Spring 2010

et cetera

Marshall University

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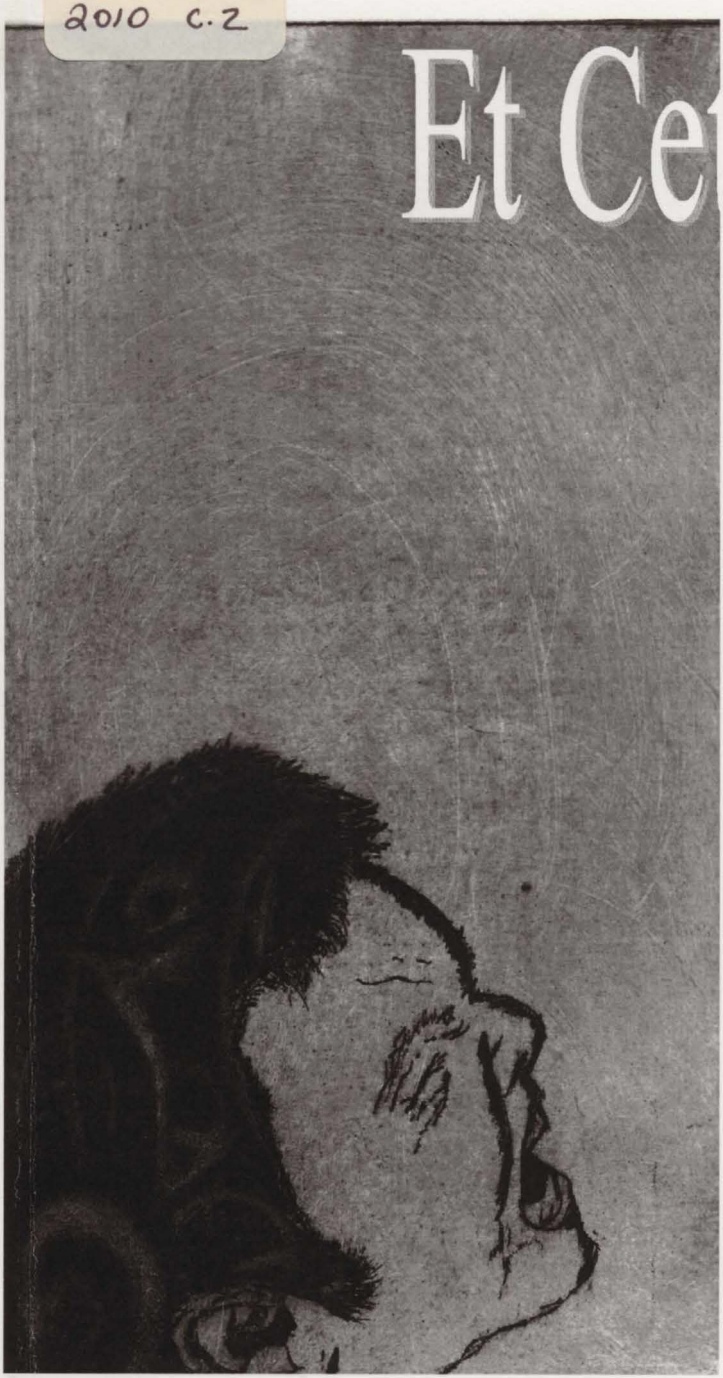

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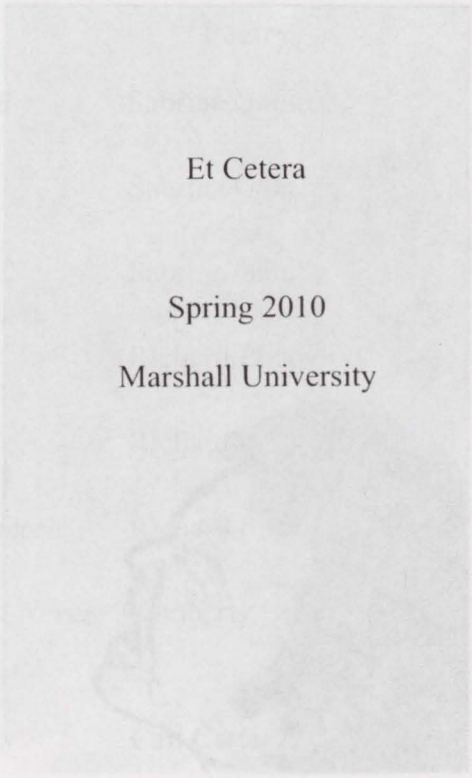

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Cover Art
A Clockwork
Levi Brumbaugh
Collograph, Intaglio Print

Poetry

Art

Fiction

Art

Non-Fiction

Let's pretend **Sabrina Gamez**

we're ghosts,
invisible to this world,
untouched, unaffected,
unmoved by it. But we
can still move things
and make noises in the night.
Rustling leaves in the trees.
A cat's soft step in the grass.
A tap on the window.
It's only the wind, they'll say,
Go back to bed.
And we will.

Suck It Up **Richard Pitaniello**

Inning nine. Shortstop. Ain't no stars,
no moon either. Squinting at flood lights,
I ache bad, sweating, thirsty, wishing
I could watch the game, not play it.

Pop's in the crowd. So's my whole damn school,
all biting hotdogs, licking soda foam, cheering
like it helps me.
The ball cracks off the bat, snaps
into a glove. "Out!" One more
and we win. The bat hit it again.
I chase the grounder, but it bounces high

and busts my lip. Pop shouts: "Suck it up!"

I let it drip into the hard, cracking dirt, stain withered grass.
Then
I suck my lip hard, spit my blood away,
and swear to miss the next one too.

The Finger **Richard Pitaniello**

Though finger-paints are juvenile, my class
used them junior year. Our Catholic faculty thought
it'd be nice to paint Jesus on a wall. So

they took artistic kids and gave them paint
dark as red-wine. They stroked the wall,
smearing trails of scarlet that always ended with
their fingerprints when they lifted hands away.

So they drew a life-sized Lord to
hold out a hand and bless us. The faculty were proud,
praised their creativity and faith.

Yet I had watched those students, noticing
they only painted with their middle
fingers, sticking them out of half-closed fists, giggling
and drawing God,
all for our Catholic school.

Old Man Wheezle **Richard Pitaniello**

Carousels spin, flinging laughter. Rides rumble.
Dust rises like bubbles, but nobody minds.
People squeal, all alive at the Halloween fair.
Some folks paint faces, others carve pumpkins for a prize.
Dark has swollen, the bourbon moon shines

high. And Old Man Wheezle flows
through the crowd, his constant hisses and rasps working
with the vampire act. His thin face smiles, eyes heavy as
oil.
He laughs loud, coughing as much as he laughs.

James and I stand between two booths, wearing the
shadows
like a cloak. James smokes, underage, the fumes
dissolving into his feathery hair. Zits prickle his face.
Chocolate stains his lip. He holds the egg carton
like a briefcase of drugs or money, opens
it to reveal swells of shell. He picks one up
as if to test the weight.

Then he squeezes.
Yellow yolk bleeds out his fingers.
He smiles, each tooth glimmering. I sigh and nod
hoping he'll wash that hand. He wipes it
on black jeans, leaving one drop on the devil
mask that hangs by his hip. We both have a
stare at the crowd, and at Old Man Wheezle.

Tomorrow that man will find his house
scabbed thick with egg. He won't wash it.
He seldom cleans those ruins of a farm, leaving
chickens to scavenge, one cow to shit in piles as large as heads,
maggots in the sink, moonshine in the fridge.
He'd be homeless in a city. Here he's just a hermit, one
with an undying bottle.

But today
he let it alone and drank only milk.
He stitched a costume together,
like every year. Once, he was Icarus
with wings of feathers and glue. Last year
he took apart his tractor and came
as a rusted robot, barely able to walk.

This year he wears black, like shadows
sewn into clothes, like the used-up oil
he burns for heat each winter, like the smoke it makes. The dark
cloth bleaches his beard by contrast.
Carved chicken bones as fangs,
canned tomato sauce for blood, and his cape seems liquid.

When the contest begins, he stands tall
in the sun of a hot spotlight, hands on hips, his head turning,
staring straight into everybody's eyes.

Awake from what you should've had
Instead of stripping in that club
Since day one it feels like you were just looking out for yourself
Not caring about me or anyone else
I'm moving on
I'm growing up
Time to be strong
All I have to say is thank you for showing me what you did wrong

Broken Glass **Cait Carter**

After Sylvia Plath's "Cut"
I enjoy cleaning broken glass,
Anticipating which piece will pierce
My skin as I clean the mess,
Watching red bead on my finger,
Before washing it away.
I like picking roses without gloves,
Feeling the thorns delve into my flesh.
I admire the broken shards,
Reflecting jagged pictures of my face.
The sting of cutting my finger
In place of an onion
Might cause others to shudder.
I anticipate these thrills.

New Black **Shiana D. W. Taylor**

Lying is the new black.
The kids say,
"Everyone is doing it."
I sport a lie in public,
a cleverly composed façade.
You lie to my face,
a craftily constructed friend.

Lying is slimming:
subtract ten, twenty, thirty.
Lying is classy:
trump up a situation, embellish.

Lying goes with everything,
Pair a lie with a smile,
and you're happy.
Match some heels with a lie,
you could be tall.
Coordinate a lie with a lie
and perhaps another.
You could be anything.

Tell a lie to be a lover.
Believe a lie to be in love.

Lie through your bleached teeth.
Lie like there's no tomorrow.
White lies, big lies, bold-face lies.
Tell me sweet little lies.
I'll reply with a lie,

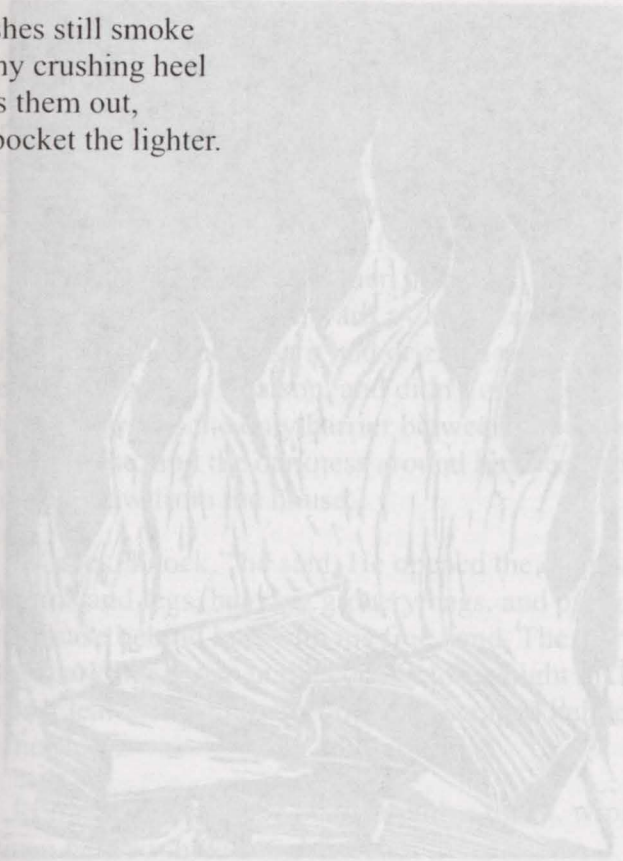
and we can lie about our troubles.

Lying never goes out of season.
That's the unfashionable truth.

Kicking the Habit **Shiana D. W. Taylor**

I light another cigarette,
and watch you burn
down to the embers.
Burning my lips,
burning my tongue
like Satan's kiss,
I don't know
what will kill me first:
You or the smoke.
The haze and the noise
are filling the air.
There is nothing left.
No birds perch in the trees.
No song hangs on the breeze.
You have choked them
like clouds at night,
like the clouds that hang,
like me on your every word.
There is no difference
when your lips are moving
or when they are still—
Placid in your lovely face,
deceitful like the snake
slithering in the grass.
Hiding the lies mouths spew
like a geyser,
like the black gold spews
and fills the soul.
But there is nothing left.
You have burnt it whole.

The ashes still smoke
until my crushing heel
stomps them out,
and I pocket the lighter.



Book Burning
Levi Brumbaugh
Plastic Relief Print

There was a low rumbling hum from the train a quarter mile off, and Albert could already smell the spaghetti sauce from the front porch. The crickets in the Kentucky night were anxious. They wanted in, where the light was. The wood under his feet felt smooth in a broken world, and Albert remembered when he helped his brother Simon pick it up at the lumber yard. A beetle squished under his work boot; because it had drizzled rain earlier, the beetle was soft like a raison, and didn't crack harshly. The screen door was the only barrier between Albert and the kitchen noise, and the darkness around him seemed dense in the glow from the house.

"Knock, knock," he said. He opened the door and was all arms and legs, heaving grocery bags, and pulling an empty suitcase behind him with his free hand. The warmth from the sparkling house in the cool October night hit him hard, and a leaf attached to his boot lace scraped helplessly across the floor.

Robin came from the kitchen with a towel, wiping sauce from her raw-hide-rough hands.

"Hey, Albie," she said. "You got that?" She sounded cheerful, but looked worn-out.

Albert smiled because his brother Simon's wife always had that way about her, making people feel welcome when she didn't especially want to see anyone. It was her faith in people, Albert knew, that made her smile when she didn't

always want to. The faith that made her house one of grit and friendly shelter.

"I'm caught up like a hair in a biscuit," Albert huffed. He handed her a grocery bag as she reached out for it and told him to put the suitcase in the hall closet.

"Thanks for letting me borrow it," he said from the hallway. "Came in handy with all of my souvenirs."

He walked into the kitchen where Robin stood unloading the grocery bag full of garlic bread and beer. He was carrying a bag of novelty tee shirts, straight from the shelves of Cincinnati, where he had just finished a job wiring a building for electric. "Where's Danielle, uh, I mean Danna?"

"Getting ready for work. She got the job at the gas station."

Albert murmured his approval, and then the talking was done. They worked quietly, because they had said all that they wanted. Albert was a tall man with more concern for the silence, and he listened to the hard ends of the laces on his boots as they clicked against the linoleum floor. His worn-out Levis were fading, and there was a hole in the back pocket where he kept his Skoal can. He was the type of man who had a hard time committing to a concrete emotion, but when he finally chose, it was like a bear unleashed.

Robin was tall, too, for a woman, and she worked at the stove, stirring the sauce, watching the pasta. She was the type of woman who, at the grocery store, straightened untidy shelves as she walked by; not out of habit so much

as just to make someone else's job easier. Her long dark hair was piled in a neat mess on the top of her head, and her plaid shirt was too big. Albert recognized it as one of Simon's old work shirts.

It was immediately understood that Albert would be in charge of the garlic bread, and he moved Robin's bony elbow out of the way as he turned on the oven. The smells of the kitchen were snug and inviting, like the exterior of the house. Dark American wood with a wrapped front porch, and green leafy plants hanging from pots and baskets. The brown wicker furniture, covered with thick cushions, eagerly waited for attention, and the yellow glow from behind the bamboo blinds shown through in slivers of horizontal light. Albert inhaled the smells of his brother's house, and stood mixing lettuce for the salad.

"Smells good," Danna said, walking into the kitchen. As the teenager, she was the girl who couldn't understand why her dad almost died four months ago, but knew that when she was young, he always called her Danna, so that's what everyone must call her.

"Gotcha something," Albert said.

He pulled from the bag a yellow shirt with the words *Newport Aquarium* on the front pocket, and a picture of a squid on the back. He handed it to the girl, and she smiled at it. She thanked him, and told him it was corny, and laughed sincerely as she held it up and told him it looked like it would fit. He bent slightly and kissed her on the forehead. She was the spitting image of her father, and she hugged him hard, because she had learned to hug people

whenever she felt like it, for as long as she wanted. They stood that way for a moment, and then the timer for the oven *beepbeepbeeped*. Robin had been watching, and turned back to the sauce as her daughter walked up behind her to kiss her goodbye. Her mom always smelled like fresh laundry detergent mixed with oranges, and the hug Danna gave her showed the appreciation of its constant comfort.

"We'll try to save you some, but no promises," Albert joked.

Danna rolled her eyes at her uncle with an easy smile, and walked out of the hot kitchen, through the shadowed living room, and onto the front porch. She had crossed into what used to be her father's world. The life of a police officer was binding, but for Simon, it always stopped on the front porch, because that was where his family began.

"She doing okay?" Albert asked.

"She's enduring," Robin said.

As she poured the pasta into the drainer in the sink, the steam rose with a loud burbling noise. Robin turned on the water to rinse, and then quickly turned it back off. Some of her hair had fallen around her face, and she had taken to pretending that the frayed edge this gave her was only due in time, and not premature. Her hands were remarkable, and she hid their inadvertent rawness in an oven mitt with peppers on it. She slid the empty hot pan back onto the stove, and, tipping the drainer to let the pasta fall into the big silver bowl, Robin instructed Albert to give the bread

another minute. He obeyed, and carried the salad to the table, where the plates were already set, and the beer was in the tall glasses that Simon had bought on their beach trip three years back.

"Parmesan," Robin said to herself, walking to the refrigerator to search for it.

Albert checked on the garlic bread. The slices were golden with crispy edges, and after he pulled them from the oven, he began to scrape the pieces from the cookie sheet to the basket. The quiet was swallowing them, and it was noticeable, but they both did a fair job of pretending to be used to it. The effort extracted from people who are pretending to be unoccupied by horrible things can be draining, and it is the everyday inclinations to forget that can further injure.

The honey-colored walls of the silent kitchen were mockingly peppered with pictures of fat, red-cheeked cartoon chef's in tall white hats. Some of them held loaves of bread; others heaved rolling pins high in the air. Beside a picture of a chubby cook with a wine bottle, Albert's eyes landed on a family photo, from the beach: Robin, Danna, and Simon grinning in front of a seafood restaurant, with a ship's hull behind them, and to their left, a shark hung up by its tail.

Albert forced his eyes back to the garlic bread, and noticed that Robin was on her hands and knees in front of the open refrigerator. Around her on the floor sat a colorful assortment of containers and pitchers. Robin accidently knocked over a mustard bottle as he walked over to her,

and he saw that she was trying not to cry. He got on his knees beside her on the floor, and she was still. Albert let her sit like that for a few moments. Quiet, she then sank into him, and he was steady, because he was expecting it. As he began to put the items back on the cold, spotless, plastic shelves, Robin spoke.

"They said he did it on purpose," she mumbled. "That the video shows it. I don't want to see it."

And then she did cry, with the weight of a husband who an eye-witness says stepped in front of an on-coming semi-truck during a routine traffic stop. A silent husband who, for four months, had been in the hospital, hooked up to beeping machines.

It had always been her faith that Albert admired about Robin. She would blindly help anyone, because she believed that people were genuinely good, and that they would return the favor if she ever asked. Which she never did. Like the magical recklessness of dreams, Albert knew that Robin would outlast them all. Pleasant stories seemed only to exist in fantasy and fairy tales, and the illusion of a happy world appeared to have slipped right through their greedy fingers.

He let her cry a bit more before helping her to her feet. Robin apologized for her outburst, and for the third time since the accident, Albert told her not to apologize for such things.

At the dinner table, they didn't say grace like they used to, and this continued to bother Albert, though out of his

appreciation for Robin's strength, he said nothing. Not a religious man himself, Albert always took comfort in the fact that his brother's family was. Albert had often understood the bankrupt feeling in his stomach. Like he once had belief in something, maybe when he was a child. But he feared he had used it all up, and couldn't get it back.

The garlic bread had eventually admitted some flaws, presenting itself as almost black on the bottom, and Albert absentmindedly cursed the oven. Robin seemed thankful for his distractions, and poured herself a glass of iced tea. They talked about things that didn't matter, because they didn't want to be quiet. Not at the dinner table, where Simon used to fill the air with stories from his day.

So that's what Albert and Robin did. They filled the empty air with old words. It turned to a different time, a way back time, one that Robin and Albert and Simon had shared together. Things were spoken of that wouldn't be mentioned if the girl was present. When there was no Danna around to shield, memories were sprinkled in among the living, and liberties were taken that otherwise would be unheard of. Old stories where Simon is always the hero; even if that's not quite how it was, that's how it is now, for heaven's sake. That's how it must be when the almost-dead are remembered and the barely-living can stand to talk again about the past.

Albert told the story about his first wife, Millie. Robin had always loved Millie, and had even been a bridesmaid in their wedding, when Robin was six months pregnant with Danna. They were all poor, then, like people were without knowing it. The wedding was at a small chapel, and Robin

wore her cousin's old maternity clothes, and Millie borrowed her wedding dress from a friend. The men were proud, standing at the front of the church, in rented suits, and the leaves were shining on the trees. Simon was the one who remembered that the ring was on the front seat of the old Chevy, and was just getting back up to the front of the church when Robin slowly shuffled down the aisle as maid of honor. Simon would always talk about how pretty she looked carrying purple flowers. He never could remember what kind, but he knew they were purple. "Freesias," Robin would tell him. And Simon would kiss her on the neck, and say she looked just right.

So Albert told the one about Millie, about the time she shot their above-ground swimming pool with Albert's dad's rifle. She had found out Albert was cheating on her, and that pool had been four of Albert's paychecks. The sides collapsed after a few seconds, and flooded the yard. Since it was behind the house on an incline, the water went right into the basement.

Albert laughed about how he had to get rid of his girl on the side, while the girl he was married to commenced to throwing all of his work clothes and video tapes into the squishy yard. And Albert fondly smiled as he told how Simon, his good big brother, had come over with his wife to calm Millie down before she threw a lit cigarette lighter on all of their picture albums. Robin still remembered one of the pictures that Millie held in her hand, next to the flame. The shiny smiling faces on the high school bleachers were getting glossy, wavy behind the orange heat.

Albert finished the story, and they were both remembering their own versions. Their smiles faded, and moved from a forgotten old couch in Albert's living room, to the imperious dining room table in Simon's house.

"There is a need for smoothness, I think," Robin slowly said, "that wasn't always here before."

"What?" Albert squinted across the table. She was sometimes like a snake-charmer, with her flute poised in the air, waiting for her vibrations to amuse the dormant creature.

Robin picked at her thumb. The skin around her knuckles in the cold autumn air had begun to dry up, and the rough patches were white against her tan country skin. Her head sat in the dip of her left palm, while she picked at her right thumb with the nail of her right index finger. When it began to bleed, she left it alone, and moved on to picking at the place-mat under her bowl. Albert saw that she hadn't touched her spaghetti, and it was only then that he noticed she had lost weight. The big plaid shirt had hidden it before, but he now saw that her chin was much more defined than before; the shoulders had a harsh point.

"I can't stand rough edges. But that's all I am now, I think." She looked at Albert. "I used to be so smooth. Even Simon would wonder at it. 'Out here in this air, in these hills,' he would say. 'How're you so damn smooth?' But it's gone, now. I'm too old for an even peel."

"No, that's not it," Albert said. "You just want to smooth rough edges. It replaces the perfection that has been lost."

He said it gloomier than he wanted, but it was her fortress-like nobility that he needed to see withstand the ugly.

"It's this house," she said. "It's too clean. Pure. We never had dogs, or pets, and we took our shoes off when we came in. People who came to visit did that, too. Uncontaminated. The garage floor, it's permanently smooth, and cold. And he left me in it. It's all here to stay, so I have to stay. And our money is gone, it's all in the house. The hospital bills, too, but here it's everywhere. He bricked it all up, the money is in the walls with the mortar and his aching back."

Albert leaned back in his chair. The house was his brother's third love, after Robin and Danna. He loved it more than the force, especially when he saw that the job wouldn't pay for the house as fast as he thought it would. The debt was heavy.

"He isn't as strong as they all think he is," Robin said. "At the hospital, that's all everyone can say when they visit. 'He's strong, Robin. Hold in there. We know you have that strength, too.' But they don't know. Nobody knows what he was thinking. What he wasn't thinking."

"Robbie, I don't like this road." Albert got up from the table and told her he needed more beer. As he passed her to get to the kitchen, she held her empty iced tea glass out to him, and he felt the cold weight of the lonely, clinking ice-filled cups.

Robin sat in the dark dining room. One crooked knee was up by her chin, and her blue jeans were baggy. Skinny legs besieged by the denim, and her plate was still full of

spaghetti. Albert knew that to hear him in the house must have been hard for Robin. A man's presence can't be undone. There is a release in knowing that protection exists; but when the noise is gone, so is the illusion.

When Albert came back to the table, there was a small piece of paper next to his crinkled-up napkin. It was tan in color, and looked like the corner of a business envelope. There was texture to it, like how Albert imagined papyrus must have felt. It was bent down the middle, and then across, like it had been folded and unfolded several times. The corners were rounded, and a name written in a strange hand at the top read *Ned Palini, P.I.*, followed by a phone number. Albert looked up at Robin.

"Joe's wife gave it to me at the hospital that first night," Robin explained. "She said, 'Just think about it,' and then walked away. That's all. No hug, or 'You're in my prayers,' or anything like that. 'Just think about it.' And then she walked away. What can I do with that? How can I have that information in my head? The chief's wife gave that to me the night they think my husband tried to kill himself, and then she just *walks away*."

She put her hands in her lap, and shrugged, defeated, shaking her head as though she didn't believe her own story.

Behind her was the door to the kitchen, and Albert was trying not to focus on the fact that she looked so small in the light that cast shadows on the walls. The walls of the dim dining room had been Robin's own project for months. They had hired a decorator, and Robin had always known

that she wanted an "aged Tuscan" look for this room. It had all the trappings of a money-fine-lifestyle. She had picked out the paint colors—there were three warm tones used, oranges with reds and browns, with a technique to make the walls look old and cracked. There were wrought-iron sculptures hanging over the swollen mahogany cupboard, matching the table. The chairs had been the most expensive you could buy; dark wood and big soft cushions, the kind that could spoil a person. In their Kentucky town, the house existed in *the nice part*. The land alone had been a hard bargain, but it was a big lot, and the closest house was fifty yards away. For a deep-country couple like Simon and Robin, Albert had seen the pride in both of them when it was finally finished.

Albert picked up the scrap of tan paper and took a deep breath. He knew Ned Palini, and he knew Ned was a Private Investigator. Palini was the man that Simon's chief had told Albert about at the hospital as well. "Look into it, is all I'm saying," the Chief had said. "I know Simon, and this isn't him. Not suicide, attempted or any other kind. Just take the card, and hang on to it. Know that you have it. That's all."

Albert looked up at Robin, who was quietly watching him. Her jaw was locked, and her eyes were subdued. She would not accept bushy-tailed bullshit, and Albert knew it would end in his loss if he tried it.

"The house echoes now," Robin said. "I'm sure it always did, and I just didn't notice. But I can't take it. I have to know why they're calling it attempted suicide. That's not an empty word. It means all kinds of things. About Simon,

and me," and her voice cracked at this, "even about Danna, Al. It's like… I don't know, like what they do with the snow that covers the roads in New York."

"What?"

"In the winter, when it's really bad, and the snow just won't stop. Eventually, they have to scrape it off the city roads, and load it on these big bull-dozers, and then they just put it all on a big boat, or a barge, I guess. And then I don't know what they do with it. But just because it's not on the roads anymore doesn't mean it's gone. Someone had to deal with the mess. Someone has to steer that barge. That's what this is. Just because they say it was attempted suicide doesn't mean it's done. I have to find out what they do with that dirty snow once it's on the barge. Get it? He's in that room, with the stench of clinical desperation, and the buzzing lights, and the hushed nurses who sit out in the hall and talk about *The Bachelor* or some shit, and Simon doesn't even know that I have to *know*."

Albert looked at Robin. But he didn't hear her; he didn't see her, not the new skinny version. He looked back, and saw the girl that his brother brought to their family dinners on Sundays. He saw her smoking cigarettes with their dad while they watched football on TV, and he hears her old laugh. He saw her shooting his dad's rifle behind his mom's old bathtub, the one that sat in the backyard because it was too heavy for anyone to move once they dropped it there behind the trailer. He saw her at the hospital after his dad beat the tar out of his mom for wrecking the truck. He saw her holding baby Danielle in her arms in the hospital, with her dark hair stuck to her sweaty forehead. And

there's Simon with the big old video camera. Albert saw the wooden frame of the house that his brother wanted to build for Robin; outlined against the empty night sky as he and Simon finished another beer, while Robin and nine year-old Danna chased that big old dog around the yard.

"What do you believe?" Albert finally asked. "You think he tried suicide? Or you think it was just an accident?"

Robin was silent. No one wanted to ask, but everyone wanted to know. It wasn't something people could just put out there, and Albert knew this. But he was the only person who could. He was connected to Robin, related, for Pete's sake, and if anyone could ask, it was him.

The problem, though, was that Albert was afraid of the answer.

Eye-witness accounts, the surveillance video from across the street, everything pointed to attempted suicide.

Simon had looked over his shoulder, that's what they can't get at. He knew that truck was coming, they say. He was calm, says the driver Simon had pulled over. He looked over his shoulder, and saw the truck. And then he just took a step back.

There were summer bumble bees flying around, and dry grass in an abandoned field in the background. Across the train tracks, there was an old church, and Simon had seen the truck, and then was calm. And then, with the label of attempted suicide, he was gone. Like the snow on the streets of New York in the winter.

"Where did you hear the snow thing?" Albert asked, when he saw that Robin didn't want to give him an answer to the questions.

"Weather Channel," she said.

She was stiff, and Albert thought she was getting smaller in front of his eyes, and he was afraid that the battle between keeping her faith and losing it was already over. The difference between Robin and Albert was that Albert knew they just dump that snow from the city streets into the river. But Robin, she had hope.

And the worst part, the very worst part about any of it, was that Albert knew the answer he would give to those questions.

Because he had talked to Ned Palini, Private Investigator. He hired Ned, and he waited for two weeks, jam-packed into his own thick ideas of what really happened that day, four months ago.

When Simon pulled over a man going eleven miles per hour over the speed limit.

When, that man says, he saw Simon look over his shoulder at the on-coming traffic on the two-lane road outside of Ashland, Kentucky. Population just under 22,000.

That man who said that Simon saw the truck, and then looked calm, and then stepped back, and then was gone.

And Albert knew why he paid Ned Palini, Private Investigator. He knew why Simon's chief, Joe, had given

him Palini's card. Because if you could say anything about Simon, if there was one thing you could say about Simon, it was that he would never be selfish enough, or coward enough, or hopeless enough to attempt suicide.

Albert watched Robin sit quietly, trying to decipher the hieroglyphics that her husband had left on their silent moneyed walls. And then Albert saw the time when he and Simon were young and climbing a tree in the front yard. It was a Sunday in summer, and their mom had them play outside to keep them out of their dad's hair. "It's dad's day off," she told them, "so be quiet." Then she scooted them out the door. But kids in the country don't need much, and for the boys, the tree was their castle. A recent rain had left huge puddles around the trunk, and that was their moat, covering the big roots. Simon was on a higher branch than Albert, so when Albert fell, it took Simon a few moments to get down to the ground.

"Don't think about it," Simon must have said, gently rubbing Albert's little ankle. "I know it hurts, but don't look at it. You're fine, it'll be fine. Put your arm around me, there you go, now let's walk, okay, but slow, good. It's fine. Just don't think about it."

They were covered in mud, and there had been a twig attached to Simon's neck. Albert had focused on it as he leaned on Simon, and they walked the whole way home with Simon telling Albert about the baseball game on TV the night before, the one Simon was allowed to stay up late to watch. When they got to the house, their dad yelled about the mud, and Simon endured the slurred hits that were aimed at Albert.

Simon was strong. And Albert needed Robin to understand that.

"I don't think he tried to kill himself," Robin finally said. "And I don't want to see that surveillance video."

"You think it was an accident?" He was gently pushing her, quietly urging her to go where she didn't want to. He needed her there, because that's where he was.

"No. That's why I showed you that phone number. I don't get it. There must be something we don't see. So I was thinking of hiring this Palini guy. They say crazy things happen to people on the force. Maybe he could find out."

"But don't you have any faith?" Simon asked. He had to control himself. He wanted to lean forward, shake his head, and yell, 'But what if Simon's waking up right now? He could tell us what happened. You have to believe that he wasn't doing anything wrong.'

"It's just hard in an empty house," she said.

"It's not an empty damn house."

"No, it's just a damned house."

"So then *what*?" Albert asked.

"I don't know why he would *do* that. Just try and leave us. I know he wasn't a coward, but he saw things that humans do to each other, on the job, the crush and the grind, even here, this tiny place. And it gets to people, so— I don't know."

"You have to have faith that Simon is who you always thought he was. Even that day, when he was heavy with something we might not understand."

Albert folded up the tan envelope corner. He never had the faith that Robin did.

He always saw the worst in people, so he assumed it was that way with his brother. He just figured there was something *bad*, something that Simon needed to escape, something he couldn't endure any longer.

So Albert had called up Ned Palini, and said, "Here, here's the thing. I need to know why my brother stepped in front of that truck. He saw it, and he was calm, and he stepped back. What don't we know about Simon? Huh? You've got to find out, Ned. Whatever it takes."

That was why Robin must not hire Palini. She would be belly-up in the falling rain of doubt. If Albert saw Robin give in to her disbelief, there would be no more faith in that house. The house that Simon built, and where Albert helped haul lumber.

The house that accumulated suffocating debt.

The house that Simon woke up in every morning, next to his sleeping wife.

The house that Simon thought about, because that's all he ever thought about, the house that took all of their money. The walls, the ceiling, were heavy with it; they were going to cave in.

The house that Simon thought about when he knew that, if he got killed on the job, then his wife, and their daughter, would be taken care of.

The house that he saw when he realized that if he was in the middle of a routine traffic stop when he got killed, then there would be insurance, and no more debt.

Albert slid Ned Palini's name back across the table to Robin. She was still, and both of her feet were on her chair, so her shins were against the table, and her knees were holding her head. Her arms were wrapped around her legs, and she sat indomitable.

She picked up the paper, and folded it in one hand. It was a little tan square, asymmetrical. She reached for her tall glass, and poured three fingers worth of the brown sweet tea. She turned the paper over and over in her hand, and appeared to see nothing else. She was small, and she itched for a cigarette, Albert could tell. She wasn't supposed to be alone, in a big house that wasn't paid for. She had a daughter in this world, and that's the worst thing you could have. Expensive, and fragile, and innocent. Albert watched as Robin dropped the envelope-corner into the glass, and filled it the rest of the way to the top. She raised it to Albert in a toast.

"Without question," she said.

Albert raised his glass, and they drank quietly. Albert finished long before Robin, and he waited to lower his glass for a moment. Robin breathed in the scent of the tea long after it was gone, and the envelope-corner was soggy

and broken, lying between pieces of ice at the bottom of the glass. As he stood to clear the table, Albert's chair got caught on the thick carpet, and tipped over. Robin looked at it, helpless in a poor world, but she smiled.

"Simon hates these damn heavy chairs," she said. She held the glass in her hand, and looked at it. "And these things. He always complains that they're too tall. Impractical, he always said. But they were cheap, so we bought them, and they were from the beach, so we kept them."

She smiled wider, already in a way back time again. She smiled as she sat her glass down on the table and told Albert to leave the chair where it was. He did as she asked, and moved to the chair next to her, and sat down. He put his chin in his hands, and his elbows rested on the table, close to her place-mat. He looked at her expectantly. Robin still smiled as she flicked her hand, and tipped over her glass. It fell almost in slow motion. The ice shifted, clinking the side. The tea-water ran to the end, searching for freedom. They watched as it eventually hit the end of the smooth edge, and little droplets were released onto the worn mahogany. The paper with Ned Palini's name had dissolved, and the ice melted, like the snow that sometimes covered the streets in big cities.

The Diver
Levi Brumbaugh
Lino-Cut Relief Print

The Tunnels in the Tower **Richard Pitaniello**

I don't remember what my costume was that Halloween, and I don't remember what possessed me to go to Marshall's Twin Towers for trick-or-treating. I don't remember if I went with friends, I don't remember if I'd ever been in the twin redbrick buildings before. I don't remember any exhilaration stepping through the front hall, or who greeted us. That information has dissolved away.

I do remember the Tunnel of Terror, or parts of it. It scared me, not fun at all. Like every house of horrors, it was dark, lights strategically placed to show certain exhibits. A black cauldron all but bulged with neon-green, viscous liquid, filled with dozens of tiny skeletons only three inches long, all of them glistening like wet sardines or tiny squids. A woman in black might've stirred it, the college kids doing that old cliché. Another woman was hunched over, dressed in brown or dark clothes with scraggly hair, one hand reached out towards me; she kept repeating "Little boy, little boy!" in a scratchy witch's voice. I didn't take her hand. There was a dark corpse too, lying down; withered, brown leaves blew over it, scratching at the white floor. A strobe light pulsed through the dark, lightning white, just as bright. It'd be a nice touch if the corpse had come back to life and moaned, reached out to get me. Maybe it did.

At any rate, I was glad to be gone from there.

Then we went trick-or-treating in a large group, going from dorm door to dorm door, the students giving us candy. I don't remember if the Marshall students liked us,

which probably means they were at least polite or else I'd remember them being jerks. I had a good time, giggling, looking into my bag.

Then I got lost, split off from the group with another person or two. I can't remember how it happened, but it did and I wanted to find them again. I know I rushed up a staircase, passing an orange sodium light on a dark brick wall.

And there is one other image lodged in my brain: the carpeted hallway beyond the staircase door, narrow as a tunnel with doors lining the sides of it, all of them closed, no people anywhere in sight, totally empty except for yellow lights burning on the ceiling. There were students in their rooms, but they were silent. I remember I stared down that hallway for a moment.

Then I moved on.

I apparently found the group again. I don't remember if I had been scared about it or if I was in trouble, and I don't remember leaving the Twin Towers, stepping into the night to go home. All I remember are those four images, three from the first tunnel, one from the second. And these images may well be corrupt. Where did they get hundreds of tiny, plastic skeletons? What was the glowing, acid-green liquid? I can't say. I don't even know if that is what I saw. Time distorts everything, and memories are withered into crisp leaves, fragile. So I set them down on paper to fix them. This is what I remember. That is all I'll ever remember. The fear I'd felt at the time has dissolved down to nothing and has given way to fun, something I

want to remember but can't. I wish I'd gone to more of them. I wish I'd kept a diary too.

The funny thing is, though, that hallway is calling me just as much as the horror show. I find myself wondering what would've happened had I gone down that path. Would students have given me more candy? Would they have been nasty and mean? Would someone have hurt me? That hall beckons in retrospect, sucking me in as if a goldfish mouth were pulsing at the end of the tunnel, as if a wind were blowing behind me, trying to push me forward. The image almost bulges inward, distorted, alluring.

But I never went down that path, and I'm glad I didn't. I had enough fear on that night already and I doubt another, greater fear would've ever dissolved down into fun.

A Studio and Tennis Shoes **Chad Tyler Pemberton**

Sauntering into a jet black gym, a draft of nippy air whiffs through my thick, ungroomed hair, causing the hair on my forearms to stand up like a porcupine. A stranger to this place wouldn't know what to expect, but the details are sharp to me: how the color of the floor glows like maple syrup; how the light fixtures dangle over the gym floor, with each one shining slightly different; and how the lone set of wooden bleachers rests dangerously close to the black out of bounds line.

This is it though; the place that has taken pictures of my highest of highs and lowest of lows. Squatting on the bleachers, the cracking of my knees and the breathings of the gym resonate throughout the openness—I don't remember it ever being this quiet. I sling my duffle bag off of my shirtless back and scoot the bag across the floor. Reaching into the bag, I yank out my tennis shoes, a limber pair of navy and white Nikes with frayed shoe strings, faded, handwritten inscriptions, and a rancid odor wafting from the inside liner. It's a smell acquired from countless nights like tonight. My nose crinkles; it's a bittersweet smell.

Tugging at the shoe strings and prying at the sides, my shoes need prepped for the task ahead. I jerk the tongue forward, sliding my foot into the shoe. My index finger and middle finger tighten each criss-crossed set of strings until I reach the top. Now, it's time to tie the bow, but I hesitate, allowing my mind to drift like a ghost, through the gym walls, across the gravel parking lot, to a slide show of my past.

~

Pouting on the couch, I clutched my new shoes, black and crimson Nikes, and chucked them at the floor. I won't do this. It's stupid, I thought.

"Chad, we won't shoot basketball together until you learn to tie your shoes" declared my dad with his eyebrows pursed. His words lashed against my ears. This time, he wasn't backing down.

"Why can't you just do it, Dad?"

"Because you're going to be in kindergarten in a month, and I can't leave work every time you need your shoes tied. You have to be prepared for the times when I won't be here." Unimpressed, I crossed my arms and planted my chin on my chest in disgust. How dare he refuse to shoot basketball. We do it every day.

Picking up my shoes, he tossed them in my lap and said, "Chad, if you want to play in the NBA, you have to learn to tie your shoes. Michael Jordan ties his shoes."

"I'll just pay someone to tie my shoes for me," I retorted, "Duh!"

"Well, when you decide you want to shoot basketball again, I'll be outside playing with Heather and Melissa."

With my dad heading toward the screen door, in a half squeal, half cry, I screamed, "This is stupid!"

~

Double knotting the bow, I slither down the bleachers until my butt meets the cold floor. It's difficult to know. Is that where it began—my acute attention to preparation? Basketball should be synonymous with preparation, the way I had to learn skill by skill in a particular order. My father was right (like most of the time); I had to be prepared.

Before I start my workout, I know that I need to stretch, but I hate stretching. No, I loathe stretching. But it's part of the preparation, a step in the dance. Stretching to touch the tips of my shoes, a sharp pain rushes through my calves down to my heels. It feels as if two teams were playing tug-of-war with my calf muscles, both sides at a standstill, both hauling with all of their might.

Jumping to my feet, I wiggle my legs, releasing the tingling feeling from my cold muscles. Even though the room is lightless, I stride toward the light switches. It's like driving in your hometown—no matter how long you've been away, you always know how to get where you're going. The clicking of the switches and the buzzing of the heating light bulbs reminds me of an antique movie projector. This sound sends me to the archives of my memory, forcing me to replay moments from the sport I cherished.

~

Silence flooded the car ride home. It's the way it was after every game, but why did it have to be so silent after this game, I thought. As each second expired, my tears steadily rose from my throat to my eyes, like a bath tub filling with

water. Trying to distract my emotions, I started to pick at my shoes.

Tracing the outline of the Nike check, I thought about the game, the 12 year-old Championship bout that I had watched from the bench. Each time the coach glanced down the bench, which seemed to lengthen exponentially as the game progressed, hope smoldered in my stomach. But my hope was dashed with each second that I sat staring at my teammates dice through the full court press, at the way their smiles and struts were influenced by the raucous crowd. By the fourth quarter, I abandoned the thought of entering the game. I just wanted to go home. But with forty-five seconds left, coach told me to check in. This was like throwing alcohol in an open wound; this was when scrubs, the players who would never grace the court in a remotely close game, roamed the basketball court. This meant I was a scrub.

After the game, I had to sit through a thirty-five minute awards ceremony. The room radiated fervor as players' names were called to accept accolades. When my name was called, I paused, allowing myself a moment to corral my emotions—I didn't earn a first place trophy. Here I was, walking up to receive a first place trophy that I didn't contribute to. I should have been thrilled that we won, but all I wanted to do was go home, to my room, to cry. To me, the trophy was a glimmering statue of my mediocrity.

On the drive home, I left my eyes on the Nike check. Allowing my eyes to investigate freely would have been a ticket to water works. Staring at my shoes, my chest brewed with shame—they were new. Mamaw bought me

new shoes to wear in the championship game, and they didn't even work off a penny of what she paid for them. The metallic red tips of the strings glistened in the sun, accenting my blue and red jersey. I was not fit to wear these shoes or jersey, I thought. Enraged, I ripped off the first shoe, but as I held it, the texture disturbed me. The lining felt dry as a cat's tongue—it's difficult to work up a sweat when I'm rotting on the bench.

Sensing the anguish seeping from my demeanor, my dad encouraged, "Congratulations on winning the YMCA tournament. Your name will be in their program forever, as a champion; that's something to be proud of..."

"I guess," I muttered, tears now trickling down my face, "I just don't understand why I didn't get to play, Dad. I practice every day, sometimes for three or four hours. Some of the starters on the team don't practice at all, and they don't even like basketball. It's not fair."

Gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles were white, he said, "I know you work hard, and it's not fair. But I know where you're coming from..."

By this time, we had made it home, and my dad was now pulling into our driveway. "I just want to quit. Why should I even try so hard if I'm not even going to get to play?" My face was now planted in my hands.

"When I was your age, I was in the same boat. I worked hard, but I never got to play much on these all-star teams. But you have to understand that you can't let this

discourage you, Chad. Make this your motivation. Work harder."

"It's just frustrating. I want to be the greatest player, and I'm the worst...the scrub."

"Keep working hard and it will pay off down the road (I promise). Let today be the fuel for your fire."

Rubbing away my tears, I gushed, "And, I want to make you and Mom proud..."

He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed, "You do make us proud. You're our only son, and your hard work makes us even prouder."

Hiding my face in his shirt, I whispered, "I'm going to be better next year. I'm not going to have dry tennis shoes anymore."

~

It's time to start my workout: bouncing the ball between my legs, I push off with my left leg and sprint towards the basket; spinning when I enter the lane, I lay the ball off of the glass with my left hand. After I rebound the make, I toss it out to the three point line and jog to retrieve the ball. I snag the ball like a wide receiver in the end zone and establish my pivot foot. Poking jab steps and fakes at the phantom defender, I lunge to the left after faking right, dribbling once and stopping on a dime to elevate and release my shot at the peak of my jump—swish.

As I walk to the foul line, I dribble the ball between my legs, occasionally whipping the ball around my back. First, I align my left foot in the middle of the rim. Staring at the rim, bending my knees, bouncing the ball precisely six times, and breathing in deeply and exhaling, I whisper to myself: finger pad control, back spin, follow through. I stroke my arm forwards, flicking my wrist and holding my follow through like a statue. The ball rattles on the rim and then drops through the net.

Three hours later, exhausted, I lounge on the bleachers, beads of sweat cascading off of my hair, down my back and chest. Thousands of drops of sweat shimmer off of the amber court, illuminating the floor like tiny magnifying glasses. This is the studio where I've poured thousands and thousands of hours, running sprints until I couldn't see straight, practicing monotonous dribbling drills, and emulating moments that rarely made it to game time. Even though my fervid love for basketball was often a mixed bag of crippling heartache and unadulterated euphoria, I used the lessons that it taught me to pilot me through life.

~

I straddle the bench in front of my locker, sliding off my black, worn down knee pads, wringing out my sweat saturated practice jersey, scripting the forthcoming conversation. The last locker clanged shut. Appearing from behind the wall of Columbian blue lockers, "Are you going to drop fifty points tomorrow night?" Jeremy prodded. "You've been telling me all year you're going to. Quit talking shit. Tomorrow is your time to do it (senior night.)"

"I'll do what I can, Jeremy. I'll say this: I'm going to surprise everyone."

"What's that?" Jeremy joked, "Are you going to finally come out of the closet?"

Laughing and shaking my head, "You're an idiot. I'll see you tomorrow, man."

The bang of the locker room door echoed throughout the vacant room. Staring into my locker, everything seemed to be in its place: my blue and white practice jersey draped on the right hook, my jump rope dangled on the middle hook, my black, satin shorts slouched on the left hook, and my navy and blue Nikes with "R.I.P. Papaw" inscribed on the side rested on the bottom shelf. To my right, down the wall of lockers that looked like a row of oversized dominos, hung a mirror the size of a twin size bed. For a moment, I hesitated, but the image in the mirror (me sitting on a bench) shattered my uncertainty. I knew what I had to do—everything wasn't in its place.

In the coach's office, Steve Morrison, a man who resembled Gumbi with his long, thin appearance, lounged in a computer chair in front of his desk. The assistant coach, Brad Meredith, sprawled out on a red and yellow 1980's retro couch. With the door half way shut, I knocked lightly as a formality. "Can I talk with you all for a minute?"

The coaches responded in unison, "Sure, Chad. Come on in."

I swallowed hard, trying to suppress my uncertainty. For a moment, I just sat, corralling my thoughts—Tell them what you want to do. Tell them why you're doing it. My soliloquy must have lasted longer than a second, because they were both now looking at me oddly, the way people stare at nude art.

"Is everything okay?" they asked.

My first word began with a stutter. "Yes, I'm doing just fine. Are you all doing okay?"

With a confused look on their faces, Coach Morrison responded, "Yes, we're fine. What do you need?"

"Well, I wanted to talk about senior night tomorrow..."

Coach Morrison interrupted, "Are you excited?"

"Yes, I'm excited, but I want to throw an idea out there, one that I've thought extensively about."

"What's that, Chad?" Coach Meredith asked.

I elaborated, "We have six seniors on the team. Obviously, we can only start five. But I wanted to run something by you all"

They piped in, "What's that?"

Breathing deeply, I explained, "I want Patrick to start in my place tomorrow night. Out of all the seniors, he has played the least. I know what it's like to rot on a bench all year long—it exhausts you physically, it piles on the pressure of having to play well when you finally do go into the game,

and it wrenches every ounce of fun from basketball. Senior night is a time for seniors to bask in their accomplishments, a time for recognition, a time to make it a night that they'll never forget. I've done all of that though—I've listened to the crowd chant my name, I've won awards, I've made game winning shots, I've played every minute of every game for the past two years. Patrick needs to experience that. I want him to experience that."

Looking surprised, the coaches complied. "That's a nice thing for you to do, Chad, a very mature gesture."

I retorted, "To me, It's not so much the nice or mature thing to do. It's the right thing to do."

~

Ready to leave the gym, I stand next to the light switches to soak in the moment. I refuse to call this *my sanctuary*—there have been far superior players before and during my time. But this was *my studio*: a place where I painted the floor with droplets of perspiration after hours of vigorous practice, a place where I nurtured my craft, my *love*, a place where I lost myself in the camaraderie of competition with myself, my teammates, and my opponents.

It was a studio that instilled me with memories that I will cherish until I'm on my deathbed—the unadulterated euphoria I experienced when crowds chanted my name or when my tenacious, gritty performances touched people in a meaningful way. It was a studio that forced me to face my mediocrity in spite of my aspirations for greatness—the humbling revelation that my talent and size would never

fulfill my dreams and expectations. It was a studio that started with a boy with talent as small as a lump of clay and fashioned him into the man that he is today—the days spent under the gleaming lights of my studio and the tennis shoes that have cushioned life's unexpected blows. Because I'll always need a sentiment etched in my brain of where I've been to chaperone me to where I'm going.

Self Reliance **Amanda Kennedy**

Since the beginning of our lives we've looked at prominent figures like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, and John Marshall, and have labeled them strong, powerful, and self-reliant. What exactly is self-reliance? How do you label a person self-reliant? In the Oxford English Dictionary self-reliance is defined as: A reliance on one's own capabilities, judgments, or resources; independence (Oxford English Dictionary).

In my mind, that definition is simple, bare, and under-extraordinary compared to the people they describe. Just like the words peace, hope, and strength – a dictionary definition cannot sum up the true meaning of these complex words. So why search for a deeper definition rather than deal with what we have been handed? Much like the point of this assignment, sometimes you need that deeper strive for knowledge; which is the exact reasoning behind my excitement to further research the words self-reliance.

When I was a freshman in high school I was introduced to Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, philosopher, and poet. 'To believe your own thought, to believe what is true in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius' (Ralph Waldo Emerson). Although we were only assigned to read the first few paragraphs, I found myself swooned by what I read. I felt as though the way the words flowed in his essay, the raw passion evident with every letter, the way he swore by every line – it was as though Emerson stole my diary, reading every last thought

I struggled to say aloud: 'Trust thyself: Every heart beats to that iron string' (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

I never read another word of *Self Reliance*, I never had to. I was in love with Emerson's every thought. He was pure genius, for he said, 'To be great is to be misunderstood' (Ralph Waldo Emerson). The word misunderstood is just another of the many synonyms of my name. The path to my triumphs and roads to my defeats all trail back to why and how I do what I do. I am misunderstood in every aspect, yet in the same breathe I am quick to call myself a phenomenal woman. Maya Angelou defines a phenomenal woman by the 'fire in her eyes, and the flash in her teeth.' I would be surrendering my greatest attributes to say I have no fire for the things I do – those that consume me, define me.

Yet and still, no adjective can describe the person I am. I am an athlete, outspoken, independent. I'm a humanitarian, vegetarian. I'm African American, Caucasian, and Puerto Rican. A lover, fighter, student – but above all I'm proud of the individual I am. I'm strong, loud, and smart. I am self-reliant, but a liar I could label myself to say I'm not dependent.

I'm dependent on my brothers, my family, and my faith. It's not a dependency that selfishly demotes my character as a whole, it's a dependency that proves, I too, am not invincible. I too have faults - that I cry, pray, and hope like hell things end in my favor. But and when they don't I have those there to lift me up, cheer me on, and hold my hand. Without my brothers in my life I wouldn't be half the person I am today, I wouldn't be where I am today.

It's my brothers who pushed me to be the best athlete I could be, the smartest person I could be. It's my brother Joe, who sacrificed an Ivy League education so we could afford to send me to the school of my choice following my dream of division 1 athletics.

So am I self-reliant? Or am I just fooled by my own majestic thoughts. Calling me an idealist doesn't cover the summation of my personal depth – I'm a dreamer, a transcendentalist at the very least. Catch me if you can is the only mentality I have. For a bird cannot fly as high as my own expectations.

And yet I'm not alone in my everlasting battle. So many I have to look up to, to crutch on their very footsteps in trying to create my own. So as I lay here in my bed pondering, I solemnly thank-you: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Nelson Mandela.

All of these people, these fellow transcendentalists, didn't proclaim non-conformity, but instead accepted conformity while aiming for a purpose greater than one person alone. Emerson along with Henry David Thoreau coined the term *Transcendentalism*, and defining their mission as merely a generation of people struggling to define spirituality, religion, education, civil liberties - in a way that took into account the new understandings their age made available (Transcendentalism). Emerson too understood that sometimes one person cannot alone stand at the top, he too must hold his peers accountable for their actions as well.

It's only then that I realize all I have is this pen and a dream. A dream deferring as I lay around pondering. Up and at it is the only way to achieve these dreams that summon me. Without movement I cannot receive my degree. Without hard work I cannot break Marshall's javelin record, without determination I cannot begin teaching. Heart and fearlessness I must have to teach in Africa, India, and South Asia, but it is pride I must attain and enthuse to change lives.

So with my sudden burst of energy and this realization of potential, and determination for change, I am up out of the bed and ready to go. I know I must educate myself before attempting to educate others. Therefore I go back to Chapter 1, and begin to read the title to my personal majestic bible, *Self-Reliance: An Essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson.*

As I begin reading a familiar feeling comes over my body. Sentence after sentence sends chills up my spine – paralyzing me in my very chair. There is nothing I could or want to do, but continue to read. As I read, the pure joy of knowledge floods my every pore. Simple quotes like, 'Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,' and '– is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood' (Self-Reliance). The simplicity of his thoughts make it almost overwhelming the way they change you. A single word can alter a mere perception. And it is this word I continue to search for, self-reliance.

What is it? And why is Emerson so ardent in his quest to push it upon others?

Just when I thought I was within arm's reach of my answer – my whole perception changed when Emerson said, "But go about your business with a deep honesty, and your power shines through, your genius arises, your true goodness has a chance to show itself, and your creativity is set on fire"(Self-Reliance). I began to jump, skip, and dance from the power Emerson's quote instilled in me. This was it – Self-Reliance means to put your best effort forth into your dream. Fight, fly, and run to your destiny by any means necessary. As my eyes eagerly moved onto the next sentence my expression changed. No longer was I paralyzed, but astonished at the preceding summations.

"Do not join a crowd." He said. "Every club or group tries to make each member a 'retained attorney,' locked into one perspective, chained to set of beliefs that blind you to the truth. You can no longer just see. You are driven to justify a certain point of view, to uphold a fixed perspective, cutting away your freedom and cutting you off from a free expression of the immense intelligence you really are"(Self-Reliance). Once again I found myself confused. In order to be self reliant you must remove yourself from all of your surroundings? Are they distractions? What's the point in climbing to the top without someone to share it with at the end of the night?

As I felt my world crumbling I began to feel an uproar of anger inside me. Since when is the goodness of pure conformity a bad thing? Who gave the word conformity this bad rep? Emerson among many others

throw conformity into the gauntlet in saying to conform on any basis is independent suicide.

Is it independent suicide? I say independent suicide is surrendering your creativity in order to avoid attaining a label. Is it impossible to be distinctive and original and stand alongside others? "I'm not here to please the world. I'm here to live," Emerson said. "My life exists as an end itself, without needing justification. My life is for itself and not for a show" (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

Naive is the fragile mind of an idealistic 18-year old to think that one can find pleasure helping other people, 'pleasing the world,' if I may quote this doubtful man. Asinine am I to not realize the thousands that marched along side Martin Luther King were simply, dependent. Was Dr. King the only self reliant person? I think not. Vast were his aspirations, but as well as I know of his dream, I know alone one person cannot conquer the world. If at all, Dr. King was dependent on his followers. Although he stood in front, without those who encouraged him to go forth, his back would have been left for the enemy conquer.

How dare Emerson imply that silence is power? Silence is in the pits of conformity if there ever was one. Standing stone cold, falling as a victim to your immediate thought – that my friend is not only sad, but it proclaims you don't have enough buoyancy in your own voice to stand up for what you believe. Wasn't it Martin Luther King that said, 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter'? (Martin Luther King).

Impatient and upset with the change in optimism Emerson displayed, and the fact that I still couldn't answer the question I sought to answer, ' What is self reliance,' I once again stopped reading. Like Emerson I have my own opinions and my own voice that despite his expectations – I love to hear.

I used to think Emerson was pure genius. He who calls himself the father of transcendentalism is in my eyes nothing more than a man without a path to walk upon. Where exactly are all of these thoughts taking him? How can he who speaks of keeping his own personal thoughts safe in his heart way from all the bad publicity and poor human judgments be a philosopher, a poet, and a famous essayist? He continuously tells you to fight for what is yours, then in your next breathe change your motives. To give your life for what you say today, and do the same for what you say tomorrow even if it's the complete opposite than yesterday.

So the fighting, contradictions, confusion – is he showing us that he is genius? Is he good enough that these lines, these unanswered questions, he so keenly hid in his essays are there to force the realization that looking up to other people is in fact different than wanting to be another person? Self-reliance doesn't force independent suicide, it forces creativity and individuality. He shuns living by the quotes of other men because he's encouraging us to make our own quotes. Learn from the wise mans observations and exercise your mind by asking why, how, and when. I always thought genius is the man who can confuse the intelligent being. Therefore that may be what he is, genius. I have a newfound respect for Emerson and his

extraordinary intelligence. His glow is of a different color. I've yet to uncover if I'm self-reliant, dependent, or whether it even matters, but I have discovered the definition of self-reliance. Throughout this paper, I've displayed it. As I've sought endlessly for the mere meaning of this word – I put my every last ounce of strength, heart, and hope into its discovery. It was my goal, my personal triumph. That is self-reliance: uncovering your own truth and sticking to it. 'Believing your own thought to be true in your private heart' (Self-Reliance) that is power, its individuality – to be self-reliant is without doubt to be genius.

The first music I remember really appreciating was Michael Jackson. I was six years old, and I was the epitome of obsessed. I listened to his cassettes with headphones on as I danced and sang throughout the house, sliding across the hardwood floors in my socks at the appropriate moments. Sometimes I would clumsily spin and grab my crotch, and my mom would laugh, but then quickly tell me not to do that in front of other people. I didn't know why that wasn't allowed, and I didn't care. I did it anyway.

Once I was walking through the house singing "Come Together." My dad stopped me as he passed and asked, "Where did you hear that song?"

"It's Michael Jackson," I told him.

"Oh," he said. He tried to explain to me that the band who originally wrote it was The Beatles, but I didn't care. I had never heard of The Beatles and there was no way they were as good as Michael. I put my headphones back on.

Some nights when my parents were yelling, I would go in my room, lock the door, and crank Thriller at top volume. I loved the creepy narrator at the beginning of the song, and I mimicked his voice while making angry, distorted monster faces at my mirror. On the first note I would break into dance. I had watched the video enough to know most of the moves, and I was certain I would dance as smoothly as Michael one day.

It was never enough just to listen to his music. I had to dance, I had to sing, I had to experience it. I had to let everyone know how much I loved him. And I wanted everyone to know that I loved him more than they did. I couldn't get enough of him. I couldn't convey to people what his music meant to me. I couldn't convey what music in general meant to me because of him. It made me itch inside. It would be another ten or so years before I could scratch that itch, but when I did I would finally be what I considered musically satisfied.

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When I was ten, my grandma signed me up for guitar lessons at a summer camp at Ashland Community College. Phil, my instructor, had something wrong with his hands; they were stiff and sort of purple, and it looked like he was in great pain as he played guitar. Nonetheless, he taught me the chords to Amazing Grace, and I strummed them slowly, pausing between each chord to remember where to place my fingers. But Phil played the song with flair. He would pluck the top string of each chord before dropping his hand to strum, allowing the individual notes to stand alone just before they came together. He sang it with a bluesy twang as I watched, mesmerized.

"Okay, play a G for me," he would say. Then I would concentrate hard as I stretched my fingers over my chestnut Austin acoustic, and ran my pick down the strings. It buzzed a little, but it was correct. "Good," he said.
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"Now you play it how it's really supposed to be," I requested. He laughed loudly, and without thinking played a crystal clear G chord.

I was frustrated, and he could tell.

"Just keep practicing, honey. You're doing just fine."

So I stretched my hand into a C.

For years I didn't do much with the knowledge I gained in guitar lessons. I would strum along with one of my older cousins occasionally, and let her teach me some new chords, but that was the extent. After a while I got bored. It wasn't enough for me to play random chords. I wanted to sing. I had outgrown my Austin, so I asked my dad for a black Fender Squier and a small ten-watt amp. He gave them to me on my twelfth birthday and I started playing again.

I quickly learned that in order to sing while playing guitar, the singing must come first. The guitar must go on the back burner, become second nature while strumming. "Blowin' in the Wind" is a simple three-chord song essentially, but your hands have to know when to move themselves. If your brain has to tell them to move, then your voice trails off into a concentrated whisper. Likewise, if you have to think about the lyrics, your mouth won't know what to say, and your hands might forget to move, and then the song stops dead. These days I can sing and play guitar at the same time without thinking about it. Therein lays another

problem. If you don't think about what you sing, then the words have no emotion. In my opinion, emotion is key. You could be singing something as simple as "I'm tired" but if you sing it with enough emotion it's suddenly profound and heartfelt*.

So I practiced the chords G, C, and D until I no longer had to think about playing them. Then I added the words, *How many roads must a man walk down...* Slowly but surely, after hours and hours of practice I was playing and singing a song. I was elated. I sang it every day after school. I sang it to my brother. I sang it to my grandma, to my dad, and to my cousin. And I looked up more songs with similar chords that I could teach myself. This feeling was new and wonderful. I was now taking music in as it came out of *me*.

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A few weeks ago, my high school English teacher wrote on Facebook that he believed music was proof of the human soul. I've been thinking about that a lot lately. What does my music say about my soul? Music can shape a person. It can convince, persuade, uplift, inspire. But how is the musician shaped by his or her own music? How is the musician affected when they see other people being shaped by their music?

What *is* music? It's a science of course. But what is music to you, reader? It evolves alongside the human race. The music of the Renaissance is different from that of the 1920s, is different from that of the sixties, of the nineties, and so on. Americans spend more on music each year than
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on sex or prescription drugs; it's used in advertising, movies, schools, sports, churches, it's everywhere—why?[1]

Perhaps music sustains the soul. Just as air oxygenates the blood, music (art) revitalizes our hearts, our life, our will to live. It gives us meaning. It gives us a reason.

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When I was fourteen I wrote my first song. It was about how much I hated my dad's new wife. Her name was Lola, and she smiled and laughed a lot; she was sweet and loveable, pretty, genuine, considerate, and she was always nice to my brother and me. But she was married to *my* dad. She was invading on my family and my space. Suddenly I had two new stepsisters—one of which was very annoying, and one of which led a secret life of drug abuse. I started staying with my mom more, but I missed my dad. My mom worked constantly which left her stressed. She would scream at us if we left our shoes outside of the closet, or if we spilled cereal, or if we forgot to turn out the bathroom light. When it got bad I would call my dad and tell him to come get me, but things had changed at his house. It wasn't the escape it had been in the past.

I wrote a song to Lola. I told her to go away and take her family with her. I said she was messing up my system. She was imposing. And I sang it loud in my room. Or I sang it quietly at night while people were sleeping. Or I hummed it at school (the Dm, E, A sadness of it). It made me feel like I was right.
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A week or two later, I wrote a song to my mom. It told her to calm down, to relax, to shut up. And when she pissed me off, I went straight to my room and played that song. And then I felt better.

I was now creating music. Every strong emotion that passed through me became a song. And as long as those emotions were sung and strummed they were acceptable to me. I was doing something productive with them. Now people could hear me. They could relate to me. This is what I wanted from music. I wanted to be heard. Songwriting was my new escape.

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It's strange how we, as a culture, consume music. It's divided into two groups: the listeners and the performers. The performers are "talented" and confident that their music will be desired. The listeners decide which performers are worthy of their attention. But it hasn't always been this way**, and it still isn't this way in certain parts of the world.

If you visit villages in Lesotho, South Africa the villagers may ask you to join them for a song. If you reply to them, "I can't sing" they will look at you as if you've just told them you can't breathe. In certain parts of the world, song and dance are considered natural occurrences requiring no training or talent. *Ho bina*, the Sesotho verb for singing, also means to dance, as is the case in many languages. The two acts are an expression of the same feeling aroused by music. In Lesotho, everyone sings and everyone dances, and anyone who doesn't is deemed absurd.(1)
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I started singing and dancing at age six simply because I felt compelled to do so. Somewhere along the way, I lost the confidence to continue twisting and grabbing my crotch to Michael Jackson songs. I think if I did that on Marshall's campus I would be deemed absurd immediately (unless of course, I were talented enough to be considered "good.")

Similarly, I began writing songs because I felt compelled to do so. I had never had any confidence as a musician up until that point. All I knew was that I enjoyed my music and I felt my music. And I knew I had good taste in music according to most so I went with that. I let my brother hear my songs. Then I let some close friends hear them. Then I let my first boyfriend hear them. I heard only positive things. I stayed shy about it for quite a while, all through high school. But by eighteen I didn't care anymore. I played whatever I wanted, and didn't care who heard. If one person appreciated my music, it made it worth it. And although I give myself more credit now, I still feel that way.

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When I was seventeen I put together a band. It was all girls. I played rhythm guitar, while my friend Jessica sang, my close friend Marinda was on lead, and an acquaintance, Brittany, played drums. We played Hole, Fiona Apple, The Donnas, and other angsty chick rock. But before we could have our fourth practice, Marinda was hit by a drunk driver on her way home from school, and killed instantly.

I wrote a song for her, which I don't play very often. But a few weeks ago my high school friend, Becca, came in from
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her college and stayed a Saturday with me. She brought friends who brought booze; I bought weed and our evening began. We smoked a blunt, then went to the bar. By the time we made it back to my apartment, we were drunk enough to be having heart-to-hearts as we rolled more pot.

"Paige, dude, I miss you," Becca said.

I looked up from the small pile of marijuana I was picking apart and laughed. "I miss you too. You need to come visit more."

"You should play a song for us," she suggested.

Her friend Cody looked up. "You play guitar?"

"Mhm."

"You should play us something."

"Yeah, seriously. Just a couple songs."

I smiled at being put on the spot. "Well, what do you want to hear?"

I played "Mary Jane's Last Dance" by Tom Petty, which we all sang together. Then I played a newer song of mine that was only half finished. They liked it, and asked me to do another one. I thought of Marinda's song, and I remembered how close Becca was to Marinda.

I looked at Becca. "You want to hear the one I wrote for Marinda Perry?"

"You wrote a song for her? Yeah, I wanna hear it."

I strummed the opening chords—F then C, F then C. After singing the first verse I glanced up at Becca. Her eyes were beginning to fill with tears and she sat up straighter, more attentive. I continued, more nervous to have her full attention. I went through the next two verses, and by the end she was crying into her hands.

"Paige, man, that was beautiful," she sniffled, "Seriously."

"Thank you. Didn't mean to get you depressed. I don't play it much—"

"No I'm glad you did. I really liked it."

I had played that song for other people who didn't care for it as much. I guess it sounds cliché. The loss of a friend, the coping involved. It sounds too dramatic unless you know who and what it's about. But it hit Becca hard. She felt the song, and I felt her feel it.

That's why I play. I play because I feel compelled. I play to extract my thoughts and feelings. I play for the people. And I don't mean "the people" as in (pretentiously) "my audience." I mean, I play to experience people and have them experience me. I can't count the amount of friends I've made because of our shared tastes in music, or because I play guitar. I can't explain the feeling I get when someone appreciates a song I have written. It's a divine sort of pride.

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It's July 2009, and I am sitting in the amphitheatre of Ashland's Central Park with my friend Dustin and two acoustic guitars. It's a beautiful summer evening—warm
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but breezy, the sun is out. We have the place to ourselves to sit, chat about music, and play songs until it gets dark.

I am in the middle of playing a song; I'm picking power chords through the beginning and have just begun to sing, when an old homeless man with greasy white hair stumbles up and sits on the concrete in front of us. He's smiling. I continue singing, but look over at Dustin like, *Who is this guy?* He shrugs, and we approach the chorus.

I begin strumming harder now, and open my mouth to sing louder. I watch the homeless man reach into his pocket and pull out a thin blue case, and from that he pulls a harmonica. He licks his lips, then wails a powerful bluesy B over my chorus, and I look at him, astounded. It was beautiful, and perfectly fitting; it brought tears to my eyes.

When we had finished the song, we introduced ourselves; we shook hands and told him he could play the fuck out of a harmonica. He returned the kindness, and began rolling a cigarette as we got acquainted.

"Name's Donny Smoak. I'm just an old drunk on the streets. I heard you all playin' so I had to come take a peek," he said, and smiled.

We told him we were glad he did. He lit his cigarette and continued.

"You know, I haven't played a guitar since I got out of the Navy, and that's been years. Would you care…?" He was shy and hesitant. And understandably so. Here is this dirty drunk homeless man, sitting in front of two suburban kids who have driven up in their 2006 Ford Focuses and

pulled out two 600-dollar guitars to have a relaxing evening of music in the park—the same place where this man sleeps.

We both hold our guitars out to him without hesitating. He reaches for mine.

"Pretty guitar you got here, girl," he says, running his hands up and down the neck.

"Thanks. It's a Luna. Made by Dean." I hold out my pick for him, but he declines and begins smoothly picking chords with his thumb and index finger.

He sings Amazing Grace.

*(Listen to "I'm So Tired" by The Beatles, *White Album*)

**(Listen to "Sing" by The Dresden Dolls, *Yes, Virginia*)

1. From Daniel J. Levitin's book *This is Your Brain on Music*, p. 6-7

Contributers

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Cait Carter was born in Huntington and has never been published. She enjoys video games, scrap booking, art and spends most of her time with her brother or writing. She is an English major and plans to teach English.

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