, the coupon in the Sunday paper is no longer valid.

Superficial Vanity still in Aisle Ten. Don't worry; if you forget Your children we'll ensure that they have a good time while you're gone. We have a playground complete with a sandbox full of Childhood Memories in the back of the store.

You'll find Empty Hopes in a new place, right beside the check-out counter so they're easier to locate... Eighty-seven cents. wop. You do not want to miss out on this deal.

## Short Fiction

*Existi-Mart*

Soulmates, Love, and Companionship still being sold as a bundle on the top shelf of Aisle Seventeen; if you can't reach them, sorry. We cannot help you on that one. Special sale on Nostalgia, Depressing Thoughts, and Tears, though. Today only; looks like you came at the right time!

Attention, customers. We will be temporarily closing this morning for stocking and cleaning. Please take your final purchases to the front of Exisri-Marc. We ask for your understanding in this matter so we can better serve you, our customer.

Sanity? Sanity? Sanity? You know where Sanity is. The same place we always put it. Yes. Still forty-eight cents.

## A Jumbled Record Of What Happened After The Light Changed Back To Red: Another Love Story

by Ryan Sarver

[Editor's choice]

### 1.

There's a 4x6 picture-frame that's been sitting on my living room table since I moved here. Inside is a picture of a boy and a girl near a swingset. The boy is much taller than the girl, although you'd never know since he's lying with his face just out of the sand, crying. His jeans are caked with dirt on the front and back, and his left overall has just come unhooked and is swinging from shoulder to chest. If you could see through all the sand, you would see his face. Rusted red, pierced by the occasional clump of matted hair.

The girl stands in the background with her arms crossed over her chest. Her mouth is a straight line in a jaw that's pushed forward. If you stare long enough you'll notice her eyes peering at a small spot of mud sliming its way towards the bottom of her faded-blue Rower-print skirt. Strands of strawberry-blonde hair float from her head, dancing like Aame-wisps in the wind. Behind her the ropes of a swing whip out of the photo's reach, the seat somewhere out of sight, reaching towards the sky. In the bottom left-hand cor-



## Short Fiction

### *A Jumbled Record*

ner a cup-shaped mound of sand peeks out from between the boy's leg and the edge of the photograph. A few gray clouds can be seen hovering over the tip of a grassy hill in the distance.

Some days I contemplate how tiny the picture is. I think about having it blown up, or shrunk to wallets, or having the scratch in the upper corner touched up so it doesn't look like the sun is splitting in two. I think about getting a silver frame to replace the homemade wooden one the picture's sitting in; about putting it in a laminating pouch so it won't break away.

Sometimes I don't even notice the frame.

Some days the picture is just right: large enough to be seen, but small enough to be ignored.

Women often ask if they're "mine," and sometimes I lie and tell them "they" are. I have a whole story for such occasions: the early marriage and messy divorce, the children caught in the middle, my reluctant acquiescence to the request against custody rights, the final trip to the park.

It's a real tearjerker.

Since I'll never see those people again, it's okay to lie about them. And the people listening will never find out.

2.

Her parents were the kind of people who used "evening" and "supper" instead of "night" and "dinner." They thought it made them appear rich (and were actually very poorly-spoken. Her younger sisters often got confused and would call brunch, supper). In childhood she hated them for their concerns over appearance,

and had grown up a messy slob in retaliation.

le cook me three days just to gee the trash picked off her Aoor. The landlord had given me five to "move her out," just before puffing a big ring of cigar smoke in my face. He was a real asshole.

On the second to last night I was awakened by a spotted black tail sweeping across my lips.

Snucifer. The pet cat.

I had always hated it. The night she dragged the cat home from the park we'd had a big fight over what to name it. She wanted to name it Snagglepuss, and I wanted to name it Lucifer. A while later she agreed that Snagglepuss was a stupid name, but also noted that Lucifer was the cat from *Cinderella*, and that *Cinderella* was a "crappy little film." She proclaimed it Snucifer.

This was just before Snucifer pissed in my shoe and shredded its laces to thread.

She laughed and stroked the car behind its ears.

"Good girl," she said.

The cat eyed me from under her hand.

*Mine. You go away.*

In the days since my arrival the car hadn't made an appearance, so I presumed she had ran away.

Or maybe I had been ignoring her.

Regardless, after char. Snucifer followed all my movings and Sarchings of the apartment. le felt like somebody was watching my every step, questioning my every move. Each rime I picked some-

## Short Fiction

### *A Jumbled Record*

thing up I heard:

*Is he taking that? It was ours first.*

The only things I could bring myself to keep were half a locker shaped like a hand (which merged with the other side to form an ugly bronze heart), some old photos, and two wine glasses (the only kind in the apartment).

When it was time to leave, the cat followed to the door and scared up at me.

*I need a new home.*

It was the same thing Lucifer had said to her the night she had brought the cat home with a string tied around its neck asking *fa/Lowed me home. Can we keep it?*

"Okay, but now you're just Lucifer."

As I bent to pick the cat up, she hissed and swiped at my hand.

*I'll find my own way.*

The cat walked out the door and started down the stairs. The living room lights flickered and burned out as I picked up the final boxes.

I stared back into the moonlit room.

The couch was still there. The love-seat was still there. The "No Cookie Monsters" Cookie Jar was still there. So many things were still there. I would've needed a camera to catalogue them all. On the bar of the kitchenette, half a grapefruit sac dripping juice into a dark puddle on the floor. It was the only sound in the apartment.

A glimmer on the living room cable marked a diamond tennis bracelet I'd left behind.

My shadow scowled at me from the mirror across the room.

## Short Fiction

Ryan Sarver

When I got to the car I found Lucifer asleep on its trunk. Picking her up, I moved towards the front, stopped, then peered at the building. Lights seemed to Ricker off just as my eyes reached each **window**. For minutes I stood, scaring at her place, waiting for the **lights** to come back on.

lley didn't.

A woman in a large marshmallow-like coat walked out and **stared** at me. Lucifer shook in my arms, Ricking the snow from her **back**. It was the first time she had woken since I came out.

"Power just went off. Whole place is going to Hell," the marshmallow woman said.

"Yeah. Whole place going to Hell," I replied

Opening the car door, I threw the cat inside, sac down, and **looked** back.

The lights didn't come back on.

3.

Every Sunday morning I drive several miles to the Twenty-First **Church** of God. The church is an old wooden building with ugly **Pllrple** and blue stained-glass windows and a failing roof. Whenever **it rains**, nobody but the Priest and his train of shriveled old women **come**. On those days the Priest and his lackies glance at me and **lllile**, and sometimes come by to have their "precious moments."

They think I'm here for God.

On the road home from the Church there's a right-turn light **that** aims drivers into the side of a mountain. When they built the **lllain** road there were plans to hollow the mountain out and build a **connection** to the interstate, and while these never came to fruition,

## Short Fiction

### *A Jumbled Word*

the traffic light for them did. The city decided to leave it and set it so that the light never changed from red.

As a child, when we drove past it, Mom always had to make some corny joke, or turn the light into an opportunity to dispense some of her "wisdom."

*Right on Red, you're dead! Red-dead get it? <insert obnoxious chortle>. Just because people built it, doesn't mean it's the right way. Take the wrong path and you could spend your whole life waiting on red.*

Sometimes my stepsister Chelsea would pipe up from the back with an awkward giggle, or "hmmm" of agreement, things that she used to make people feel better. It was her way of saying "Thanks for trying."

While all this was going on, I sometimes secretly imagined the light turning green and a big dark mouth in the mountainside opening wide to swallow us whole.

4.

Here's something I like to do: Whenever I'm anxious I lie down in bed, bury my face in the pillows, and listen to the blood flowing through my neck. If I close my lips and am very quiet, sometimes I can hear my teeth chatter along with my heartbeat.

*Bmsh Uk Help Uk Brush Uk Help Uk Brush Uk Help Uk*

And after a few minutes of listening, I open my eyes, see the pillows underneath me, and smile.

## Short Fiction

Ryan Sarver

For the first several months Lucifer wouldn't sleep with me. From what I could tell she didn't sleep at all. Every morning I would wake to a pair of tattered sneakers, mangled socks, and a few chewed-through power cords. I still wonder how she does it without electrocuting herself.

Last winter, after a day of staring into space and drinking, I staggered into bed and dreamt the girl and I were walking across a bridge in the snow. Each step seemed taken in slow motion, our legs arching in a bandy guster to avoid slipping on the ice. As we neared the end, a steep wall plastered in frescos came into view. The girl stopped, hopped on her tiptoes, kissed me, then whispered in my ear. "We made it," she said. The gentle brush of her breath made my ear tingle as the words slipped in.

Just as we reached the end of the bridge, something large and blurry jumped out of the water, and, as the girl scrambled to look at it, she tripped and toppled over the bar.

This is where the dream should have ended.

If I had control over dreams, this seems like the right place to cue it off. But it's not where it ended. For minutes I stared over the bridge, then at the clouds, then over the bridge again. A silhouette of something splashing out of the water could be seen in the distance, frozen in midburst. The gray shapes of birds hung static in the sky, as if held in place by hidden strings. The area began to slowly dim until only the sharpest waves and closest bridge-bars could be seen. Nothing was moving, and nobody was around.

About this time I realized I was in a dream, but couldn't wake up. I banged my head against the bar, ran for the end of the bridge (which snaked forward with every step), and slipped on the

## Short Fiction

*A JIIIIBkal Record*

ice, but nothing worked. Finally I threw myself over the bridge.

I opened my eyes half-expecting to be in bed and half-expecting to see tiny fish statues, but was instead greeted by a sandbox and pail. Behind me a girl in a faded-blue flower-print skirt was swinging high, scaring down at me and my pail. Apparently I'd been building sandcastles. All around, small cup-shaped mounds were slowly being broken apart by the wind. Every time the girl peaked it seemed like she was going to fall off the swing, onto me, but then she would always catch herself right before she did.

Whatever it was, it seemed better than the bridge dream. But then it went on, and on, and continued, then went on just a little more. The girl never stopped swinging, wouldn't get off or come say anything. The castles continued to slowly crumble in the wind.

I stood and began kicking in all the castles I'd built. I was ready to wake up.

When I woke up I felt a familiar warm feeling on my side that I hadn't felt in months.

"Sweet dreams," I said, not remembering.

Lucifer rolled over and yawned.

5.

Helen asks if they're mine. I nearly tell her the story I've made up about the divorce children, adding a little bit about how I'd-just-seen-them-at-the-mall-the-other-day-and-how-it-took-a!l-my-strength-not-to-run-and-hug-them. I think about telling the truth, about you and me, but that still doesn't feel right to talk about.

## Short Fiction

Ryan Sarver

"He came with the frame," I say.

For a moment she stares at the homemade frame and looks unimpressed, then smiles.

"You're funny," she says.

In the corner, Lucifer stops mauling on Helen's shoe and slumps back towards the bedroom.

I met Helen at a bar a few weeks ago. I'd never let my friends drag me to a bar before, so I didn't know what to drink, and they all got in a big argument over what my "first one" should be. While they were all still fighting, this girl came up to Bob (one of my friends) whispered something in his ear, then ordered a "Tequila Sunrise" and pointed it over to me. The bartender plopped a drink down.

I didn't want to drink it.

It was all yellow and red and cloudy; it looked like something someone with a UTI had pissed out.

The girl continued eyeballing me.

I wanted to not like her, and I wanted to not drink it. But her face. It looked so much like the one of the girl that grew up from that picture.

The drink tasted like stale chocolate dipped in orange juice.

It was awful.

I smiled at her.

After buying me several more terrible drinks she introduced her as Helen. In the time between the tequila sunrise and what the green thing was I drank, I discovered that Helen had the most annoying laugh I'd ever heard. It sounded like someone playing a musical saw over a bleating sheep. I began being



## Short Fiction

*A Jumbled & cord*

not funny on purpose. I was so not funny that I found myself too irritating for myself, and decided it was important for me to leave to get away. Unbeknownst to me, I must have telepathically invited Helen to my place sometime between then and when I left, because she followed behind like a lost puppy to my car.

The entire way home she laughed at all the corny things I cheesed up.

I tried telling dull stories:

When I was a kid I used training wheels until I was eight ... That's all. Only to have them met by the exuberance of a baby with a new rattler.

Training wheels! Wow! When I was a kid we couldn't use training wheels. Dad would be a t -

And I would stop listening. I began feeling sorry for her. Maybe she was more like a baby than I knew. Once we reached the apartment, I'd resolved to let her spend the night with me. It would be the first time I'd had company all night since the girl from the picture had gone away.

"Are they yours?" she asks.

Looking at the little homemade job the photo's sitting in, I answer "It came with the frame." And for the first time I'm not lying.

"You're funny." She replies, tacking on an abrasive little chortle. Yeah. Funny.

6.

"What are we having for supper this evening," Sarah asked. Mom shot her a stupid little grin, as if to say "good girl."

## Short Fiction

Ryan Sarver

"Lasagna with garlic bread," she said

I had arrived earlier to find Sarah taking down and rearranging the pictures in the living room. In the kitchen, mom stood breaking apart frames, hurriedly tossing photos into a box on the floor. The two were having a fight over something.

"I still don't think this is right," Sarah said. "It's too soon. And it's morbid."

"There's nothing morbid about it. It's for Peter. You don't want to go reminding people of their..."

Peter. I'd really thought he wouldn't come. Or maybe I'd just hoped it.

Laying a hand on Mom's shoulder had made her jump. Apparently she hadn't been expecting me.

"What's going on," I asked.

Mom hesitated. I could tell she hadn't heard me come in. Mollentarily stuttering, she quietly nudged the box to the back of the room with her foot.

"Nothing dear. Just go sit on the couch."

There had been an awkward silence since.

Looking around, I noticed all the pictures with Chelsea were missing. Three white rectangles spotted the cream-colored wall where a pyramid of photos of she and I in Rome had once sat. The portraits that lined the staircase were spaced unevenly, and large oval-shaped clean patches were outlined in dust.

They're taking the pictures down because they don't want to remind Peter of her, I thought. They don't want to remind him. Because she was his. And because now she's not.

The sudden thumping of the Far Man making his way down the stairs grabbed my attention. It was a reflex I'd gained as a child.

## Short Fiction

### *A Jumbled Record*

When I was little I used to run outside and pretend to be playing whenever I heard it.

It still makes me sick. And slightly angry.

"Is Peter here yet, Teresa," The Fat Man yelled from the stairs.

"Not yet," she replied, shooting me a wide-eyed glare from the kitchen.

The Fat Man stopped at the base and stared into the back of *my* head. I didn't need to see it to know it was happening.

"Jack," he said.

I didn't respond. In the kitchen mom further widened her eyes and wagged a picture-frame at me. I thought she looked funny.

"Don't bother Teresa," The Fat Man said. "I'll take care of it."

He made his way in front of me. He was wearing a black suit that would've looked nearly pressed if it hadn't been stretched across the bulk of a hideous blob-man. The stench of rotten ham and alcohol flooded the area as he drew closer.

"I don't want any of your shit tonight," he yelled. "Peter's coming over, and he's already been through enough. If you can't do that, leave."

I didn't say anything, hoping he'd walk away. He just stood there, staring down at me.

"What," I asked, looking up at him for the first time.

"You can't do it," he said. "Get out."

"No," I said. "She was *my* sister and I'm staying -"

"And she was Peter's fiancée. I'm not having *you* cause trouble," he interjected. "You never could do shit without making some scene. Especially with Peter involved! Go home."

"No," I said. "I'm staying."

Suddenly the doorbell rang. As Sarah pulled the door open, the

figure of Peter came into view. I turned and found The Fat Man still glaring at me.

"I'm the dad and the owner of this goddamn house, and I say you go," he yelled.

"You're not my father," I said.

"And she wasn't your sister." He paused for a moment, as if he'd lost his train of thought. "Christ. Aren't we too old for this shit," he asked. "Just go."

His voice trailed off, and his head tilted back towards the kitchen, where my mom was hurriedly breaking apart frame after frame, feverishly tossing pictures into the box on the floor.

"What're you doing," he asked my mom, making his way towards the kitchen.

I jumped at the hand that had just landed on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw Peter's face smiling down at me. My shoulder suddenly felt dirty.

"How you doing," he asked.

I pulled away and jumped from the couch. Looking into the kitchen, then at Peter, I decided I would leave. But just as I was making my way out the door, in the doorway, something broke in me. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't just walk out on her.

"Hey," I yelled back in the room.

Only Peter looked at me.

"Hey," I yelled, this time louder.

The Fat Man looked at me.

"Whar?" he asked, half questioning, half demanding.

I didn't know what. I didn't know what I meant to say. Somebody had gotten into my head and stolen it. I had nothing to say.

"Fuck you, *dad*," I said. "And fuck you too Peter."

## Short Fiction

*A Jumbled Record*

I stood in the doorway, staring into the kitchen, waiting for something meaningful to say.

There was nothing.

Peter turned and walked into the kitchen. After seeing Peter's face, almost as an afterthought, The Fae Man turned red and scarred picking up frames and chucking them at the doorway. I quickly pulled at the door, then stood there, static, feeling drowned inside. A small wooden frame slid out and hit my foot just before the door clicked shut. In it laid the picture of a girl standing over a boy with his face just out of the sand, both in front of a swing-set. The glass had broken in the frame, and a shard had scratched the sun in half. Shaking the glass out, I picked the broken frame up and carried it home with *me*.

That night I sat with my head buried in my pillow, trying to listen to my heart.

I heard nothing.

### **Epi / Confession**

Lucifer ran away a few weeks ago. I'd like to think it was because I fell asleep with the front door open, but it's more likely that I didn't give her enough attention (or shoes).

I gave Heather the other half of the hand-heart pendant Chelsea and I got in Rome. I thought I could trust her. I could call her late at night when I was having my little panic attacks and she would listen, and sometimes come over. She even had the same fear I have about being retarded and not having anybody tell me about it (or at least she said she does).

Heather and I haven't talked in months.

I don't know where your pendant is.  
I'm sorry.

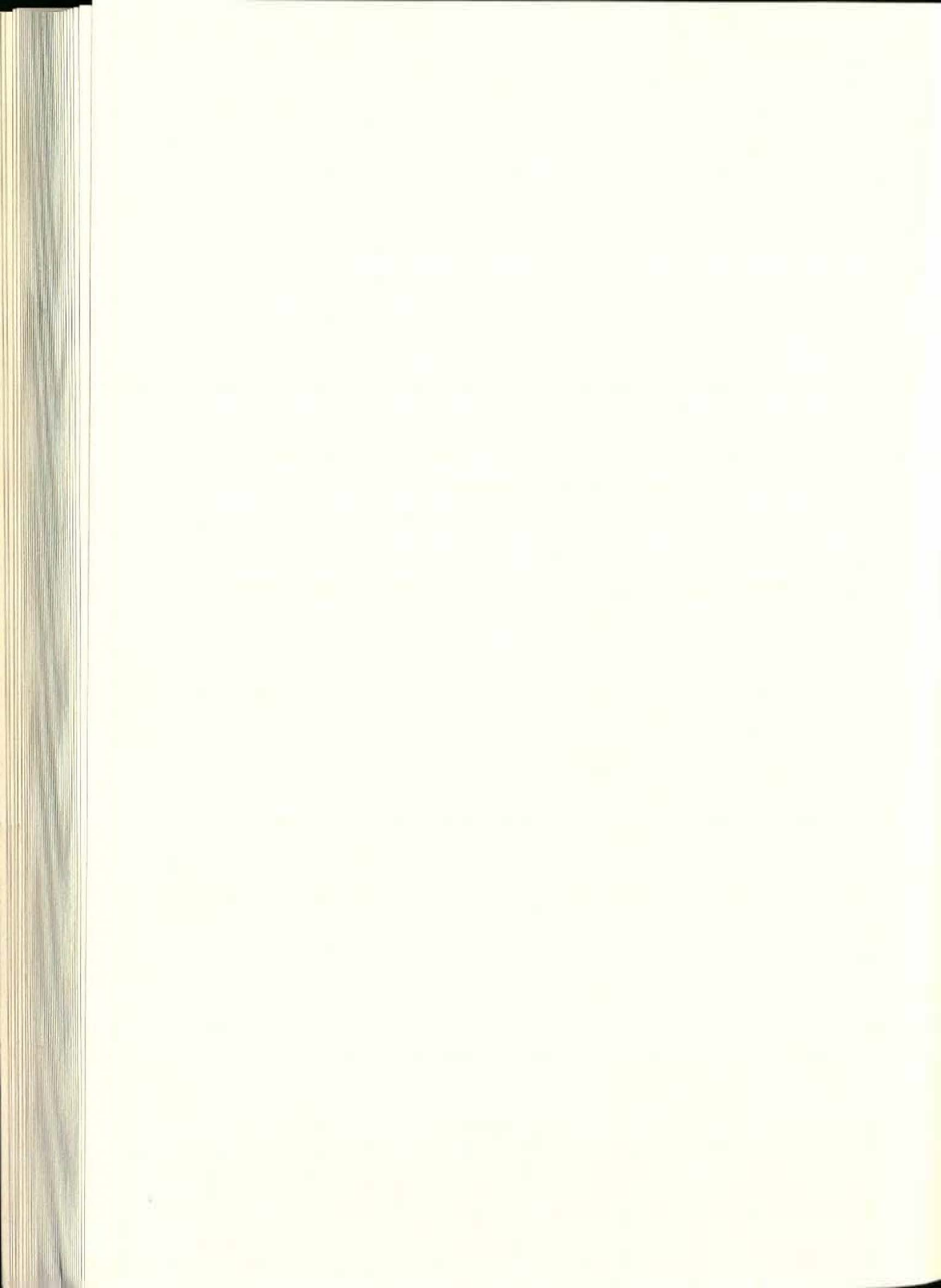
*I've* spent *entire* days lounging around in my boxers, contemplating how small the picture is. Sometimes the boy's face reminds *me* of how sad I was after you knocked *me* in the sand, and *some-*times I watch you and guess at whatever ran through your head that could've made you so angry. And once I remember how sad I was and *see* how angry you look, once I realize what a pathetic couple *we were*, I understand why I never got the picture blown up.

Because it isn't who *we were*. It wasn't who *we* should've been.

I don't have other pictures of us out. Nobody wants to *see* those. They wouldn't understand. That was us after, and not before. This is what they want. *Me* with my face in the sand, and you, *ever-*watching and angry at *me* for it.

I don't have to lie to people about it, or us.

But it certainly helps.



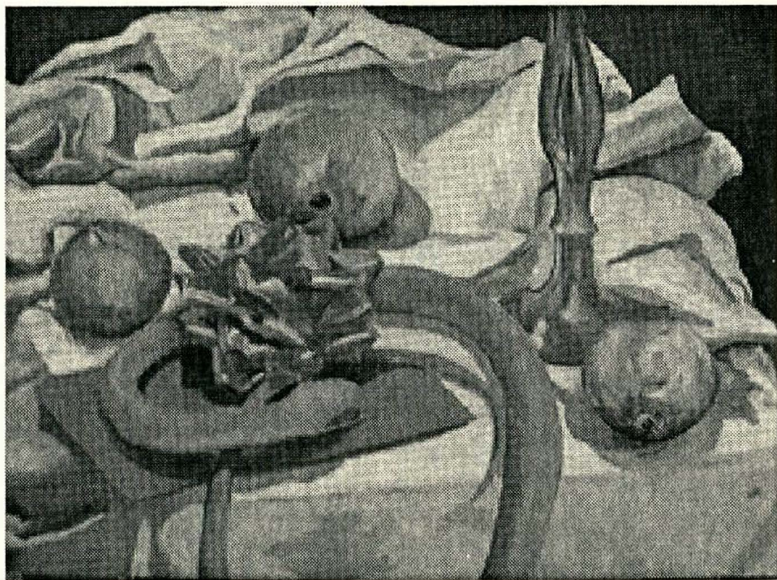
*.et cetera.*

Art



Art

First Place

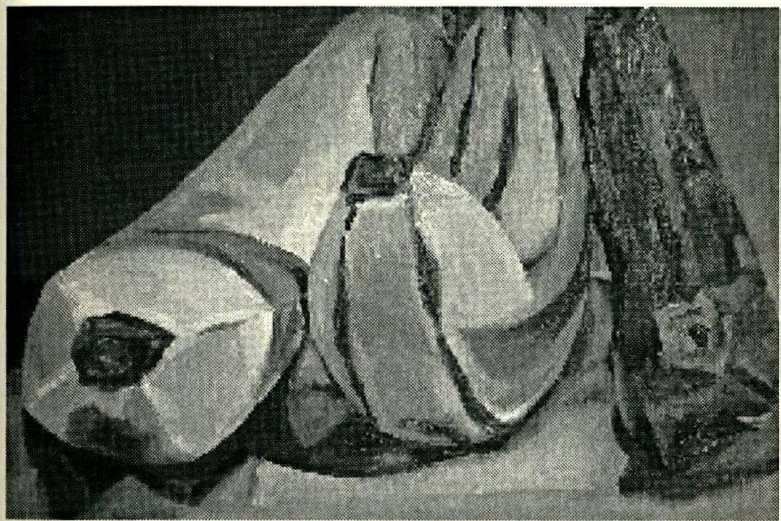


**Misremembered Snake**

Sean Laishley

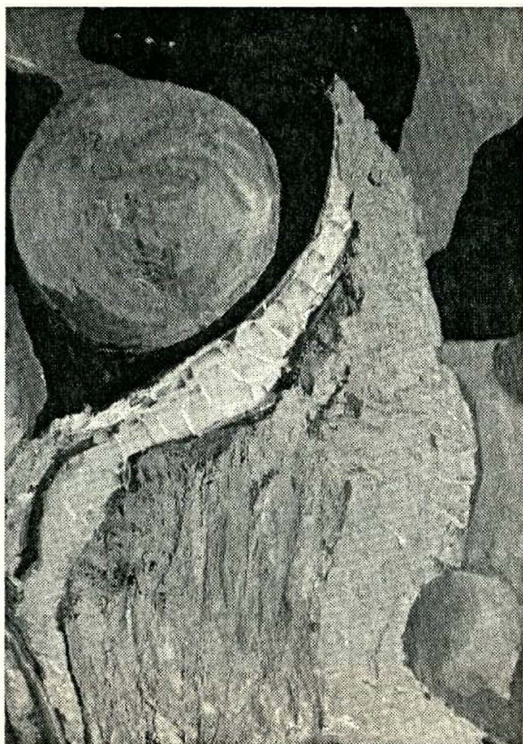
Art

Second Place



**[Untitled]**  
**Melany Gossick**

Third Place



**[Untitled]**  
**Will Starcher**

Editor's Choice



**[Untitled]**  
**Justin Gillispie**

Honorable Mention



**[Untitled]**  
Stevey Hughes

*.et cetera.*

# Poetry

## **Christmas Party**

**Travis L. Michael**

[1st Place]

I remember the winter night I finally lost it,  
slipping past the gathered noise to wander  
as a pseudonym through half-familiar streets;

to crumble, collapse on a stranger's lawn  
with the stale menthol afterthought of too much  
vodka burning a path through my nose.

I have memorized the street-lit fog, and how it  
made the sway of long-widowed apple trees seem  
even more skeletal; their stiff dance tipped

my senses over and, spilled by a drunken gravity,  
I lowered my cheek to the s n o w -  
envying the ability to melt away, so suddenly,

and wondering if it could be learned by listening;  
an unexpected wind scolded me and I Ained,  
pushing my open palms against it and rising,

## Poetry

with porch-light and swept ice threading through  
my fingers, I wobbled back to the parry,  
stamping the ghost-glitter of untracked snow to a

dark pulp, thinking: I always manage to find a  
path back to these same empty houses,

full of people.



## Heaven's Details

**Sarabeth Wilson**

[2nd Place]

Did you go to a black void?  
Floating in empty nothing  
like swimming in jam  
permeable and molding  
to your formlessness.

Is there light, like they say?  
Gold gleam and God,  
the river Lethe and a ladle.

*You'll forget me.*

Or is it a place tailored  
to your fancy?

Brown reclining chair,  
Matlock, MacG<sub>y</sub>v<sub>e</sub>r, Jeopardy  
and room service.

## Little American Haikus

### Cade Elkins

[3rd Place]

- A. I awoke today with a burning in my guts  
urging me to stand for justice,  
but by the time I showered and dressed  
I forgot what I was showering and dressing for.  
So I went back to sleep.
- B. My roommate is a great friend but I tell you  
if he doesn't stop drinking my milk  
I'm going to kill him in his sleep.
- C. I heard a man proclaim his moral relativity, and when he asked  
why I slapped him I said "Slapping you was right for me."
- D. A guy asked for a handout. I told him to get a job.  
He said his job was begging. I gave him a five and said,  
Touché!
- E. There are no haikus  
of five and seven sounds here  
save the last three lines.

## **Enola Gay**

**Adam Brown**

[Editor's choice]

Enola Gay

What do you say

Sitting in a museum

In Northern VA

Where citizens of the culture of death

Come and flock to you in health

And wonder what it was like to be there

And see it all

When mushroom clouds ballooned

At the pain you caused

When you dropped your payload

You killed people

Not soldiers, not enemies, but people

Little girls on their way to school and young mothers

Wondering if their husbands would survive and come home

But all that has survived is you

And those who love to memorialize you

Old men who come in reverence to salute you

And boys who buy models of you

And fight the war all over again

## Poetry

Did you know the war is going on again  
On porches and bedrooms throughout  
The country Enola Gays fly  
Over green molded men  
Who secretly want to kill  
The killing mentality  
And be released from their duty  
So they can live their lives freely But all they can do is stand poised  
With their bazookas and grenades  
Ready to annihilate  
Decimate, decapitate  
Insurgents and terrorists so they can demonstrate  
Their power over man

And when the rag heads are gone  
And the Commies are gone  
The spies, kikes, and darkies are gone  
When the hippes are dead  
And the last welfare check has been handed out  
And when we bomb the dykes  
And scone the fags

When Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson and Sean Hannity  
Usher in the 1,000 year reign  
And a buzz cut camo clad Jesus  
Looks over all and says  
"This is good."  
Then the world will be safe for democracy.



*.et cetera.*

# Creative Nonfiction

## Of Plexiglas Cows and Elie Wiesel

by **Joshua Mattern**  
(1st place)

**T**IBSDAY APRIL 12, 2005, 4:30 P.M.

Today, as a fourth-year college student who should have all such things behind me, I embark upon what could prove to be an incredible, life-changing journey.

Four years ago while visiting a friend, I lazily rummaged through her bookshelf, seeing if she had anything interesting for me to borrow, or anything horrible for me to ridicule. Almost lost in the seemingly endless stacks that made up her library was a 90-page novella called *Night*, by a man named Elie Wiesel. I asked my friend about the book; something about the shadowy cover and the understated presence of the book itself had piqued my interest. She told me it was the story of a man who survived Auschwitz, and agreed to let me borrow it, without my even asking the question. I am sorry, Cicily, for still not giving you your book back.

Since then, I have become obsessed with the man and his life. I have read all of his novels and nonfiction work. I have twice visited the National Holocaust Museum, which Wiesel himself helped to

build; when they, the always nagging they, asked him why the Museum leaned so heavily on the Jewish aspect of the Holocaust, comparatively ignoring other such peoples, such as homosexuals and Gypsies, Weisel responded, "not every victim was Jewish, but every Jew was a victim." I have used his work, his words, to defend in a classroom my position that fictional Holocaust literature by writers who know nothing more Jewish than the Hanukkah Song is not **only** created in bad taste, but is also dangerous. In short, then, Mr. **Wiesel** has become a sort of hero of mine. And tomorrow night, he is speaking for the faculty and student body of Virginia Tech.

My friend Laken, who attends VT, called me a couple months ago and said, "Guess what?"

I said, "What?"

She said, "Wiesel is coming to VT in April."

"Holy crap," I said, "Can you get me a ticket?"

"I already did," she answered.

As if it were ordained by God.

In about two hours from now, at around 6:30 p.m., I'll be hitting the road. Map Quest says it's a 4 hour drive from Huntington, where I live, so I should be in Blacksburg by 9 p.m.

I may decide to write some more after I arrive and settle down for the evening; if not, then I'll tell you about the Plexiglas cow tomorrow.

**Wednesday, April 13, 2005 12:41 a.m.**

The Plexiglas cow.

I work at Borders, a fairly large chain bookstore. When I told my **coworker** where exactly I was going, the first words out of her



## Creative Nonfiction

*Of Plexiglass Cows...*

mouth were not along the lines of, say, "Oh, awesome!" or "That's great!" No, this woman, Melissa is her name, the first thing she said to me upon learning of my upcoming trip to Blacksburg, Virginia, was: "Shit! You'll be able to see the Plexiglas cow!"

My reaction, naturally, was to say, "What the fuck?"

Melissa explained to me then that Virginia Tech. is big on Agricultural Studies, or whatever the hell one would call the study of livestock. "Cattle Theory" maybe. Anyway. She told me that one year, as part of a study project or something, some students sedated a cow and removed a small rectangular section of skin and muscle on one side of its torso. A real, live cow they did this to. Not a dead one. Not a small, fuzzy, plush, albeit fake, one. No. To a living cow, one which to this day still grazes the fields as happily as its condition will allow it, they installed an internal organ looking like glass.

In place of what they had taken, they left Plexiglas (and of course enough gears and doohiggeys running so the cow didn't fall over dead) so that passersby could, presumably, look at the cow and say, "Wow, the insides of a cow. Just what I have always wanted to see."

So, Melissa told me about the Plexiglas cow, and said that I had to see it while I was in Virginia. I don't think I was out of bounds in initially chinking her to be a big freaking liar about the whole thing. I mean, I could just see the scene in my head: I walk up to random people and say, "Hello student of Virginia Tech. I am Joshua, from Southern West Virginia, and I have come to view your Plexiglas cow."

Not a conducive way to go about making friends in a strange town.

But Melissa did make an interesting point. She kind of cocked her head to the side, squinted, and asked me, "Why the hell would I make that up?"

Good point, Melissa. Good point, indeed.

But still, a Plexiglas cow? How about a Velcro pig? It's not that I wouldn't be *interested* in seeing a Plexiglas cow, it's just... why the hell would somebody dream up the idea to create such a beast in the first place? It was all too much, too much, so I put it out of my mind with a simple thought of, "Nah, can't be true."

And then ... late last night ... held tightly within alcohol's grasp, I called Laken, my hostess to be.

"Are you drunk?" she asked me.

"No," I said.

"Well," she said, and then, "Blah blah blah."

And I said a lot of, "Blah blah blah."

Finally, at a lull in the conversation, I could tell from her breathing that she was about to form the words, "Well, I better go."

So I just kind of blurted out, "Someone told me to look for a Plexiglas cow."

My life changed forever at hearing her reply. "Holy shit, I know where that is!"

"Is it real?" I asked.

"It's soooooo cool."

"Is *it* real!"

Silence...and then, "Yes."

And so my journey shall take a side route. Tomorrow, with the breaking of the early morning sun, Laken and I will venture out into the cattle pastures surrounding Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and we shall find the Plexiglas cow.

## Creative Nonfiction

*Of Pfixiglass Cows...*

**Wednesday, April 13, 2005 1:28 a.m.**

I am now lying in Laken's bed. She is sleeping in her roommate's bed, on the other side of the room. Her roommate has, for the evening, opted to bunk with friends upstairs, rather than share quarters with some strange man from West Virginia. I don't blame her all that much.

This is a dorm room. I had forgotten what it was like to sleep in a dorm room. The innate claustrophobia that comes with the territory. Earlier, just after getting out of the shower, I heard a deafening screeching sound and had no idea what it was - until, that is, I heard from two stalls down a disgruntled exclamation of, "Aww, shit!" That tone, that pitch, I had heard that sort of "Aww, shit!" before. It was the "Aww, shit!" of a dormitory fire drill. Strange: I didn't remember the fire drills themselves, only the exasperated cries of the residents so rudely interrupted from whatever late-night atrocities they happened to be involved in.

Waiting outside for the all-clear to go back inside, Laken looked at me, shivering in a pair of gym shorts and a tank-top, and said, "Jesus, it's cold out here."

"Sure is," I agreed, only mildly interested.

"My nipples could cut diamonds."

I looked at her, my brow scrunched and my mouth hanging open in unabashed disgust. "What?"

Ignoring, or perhaps just not noticing, my repulsion at her word choice, she went on, "Can your nipples cut diamonds?"

"Good God, no!"

A guy standing several feet away, perhaps it was the same guy I had heard yelling in the shower as he had no shirt and wore only

a pair of boxer shorts, had his arms wrapped around his body. He nodded to someone standing next to him and muttered, "Fuck, it's cold. My nipples could cut diamonds."

I looked back at Laken. "What the hell is wrong with you people?"

She only shrugged.

Inside now, I'm not sleeping. I should be sleeping, but I am not. I didn't sleep last night, not more than two hours, anyway. By the time I got off the phone with Laken, I wasn't drunk anymore, wasn't even buzzed, and I have found that for some reason, any time I drink, if I don't fall asleep while still actually drunk I don't fall asleep at all.

She wanes me to sleep in her bed, with her. I know this. We have discussed it. Dubiously in my own defense, I don't think I ever spoke about it to her without being intoxicated. It's really not the sort of thing I want to do at all.

Though she is pretty, in an anorexic tortured artist sort of way, I am not attracted to her. This is going to be very uncomfortable.

I shall think of Elie Wiesel, and Plexiglas cows, and be comforted.

Wednesday, April 13, 2005 2:31 p.m.

Fucking \$30 parking ticket!

This was the plan: I parked illegally last night in the student faculty lot, because the place where we could pick up a visitor's parking permit was closed when I got into town. But in the morning, this morning, we would rise early, very early, and take my car down to the welcome center place and acquire the aforementioned

## Creative Nonfiction

*Of Plexiglass Cows...*

permit.

Seven-thirty in the morning we got out to my car. Seven-fucking-thirty. The ticket was propped up on my windshield, held in place by a windshield wiper and the early morning dew. The time of the citation, as reported by the ticket, was 7:17. We had missed out by all of thirteen minutes. That is not cool.

But a small glimmer of sunshine has peeked through the clouds of an otherwise dreary-ass day: after coming outside of the welcome center with my new visitor's parking permit-which was free, I should add-Laken pointed across a field and said, "Look." It was the Plexiglas cow.

It was about fifty yards away from us, so I didn't exactly get a good view, and in fact I couldn't even really see the Plexiglas itself. Bue Laken insisted it was the right cow.

I pointed to another cow, one not farther away from us than twenty yards. "Are you sure that's not it?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's it over there."

"Oh."

Later, tomorrow probably, we will borrow her roommate's digital camera (it has a zoom button) and either A) hop the electric fence that separates me from the Plexiglas cow, or B) simply ask the people in the Agricultural Center if I can go look at the cow. Either way, I will have my picture taken with that cow.

Wiesel speaks at 7 tonight. I don't know what I expect him to say, or even what I want to hear. It's kind of scary, for some reason, as the hour approaches. What if he doesn't live up to the lofty ideal I already have? What if he surpasses it? What if his words

are moving and I cry in front of seven thousand people? What if I **laugh** instead to keep from crying? What if, what if, what if, what if. Ahh... Till later, then.

**Wednesday, April 13, 2005 3:23 p.m.**

I have been left alone to my own thoughts and devices for a couple hours, now-since the last entry, in fact. And what have I found? That I kind of like this place. Maybe, no, probably it is more the novelty of a new environment than anything else, but I **can't** help but think that it's something else-something more. The anonymity I enjoy here. I could disappear forever on this campus, and while my friends and family would eventually know I was **gone**, they would never be able to find me. I could sit here, on this **couch** in the main student center, for weeks without ever having to make eye contact with another person. It is both amazing and **tragic**.

The banner hanging upstairs on the third floor reads, in huge **block** letters, "Holocaust Awareness Week," with the word "**Ho-**  
**locaust**" accentuated by black colored illustrations of barbed wire. It **reminds** me of a cheesy horror film, which is not how I wish to think of the Holocaust.

Then there are the photographs. About two dozen black-and-white are on display on the third floor. None of them specifically lay anything about the Holocaust, or depict anything particularly **kazi-esque** in nature, but at the same time it is apparent that these are pictures of a concentration camp. Nothing else in the entire world **looks** so desolate as does an abandoned concentration camp. A simple close-up photograph of a wall, unadorned by any markings,

writings, any dead-giveaway distinguishers, could be easily understood to be a picture of a concentration camp prison wall. It is a certain shade of gray, replicated nowhere else in the entire world.

But then, after the last photograph, presented in the same fashion as all the others, is a piece of poster board, upon which is written, "Auschwitz through the eyes of Virginia Tech. Students."

How dare they, I thought. How dare they let their eyes be the lens through which we view this; even now, decades later and with most of the actual survivors dead themselves, surely there exists a better voice for the preservation of this history than that of a 19-year-old photography student. Who do these people think they are?

Who do I think I am?

**Wednesday, April 13, 2005 9:20 p.m.**

And so.

I thought there would be so much more to say right now, just an hour after leaving the auditorium. I thought I would be saying something about how inspiring it was to hear him talk about his time in the camps and how much it hurt to see his father die, to walk by the furnaces where they burned his mother and sister, and not watch them die, not actually *see* them...but *smell* them, as their ashes floated out of the smoke factories. Had to probably feel their ashes on his own skin, breathe their ashes into his lungs. Have their ashes become a permanent part of him.

I thought he might get onto the stage and be nursing some sort of perpetual tremor.

I thought I would see rage. I thought I would see hate.

All those things, I told myself I would write about them after the event. But I can't do that. It didn't happen like that. I didn't see that. What I saw ... was something more than beautiful. I will talk about it later, but not right now.

**Wednesday, April 13, 2005 11:03 p.m.**

Noc to wreck the mood, but...

Laken is drunk. She has had a single Sierra Nevada, and a single Smirnoff Ice. And Laken is drunk. Did I already say that? I may have. Anyway. She is smashed. She had to have her roommate walk her to the bathroom, because she did not feel herself capable of making the trip herself—a trip that, *rotmdtrip*, is probably no more than twenty-seven steps.

I feel like an irresponsible visitor.

And I realize now, or more likely am just articulating now, that I am very angry with her. I am angry with her for being a poet; or, rather, I am angry with her for wanting to be a poet: randomly talking about dandelions in the middle of my tour of VT's campus; starring each sentence in a relatively high-pitched tone, and then gradually lowering it as the sentence goes on; saying to me, again **Ilndomly**, that, "You're attractive. Just thought I should say that. It Was on my mind, and so I said it." Oh. Hah hah. Hah.

I have thoughts like this often; not about Laken, I don't mean, but about my unjustified anger toward certain people who, to be honest, haven't really done anything to deserve my resentment.

And I traveled a couple hundred miles to hear Elie Wiesel, **Illrvivor** of the Holocaust, survivor of Adolph Hitler, survivor of, in **tlacnce**, an entire world that didn't give a shit about him when his



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*Of Plexiglass Cows...*

people were dying by the millions, say to a crowd of seven thousand college students, professors and general community members: "I believe in the relative goodness of humanity."

Who am I? How dare I?

**Thursday, April 14, 2005 2:56 a.m.**

. . . And now *Im* drunk.

Maybe I shouldn't include this in the final version. Or maybe if I do, I should edit the hell out of it. But what's the point of including drunken ramblings if I edit them? I mean, chances are, if I edited, I would edit out the most drunken parts, thus negating the essence of the drunkenness. Alright. So if I edit, no, when I edit, I won't touch this part. To preserve my drunkenness. Hah.

"Our Lady Peace" is playing on the stereo. Laken has come down from her high, and is sitting at her computer. I'm lying on the floor, my elbows grinding into the carpet, and I'm trying to figure something out. Something about what I heard tonight when Wiesel spoke, in conjunction with the rest of my life. I'm crying to figure it out, and I'm coming up empty.

I heard a survivor, a Survivor in the truest sense, say that he believes in the basic goodness of mankind. That touched something in me. I know it sounds...corny, maybe even a little fake, considering the fact that I already admitted to being drunk, but still, it touched something. So if you don't believe me...well, then, that's your right.

They asked him, after his lecture, which lasted for just over an hour, what he would say to those who would downplay the significance of, or even deny the existence of, the Holocaust. And

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Joshua Mattern

Wiesel, his face contorted, and for the first and only time all night I thought he might succumb to the emotion that guided the preceding words, and after taking a moment to calm himself, he said, "I would not grant them the dignity of the debate." I will admit, that even though I did not cry throughout his entire address, I did feel my arms tensing up and noticed goosebumps appearing on my neck when he spoke those words.

This man, he tried his best to keep his message positive. I quote it again: "I believe in the relative goodness of humanity." But at this point, when someone brought up the fact that some would dare suggest that what he went through, that he didn't really go through it—what? did he make it up?—at this point, he nearly lost it. But he recovered.

"Knowledge," he said, when asked about the responsibilities of the educated once they make it out into the real world, "Knowledge is like love. It's nice, but it all depends on what you do with it."

"Hope," he said, "Is something they can never kill. Hope is something that we always will have within our grasp, and something we must never stop reaching for."

- I'm Aying out on a tangent here, I know, but whatever-

"Cruelty," he said, "That hurt, sure. And hatred, of course that fueled the suffering that we endured. But," and here was a pause... a pause that cannot be described, "But what hurt the most, what hurts the most, was the indifference of our friends."

Elie Wiesel came to Blacksburg, Virginia, a town that ran as the cover story of their local newspaper yesterday, "Liberals crying to Destroy Religion in America," he came to a town whose major university has a Liberal Arts Department in name only, and he said, "I go to France. I go to Normandy. And I see the graves. Endless

## Creative Nonfiction

*Of Plexiglass Collis..*

tombstones, they go on forever. And you feel, you think, tens of thousands of young men, they gave their lives for this. Americans, America, you did a lot in the 20th Century. You fought two wars to save Europe. You did. And you sacrificed the lives of tens of thousands of young men in World War II. You fought Fascism, you fought Hitler, you did. You tried. But you failed. You failed."

Maybe I'm just drunk... but Elie Wiesel says I have failed, and I believe that I have failed.

Fucking Plexiglas cow.

I'm going to bed now, before I make any more of an asshole of myself

**Thursday, April 14, 2005 2:23 p.m.**

Fucking \$30 ticket!

Sorry, I had just about gotten over that whole thing, but then of course I go in this morning to pay the fine, and all the rage just comes right back.

I am currently sitting in on a poetry class at Virginia Tech. I was going to pay attention to the class-wait, now they're talking about the movie "Gloria." I guess someone wrote a poem about the real-life white Colonel who led the first black regiment in the Civil War. Okay, I have lost interest again. This class, I think it lets out at 3 or so. And shortly thereafter, I will begin my journey home, without having seen the Plexiglas cow. Without, I should point out, even really trying.

This isn't about a cow. I don't think it ever was about the cow. I think, now that this is all drawing to a close, that [superfluously injected the cow into this account, so that I could ignore, at least

in part, the daunting task of trying to put some cohesive order to what I truly came here to experience. I came here to hear of one man's absolute pain, and to be inspired by it. I don't know if that is poetic or sick.

Much of what he said, it wasn't what he said, but, of course, how he said it. Near the end of his lecture, while drawing to a conclusion his points on indifference, on remembrance, he began, seemingly out of nowhere, to speak like a prophet. "If I show charity, solidarity, empathy... then I will be alive until the day I die." And he paused, looked out at us, all of us, seeing through each and every one of us, yes, even myself, I shall forever be able to remember the day that Elie Wiesel looked through me.

He paused, and looked through us, and his eyes were sympathetic to us. To us. *He* was sympathetic to us. "If I show charity, solidarity, empathy... then I will be alive until the day I die... and so many people are not."

I came here for three reasons: to have my picture taken with a Plexiglas cow; to take advantage of a high school crush that now, fifteen years later, still cannot completely dissipate; and to see a man who only now I realize I have always looked upon as a rock star. On all three fronts I have come up empty: I got no closer than perhaps fifty yards from the cow, my nerves have been grated to the point of numbness in the time I have been forced to spend with this girl, and Elie Wiesel is no rock star. He is a martyr, who was just too strong to die when history told him he should.

Thursday, April 14, 2005 9:28 p.m.

I am choking.

## Creative Nonfiction

*Of Plexiglass Cows...*

I said earlier that I was trying to figure something out. And now I have it, though I wish to God it could have remained forever within my subconscious mind, tormenting me in whatever devious ways it wanted for the rest of my life, as long as it stayed out of the foreground.

He said that it was indifference that killed his people. "What if Roosevelt," he asked us, "Talking on the radio, doing his fire-side chats, had said to us, 'don't get on the trains.' Why didn't our friends warn us? Why didn't anybody warn us? Many years later, after it was all over, we learned just how much the world knew, and so early, too."

And yesterday, while walking across YT's campus, a girl who was running some sort of table approached me and said, "Hi, would you like to sign a letter saying the government should do something about the genocide in Sudan? Just sign a letter, and we'll send it to your congressman."

I didn't say no. I said, "I can't."

*All* I had to do was sign a letter, a letter saying something along the lines of, "I think what's going on in Sudan is wrong, and something needs to be done." I didn't even have to *write* the letter, just *sign* it. And then maybe give them my mailing address. I will each month faithfully write my return address on an envelope to pay my rent, but I won't just this one time write down my address on a piece of paper that says I think the Sudan Genocide is wrong.

And they would have sent it to Robert Byrd, my senator. I would have told them to send it there, to him. He's a good man; regardless of your politics, he is a good, kind-hearted, decent man. And maybe he would have read that letter-I sent him a letter in the 7th grade and he actually wrote back to me, included a signed

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picture of himself-maybe it would have touched him, inspired him, yes, it would have moved him to know that some stupid kid from his stupid state was so naïve as to think one person could make any sort of a positive change in a fucked up world, and then Byrd, he would have used his boisterous personality, his Senate seat, to get people to pay attention, to listen; maybe that's all it would **taken** to finally set things in my motion, to get people to care, to finally do something, rather than just sitting around talking about what a good movie Hotel Rwanda was: my letter. The letter I said I couldn't sign, couldn't mail. No, I'm sorry, I'm still tired from last night-seeing Elie Wiesel and all. Can't sign your letter.

That's why he was looking through us: he knew. He was speaking to a roomful of college students about indifference. Good God, I didn't get the joke until now.

We are all guilty. We are all responsible. We are all **condemned**. Because we know, and yet we do nothing.

I, like Mr. Wiesel, have faith in the relative goodness of humanity. But only because of the few great men, just like him, who **live** in this world, fighting against a raging tide to get the rest of us to care.

## **Parallel Lines**

**Travis L. Michael**

[2nd place]

... and this park path veers off into half-light; a daydream vanishes, recurs, and vanishes again. You watch leftover images sleepwalk across the bridge and dissolve like extinguished fire around the bend, lifting up into the anonymity of flow leaves. Time scrolls by absent-mindedly, and soon the evening is rushing down around you, cooling everything: the weak light softens the grass, and yellows over your hands like years over piled attic photographs. These adjectives overwhelm you again, unrelenting. Quietly disarmed, you watch as they slide into place alongside various objects, instantly changing them: fallen leaves, ghostly evening moon, lose minnows darting in and out of waterlight. And to put it quite simply - to put everything quite simply: you wanted so much more. You wanted so much more.

*Stepping through the long, even shadows that escape from the bridge, a child carefully approaches to*

## Creative Nonfiction

Travis L. Michael

*analyze his reflection in the water; the outline melts away into tiny waves as a single leaf disrupts the mirror surface. Laughing into cupped hands, he absorbs the present without bias. His eyes rest easily on anything, drifting over the Landscape with a sort of single-minded honesty and fully satisfied indifference that, if you can read these words, you have probably forgotten. For him, the Language of sadness has not yet been assembled, and this emotional simplicity makes his movements seem almost purely existential; searching with his eyes, he thinks: leaves, moon, water, fish, sky.*

Rising up from this bench, and from the fading autographs pressed into its wood, you were waiting for something - something your reckless intuition left unspecified. Tip-tapping across the bridge, you peer cautiously down, suddenly grateful that the water was not clear; you wanted mud and Boating leaves, not a metaphor for a rearview mirror. Then You imagine the laughing child looking up with a medicative Ytatrside clarity and suggesting: Try imagining something transcendental. Imagine the wind pulling those whispered words from your mouth and into the water, where they can be carried downstream, away from you ... You might interject: "But it isn't really the words that I want to escape, but rather all the emotional baggage I have strapped to them."



## Creative Nonfiction

### *Parallel u-nes*

*... then let go of the weight, and let the words sink alongside it; become a blank canvas, adopt other words, develop a new subjective vocabulary.*

Could you? You had almost forgotten this weather, this shifting interval that forces adolescent symbolism onto everything. The invisible pull begins in late September, and continues long into winter, leaving you walking old neighborhood streets, disappearing into alleyways, and rehearsing the same exhausted verses over and over until their meaning has been romanticized far beyond their actual significance. Fall is to blame; it is Fall that yanks these ghosts from their thick water, leaving them gasping, flailing on a sudden shore, the Halloween wind singing like cool poison through their gills. But still yet, Fall is your favorite season; you are a masochist and project your aching disposition onto the scenery. You choose these words; you choose to interpret autumn this way - a sad love affair, an inevitable "may I have this dance?" to nostalgia and landlocked despair.

Each year this glorious, red-leaved ghost comes back to apologize and, peering through the peephole, and knowing better, you unlock the door. Soon the familiar montage begins, and all your evenings run together like cheap, discount-bin watercolors, blurring into a frame-by-frame sequence of art-house movie clichés: you become unusually quiet, and start dedicating long evenings to sleeping in the bathtub; you

sit in the fallen leaves until their lovely dead smell seeps into your bloodstream; you wander old elementary school playgrounds at 3 a.m., quilting a secret inner-patchwork of memories; you unbury photo albums and yearbooks from their temporary closer homes; you stare from bedroom windows for hours as a living, breathing archetype for a loss that is half-imagined. Some people are in love with this; some people can never see this go. And you know, as maybe you will know.

*On the creek-bank, he is lifting his arms up to the sky, stretching out the single syllable in the word "Leaves," singing it almost. His mother, Looking down, replies warmly, but with a flatness that exposes her disconnection from the simple peace he has found: "Yes dear, leaves. Good. "*

As you watch him look up, you think of that day in third-grade when your fingers slipped on the monkey bars, and you watched the dark parallel lines running away into the sky. The shock of impact was like the dream where you cry to cry out, but the words fill up with water and drown. You remember how later, as some kind of strange reward for getting hurt, your parents finally caved and let you rent *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and you spent the remainder of the night with your Cincinnati Reds covers pulled so rightly over your face; hoping that if you had to scream, the words would somehow find their way through the screeched fabric.

The descent of a few wind-liberated acorns is violently cut short by the wood planks around you; their bodies burst like dry, uneventful fireworks, and the sound alarms you from your reverie. Feeling the present return, you sigh loudly, and begin to walk away. A brief thought rises from the sound of your footsteps and, looking over the railing, you try to find peace in the thought of falling. This is an impulsive habit, a byproduct of your affinity for high windows and anticipated self-effacement. However, this transient comfort is thwarted; you know that falling would only be an inconvenience here; it would be a bruised wrist, or the wary, concerned look from a jogging stranger, or the uncomfortable heaviness of driving home in wet clothes. The footsteps lose their echo as they cross over onto the path.

*Looking up again, he finds the exaggerated outlines of cartoon characters in the shape of clouds, and the skittish squirrels are magical little cats, scampering up swaying trees. Later, after dinner, and the mysterious thrill of spooned ice cream, he will find a delicate hymnal trickling within his Grandmother's back-porch wind-chimes, he will pick idly at the grass, and listen as adult chatter glides faintly through a window screen. You would only find loss in these sounds; you would only find a tortured, un-specific homesickness; you would be haunted by that*

## Creative Nonfiction

Travis L. Michael

*childhood memory about bells that you can never  
quite put your finger on.*

Back in the trapped heat of your car, you can still sense the leaves trembling down around you; along the path, you watch a few skeletal, wind-struck ones cartwheel in the dust. The windshield wipers squeak dryly across glass, deflecting a few more, and one settles deftly, balanced on its edges like a poorly assembled card castle atop the rearview mirror. You crack the driver's-side window, and listen as the murmur of distant water wafts through the slit; the current is a lost song lilting up and over rocks, soliloquizing to an audience that rarely lifts its head to listen. Suddenly, the view is clear, and you can feel the adjectives gathering thickly ahead of you, swarming like frantic insects suddenly illumined in a row of streetlights -

*falling from monkey bars, the parallel lines frame  
an inaccessible sky; a picturesque window view to  
accompany your fall. This glorious despair reaches up  
from playground dust, from layered foliage, from the  
seafloor of bathtubs; bracing for impact, you wanted  
so much more, and you wanted nothing more ...*

## Sugar Free

by **Suzanne Samples**

[3rd place]

*Another day  
A perfect day  
A twinge o' pain  
The sting o' the needle  
So warm at the bottom  
illzrm neverfelt so kind  
And for a moment or two  
I leave it all behind.*

-Guster

Howdoyouspellyourname? Howdoyouspellyourname?  
Hooooow. Do. You. Spell. Your. Name? I know what she's  
asking me, but all I can think about is my phone number.  
3042085411. Her phone looks humongous. 3042085411.  
Buthowdoyouspellyourname? Can she tell? Can she tell that  
when I look at her, her head quivers back and forth like che

## Creative Nonfiction

Suzanne Samples

string of a musical instrument when plucked? Does she know? Please know. Please know I understand you, you just want to spell my name right, and I appreciate that. I just need food. Now. Please go get me something. See it in my face, see the color drained, see the confusion?

No. I'm not usually confounded by simple questions like how to spell my name. It's not my fault. The oxygen, it can't get to my brain. There are vending machines down the hall. They took the Coke machine away. Why did they take the Coke machine away. A statement, not a question. Why why why. The oxygen. I can't think. I could die; I could damage my brain if I don't get down that hallway. That's what I read on the internet once; if you let it go too long, brain damage. Brain damage. Coma. Death. Julia Roberts. Why doesn't my doctor talk to me about this? Because he knows. He knows I am too stubborn to let anything happen! Nothing happening to me. Julia Roberts. Ha. Wimp. I haven't fainted before. Not once.

S. U. Z. A. N. N. E. S. U. Z. A. N. N. E. Oh, 30420854 ... 3042085411. 3042085411. Yes, that's my number. Correct, correct. Yes, call me for lessons, anytime. I am sure of my name, my number, and that I can give bacon twirling lessons to your daughter. Don't joke about being old. You are not old, your daughter is seven. You look twenty-five. You have short, curly, blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a slender figure. You are not old. Good, she enjoys piano lessons. Did I say S-U-Z-A-N-N-E? Did I give you my last name? My phone number? I pray for her piano teacher that your daughter better focuses

## Creative Nonfiction

### *Sugar Free*

on piano than she does on bacon. Bonnie calls her the butterfly watcher, and she is. Cute. Bue a butterfly watcher.

My head is going to roll off my shoulders. Can you see it, butterfly watcher's mom? My head is going to land on the gym floor. *Thump. Roll, roll.* My legs. Like lead. But light. Light lead, light lead, light lead. That's not possible, not at all. Bue alliterative. Light lead, light lead, light lead. Heavy, but if I cried kicking them, I feel as if they might fly off my body and land across the gym. That would scare the bacon students, my head and legs dismembered from my body and on the gym floor, flailing and wondering where the rest of my body went. The students would never wane to do kicks again. Or learn neck rolls. And they are lazy anyway.

I have to leave, yes; I have to walk down that hallway. I think they left the snack machine. How nice of them. Should I inform someone where I'm going? Should I? No, they will cry to help. They will ask the normal questions, and I will feel like a nursing home resident ringing the help button. *Bzzz. Bzzz. Riiiiing!* Are you okay? Are you okay, are you okay? Are. You. Okay?

She will know. Bonnie will know why I left the gym and disappeared down the claustrophobic elementary school hallway. The Coke machine. Why did they take it out. Elementary school bastards. Don't wane the students drinking caffeine. Everyone must be QUIET come September. It's gone forever, gone gone gone. The summer, the Coke machine, gone. I don't want another granola bar. I just ate. Coke works faster

chan anything. Noc good for me, not *complex* carbohydrates, just the fun sugary kind that make you gain weight. Coke. I want it fixed, now. I want to feel good, *now*. But no Coke. Coke. Shoots it up fast, too fast, unless, of course, I'm exercising. And I am. Teaching eight seven year olds how to twirl barons. I am good at this. They want lessons from me. Private lessons, after the group lessons. No, no, their *parents* want the lessons. *Illeir parents* want them to win trophies and banners. The girls, they want to hit each other with their batons. All the time.

Bonnie. She has instructed me since I was seven, now pays me to help at all her practices. Has seen my mother pour **orange** juice down my throat while I sat against a bleacher in **the** gym to keep me from falling over. Has watched me run off the floor after a performance and down three Snickers bars to prepare for the next performance. Will not mention to the **seven** year olds this *condition*...

*condition*...

*condition*...

*condition*...

... why I must furtively exit the gym and come back after inhaling a granola bar that my stomach, full from dinner, has no use for and does not want.

She knows; she knows me, chat Bonnie, she knows I will not want her to make a spectacle out of what I must do, chat it Would be like asking to watch someone brush their teeth. Vs on the vending machine; I wane the damn Coke ma-



chine. This episode is going to take two V5's; they are Kudos, smaller than the average fifty-cent Sunbelt granola bar found in every convenience store across America. A few months ago they only cost a quarter, but then they made chem bigger and doubled the price. Everything must look bigger and cost more. Except Kudos. They keep getting smaller. And more expensive.

I don't have enough for two. My quarter. Is stuck. Motherfucker. I cannot say those words around the seven year olds. I should stop thinking chem, I really should. Pretty soon I'll think those nasty words out loud and no mothers will ask me for private lessons anymore. Would that be so bad? Maybe not. Two bites. Gone. Is one enough? Why didn't I bring something from home? After eighteen years, shouldn't I know how to prepare for this? B.B. King is totally not 107 all the time. Ha. My dad and I laugh at that, because after eighteen years of watching me, he knows it's not true either.

Two years ago my professor handed out a descriptive paragraph for us to dissect, to explicate, to *discuss*. This woman in the paragraph, her leg turned green and black and smelled like decaying flesh. Rotten. Completely rotten. I could see and smell it just like she described; I could *feel* my leg beginning to do the same thing from the inside out, the extra sugar picking and eating my muscles and bones like termites on a new piece of wood. They would destroy it, bit by bit, until it became juse like the woman's.

Still, what struck me most about the paragraph was the care the author left unwritten; I knew this woman's leg would not fall off. No. The sugar termites would gnaw it until destruction but not carry it away. A doctor would have to saw it off, even though her body didn't want it or recognize it anymore. A professional would chop off her leg, and she would spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair, wishing she could have been sugar free, sold in the grocery stores for twice the price of regular candy, its steadiness more valuable than an immediate rush and crash. Then, of course, her kidneys would fail. Transplant? Too late for that. Dialysis? No, would not work. Eyesight? Gone.

So I went into the professor's office and cried and cried and cried, gasping and sobbing so dramatically I could barely articulate what I needed to tell her. I needed to do this here, in her office, not in class in front of my friends. Just once: I would only cry about it once. We... *just... sniff, gasp...* cannot read this... *hiccup...* in class. She hugged me and said we **Would** forget about it, she wouldn't even mention it to the other seminar students. We had plenty of other things to do anyway! I laughed, and it felt good. But you look healthy, she said with ultimate concern. You will be fine. This is someone **who** didn't take care of herself. You will take care of yourself.

I have to admit, the author's description was profound.

They're old enough. Tell them.

(No, no, no, no... I don't want to, they don't need to

## Creative Nonfiction

*Sugar Free*

know, they won't understand! Bonnie!) Okay.

So I tell them. I tell them the G-rated version, the version that does not mention how sometimes I try to inject an infusion and the needle will not puncture the skin of my abdomen because it is too tough: how this causes me to stand there, one hand pinching my fat and the other hand trying to force the needle through years of scar tissue that is hardened like my optimism that I will not have to do this someday; how I clench my teeth on the throwaway plastic needle casing and grip the carpet with my toes to distract me from the pain; how I pray that I will feel the needle enter my skin with a pop and won't have to start over. I leave out how sometimes the needle tip will slide in, but the tiny tube surrounding the remainder of the needle will not budge; how this causes me to fill tissues full of blood and my stomach to look as if the tip of the needle burst a bubble of bluish purple paint hidden beneath my skin. I forget to mention how one time when I was a teenager, I awoke to find my parents and sister surrounding me on the top bunk of my bed, shoving cereal and juice down my throat as I patted my head and tried to figure out why my hair and face felt so sticky. We had to force honey into your mouth, honey. You couldn't swallow anything, you would have choked. And we could barely contain you.

My cousin has chat!

Yeah, so does my grandma!

(Your grandma's probably overweight and has never exercised a day in her life. Probably eats five donuts every

morning and watches soap operas all day long. Did you know that 90 to 95% are like your grandma? No one tells you the difference. Those people ask for it. The other 5 to 10% are like me). Do your routine. Again. Smile this time.

The first and last night I spent at Derek's house, he accidentally pulled the wire and caused me to yelp. My clothes, they came off easily, but when his hand tangled with the clear line attached to my abdomen by the Teflon tube inserted inside my Aesh, I thought of the time he told me that yes, he liked me, but no, he wasn't smooth, he was more awkward, even though he tried his best. The confused look on his face let *me* know he had never seen an insulin pump before. I didn't want to explain it to him; he did not need to know. *Ouch. Be careful, it's attached!*

*Oh.*

Derek wanted an exciting night; I wanted an exciting life-time, so we laid in the bed and each penned the story exactly the way we saw it: in his version, I would leave tomorrow and he would never call me again, although we considered each other friends, and in my version, I would leave tomorrow and make excuse after excuse about how he's just "not smooth;" he told me that himself, it *must* be true. In my plot, he didn't know how to handle someone he liked so much. Completely forgivable. Stay waiting by the phone: he'll eventually call. In his plot, he was horny. Completely forgivable. Why wouldn't I just want to be a casual friend after that night?

Before we fell asleep, I jerked the wire the opposite direction; I couldn't find the pump. I was stuck under something. Derek's body.

*Are you lying on top of it?*

*Yeah.*

*You could have told me so.*

At my suggestion we went out to dinner once after that, and I had to get up and use the bathroom five times. I kept pricking my finger under the table so he wouldn't see me; I couldn't tell if I was headed toward a high glucose comatose state, what doctors would refer to as DKA, or just nervous. If Derek noticed, he never questioned me. And though I knew it would never happen between the two of us, I convinced myself that it would for many months.

And it will never go away. Chronic. You can control it, and that is the best and worst thing about it.

I will dance to raucous banjo music; I will teach my butterfly watchers to toss their batons high and do a double-walkover-catch-backhand-in-an-illusion; I will *do* toss-double-walkovers-catch-backhand-in-illusions for the rest of my goddamned life; I will look at other people and realize how lucky I am to know, to know how elating it is to feel good, to feel really good and how equally elating it is to feel really, really down; I will talk late at night on the internet and search "Myspace" profiles for long lost friends. I will shrink my

female fat zones with Denise Austin, I will listen to my doctor and secretly despise him when he tells me to get outside and walk four miles everyday; I will count my calories, carbohydrates, protein, fiber, and even trans fats, whatever those are.

I will read, I will read, I will read and discuss everything I put in front of my face, even if it's about a leg rotting off; I will write terrible stories, okay stories, great stories; I will submit them to journals and have them accepted; I will submit them to journals and have them declined, mostly declined; I will sob and gasp when the boy I like decides to date other girls or when I watch a heart wrenchingly sappy Lifetime movie, but not when I'm poking my stomach with a needle or when some rookie phlebotomist can't find the right vein in my arm; I will wake up in the mornings and feel weak and helpless until I down cranberry juice and eat a PopTart; I will sneak a piece of hard candy, just one piece, when I visit my grandparents' house, knowing that they still think eating one piece of candy will *surely* kill me, and I will crunch it with my teeth and feel the sugar shoot through my molars like a bee sting.

I will drive to my parents' house after baton lessons, and instead of watching the road, I will look at the tea-green hills outside my window like a postcard, the scenery blanketed with the thick West Virginia August humidity, and I will wish that I could jump off the guardrail and land right in the middle of the hills without hurting myself; I will laugh and laugh and laugh when I hear my sister's message on my cell

## Creative Non fiction

*Sugar Free*

phone about how she doesn't know how to spell "lasagna," not even close enough to find it in the dictionary, so could I *please please please* call her back and let her know?, and I will feel indebted to her when I remember how she's the one who found the honey and saved my life while I seized in my sleep.

I will drive faster and faster and faster and not care about the police or that my fifteen year old car could die at any moment, and I will roll down my windows on the interstate, crank the volume on Guster's "Perfect," knowing it's not really about me, but for now it will work just fine; I will tell the uneducated that it's a beeper, or if I'm feeling extra ornery, I will tell them I was a crack baby and it's a crack pump to keep me from having those awful withdrawals, and then I will eye them as they look at the wire suspiciously-I will read their minds and know what they're thinking *But I've never seen a beeper with a wire attached to it! or Oh my god! She was a crack baby? I know her mother!*, then I will giggle, make them feel dumb, and tell them that I lied, it's not a beeper, no, I'm not a crack baby, yes, I have to sleep with it on, do you think that the *condition* disappears in the night like your consciousness does?

My blood sugar will spike or drop, and I will feel terrible, like I can't drink enough water or eat enough food to make myself feel halfway alive again; when it's high, I will wish to jump straight into the Lipton Tea pool on the commercials to quench my thirst, and when it's low, I will want to have someone get me something to eat and *fast*, with just one look so as

not to embarrass myself or let them know that yes, I am weak.

I will read my Bible and go to church, and I will struggle with the use of foul language and alcohol consumption. I will have three babies someday and roll my eyes when I remind them as they walk out the door to *Be careful! Havefun! Do you have a snack with you?*, just like my dad did to me. I will deny this *condition* the remainder of my life, and I will see no harm in convincing myself that I and the other 5-10% are no different than anyone else. Bue I will not, I will not, I will not be like Julia Roberts in that terrible movie, and I will not, will not, will not *ever* order any supplies from Wilfred Brimley off the television; however, I will. I will. I will be like B.B. King, 107 every time, at least that is what I will cell my doctor when he asks. And I will. I will. I will. Laugh and laugh and laugh without a care until the last note is played.



## Sprechen Sie Englisch?

**Amanda Rogers**

[Editor's choice]

"D'you got fi<sub>c</sub>y sin?"

"*I-ah-what?*" My mind is on taking roll for the hundredth time today, and a few moments pass before I realize that I can't imagine what language this person is speaking.

"D'you got fi<sub>t</sub>y sin?" the kid repeats, swiping his greasy hair back, revealing watery blue eyes. "*Fit-E-sin*. You know, fi<sub>c</sub>y sin."

"I have no idea what you're saying to me," I say at last. Bedlam is erupting around us, and I have no time for courtesy. I motion for him to take a seat, but he won't budge.

"Wur you from, anyway?" he asks, eyeing me suspiciously, as though contemplating whether I'm a German spy, or just another loopy English teacher. I ignore the question, looking over my list, trying to get the class's attention. He sighs and tries again, this time drawing little circles in the air with grimy index fingers. "You know, two carters. Fitysin?"

"Oh," I attempt to laugh, but I am too tired. "No, no - please sit down."

"Aw, come on," he insists, sidling up to me. This is the kind of thing that will echo through my shallow sleep all night. I will find myself naked in the supermarket, being chased by quarters that keep asking me for "fi<sub>t</sub>y sin." I take a deep breath.

"SIT DOWN ... *please*," I say, gaining composure or some semblance thereof. -ac the end. He shrugs and walks away.

I exhale and look at the big white clock on the wall - a compulsive habit by now. Two minutes later than it was the last time. Maybe the battery is dead. It's only fifth period. Three more classes to go. Three more roll calls, flinging my tiny voice into the din of thirty separate teenage screeches, three more assignments, which they will totally ignore, three more five-minutes-to-the-bells during which I will have to physically stand in front of the door to keep them from escaping. Three more hours until I can return to my college campus, abandoning high school forever. Or at least until next Tuesday, when I have to work here again - since "college student" has become synonymous with "broke," or, more appropriately, "desperate." I push down the panic that rises with this thought and write the assignment on the board.

I have long since abandoned crying to give the lecture their regular teacher planned, so, maintaining my usual level of reaching excellence, I yell "Here's your assignment" and

## Creative Nonfiction

*Sprechn Sie English?*

consider my job done. I plop down at the desk once more and pick up a book. I'm starving, and I ask myself yet again: who in their right mind would wane a job that requires you to be at work in the middle of the night, and then only gives you twenty measly minutes for lunch? I try to focus on Mann's "Death in Venice," but I've read the same page a dozen times; the noise level in this school has roused complaints from the airport. I've tried standing patiently in front of the class, yelling until my throat *is* sore, attacking individual groups, even standing on the desk and madly waving my arms—but nothing makes them stop. Oh, well; let them talk. Lee chem yank out each ocher's purple hair. Lee them strangle each other with their dog chain belts, for all I care. After all, that which doesn't kill us gives us something to discuss in therapy.

"Hey, substitute," fif<sub>t</sub>-cent boy says, smiling amiably and breaking my reverie. "What's yur name? How old are you?"

"Ms. Rogers, and none of your business," I say. "What's *your* name?" He mumbles something that could be Jimmy or Jamie or Susan Snell, and I repeat my obligatory line, "You need to be doing your work."

"Ah will, Ah will," he says. "So, d'you always want to be a substitute?" Ac chis question I smile genuinely for the first time since this demented episode of "Saved by the Bell" began. The students always assume that all substitute teachers are lifers, and indeed, most of them are. All the other subs were here when I was doing my four-year life sentence in high school, and they all have missing teeth, carry a lunch box, and

say things like "If you h'aint done yer English, yer in fer it."

"Actually," I say, giving up on ever understanding Herr Mann, "I'm going to teach college English." My greasy companion whistles.

"You must be puny smart. Ah hate English," he says - a response that varies very little from that of every other person who has ever asked me about my major. "Hey, d'you know that Shakespeare dude?"

"Not personall<sub>y</sub>. Why?"

"He wrote a poem.

"No kidding."

"S'true - I sended it to my girlfriend ... she cried," he adds proudly.

"What sonn-er, poem, was it?" I ask, chinking that there are two possibilities here. One, he will recite some limerick whose first line ends with "duck," or at very best, I'll get a dose of "How do I love thee ... "

"It was called Sonnet 18, even though they wouldn't no eighteens in it. I tore it out'n my English book." For some ungraspable reason, perhaps mental and physical exhaustion, coupled with lunch from the candy machine, I see humor in this. Five hours of tension explode, and I find myself laughing hysterically - the embarrassing, totally unwarranted and inappropriate kind of laughter, complete with tears.

For once, the room is quiet.

"Man, you are weird," he says, and starts backing toward his seat.

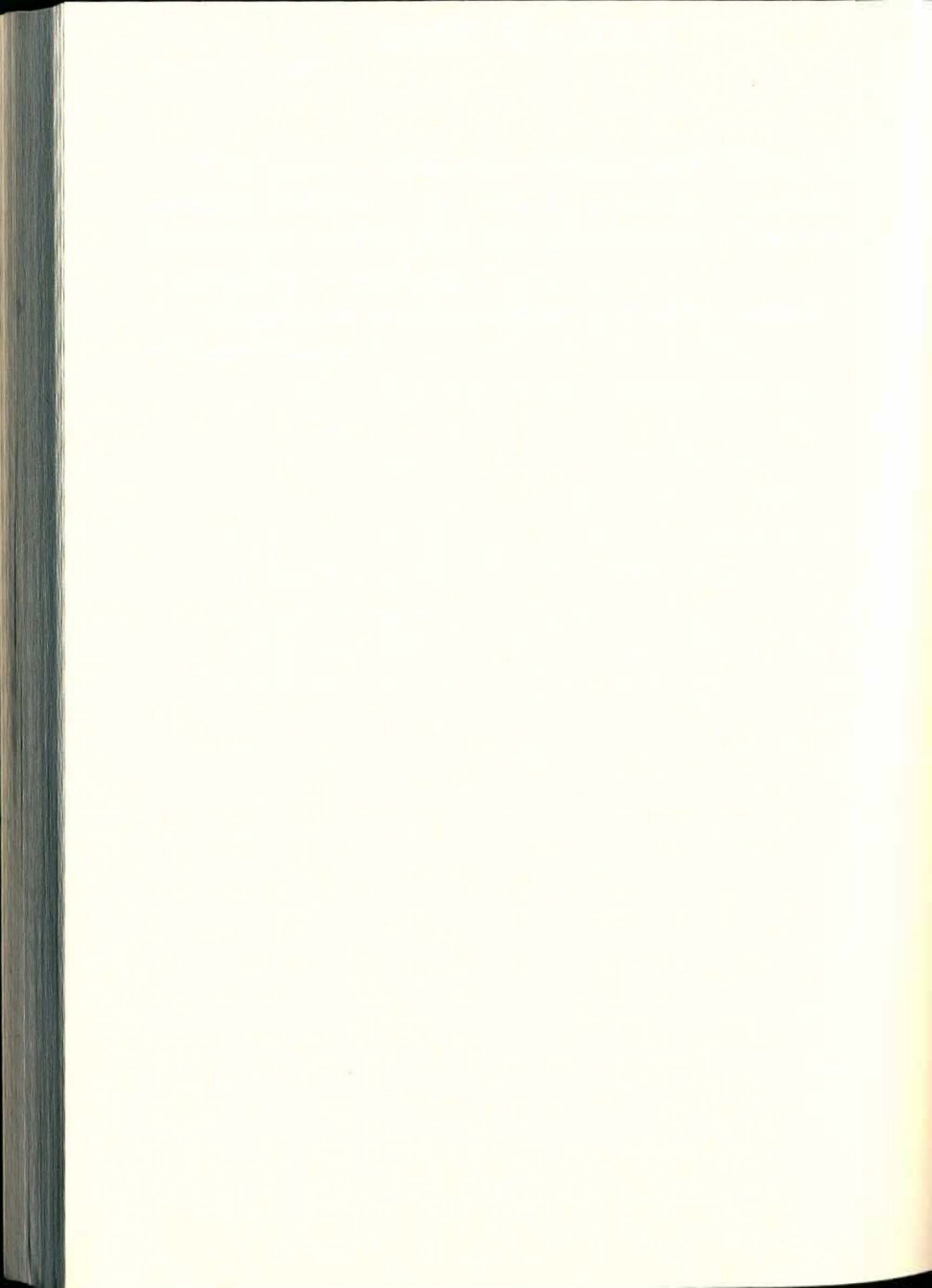
## Creative Nonfiction

Sprechen Sie Englisch?

"Hey, um ... " Dammit, what *is* his name? "Here," I say, nodding in his general direction, as I toss him two quarters from the real teacher's desk. "Just promise me you'll hold on to those English book pages."

"No problem," he says as I pick up "Death in Venice" with new resolve.





*.et cetera.*

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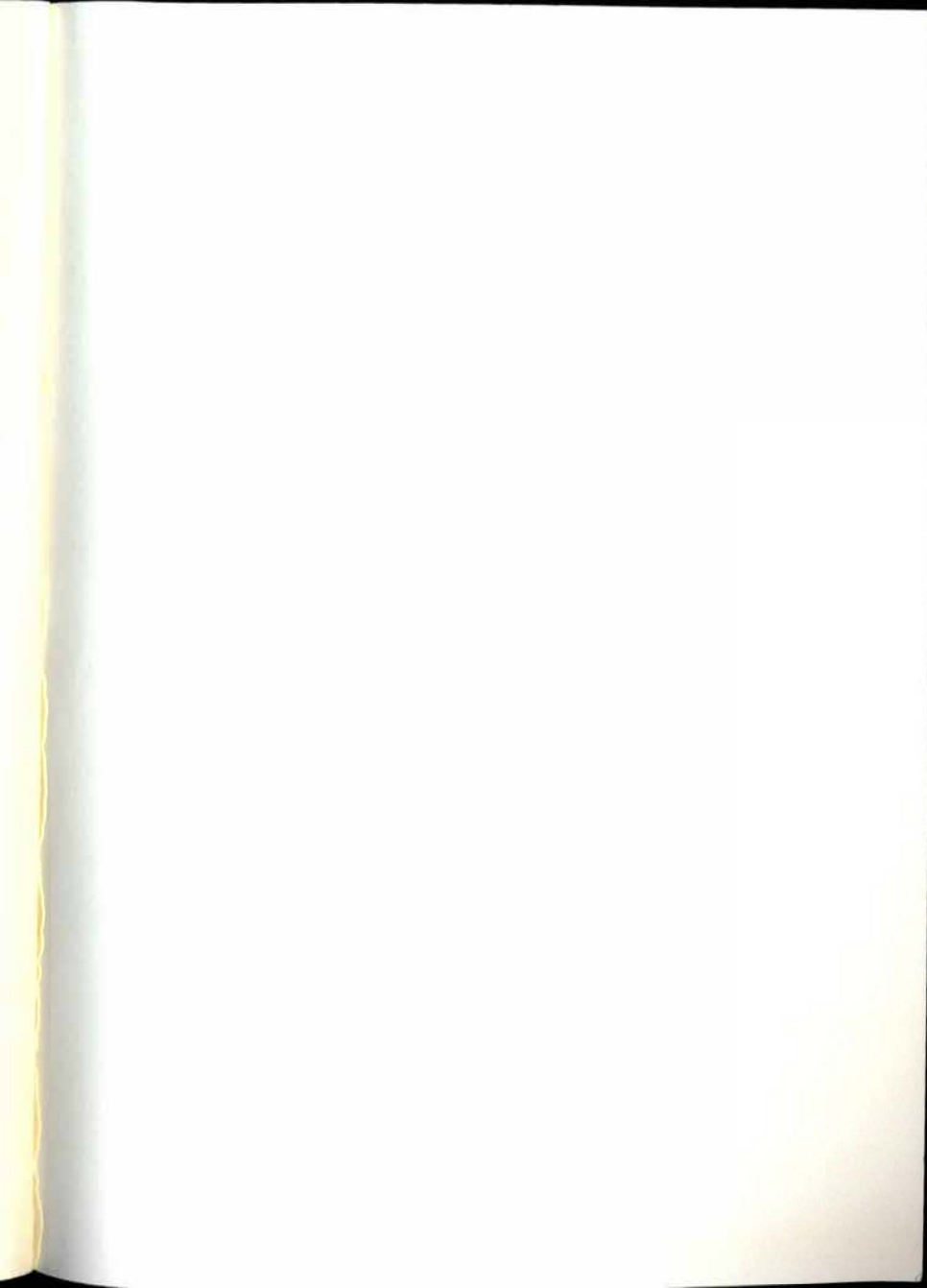
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