



“Being around people who actually wanted to write for once was **mind-blowing.**”

“Our nightly readings were **amazing.**”

New York State Summer Young Writers Institute 2009

“I’ve never read a piece to a more helpful and **insightful** group of people.”



“The New York Summer Young Writers Institute is an experience every aspiring **teenage writer** should have.”



**YOUNG VOICES:
An Anthology of Student Work**

The New York State Summer Young Writers Institute

This anthology contains poems, stories, and creative nonfiction pieces produced by the talented high school writers of the 2009 New York State Summer Young Writers Institute. Now in its eleventh year, the NYSSYWI is a week-long creative writing residency held in July on the campus of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, to coincide with one week of the adult New York State Summer Writers Institute. This prestigious writing program, sponsored by the New

York State Writers Institute at the University at Albany and directed by Robert Boyers, brings internationally-famous writers like William Kennedy, Joyce Carol Oates, Russell Banks, Robert Pinsky, and many others to Skidmore during the month of July.

For our high-school writers, having the opportunity each day to work on their own writing in three classes with a faculty of professional writers, to hear accomplished writers in late-afternoon craft sessions or at evening readings, and finally to hone their own works-in-progress during late-night performance marathons in the residence hall meant that they were thoroughly immersed in the writing life during every waking hour. And judging by the photos and student comments included in these pages, they loved it.

More than one hundred students from all regions of New York State send original writing samples each April, and we choose the thirty-six best writers to attend the Young Writers Institute. These young writers are unique in any number of disparate ways but they all share a devotion to writing, and that common interest creates almost instantaneous bonding

when they meet each other. Year after year, we offer these students respect and recognition for what they have already achieved, and in return we receive not only a committed, attentive group of students for a week but also the dramatic, funny, moving, troubling, and remarkable creative pieces in this anthology. It was our pleasure to watch as these pieces unfolded, and it will be your pleasure to discover them here.

William Patrick

Director
New York State Summer
Young Writers Institute



NEW YORK STATE  INSTITUTE
State University of New York

SKIDMORE
C O L L E G E

Summer 2009 Faculty



Kathleen Agüero's most recent book of poetry, *Daughter Of*, is published by Cedar Hill Books. The author of two previous books of poetry and editor of three anthologies of multicultural literature from the University of Georgia Press, she is a Professor of English at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, MA, teaching in their low-residency MFA and undergraduate programs.



Liza Frenette is an assistant editor at *New York Teacher*, the official membership newspaper published by New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). Author of three novels for children, including *Soft Shoulders*, Ms. Frenette has published articles in *Reader's Digest* and *Adirondack Life*, among other publications, and has won first place feature and news writing awards from UPI and Associated Press.



Elaine Handley is a poet and fiction writer, as well as an Associate Professor of Writing and Literature at Empire State College. Her poetry chapbooks, *Notes from the Fire Tower* and *Glacial Erratica* won the Adirondack Center for Writing Award in Poetry in 2006 and 2007, respectively. She is currently completing *Deep River*, a historical novel about the Underground Railroad.



Richard Hoffman's memoir, *Half the House*, first published in 1995 by Harcourt Brace, was recently reissued in a new and expanded edition. He is also author of the poetry collections *Without Paradise* and *Gold Star Road*, winner of the 2007 Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize. Writer-in-Residence at Emerson College, he also teaches in the Stonecoast MFA Program.



Bob Miner worked for *Newsweek* and has written for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Village Voice*, and *Esquire*. He has published two novels—*Exes* and *Mother's Day*—and is finishing up the third novel in this series, *Father, Son and Holy Ghost*, as well as writing nonfiction about Istanbul, Turkey. Since 1980 he has taught writing for the University at Albany and Empire State College, as well as for Skidmore College, Syracuse University, Siena College, and the College of St. Rose.



William B. Patrick is the founder and director of the New York State Summer Young Writers Institute. His latest book, *Saving Troy*, is a creative nonfiction chronicle of a year spent living and riding with professional firefighters and paramedics. He has also published a memoir, an award-winning novel, and two books of poetry with BOA Editions. Mr. Patrick teaches writing for the College of St. Rose and for the Stonecoast MFA Program.

Earned Wings by Conrad Baker

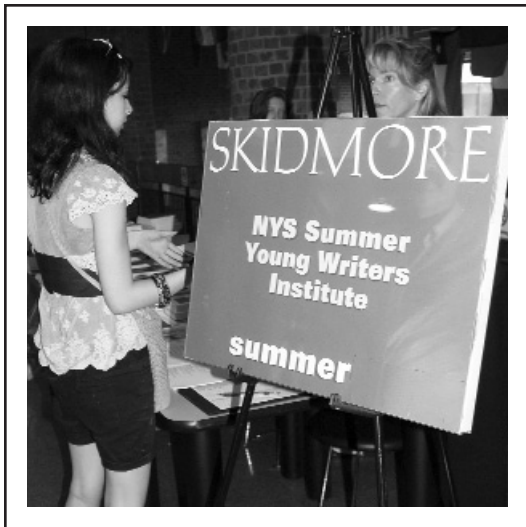
CHARLIE PUSHED OPEN THE BARN door and set straight to work. His boots echoed in the empty stalls as he reached up and snatched an old wad of leather off a nail. He had brown, callous hands, almost a proper rancher's. Long summer days and private whittling lessons had colored those little hands. Charlie swung a long leather cord over his shoulders and pulled a heavy red glove from an open stall door. His hand disappeared inside, the thick leather hanging loose around his wrist. He turned to a wooden post standing in the dust behind him. Hunched on top was a gray bird, a tall, thin hawk. Charlie smiled to see her, showing some new front teeth, and, standing tip-

long, stony beak was left poking out. As she swayed with the chicken feather a pair of bells at her ankles clinked quietly. Trembling, Charlie pinched a tuft of feathers on the hood. He paused, took a deep breath, and tugged those feathers just a little bit. The hood fell away, and the bird came alive. His smile spread again as her brilliant brick red eyes caught the rising sun and ignited, her feathers standing on

cold. The hawk stood tall, flashing in the sun, and curled her neck to meet a morning breeze. Charlie brought her to another post on the lawn and held her to it, and she

"My week at Skidmore was eye-opening & thrilling. It brought back this part of myself that had diminished during the school year since I felt so 'different'. When I met all of the staff and kids I realized – these are my 'people'. An ideal writing experience!"

— LILY LOPATE



toe, ran a chicken feather over her belly. She was tall, with long yellow legs and a neatly squared tail, straight and stiff with wide dark bars. Her shoulders and breast were wide and strong, freckled with seasonal browns. She wore a tight hood, the leather cap to keep her blind and quiet at night. Only a

end. With difficulty, Charlie pushed the cord through a hoop in her ankle bells. He dipped his hand into his pocket and produced, at length, a fat, brown mouse. The hawk bent forward intently, long and low and pointed. Charlie raised the glove, and, on his toes, touched it to her long, hooked feet. His voice was small, so his tiny, "Step up" was lost in the empty barn. The bird gripped her post, bowed low and hopped down to the glove, her bells singing a brief note. Charlie, beaming, brought her down. She was heavier than he thought she'd be, and her feet much stronger. He kept his mouse just out of reach and moved carefully for the doors.

Outside, the sun was already blinding with no clouds to smother it. The lawn smelled clean and

jumped to the top, bells jingling sweetly. Charlie stood back from her, gripping his end of the long cord. Casting a long glance past the house and the barn, the driveway and the grazing fields, he held his arm high and sent his mouse sailing for the horizon. The hawk was off the perch and after it, riding the breeze to a tiny spot in the grass. The mouse disappeared in her golden fists, and she worried it like an old woman beating dough. Charlie ran to her, and she jumped up, the mouse gone. The leather cord slipped elegantly from her ankles and fell to the dewy grass. There was no knot tied in the end. Charlie cried aloud, but she was away, slicing folds of sunbaked breeze as it swirled beneath her. Charlie stood stranded in the yard while she tore gracefully away, the bells singing softly even after she had vanished.

Daddy would tell him later that he was foolish to fly that bird. "She's got to earn her freedom, Charlie, and so do you and I. We've all got to earn our wings." ■

The Cat Fight

by Chloe Barker-Benfield

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU?” THE BACKLIGHT of my phone illuminated the biting question.

“Nothing.” The only response I could think of. I knew what this was about, but I didn’t want to believe it. I was hoping the conversation would just end; I didn’t want to fight, especially not about something so beloved, especially not with Nole.

“Why can’t you take care of Whiskers? I thought she was ‘so happy’ and you ‘love taking care of her.’” I felt nauseous. I had said that, but only to comfort the young girl on the other side of the world who had believed Nole and was convinced that her small, gray cat was being kept in a closet.

I wished I had never agreed to take that cat. I wished that I hadn’t received a call from India begging me to watch my friend’s family pet for a week. I wished her father hadn’t abandoned Whiskers and I wished I hadn’t saved him from having to take her to a shelter. But none of my wishes would come true and that dirty job had fallen onto my shoulders.

“I did what I said I would do,” I replied, trying desperately to defend myself. After spending four hours on the phone with various veterinarians and boarding facilities that might be willing to watch the poor, little feline, I’d grown exhausted and self-righteous. “I’m going to take care of her for a week; cats make my mother ill; she’s sick, we can’t take care of her for more than a week. You said you would take her after me but your mom said ‘no’. My mom is saying ‘no’ to taking care of the cat for more than a week.” There was a pause during which I cursed both our inability to pay for the cat to be boarded and my friend’s poor taste in men.

“You can’t just get rid of her! If cats make your mom sick, then you shouldn’t have offered in the first place. I told you that you shouldn’t have her.” I waited while there was a lull in the flow of accusations. I pictured Nole trying to text while he made a Quizno’s sub and gleefully toyed with the idea of history repeating itself and my imagination spun out a picture of Nole being fired for texting again.

“I honestly liked the teachers more than I expected. They were so interesting and I wish I got to know them better. The kids here made me get another chance to relook at my thoughts at how I view people different than me and how I view the world. They changed my “stereotypical” judgments on the types of people they were. They brought my intelligence out of my shell and made me realize I had more in common with them than I thought.”

— ANONYMOUS

“Keep your mom away from the kitty!” The customers must have left. “Suck it up until we find someone else. You’re responsible for the cat now. You can’t just board her and expect them [meaning his girlfriend and her little sister] to be able to pay for it.” Another pause, I mentally banned all Quizno’s.

“They’re relying on you.” I was growing more and more sympathetic towards Nole’s boss. “If you can’t handle the cat and have to put her in a hotel then YOU pay for it.”

I could feel my blood boiling in my veins. My eyes filled with tears

born of frustration and rage. I just wanted to do my friend a favor, I just wanted to hear her say “thank you”.

“I did exactly what I said I would do,” I repeated. “I’m taking care of her for a week, that’s more than you did. How about I drop her off at your house if you’re so responsible? Furthermore, it’s not up to me; it’s up to my mom, and she told me from day one that I could only keep the cat for a week. Let’s see you pay for her to be boarded. You were supposed to take care of her for the second week. It’s your week that’s falling through, not mine.” I was angry—partially at myself for stooping to Nole’s level—partially at Nole for purposefully trying to hurt another person’s feelings.

“Yeah, my mom said I can’t. Not my fault. At least I’m taking responsibility for trying to find someone to take care of her!”

“Ditto, but I also spent my morning cleaning Whisker’s litter box. You didn’t.”

“Big whoop! That’s part of taking care of a cat! I have cats. I know.”

“It’s not up to me, my mom said I can’t keep her beyond a week. I HAVE NO CHOICE.”

“See, I took responsibility and found someone to take care of her.”

“Who is it? I’ll gladly drive Whiskers to their house.”

“Drive her and all her things to my house around seven today.”

I did drive Whiskers to Nole’s house, or rather my mother drove Whiskers and me to Nole’s house. As Nole carried the tiny, frightened creature into his neighbor’s house, I stared into her big, green eyes peeking over his shoulder at me and saw a vulnerability in them that made me think of her lonely owner on the other side of the world. And I worried that both their hearts would be broken. ■

The Complexities of Desire

by Pooja Bhaskar

“AND I TOLD MR. HORAN THAT I should get a trophy. Don’t you think I should get a trophy?” Lori was talking animatedly about nothing, as she often did. We were sitting in the Castleton Firehouse, peeling and cutting apples for the Girl Scout Apple Pie Sale that happened every fall.

“Why?” Anastasia snorted.

“Because I’m a *super star!*” said Lori, striking some ridiculous pose. The six of us laughed, some of us with her, most of us at her. It was all in good fun.

Kaycei laughed the hardest, though. At that moment, I didn’t know why; this was the sort of conversation that our lunch periods were filled with. But then Kaycei didn’t know that. She had stopped hanging out with us three years ago in the beginning of freshman year when she quit the Girl Scout troop. She was with us now because, according to some complicated, stupid rule, we made more money with six girls in a troop instead of five. We asked her if she would join telling her she didn’t have to do anything but help make pies, and here she was.

“God,” Kaycei was saying, now, “I haven’t had this much fun since, like, June.” That was about five months.

“Are you serious?” We stared at her. “We’re miserable being here, and you’re having fun?”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “How are you having fun if you’re miserable?”

“I don’t know,” said Lori, “We’re always like this.”

“Huh,” Kaycei replied.

We went on peeling apples and joking around. We didn’t talk about it anymore, but later Lori and I said to each other, “I can’t believe it’s been *five* months since she’s had that much fun. *We’re* always like that. Why is she even friends with those people?” “Those people” referred to the girls on her volleyball team. “We were always better friends to her than they are.”

And we *had* always been better friends to her. In fact, I had always been a better friend to her. In the sixth grade, we were best friends. In the seventh grade, a new girl moved in and Kaycei decided to give me the boot to be the new girl’s friend, instead. After a year of hurt and hell, Kaycei had had a fight with her new best friend and came to me to ask me if we could be friends again. I’d always been kind; I told her yes, and gave her a second chance.

It turned out that the second chance was completely undeserved. In eighth grade, Kaycei and I had all the same classes, but she spent a great amount of her time flirting with our

friend, Joe, and paying very little attention to me. Aside from her, I was virtually friendless and the fact that she barely spent time with me hurt. All this hurting she caused me, even when I tried to talk to her about it, and I still didn’t learn.

I forgave her, and that summer, we spoke eagerly on the phone about the coming year in high school. But she had joined the volleyball team and found new friends among her teammates; that was when she stopped hanging around us. Around me.

After a few arguments about the way she was treating me, we drifted apart and since then have had a few conversations about trivial matters in the lunch line. I suppose she wanted to be popular, but I, like the rest of my friends, couldn’t understand how that was more important than having good friends.

I doubt that I had made any sort of impression on her, but she taught me a lot. Mostly, she taught me not to expect much from people. But with the decisions that she made, she also taught me the value of happiness and having good friends. And that the people you think are your friends, or the people you think like you, might not. She taught me to have thick skin.

And so, I’m grateful for our friendship, if it could be considered that. I still feel stupid for giving her so many second chances but if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have learned these things. I only hope that Kaycei ends up learning what I could have taught her: that friendship is more important than popularity. ■



A Perfectly Innocent Christmas Letter

by Zak Breckenridge

Dear friends and family,
I am writing to wish you all
a very happy Christmas
and to give an update
on what's going on in our little family.

Those of you with whom
we have little contact otherwise
may be under the impression
that we are now a family of eight.
This would, however, be a false assumption to make
as we have recently had our numbers
reduced to three,
and perhaps soon to be two
by the time you receive the letter
because Timmy has been suffering
from a spot of Leukemia lately,
which has hit our finances quite severely.

We were, as I mentioned in the last letter,
expecting a sixth child
some time around the New Year
but he was unavoidably miscarried
late in the third trimester.

The second to go was Jimmy,
who fell out of a chairlift in March
into a drunken snowboarder
who was going far too fast.
It turned out that he had a rib through his heart
or something
if I remember correctly.
A year can run together
so easily in the memory.

Third was Cindy.
Our family was hit by a rather
severe bout
of the Swine Flu in May
and Cindy ended up biting the dust.
Remember the one fatal case
in New York State?
That was Cindy.
Sadly, this was when the
welfare checks really
started decreasing.
It almost felt like
all of our income was
made up of sympathy gifts

that we sold.
Those of us still living
practically survived on
casseroles.

Annie caught fire this summer
whilst cooking breakfast for the family
and none of us could save her.
People can be so clumsy.
Around the same time, David,
the children's father
was in a mine that collapsed.
Silly bastard.

It was around this time
that fewer gifts arrived in the mail
and I have a lurking suspicion
that it's connected with knowledge
that I, out of absolute
necessity,
was forced to buy caskets
in bulk.

Now is a time that
we need support,
especially monetary support,
from our friends and family,
no matter how distant.

In other news,
Steven, the only healthy child I have left,
has been doing quite well in school
and has a girlfriend named Sarah
who I quite like,
and
I am working on getting
my catering business off of the ground.

There is so much more to tell,
but I am feeling a bit of a headache
and maybe a fever
coming on. I think I'll take a bit of
a lie-down now.

Happy Christmas,
hugs and kisses,

Bridget

Fire Hazard

by Rebecca Brown

I HAVE WORKED THE MAGIC OF FIRE EVER since I was born. It's a rarer power than the other element-magic and not looked upon kindly by those who wield air, water, and earth. Many fire users have been known to go astray from the rules of society, creating destruction, but I find it beautiful. Why not use a gift such as this? My mother fears for me, but I do not fear for myself. I have never been attacked despite the many threats thrown my way.

So, on a day like any other in the summer of rural northern New York, I was in an area of the woods that I had thought was secluded. I was practicing with my fire in a place where I knew loss of control would mean more trouble than anything I had ever done in my life, but that just made it a fun challenge.

My favorite magical practice was to cast flames into the air and then bend them into the shapes of animals that would gallop around me. They were colored differently based on how hot I made them, from cool red to blazing blue, and they flickered more or less based on how well the magic was cast. It sent up about the same amount of smoke as a campfire, but in the past people have seldom come searching for me to investigate the source. This time was different.

I had just produced a cobra to join a relatively cool red and orange flickering horse and a hot blue and white tiger when I heard the sounds of rustling in the bushes behind me. It could be a frightened animal, so I did not kill the fire yet.

Unfortunately, it was not an animal, but two girls. A blonde girl with green eyes and a matching shirt exclaimed, "I told you! It's her! Damia Lawrence is a stupid Burner!" Oh no. I knew that tone of voice.

The second girl, a brunette I recognized as a water wielder cackled, "Let's get her." Both girls raised their hands.

Anticipating a flood, I sent my fire animals at them, but not quite fast enough. They met their end in steam and smoke as they collided with the water between me and my attackers. In the moment of obscurity, I turned and ran. All I could do was buy time; maybe make it to a more public place...

Apparently not. I heard heavy footfalls behind me and the next moment I had slipped in a puddle of

"Being completely immersed in such a thriving, creative environment has been one of the most inspirational experiences of my life. I felt supported and appreciated in this writing environment, never like I had felt in my English classes, where people were afraid to critique and no students really wanted to be there. The institute enveloped me in the ideas and support of an excellent faculty and a wonderful group of students, and has really helped me improve as a writer."

— BEAL ST. GEORGE

water that had not been there seconds before. Falling into the muddy water, I flailed out wildly with both my limbs and my panic-strengthened magic. I saw the light as a pride of lions erupted into being, but I only heard the screams that told me I had produced white-hot, water resistant flames. I turned over in the water to peer blearily at the two girls who were no longer trying to attack me directly, but sending hopeless streams of water at the flames engulfing them. They were also screeching as their skin was slowly burned off. There was nothing they could do. I was the one who started

the fire and I was the one who had to put it out. I was in a position of power.

Suddenly scared for a new reason, I tried to shoot to my feet, but water makes everything harder for me, so I fell back down again when I was half way up. The resulting splash alerted them to my continued presence. They then realized that their fate was hopeless, so they began attacking me again, sending torrents of water at me.

Frightened of my own power now, I did not cast a wall of protective flame around myself. The force of the water knocked my limp body around, engulfing me. My air supply was cut off. I could not breathe. I was living my worst nightmare; my biggest fear. I was drowning. No, there was no point in all of us dying. I fought it. I wrenched my body back under control and tried to push myself upward, but that was no good, so instead I insulated myself to the heat of the average hearth-fire and caused some of the

water to evaporate. Finally, I was free once more, at the edge of the suddenly calm puddle.

My vision hazed over with fear and I dragged myself out of the disastrous water, dripping and shivering, and faced the three fires that had not yet spread to the trees. Mustering all of my control I stopped the fire completely and crawled forward. I looked at the three blackened shapes and knew there was no hope. I felt for pulses, but there was nothing. No chests rose and fell with air.

I was a murderer. ■

Medicated

by Laura Colaneri

The last time I saw you, I wondered
at the chemicals
that gathered beneath your
eyelids. I saw fumes hover,
drifting out your ears. A smell,
like a metal gurney.

In an attempt to
flush out foreign fluids
that had taken you over, you traded
darting pupils
for glazed and idle corneas,
certain disruption
for uncertain results.

In search of your lost memories, I
have left for a time. I am collecting them
in snatches
like they were made. Losing them through holes in my pockets
as you did, tripping after them
as they crawl away.

The landscape is familiar
like you were when I first met you, and so
I have learned to tread the fringes of chemical spills
in the dark, skirting the puddles
you left behind.

When I return home, you will know by
the sound
of voices
in my pockets,
and I will repeat their stories to you softly
if your ears have not glazed over too.

Convenience, Value, Service

by Jordan Ferrin

FIVE HOURS AND FORTY THREE MINUTES to go.

The girl has timid brown eyes that flicker around in agitation and studiously avoid my gaze. I glance at the items she places on the register in front of me and suppress a giggle: one hot pink Venus razor-blade. One large box Band-Aids.

Some items just shouldn't be bought together. Many items shouldn't be bought at all. Take for example Nad's Facial Hair Removal Strips. That's right, I really want "Nad's" all over my face.

I try to find the humor in all situations, even at this shitty excuse for a job. Facing the women's aisle is always good for a laugh. The toppled towers of tampons, Vagacaine, and personal, long-lasting, warming, stimulating, strawberry flavored lubricants always do a little to spice up the never ending hours of monotony.

I scan the razor, and then the Band-Aids, both times reliving the screeching beep whose sound-waves were manufactured somewhere in the depths of hell.

"Would you like a bag for that?" I ask after she swipes her credit card. Her amber irises flicker in my direction for a fraction of a second and she nods her head. "Have a nice day," I say as I hand it to her.

"Havanisday," she mumbles and races for the door.

Five hours and forty-one minutes to go.

The next customer is a woman wearing a white sundress with red floral designs. I recognize her as the mother of some girl I used to have a crush on. She places a box of tampons on the counter and I wonder if they are for her or her daughter. It's an interesting thought: "You know that tampon you're wearing? Yeah... I sold that to your mom."

I take it from her and search its purple and white walls for a barcode, which is not apparent to the eye on the first try. I spin the box around a few more times but for the life of me cannot find that

patch of zebra skin. I peer up from the box to the mother's face and she's giving me a dubious look like I'm some weirdo who's inspecting the exact absorbency (super plus absorbency) of her tampons. Then the phone rings.

"One second, ma'am," I tell her as I drop the bar code hiding box with relief. I grab the phone to end its incessant ringing and bring the receiver to my ear.

"Hello, how may I help you?" I say. I'm answered by a voice that must belong to some ancient relic of a man.

"Are the Depends on sale today?" he queries me.

"Uhhm, I'm not sure, let me check for you."

"But are the Depends on sale today?" he repeats louder.

"Let me check for you, sir," I respond, keeping the annoyance out of my voice.

"Yeah the Depends..." I lower the receiver from my ear and turn to Jill. She is wearing the same powder-blue shirt with red embroidered letters as me. She's short but kinda cute.

"Can you go to aisle seventeen and check if there is a sale on Depends this week?" I ask her.

"Sure," she says. I can tell she's excited.

The woman with the white dress coughs very inconspicuously so I put the phone on hold and turn back to the tampons. After another few games of spin the box, I spot the barcode half under the pricing sticker. I have a quick fight with the adhered label until I reveal the code and scan the 'tamps. The woman swipes her credit card every which way before finally getting it in correctly and then departs, leaving me thinking about what goes into her daughter's vagina.

Five hours and thirty-eight minutes to go.

My power-hungry, pot-bellied boss comes down from his office and tells me to go restock the drink fridge. I tell him to go fuck himself... in my head. I saunter over and into the fridge where

the frosty air nips my naked skin. There are boxes of drinks stacked high up the walls of the room. I grab an armful of big red Gatorade bottles and dump them none too gently into the drinks shelf from behind. They slide down the shoot and knock the bottle in the front onto the floor, where its cap cracks like a thin skull. A pool of red slowly forms on the floor like I'm at the scene of some recent murder. My boss would probably consider this just as serious a crime.

I wait until the sticky pool of blood has stopped spreading, and then I leave the fridge quickly to find the mousy, over-the-hill assistant manager.

"Someone broke a bottle of Gatorade in the drink fridge," I say.

"Oh my," she exclaims, "I guess you'll have to grab the mop and clean it up."

Five hours and thirty-three minutes to go.

After a session of scrubbing, the evidence has been erased, and soon enough I'm back at the register. A kid I know from school walks up to it. He's a third year super-senior, so let's just say he's in the bottom three of the most intelligent people I've met. He's wearing a wife-beater even though he has pale white arms with no muscles to speak of. His face is covered in red splotches like a mob of mosquitoes declared war on him. All in all, he contains every attribute that would repel a girl and...and he's carrying a box of condoms. He places his package of Mint Tingle Twisted Pleasure Lubricated Latex Trojans in front of me.

"These fit up to eight inches," he tells me with a lopsided grin.

"I'm sure they do," I respond. The phone rings and I snatch it up while I scan the condoms with my other hand.

"Hello, how may I help..."

"Are the Depends on sale today?"

As soon as the gawky teen has left, I walk up to the office quietly and leave my two-week's notice. ■

Untitled

by Leigh Gialanella

A mouse is squeaking, stone steps keep going down and down;
The air is thick with waiting, and one wonders
If it is safe

To venture down below, in the rubble, in the maze
Looking at the channels built for the use of man.

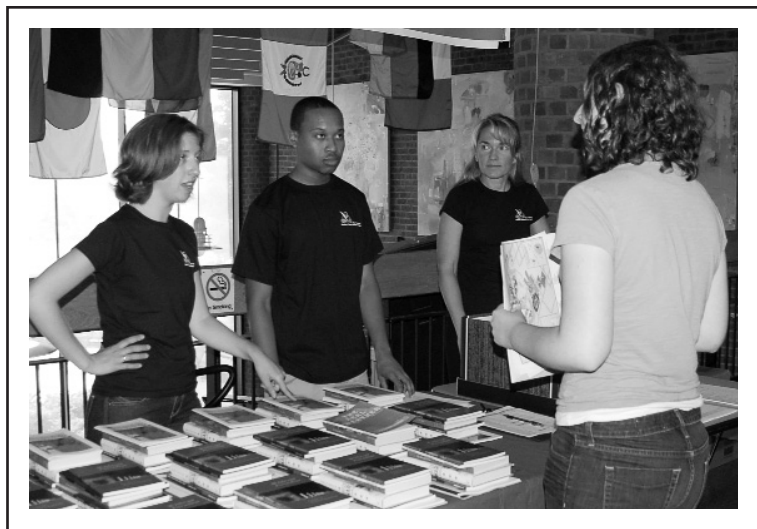
Such a mystery, dusty clouds are filled with gold!
Jewels are falling, a gilded sun bursting
Everywhere I step.

Some say that the air is still and heavy, that metal
Shrieks by night, but all I smell is rosewater
And sound delightfully mutes away.

Wonder what they all thought, harried and hastening as they were
Did their smiles reflect on the walls, the steps
Jump high for them as well?

The steps down did they seem both quick and light,
Knowing their ways with the aid of a bright flickering torch?
Did they see the ivy crawling up the walls and
Want to cry out with a created joy?

Surely they did not suffocate or step on shards of glass
In a world that such this is, good fortune would not concede
And maybe when they caught their ride, held the chilled icy poles in hand,
They knew that they were holding life.



The Plan

by Natasha Gross

GO TO AU. JOIN THE PEACE CORPS. Become a journalist. Save the world, stop global warming, and, if I have time, take down an oppressive government using nothing but my wit, my pen, and some paper. Die young, taking a bullet for my best friend, whoever that will be.

That's my life plan.

I think it's a pretty good one.

It was December, two thousand something, and Samantha Wesner had become part of the group. Funny phrase, "the group". We weren't a group. We were a collection of five people who nobody else liked, who happened to get along with each other. We walked around the playground, finding little ice sculptures in the mounds of snow piled up around the blacktop. Sam was pretty. Angelic smile. Soft hazel eyes that lit up. Artistic. Quiet. Shy. Loveable in every way.

I hated her.

For two months.

Two Octobers later, I was waiting to hear if she was still alive.

It's July, and I'm sitting at a computer, writing a story. I'm missing Sam. Her mother, Amanda. Her father, Jake. My friends, my fairy god-family. I'm missing banana bread right out of the oven, and piano duets by whichever composer we pick up first. I'm missing badminton on their sloping lawn after a rain storm. I'm remembering our last philosophical discussion in their living room, watching *Star Trek*, talking about guilt and motivation.

It was all theoretical, of course.

Join the Peace Corps. Die young, taking a bullet for my best friend, whoever that will be.

In class they called me courageous. I wasn't sure what for. They asked me why, why I would want to put myself

in such adverse situations, willingly. I wondered that myself. I'd never really thought about it before. For as long as I can remember, I've been that way. It's just...part of my makeup. I want to help, I want to defend, I want to avenge. And I'm stubborn enough to not let things get in my way.

"I've learned so much during this week. You really get to know the 'tricks of the trade' through this program."

— LYDIA YOUNGMAN

It was the August before that October, two thousand something else, and Sam and I were walking in the woods. Sunlight streamed through the branches, water bubbled down a stream. Everything shimmered the way it would if you had left a dark cave for your first time into day. We were laughing at something two artistic, nature loving, momentarily child-like girls laugh at. We skipped back to the house, drank iced tea in the hobbit-hole kitchen, and pulled little black insects off our T-shirts and jeans.

Two weeks later, Sam was in the hospital. They didn't know what was wrong with her.

Her birthday was in a week.

I'm not courageous. I'm not selfless. I'm not a decent person who wants to help. I'm a kid who's too scared to see the person who loves them most dying in a hospital, too guilty to face her.

She was dying. Her birthday passed. I couldn't think of anything to give her.

It was October, two thousand something else, and I was waiting to hear if she was still alive.

How could I ever have hated her?

The November after, I was scared, I was guilty, and I was trying not to laugh. I was staring at her half paralyzed face in choir class. It looked like a truck ran over half her face; flattened it. She smiled. I felt myself edge away. She was my friend, and all I wanted to do was run away, and laugh until I could cry.

Go to AU. Join the Peace Corps. Become a journalist. Save the world.

It's six Octobers after I met her, four Novembers since she came back to school.

Sam is healed. She's beautiful; the only traces left of the still-nameless disease are her charming half smile, with only one eyebrow raised.

It was the June before our senior year, the last June before this July. We played badminton in the sloping backyard, slipping on wet grass, squinting in the newly brightened sun.

I was winning. As always.

It's summer, two thousand every year. We're picnicking in the park, watching the sun set behind West Point on the Hudson River. We're in a giant tent, watching Shakespeare's plays. We understand him, understand each other.

She cringes when I get to the end of my great plan: Die young, taking a bullet for my best friend, whoever that will be.

She worries about me. I can see it. I don't understand it. I should have been there to take that bullet for her.

It was December, two thousand last year, and we were on the bus ride home from school. She was one of the first people I told. She hugged me, congratulated me, told me we'd have a coming-out party when we got home. ■

Untitled

by Margaret Guzman

THAT WOMAN IS WATCHING ME. I AM quite sure of it. She has no food. She is merely sitting at the table in front watching me. She is judging me.

I long to fake absorption in my fries so that she will see that I do not notice her and look away, but I cannot tear my gaze away from hers. Anyway, I know that she cannot be fooled. I see that I know her, although she is no person that I have met. She is familiar in the way of an individual who you are accustomed to seeing only in the context of a group. By herself I am barely able to identify her, the way that when a chunk of hair is chopped from your head you are able to recognize it as your own only through close study.

She knows that I took my food today without paying. She knows everything I've ever done. Yes, I remember now she stood behind me in the long line when I, overwhelmed with impatience, took my food and slipped away. She stood so close behind me as though she would have liked to consume me.

I wish that she had ripped the food from my hands. I blame her. Why should I be punished when she didn't do a thing to stop me?

A mall security guard walks by and I wait for her to tell him but she doesn't even look away. I know she thinks that I should tell him. She doesn't think impatience is a good excuse. I don't think she'd care much for any excuse.

Her eyes stare at me steadily and composedly but I notice that her hands are restless, twisting over and under, interlocking and releasing fingers. When I look down, I see that I am doing the same thing.

Shaking, I tip my food and my thoughts about the woman into the garbage and leave the building. The

woman follows. I try to push her back into the trashcan of my mind but unlike the food, her smell remains.

When I arrive already shaken at my interview, there is a man waiting at the door. He is tall and pale and handsome and cruel. Something in his eyes stops me from entering. Something in his smile mocks me.

"What do you want here?" he asks with a smile made of ice and misery.

I do not answer. He already knows.

"What makes you think you're worth it?" he asks me as the woman I

"Overall, I think this week has really helped me to see myself as a writer, prepared with the knowledge of what makes such a passion challenging, unique, and (most of all) worthwhile. It was very rewarding to be immersed in literary teaching, and I know what I learned will help me in the future."

— GABRIELLE HABER

was supposed to have forgotten nods in my peripheral vision. "You're nothing. Nothing. Nothing." He repeats the "nothings" over and over, his soft cruel voice forcing its way into my mind. His words are already there in the shadowed parts of my mind, but it is his voice that makes them come alive. I feel that I am blind—an organism made up of only one sense.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" we, all three of us, ask at once and this confuses me. The man laughs and the woman stares and I stumble out of the office and into the street.

The woman follows me, close behind, but the man stays closer, hooking his arm in mine and I know that I cannot shake him off. We are soon joined by another man, who hooks my other arm, and he and the first man

drag me along while he tells me that I'm a coward and the other man laughs and "nothings" and laughs.

Far in the heart of the crowd, as I am pulled along, I see a woman dressed in a neat black suit. The men pull me in her direction but she drifts backwards, always obscured by the crowd, so that I never quite see her whole face. I know she wants to help me but that the men and the other woman behind me are too strong for her. She speaks but her voice is quiet and lost among the constant jabbering

of the two men and the heat in the back of my head from the first woman's eyes. The woman in the suit sadly repeats the words until I just catch the word "logic" clearly formed on her lips, before another man dressed all in black rises up behind her and stabs her through the heart. As she falls dead, I find that all I can see now is the man in black. He looks at me over the bloody blade and licks it clean. It is as though he has devoured my last thread of calm thought as well,

and I scream and frantically try to free myself from the grip of my captors.

"Help!" all five of us cry desperately but I barely notice and my head feels cloudy and the woman is staring and she and the three men are saying, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you..." and their words join the buzzing in my head and the man in black moves closer and closer and his face is shifting, like he has so many faces, so that I do not know what he looks like, and he brings his hand to my face almost gently and touches me and I am cold and I sob and he smiles and I am him.

"I hate you," all five of us say as one to me, calmly, and I am all alone on the busy street twisting my hands over and under—interlocking and releasing fingers—and I know that this has been true all along. ■

Mittens and Potatoes

by Gabrielle Haber

“FUCKIN’ BASTARD!” I CRIED ACCUSINGLY.

My candy-sweet voice dripped poison, echoing both teary embarrassment and ill-natured conviction. I felt an exhilarated rush cradle my insides; I had never sworn before in my life. I yanked my mittens off dramatically and abandoned them to the playground asphalt, where they tossed blissfully in the London winds like fat, knitted leaves. Swarms of children, huddled together in the cold like baby polar bears, paused and turned to face me curiously.

“What happened, Gabrielle?” piped up Ellie, a look of intense and deliberate caring planted on her six-year old features. She studied me knowingly through a curtain of auburn bangs, and then patted my quivering frame sympathetically. I sobbed harder, providing admirable dedication to contributing towards my own humiliation. I glanced around my school’s playground, fiercely searching for him. His burly and menacing second-grader form was nowhere to be seen among the staring, pale figures.

“Mike threw a potato at my face,” I whimpered. Ellie gasped, her hands flailing to cover her mouth in shock, as if I had spoken of a gruesome murder.

Through my loneliness and fright, (and the actual physical pain of the angry sting left as a result of a potato being shot at one’s eye like a cannon), I thought myself a soldier of sorts. I had been wounded by the evil forces of the older bullies who, as Mommy assured me, were just too dull to be nice. I felt myself a martyr for the well-mannered, a brave humanitarian taking one for the team.

Many doll-faced girls from my grade now crowded around me, riled in my defense and ready for

intense combat.

“We’ll get him damned good!” declared tiny Cassie, fists clenched, eyes narrow with a thirst for vengeance, her already rosy-cheeked complexion aflame with redness from anger and cold. “He’s right nasty,” agreed Emily, stepping towards me. “The way he always pulls your hair like this.” She clutched my waist-length, tangled hair. Her bony fingers slid through the unapologetic barrier of knots as if running her hands through sand at the beach, through snow in the field. She tugged. I winced and pushed her away threateningly. Laughter.

“I reckon this sort of thing happens on account of you being a Yankee,” another girl revealed to me matter-of-factly. I blinked and turned away, feeling as though my momentary importance and very being had outgrown the restrictions of my little body. I felt defenseless, wronged, a victim and an outsider—but somehow all the more special because of it, a sense of hard-earned grandeur bubbling in my skipping heart. Tears continued to travel down my face like raindrops racing along a car window. I had one hand pressed up against my right eye.

“Maybe you’ll need an eye patch,” Ellie pondered.

“She’ll look like a bloody pirate!” giggled Emily. I couldn’t help but chuckle through my squeaky sobs.

Cassie charged towards us with an air of accomplishment, my favorite lunch-lady following her curiously. I liked this lunch-lady, despite

her tendency to call me “Julia,” a name under which I had conversationally introduced an imaginary friend of mine to her.

“Hello, Julia, is Gabrielle with you today?” she’d often question me playfully.

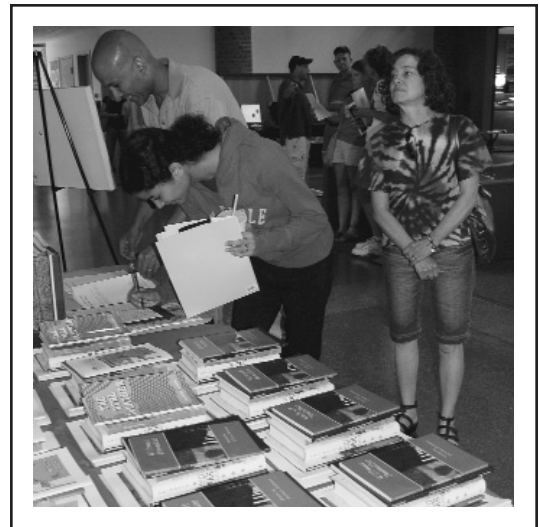
“No, I’m Gabrielle, my friend here is Julia,” I’d correct her, gesturing to the empty space next to me where “Julia” supposedly stood. She’d often simply pat my head and walk away.

“Come now, sweetie,” she said gently, ushering me along with her wing-like arms. “Mike stole those potatoes from the lunch room, the little grave-digger.” She shook her head and sighed.

We stepped rhythmically inside my school’s brick facade, where I was led to the infirmary. The bird-y lunch lady sat me down on a chair, handing me an ice packet after I was told to wait. Wait, and wait patiently.

“Well, Julia, at least you’ll have your friend Gabrielle here to keep you company,” she said, waving a lanky arm towards the vacant chair next to mine, and winked at me.

I stared up at her and sighed, still holding a mittenless hand to my bruised eye. ■



Lost in the fog

by Isaac Handley-Miner

THE SUN GLISTENED OFF THE COOL, CLEAR surface of the ocean. A light blanket of fog was just beginning to slither its way over the rippling water as I gazed out over the sea from my perch on the porch railing.

"It's starting to get late, but I'm sure we could still make it to the island if you're interested," my dad said.

"Yeah, I'd love to," I answered enthusiastically.

Within ten minutes, my neighbor, my parents and I were seated in the old, rickety row boat we used to travel short distances over the ocean. After starting up the small, sputtering motor we left the bay and set out over the water.

As land had just slipped out of sight, I suddenly noticed the skin on my arms was crawling with dew. Looking around me, I realized we had glided right into the midst of a fog denser than concrete. The swirling mist enveloped our boat and its occupants in a velvety blanket that was eerily tangible. I turned and looked to the rear of the craft. There was my father, steering the tiller, his face shrouded by the creamy film of the mist.

"I hadn't anticipated such a thick fog," I mused. No one answered me.

We took a compass reading and carried on in the same direction we had been traveling. The island wasn't too far away, so we reasoned it would be safe to continue.

As the fog continued to curdle, it became impossible to see ten feet in front of us. My father entrusted me with the job of watching out for rocks. If we ran aground, it would be impossible to find help. I strained my eyes, scanning the surface for any disturbance that could signify the existence of an obstruction. Soon, the monotony and the sting of the salty spray forced me to give them a break. Plus, we would arrive at the island shortly. But I couldn't help feeling unsettled by

the unbounded whiteness. It was frightening to stare into a vast nothingness.

The fog began playing tricks on my mind. I saw haunting apparitions materialize in the distance, only to dissolve into mist as we got closer. The perpetual clunk of waves hitting the boat sounded like the beating of far off drums, dogging our voyage. My voice

"I had more fun this week than any other summer in my life."

— REBECCA BROWN

sounded strangely hollow and hung in the air, muffled by the sea of fog.

I listened to the put-put-put of the small motor and inhaled the noxious fumes from the oil. It had a calming effect. It offered some familiarity to the bleak vacuum we found ourselves in. I tried to busy myself by peeling off the white, chipped paint from the bow of the boat. My stomach twisted with uneasiness.

Minutes crept by, as the uniformity of eddying vapor dulled the brain. I kept checking my watch. It had been ten minutes since we'd left. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Twenty-five minutes.

"Surely we should be there already, right?" I pondered aloud.

"Can't be far now," came the echo from the rear of the boat.

I looked above me and vaguely made out the shimmering golden orb of the sun through the haze. It was reassuring to know that the sun could see us, even if no one else could. Suddenly I began thinking *What if some monstrous oil tanker were to come across our path?* They wouldn't be able to see us in time and we had no way to signal them. I was interrupted mid-thought by my father saying, "You know, I never thought to check the gas before we left."

Lovely. We're stuck in the middle

of the ocean in a terrible fog; we don't really have any idea where we are, we could be run over any minute by some large boat, and now we don't even know if we have enough gas to make it to the island, not to mention back home again.

The lump in my stomach swelled to the size of a tennis ball. I almost laughed at how stupid our situation was. The only thing we had to battle fate was a compass—a compass that I wasn't even sure was working properly. It had been thirty-five minutes and we still hadn't seen any sign of an island that was only supposed to be twenty minutes away.

We talked it over and decided our best bet would be to continue in the direction we were going. Hopefully we would hit some land and figure out where the hell we were. Ten more minutes passed and still nothing. We were all really beginning to panic now. The churning and shifting fog echoed our own thoughts. *Do we turn around and hope we're heading back to our island?* Or do we simply carry on, perhaps drifting farther and farther away from a safe haven?

Just as we were about to turn around, I thought I caught a glimpse of something through the fog. It looked like a long, thin green object off in the distance. As we floated steadily closer, I realized that what I was seeing were trees! Finally, we had found land. The weight lifted off my chest and I felt like a free man.

We spotted a small fishing boat and pulled up alongside it. We asked the fisherman where we were

In a thick Maine accent, he replied, "Isle au Haut."

It took us a few tries to figure out what he was saying, so he showed us on a map. We had hit the tip of the last island before the open sea. Next stop? Portugal. I looked back into the swirling haze and felt my mind clear. ■

Kiss the Pavement by Cassandra Hartt

IT WAS THAT TIME OF YEAR WHEN DOGS wished they could sweat. They couldn't, so they panted. All the time. Their pink tongues spilled over their teeth and lolled until the saliva became foam. The pavement was new and smelled like the heat that softened it.

Jem was precarious on the bike with the banana seat because it didn't belong to him and there was a girl sitting on the handlebars, backwards, with her sticky fingers over his eyes. The bike was bubblegum pink and meant to look vintage, even though it wasn't. He weaved along the blacktop leaving a path like a wave in his wake.

The bike belonged to Piper, the girl with the sweaty hands and the freckles. She had gotten it yesterday for her ninth birthday and loved it for all of twelve minutes.

Jem remembered counting the freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose, losing track in the two hundreds and starting over. Once he had used her speckled face for connect-the-dots. The ink of the ballpoint pen had not readily flowed over the layer of greasy sunscreen, and he had to press the tip of the pen deep into her fleshy cheeks to create the shaky blue line connecting one splotch to the next.

As a little kid, he thought the blemished plane of her face seemed similar to a galaxy light-years away. Full of mud colored planets with irregular borders. He never repeated to her what his dad said about freckles: that you got them from standing too close to a cow's ass.

The bike wobbled dangerously and Piper grabbed Jem's ears to steady herself.

"Let go of me!" She only obeyed because a car was coming up behind them.

Around the time he lost his first tooth he had walked in on his mom and Piper's father. It was the middle of August and their air conditioner was broken. Jem had been going to get tam-

pons out of his parents' bathroom. Canons for his G.I. Joes. He remembered that the blinds were closed and sweat dripped off her father's nose. Jem felt his mouth twist and pucker, like drinking the pulp of fresh lemonade, and he took a few hasty steps backwards, as if moving in the opposite direction would make time follow suit. He didn't understand why their parents couldn't keep their clothes on. It wasn't that hot outside.

"Your dad and my mom were *kissing*. And they didn't have any clothes on!" he had whispered in her ear when he returned to the backyard. He liked the way Piper's hair smelled and how sometimes she painted her toenails pink.

She mirrored Jem's wrinkled, indignant expression. His face looked pruny, like toes after a long bath. "You mean they were *naked*?"

He nodded and waited for her reaction before he decided what his would be.

"Gross!" She banished any sinister connotation that bedroom of glowing silhouettes had, what with its smell of salty bodies and mysterious, sacred limbs decaying. It was only disgusting, like maggots in dirt or blisters full of pus. Not scary.

They were riding the banana bike to get to the store where they had pop-sicles and twist cones and Italian ice and ice cream cookie sandwiches and hard serve by the hand-packed pint. Piper wasn't allowed to eat dessert on days of the week that ended in "y". But then, she wasn't supposed to climb on the handlebars and he wasn't supposed to let her. She figured that if you had already broken one rule you might as well break them all. Jem picked his battles, and those he chose didn't involve Piper. She covered his eyes again.

He tugged at her hand, half-heartedly because it was all in good fun, and the bike meandered from the safe curb. She saw a maroon mini van, a non-

threatening gem on the horizon, then screamed because it was upon them. Too close, and like a blindfold the color overwhelmed her. At such an intimate distance she saw that the van was more of a red-violet than a violet-red. Beneath her the bike shuddered and was sucked under.

Jem howled. The front spokes of the pink bike bent their backs to kiss the pavement.

She sat on the ground, her mouth open, her hands clutching either side of her face, covering her ears. Her fingernails left tiny half-moon indentations in her cheeks. Each semicircle was beaded with blood. She couldn't move and her throat didn't work like it was supposed to because she seemed to have swallowed a wad of cotton balls. Her bike had been yanked out from under her and Piper's elbows, her bare feet were scuffed. Pebbles had wiggled their way into the life lines in the folds of her palms. There were tiny, sparkling rubies all over her and the melting pavement.

There was no color in Jem's face because all of it had drained out his leg. He was mostly made up of red. When Piper saw that leg she saw the insides of things that could be squished. Things like spotted brown bananas and blue Play-Doh. And, apparently, feet.

A woman yelled in her face, spit flying. She sounded like a dog, but really she was saying "help" over and over. There was lipstick on her front tooth. She shrieked that Piper had to go get somebody, but all Piper could think was that she couldn't leave Jem alone with that lunatic. Because she might kidnap him, because she was a stranger with a car. They shouldn't have even been talking to her. The maroon van and crimson blood and his hair the color of autumn. A pool on the road and all over his shorts and hands. Hands that were shaking, his and hers. Piper started to run, and then she didn't stop. ■

Strikeout Summer

by Gretchen Hohmeyer

WHAMP GOES THE SMACK OF A baseball into the catcher's glove.

The pitcher of the team Flapjack Grill/Carriage Pharmacy—called the “Medicated Pancakes” affectionately—is warming up for their playoff game. Since this is my little brother's team, I should be excited, but I'm not.

I turn to my mother as we sit in the freezing metal bleachers, “Derek should be on the mound.”

Derek is, of course, my 13-year-old brother. He is tossing balls in the outfield among his other teammates in their red

so much work into this year. He even practiced at home in the pouring rain!”

It is Derek's dedication to this sport that has shocked me the most. He has this permanent scowl on his face. He's moody and he refuses to go after something if it gets hard. I never believed he would have had this season in him. I'd like to say his hardcore practices have paid off, but the thing he has been working on the most—the thing he loves the most—has not been really any part of his season.

“But Coach would rather put Nelson on the mound,” I say. “Because Nelson is his son. But Derek pitched so much better than Nelson in just two innings! And the fact that he overcame his shyness and spoke up shows an immense amount of growth right there!”

In the beginning, Derek refused to speak about his wanting to pitch. Instead, he watched silently as Coach benched him and the other players who are not the “best,” in favor of the divas who “are.” He quieted his outrage when Coach pitched his own son or, worse, the boy who didn't even want to stand anywhere close to the mound.

What boosted his confidence was the fact that Derek's batting practice had him hitting so well that Coach moved him from batting ninth to second. I remember the day he came home from one game, bouncing.

“I spoke up,” he had said.

“You what?” Mom had squeaked, amazed and incredulous.

“I asked Coach if I could pitch.”

Mom had hugged him tight. “Look at you, all grown up.”

Derek just grimaced.

He was supposed to pitch that Thursday, but the game got rained out just like too many others that season. He took the mound on Tuesday instead.

The whole family clutched at the fence around the field with more nerves than it seemed Derek had.

The first inning, Derek struck out all three batters he faced. He quickly became the topic of conversation with Coach and his assistants, as well as in the stands.

“Why didn't this kid pitch before?”

“Hey, this kid is good!”

“Just who is this kid?”

I proudly told anyone who would listen, “Derek is my little brother.”

The second inning had been more of the same. He had let some guys on base, but then started striking them all out again. However, just as he was about to strike out his last batter, the rain started. It stormed with a hammering downpour, ear-shattering thunder and vicious lightning. Our quick sprint to the car soaked us.

Derek had dashed up and jumped into the car. He was dripping, flushed and—uncharacteristically—smiling.

“I'm really sorry you couldn't get that last out,” Dad said.

Derek turned his dazzling smile on him. “It doesn't matter.



shirts with white writing. He is determined to win this game—more determined than he has ever been. This is the last year he will be eligible for Little League, and the next league up (which plays on Major League standards) honestly scares him a little.

My mother nods, “He's put

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Now Coach has seen that I really have practiced and it's really paid off."

I punched his shoulder. "Everyone was talking about you. Coach will definitely pitch you again."

But he wouldn't.

Even now, that thought still stings as I watch Derek warm up in the outfield now as Coach's son Nelson warms up on the mound. He is not a great pitcher, to say the least. Yet Coach has pitched him every day he can. Nelson has lost more than one game for this team.

But I should be glad they are here, in the final four of the playoffs. Coach had called the day before and said that he'd seen Derek out practicing.

It made Derek hopeful. "Maybe he might let me pitch!"

I turned my thoughts to that now. Maybe Coach will realize his mistake and put Derek in instead. *Let him pitch, let him pitch.*

Coach benches him for the first three innings.

The first part of the game seems promising. Their good batters hit like they always do, and it's two to zip going into the third inning. If Nelson can keep it together for one more inning, he'll hand it over to the team's best pitcher and we might have a chance.

Wrong thought to have.

Nelson gives up four runs in one inning. Coach keeps him in there, though, until the end and Nelson comes off the field, rather nonchalantly. It is four to two—a winnable game.

That is the score when Derek goes into the outfield at the top of the fourth. He likes it there well enough, and he's been working on his fly balls. He catches a few to get some outs and the inning ends.

After the first part of the game, not a player can hit the opposition's new pitcher. Derek is able to draw a

walk, trying to at least put himself on base. No one manages to even get him to second.

It's got to be depressing when you

"This was my fourth year attending the institute and, as always, it was absolutely brilliant. The participants are among the most genius writers and fascinating people that I have ever met, and the discussions and criticism they have provided have had profound effects on my writing. Without the institute, I would not be nearly as good a writer or anything close to the same person, and for that I am grateful."

— LAURA COLANERI

try your hardest yet there is nothing you can do. The game ends with a score of five to two.

When it is over, Derek seems to be the only one not overjoyed to see the cupcakes someone's mother has brought. His teammates are easily distracted from loss, it seems, but Derek nearly walks out on Coach because he doesn't want anyone to see him cry.

I feel like crying.

He is dejected on the car ride home. I try to cheer him up and, for a while, it works.

"It's been a strikeout summer for you and Yale," I say. "Look forward to next year."

Derek is already thinking of then, when the field will be twice as big as a Little League one and where the distance from the mound to the plate is

sixty feet instead of thirty-five. He is already thinking of his new teammates who will be as old as eighteen and dwarf him, as some of his other teammates already did.

"I don't think I'll play next year," he mumbles to the floor.

I sigh—typical Derek.

When the going gets tough, he gives up. It's like his other sport, ski jumping. He loved it from the very first day and yet he refused to do it in the summer and—when he got too good for the small hill and progressed to the next biggest one—then collapsed just because he didn't want to put in the effort.

We get home, unload the car, and give Dad and Yale the news, since each would have had a heart attack had they gone. I go to the living room and read, trying not to think about how disappointed Derek is and how he always surrenders his dreams when he meets adversity. But he is small for his

age. He is emotional and isn't accustomed to dealing with people. Perhaps this is for the best. Yet I know he loves the sport so much, and his admission of defeat cracks my heart.

It takes me a while to realize he's not inside.

I hear a faint grunting outside and look out the window. There is Derek, who has measured sixty feet from the pitching mound—to simulate the conditions of his league next year—and put the Pitch Back there. The balls he throws are nowhere near accurate and some don't even reach.

When they don't, he squares his shoulders and chucks another, doggedly refusing to give up. This is a new side of him that I have never seen, and it makes me smile like nothing ever has before. ■

Untitled

by Tessa Hunter

IT WAS DEEP INTO THE NIGHT, that silent time where the darkness had become so thick that you could hardly even see your hand in front of your face if you wanted to. A soft, brisk wind whisked through the air, carrying with it the chill of the winter days to come.

But none of this mattered to the man who was walking down the empty street.

He paused now, having reached his destination, and turned to look up at the large wrought iron gate, behind which the dim outline of gravestones could be seen.

He gave the gate a gentle push, making it swing open with the creak of old age, and then slipped stealthily inside.

This was an old cemetery, filled with people who had died centuries before, and many of the gravestones bore inscriptions that were so worn they were hardly legible.

The figure stalked amongst the graves with little care for any of them until he reached the monument that stood at the

very center of the graveyard.

The headstone was an enormous structure made of white marble with a statue of an angelic boy on the top.

The statue itself was hardly

He was exceedingly handsome with inky black hair pulled back in a ribbon—the onlooker knew for a fact that the said ribbon had been a snippet of fine silk—extenuat-

“This week has been such a beneficial experience. I’ve learned more this week in regards to creative writing than I have in a very long time. The other young writers were especially helpful, because I was able to get their honest feedback on my work. Meeting and befriending other people like me was definitely one of the best parts of this whole experience.”

— POOJA BHASKAR

an uncommon image, but it differed from others of its kind, for its wings were fashioned from dark marble instead of the normal white.

Placed below the statue was a golden plaque where the name of the deceased and their length of life was engraved in careful cursive lettering.

And right above this plaque had been hung a portrait of a young man who couldn’t be more than eighteen years of age.

ing the high, finely arched cheekbones of his pale, aristocratic face. Chillingly deep blue eyes glared out at the observer over the bridge of a slender nose that seemed to be uplifted in some sort of distaste. And unlike what one would have expected, the pale, supple lips of this boy were twisted down in a frown.

A smile crept onto the mouth of the figure as he pressed his fingers to the painting.

“It’s been awhile; since I last visited my grave.” ■



Class Trip by Yasmin Kelly

On our class trip to California,
in the year I don't know when
I was the one that stood behind
and watched the lunchboxes
while the other girls played.
In the year I don't know how,
but a gray whale came up on the shore
and showed me the harpoon scars
on her back.
Survivors, whale blubber and desert mammals
listened to me and my lunchboxes.
The sand rats and the hummingbirds,
cougar, coyote, whales again,
survivors.
I gave them the food in my friends'
lunchboxes,
I think they might get mad
when I tell them
"the whale ate it."



Tracks by Erik Koch

WHEN I WAS LEARNING TO SKI THE SNOW was hard. Not hard like cement, but like a stale pastry. Squeeze it between your thumb and index finger and you'll break through the crust and into the warm custard. The snow was similar—ice on top, slush on bottom. Your ski would pierce the ice sometimes and you'd have to pull up with your leg to get it out.

I rode up the bunny slope lift, sitting next to old people and Asian tourists who would frantically snap photos of the evergreens as if they wouldn't pass by them again in a minute or so.

There's a bored, overweight man who sits in a booth at the top of the lift. He's often asleep. His job is to wait for someone to fall off the lift. Every time a kid jumps ahead and nose dives into the off ramp, the whole lift stops.

Today it is raining. The bus back to the supermarket in Horseheads doesn't leave till dark and there's plenty of gray daylight left. All the snowboarders and kids who pay to get in, but don't actually leave the cafeteria, are playing a game of who's the biggest badass of them all in the lodge at the bottom of the slope.

I rent my skis directly from the resort because I really don't like skiing enough to buy my own. But most weekends I need to get out of the house. Anything is better than listening to the laments of a family affected by undiagnosed bouts of seasonal affective disorder. The dogs will even begin to whimper at times during the incessant conversations regarding the future of public radio and the legitimate effects of classical music on babies.

Every weekend I go to the same counter to get my boots. A girl with a fake diamond nose piercing and a fake diamond earring stands there in bore-

dom and tells me, "Thank you for skiing at Greek Peak." I almost want to make her try to remember me, not because I find her attractive, but just for the hell of it. Most of the time she's incoherent and the words "Greek

"The NYSSYWI helped me grow as a more mature author by exposing me to a challenging yet rewarding program. I have interacted with other people who share my interests, which has broadened my outlook. Thank you! P.S. NYSSYWI is epically awesome."

— MARIA MAZZARO

Peak" turn into a Sneak a Leak or some other rhyming combination. The skis seem designed to obstruct you from adjusting them. In order to make them tighter, you must take the ski off, tighten and try it back on. Rinse and repeat. No matter how much time you spend doing this, one ski will always be tighter than the other.

It's raining hard enough that you have to wipe the sleet droplets from your goggles every few minutes. My gloves are fingerless and I regret this. The snowboarder riding next to me has a pierced eyebrow. His hair creeps in matted ringlets from under his knit hat. Moisture has fused the curls together into frozen dreadlocks. The lift swings and the joint creaks above us as he tries to peer to the front of the line to see what's halted the lift.

"Fucking kids," he mutters. He appears experienced enough. The board dangling from his foot is plastered with faded stickers. I wonder why he's riding on the bunny trail lift in the first place.

"What brings you to the bunny trail?" I ask him.

"Oh well." His voice is very loud,

as if he wants everyone else on the lift to know why indeed he's riding on the bunny trail. "I broke my leg. I'm working my way back up." Ah, an injury. His coolness has been validated.

"Yeah, me too," I lie. Maybe he can't see my rental skis through the freezing rain. I pat my left arm in confirmation.

There's a pause. He asks me, "What trail?"

"Oh, you know." Now I'm done. I've only ever skied on one other trail ever with disastrous results. "You know, the big one." I laugh seriously and add, "I totally wiped out on a mogul." Maybe my correct use of ski terms

can save me. He laughs too like he might believe me. I can't tell.

"Where do you come up from?"

"Horseheads?"

"Oh."

It's been almost five minutes since the lift stopped. I'm waiting for a red emergency sled guided by a park official to speed under me. But no sled ever comes. Perhaps the man in the booth has just fallen asleep on the giant red STOP button. The snowboarder lights a cigarette and blows smoke out his nose, never offering me one, which I like. Innocence is fleeting. People are always eager to snatch it from you, like a dirty magazine. The rain extinguishes his cherry and he has to relight it a few times before the lift finally starts up again.

We don't speak the rest of the way. He hops gracefully off and speeds away down the mountain, the butt of his cigarette smoldering in the snow. I grip my poles tightly and jump after him. The world seems to slide out from under me as I fall heavily on my ass. Everyone above me on the lift groans collectively as it grinds yet again to a halt. ■

Richard the Great

by Katie Lasak

SAM STEPPED UNEASILY INTO THE elevator beside her mother, causing a sickly, churning feeling to spread throughout her gut. Elevators had always had this effect with her, and though there was not yet a name for this phobia, she was certain that she had it. But little did she know that the elevator would be the least of her problems today. Soon enough her rotten, roused up stomach would only become more agitated. She was here to see her grandfather; 80 years old and fresh off the operating table. A mere 26 hours before, a scalpel had broken the skin and sawed through his skull in an effort to remove a tumor that had already stolen his voice months before. His voice. The man's own voice. That troubled Sam to the deepest level because her grandfather was a great man, and the thought that kept repeating

ready to faint. The whole "changing momentum" thing never sat well with her, but after a few moments she was fine, soon walking down the halls beside her mother. Sam's mother had a poor sense of direction but would never admittedly declare when she was lost. Still, Sam knew when she was.

"Should we go..." Sam's mother pointed to her right. "We need to find D6."

"Mom, don't you come here, like, everyday? You should know this," Sam said with a sigh, followed by a look as if to proclaim *Are you for real*, which was a basic teenage expression. "See? This sign says that if you go that way," Sam pointed to the right, her vacant hand placed upon her mother's shoulder "you go towards Cs. Ds are this way." Sam gave her mother a small push and began leading the way knowing that she'd find the room, if even upon mistake.

When Sam did successfully find the room though, she was unable to look in it, not knowing what to expect once she entered through the doorway. The uneasiness in her gut was growing once again, but she swallowed and pushed it away. *You're here for Grandfather, Sam. No fainting.* Sam was a notorious fainter, especially while in medical situations, which was one of the reasons

she gave up on striving towards a job in the medical field. So Sam waited by the doorway and gestured for her mom to go in first and then followed behind.

The room was different than she'd expected. She'd always imagined a hospital room as two beds, a window, and a couple televisions with a curtain separating the two beds. But in this room sat a desk with medical beds surrounding it. Each bed was separated by a curtain, but Sam highly doubted that the hospital's attempt to give each patient their own "room" to make them feel more comfortable really had an effect.

"Hey Dad!" Sam's mother's tone was now upbeat, obviously trying to keep the mood light and positive. She bent down and hugged Sam's grandfather, with Sam doing the same right after. He didn't seem like himself, sitting upright on his bed, an IV in his arm and a bandage a top his head where what little hair he'd had there before had been shaved. As Sam sat beside her mother she felt hope rising in her; he was better than she'd expected. And with this she figured it was going to be an easier visit than earlier thought. This was all erased as soon as her grandfather began talking...or trying to talk rather.

"So what's this? You didn't eat?" Sam's mother directed her gaze from him to a tray of untouched salad, mashed potatoes, and chicken, indicating the source of her question. He shook his head.

"Well...see they brought me breakfast..." He was shaking as he spoke.

"Did you eat it?" Sam's mother's tone was harsh upon this question. The elderly man nodded, as if he were a small child being interrogated by their mother for eating a cookie before dinner.

"It was..." he paused, as if trying to find the words he wanted to use.



in her mind was "What's a great man without his voice?"

The elevator doors opened to a deserted hallway, only decorated by a lone wheelchair. Sam burst out of the doors feeling a tiny bit queasy,

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This was the very problem the tumor was causing; a loss for words.

Sam's mother had told her the doctors had said "There's going to be swelling. He's going to get worse before he gets better." Still, everybody knew that this surgery was only a temporary fix, a fake tattoo. Her grandfather continued to find the words he so desperately sought out for, obviously frustrated and worried that the surgery had failed.

"They brought..." he sighed, thinking. "So anyway..."

"No, no, go on. What'd they bring? Pancakes? French toast?" Sam could tell her grandfather was getting impatient, not wanting suggestions and just wanting to find the words himself. He continued opening his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but always gave up after a few seconds. Seeing the man she'd always looked up to for inspiration not being able to simply say what he'd eaten for breakfast caused a wave of weakness to crash over Sam. She felt faint. She'd never seen her grandfather so helpless, and she never had pictured that he'd be in this sort of state.

Eventually her grandfather picked up a nearby newspaper and a pen with his brittle hands and began writing something down.

"Goop?" Sam's mother said with a chuckle and a smile. "They brought you goop for breakfast?" Her grandfather nodded. Goop? *That's the only word he could think of?* Sam thought to herself. It was painful to watch.

Whoosh! Another wave of discomfort came over Sam.

"Yeah, and then I got no sleep

last night because...I didn't sleep." He nodded.

Whoosh!

"Do you want me to get you some ear plugs? Will that help?" Sam's mother persisted, her grandfather nodding as a nurse popped out from a bordering curtain.

"We can get him some. I'll get them in a minute," she says. Both nodded in sync, Sam's grandfather and mother, while Sam simply sat still and put her head as close to her knees as possible without seeming rude. She wanted to visit, but she also didn't want to keel over, especially in front of her grandfather.

"There she is!" Sam's grandfather exclaimed to a nearby nurse who was passing by on her way to her desk, pointing to her.

"Who? You want her? The nurse?" Sam's mother tried to understand.

"No." *Whoosh!*

"Then who do you want?" Sam's mother pleaded with him, now acting like a mother trying to make out her infant's first words. Sam's grandfather was no infant. *Whoosh!*

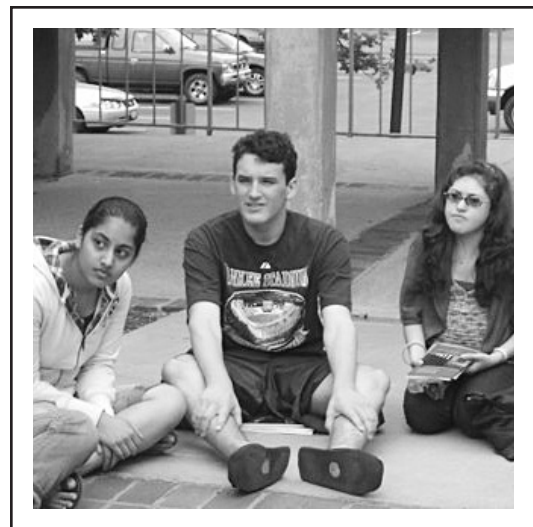
"You. I want you." Her grandfather smiled and they both gave a small laugh. Sam was glad that he was still able to keep his exceptional brand of humor even with the state he was in. *Whoosh!* Trying to push her nauseating feelings aside Sam sat up straight, taking long, deep breaths. *No fainting, Sam. Don't you faint.*

"Well, we'll let you

sleep then and get going," Sam's mother said, noticing Sam's odd behavior. The nurse appeared from behind Sam and handed the aged man his ear plugs. Sam hated the fact that she felt relief over the fact that they were leaving, but one more wave of uneasiness and she'd be on the ground and out cold.

Sam and her mother stood up, hugged the elderly man with the bandaged up skull and no voice, and began their trek back to the elevators. This was an experience Sam would never forget, and she knew that if she ever thought back on it, no matter how many times she did, that it would still break her heart to see such a great man at a loss for words over something as simple as breakfast foods.

"He'll be just fine Mom," Sam put an arm around her mother suddenly realizing it was the first time she'd spoken since she'd entered room D6. "He wouldn't want us upset, because that'd make him feel guilty, and we don't want him to feel guilty." They nodded together in agreement as they reached the metal doors of the elevators. ■



Sensational Sitting Ducks

by Lily Lopate

“GET OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” EVA YELLED. HER eyes were bloodshot, her mascara running, making her look like a rabid raccoon. I tried to touch her hand to comfort her and began to extend my arm. Her thigh was hot and clammy. I hadn’t made it too far before she yanked my wrist away. “I already said, GET OUT!!! Jesus Christ are you that dense!?! Leave NOW! We both know you don’t even wanna be here anymore and don’t give a crap so get out!” Jen was sitting beside her while Eva began panting like a furious dog, now sweaty. Her knees wobbled as she sat down on the crumpled bed sheets. It was past midnight. Jen leaned over, her loose T-shirt spilling out while her chest sandwiched together, greeting the cold floor, simultaneously revealing her bra. “Let’s turn on some news...some distraction,” she said. Her voice was shaky, while her eyes jumped about spying the corners of the dingy motel room. Elizabeth also seemed shocked, we all were, this meltdown seemed very sudden, out of nowhere. It thundered down on us at this dark hour like a hailstorm that slaps against your car windows once you exit a tunnel. This whole year had been the tunnel, cradling us before we parted ways. This fight was like the open highway—anything could happen. “The news is over, Jen! Ok, got it?!” I barked at her slamming the door, only taking my key card behind me.

Just down the hall was the boys’ room. I knocked on their door impatiently. I needed a distraction myself, forget Eva! Boys seemed the only thing here that would hold my interest at this point. “*We were so ready for this trip,*” I thought. “*We even badgered the teachers to give the four of us the same room. Had we been this oblivious to the subtle decline all along or was it really unexplainable?*” The sweaty adolescent boys greeted me with braces and goofy smiles at the door. They had this fake

demeanor about them like they had just learned the proper stance for being “sexy” or “cool”. I walked in—their room was a mess and smelled of cheese puffs and muddy clothes. I was wearing the most unflattering T-shirt that managed to reveal no attractive features and I was pale with no make-up. The only good aspect was my pastel shorty-shorts, which showed off my legs.

I’ve always liked my legs. But never my mid-area. Always so round and I felt like the entire circumference of my stomach was equal to my intestine. “*Shut up, Bella,*” I thought. “*Don’t be so self absorbed; there are bigger things going on here than just you. You’ve known these guys since 3rd grade. You’re not going to do anything. Eva is falling apart for some unknown reason and yet you’re going to think about...flirting or kissing?!*” I took a deep breath and explained to the guys, who seemed starved for gossip, what had just gone down. An hour went by and a party had invited itself into their room. Hot and excited bodies crowded around, girls’ fat jiggling from their thighs with pimples on their cheeks and guys with sweaty hair strings over their forehead.

There was one guy who was different from the rest of them. Still a jerk at times, but not at this moment. Now he was charming and attractive. His flannel p.j.’s with polo and gym socks could’ve been construed as preppy or childish but seemed to only add to his charisma. He was Italian and he had that effortless curly hair flip going on. And the finest hands and his Adam’s apple and jaw structure were defined too. I had always liked him on and off but sometimes concealed it since my other friend Sasha was always his go-to girl. He was the kind of guy where if you fell on a hiking trip he would briskly whip a first aid kit out of his pocket and bandage your ankle. Giving you that “it’ll be ok” look

at the same time. He knew how to cook, spoke two languages—he had a lot that was appealing. I snapped back into the present and glanced over to him across the room to see him leaning perfectly against a cheap mahogany dresser. He changed his weight from one foot to the other and like sending a secret code, I walked over to him. He cleared his throat and put his beautiful hand on one of the knobs in the drawer. I brushed my hand through my hair. A romantic technique I had learned from chick flick movies and older friends. It said: “*yeah, I’m on your wavelength... take me.*”

It seemed to go all in slow motion according to the Cinderella side of my brain but my logical, sensible side chimed in informing me it was all happening within brief minutes. We leaned into each other instinctively and a moment occurred where I could’ve very well kissed him. It seemed he was nearly going to kiss me. Just a few inches away from my face. My lips. In a split second where you are living life at a dream pace, our extremities warm and relaxed, real time kicks in and your mind speeds on adrenaline and your muscles tighten. The moment was gone. He turned away and his hand brushed over his face like a washcloth but I never got to see the rest. Sasha sauntered right up to me at that moment. She was giggling without a care in the world. Her black curly locks hopping up and down. “C’mon! We are prank calling in our room! You gotta come! You can do your Indian accent.” I reluctantly followed her, my slippers dragging against the carpet and out of the room. Away from him. I was being forced to change gears and safety pin a smile on my face. Another McDonald, taxi guys, and Indian waiters’ impersonation. An hour later and we were kicked out—“You’ve had your fun,

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now back to your rooms. And no funny business along the way,” my middle-aged middle school teacher said. She was part of a whole different world that I couldn’t even sort out now. All I could think of was how furious I was with Eva for pulling me away.

Jen opened the door; her face was tired and pissed yet empathetic and friendly all at the same time. “We’re all sleeping,” she said, motioning her hand to the pitch-blackness. I obediently tucked myself into my hard rough white covers in my bed. They had a baby blue strip down the edge like a hospital sheet. I was dreaming, my body unwinding, my mind digesting. Suddenly mayhem broke loose. Lights were whipped on, and tears and screaming erupted. I felt like I had entered the baby ward in a hopping hospital and I hate babies. There were hot tears rolling down people’s cheeks, sleep deprivation crawling in to haunt you in your tear ducts and confusion, anticipation. It was a drama. A Sunday lifetime thriller only full speed ahead reality.

I opened my eyes to see Elizabeth’s feet with pink toenail polish dangling in over my bunk. Eva was shaking. She let out a belch of a scream, her voice running ragged and grizzly like a drunk’s. The phone rang loudly, that classic old-fashioned ring. I picked up. It was the guys’ room inviting me over again, Elizabeth too if she wanted. “Really,” I said smiling and giggling a tad. “Well... I would love to but... things got a little out of hand...” My conversation stopped there. Eva scooped the phone viciously from my grasp and yelled foully into the speaker. I imagined the guys’ ears going back with shock just like a small dog that had been scolded. “YOU!!!” Eva yelled. Her veins bulging from her neck. Her eyes red with fury. Her voice more angry and full of gravel. Within an instant her arm stretched across me

and pulled the only lamp in the room out of its socket. “AHHHHHHHH!!!” she yelled, throwing it across the room. It crashed and there was a silence as it sat collapsed like a car accident or a dilapidated cardboard box in a corner. I looked over and met eyes with Eva, who was shaking.

Having learned from our mothers the ways to nurture and tend to, we wrapped blankets around her and wrung washcloths out in the sink to soak on her neck. We were unstoppable. We had established a synchronized rhythm. There were no words. Just utter comprehension of what needed to be done. We settled down like sitting ducks single file behind the door. It looked like one of those “in case of an emergency” demonstrations. Eva was first, her head hung over heavy with her palm pressed against the door. As though she was wishing for the power to break down the door like a transformer and bolt. RUN. Then came Elizabeth holding an extra blanket while tenderly rubbing her shoulder, then Jill holding a newly opened *Poland Spring* water bottle, then me—holding nothing. On the opposing right hand side of the wall was a mirror. “*What the hell is this? What the hell are we doing?*” I thought. My back was slumped and my eyes worn. This was the TV drama I had always wondered about, but now that it happened it was too heavy to handle. All I wanted was to be normal. (A significant understatement at that.) Having my night hanging out with the guys. Doing something, doing whatever it was that I wanted, even if I wasn’t able to articulate it. Other than this.

It is a year later. It is winter and it is very cold. I am lonely and do not fit in with the people in my new school. These people irritate me with their shallow talk about nothing. I do not connect and have nothing to say, so I

think inside myself. The reality of High School is far from my vision and expectation. And I am disappointed. I keep thinking about last year and that night with the guys, Eva’s breakdown, and later her dropping out of school, her telling us that we had failed her as friends. It’s still so raw and unresolved. I keep thinking; “*Was I selfish that I wished I were with the guys instead of being with Eva?*” “*Yes...No... Bella. Listen! You cared about Eva but not enough to let her rampage spoil your trip, you wanted to enjoy yourself. Your subconscious told you that things would be different next year and this was one of the last chances to be yourself, your ideal social-balancing self before summer.*”

I am thinking I wish I had more guts in the beginning of September to be myself. Make my vision of High School happen. Instead I waited. I still have this feeling in the pit of my stomach, forever nagging at me like a cat whipping its paw against a floorboard when it disapproves of its meal. I think back to how freeing it felt to not be strapped down by obligations that night. In the midst of all that was happening I had found clarity.

I guess I could say that was one of the most memorable nights of my life. But when assessing the night later on with Jen, while drinking peach tea on a bench, wearing fabulous sun hats at the park, she would ask me: “So Bella, do you think it all boils down to ‘would you rather...betray a boy or a best friend?’ I do not read too much into the “would you rather” and “truth or dare” phenomenon, but regardless, she was onto something. They say, “boys will come and go but friends last forever.” Well that may be all good and true but as for me, on that night I betrayed my friend, and just nearly did something utterly sensational with a guy. But the friend wasn’t much of a friend and the guy, well...he was a wish...or maybe just practice. ■

Untitled

by Sidney Madsen

THERE IS A MAN ON A DUSTY ROAD. There is a man who walks under a sullen sun across an endless plain. There is a man with a limp in his step who is running away. He has no destination, no plan, no certainty. There is a heaviness in him, a great weight that rests on his shoulders. His shoes are torn, his clothes tattered and he is brown. Brown as the plains, the dust, the broken trees and twisted bark, the clouds stretching to the end of the earth. There is a wind about him, a wind that pushes him backwards, tearing through his soul, blurring his squinted eyes, causing an agony of memories to throw him back to that house, that porch, that woman, that time.

His old mother, her face parched, her hair yellowing, stood on the porch, yelling. Her voice was cracked and desperate as she called for her dead husband. Her fists were clenched around the peeling porch railing, her knuckles white, the tendons of her hands protruding. She was barefoot in a white nightgown and from a distance she looked like the little girl, who, just awakened, ran downstairs, through the screen porch door and out onto the porch to gaze wide-eyed at the outline of the tunnel of wind, framed on the prairie horizon many years ago. But it was an old woman who heard the bang of the shutters on the side of the ranch house and rose from her bed, consumed with a suffocating fear. She had stumbled through the door, out onto the wood-planked porch and into the whipping wind trying to find the only person who had ever kept her safe.

"Henry! Henry! Where are you? Get in here!" Her eyes were wild and searching as the wind toyed with her, ripping at her face and hair, then

snatching her body and throwing it sideways. She lurched, but caught herself on the railing. A man ran up the porch stairs from the path to the barn, his face anxious.

"Ma? Ma? Are you alright? It's just a twister, it'll pass, you've been through hundreds of these things." He reached for her arm, trying to lead her inside.

"Get away from me! You aren't Henry! What are you doing here? This

"It is extremely gratifying to be amid other writers whose work and curiosity about the world makes us realize that through writing it is possible to realize the worth of the way we think. The Young Writers Institute has taught me that the purpose is to affect the reader."

— ABIGAIL SAVITCH-LEW

is my house! I want my husband!" She pulled away from him, backing away from the door, towards the steps and escape, her face terrified. The wind picked up an empty rain barrel, sending it crashing into the side of the house.

"Ma. It's me, Paul, your son. You know me." He advanced slowly, as if towards a wild animal, his voice calm and low. "Now come here and let's go in and get you out of this weather. The doctor said—"

"Get away from me! He'll kill you if you lay a hand on me! He'll kill you! Henry! Henry!" She scrambled towards the stairs, but he took a step forwards and grabbed her arm as gently as he could. He felt the arm tighten. It was as if his touch had unleashed something in her. She spun around and slapped him. She was strong, stronger than he had expected. He staggered. She started to pull her other arm out of his grip. A gust

ripped shingles off the roof, hurling them across the yard already covered in blowing debris.

Something in him snapped. The months of nursing his insane mother, alone, the sleepless nights spent comforting her intangible fears, bathing her, cleaning her sheets and bed pan, staying on this broken-down ranch she refused to leave, miles and miles from anyone, without gratitude, and this was what he got.

He seized her by the shoulders and wheeled her around, the wind roaring in his ears, stripping him of reason. He shook her with a violence he had never known he possessed.

"Why, Ma? Why? What did I do to deserve this? Why won't you come back to me? Why did you leave?" he yelled, his voice breaking, his face contorted. She was screaming too, for a man

who would never come. She was like a ragdoll caught in his fury, her body limp, flopping back and forth, her head whipping forward on her neck. Then suddenly her voice was mute.

His body relaxed, he stopped his shaking and pulled her to his chest in an embrace, burying his face in her hair, tears tracking down his dusty cheeks onto her head, oblivious of the still advancing storm. "I'm sorry Ma. I'm so sorry," he whispered to her, his throat thick with remorse. He held her close and she was quiet. After long minutes he spoke softly, "Let's go inside where you'll be safe, Ma." Then he pulled her tight for one last time, a gesture that was a plea for forgiveness, and let her go.

She crumpled. The sound of her body hitting the wood floor was surprisingly soft. He stood there. Motionless. Watching the wind play with her white nightgown. ■

Astronauts in Africa

by Julia Malleck

THE HERB GARDEN IS STILL FLAT and dead, the stairs not yet covered in seedpods and moss. My Dad and I are strolling in the Botanical Gardens in early spring. It's cold enough out that I still have to wear a red zipper-down fleece. He's wearing his usual forest green Eastern



Athletic hat and jogging shoes, hands resting lightly in his jean pockets. The day is cool and bright.

We're walking to the food court for lunch. I leave his side and skip through the secret passageway under the pine trees into the Shakespeare garden, laughing in delight when I see that I reach the cafeteria before him.

Later, I have lentil soup for lunch that I'm too afraid to eat because it is scalding hot. A few stragglers sit outside, daring the cool breeze. The meshed metal seats feel icy. As I wait for my

soup to cool I remember something I'd been meaning to ask—an especially goofy question I spent hours inventing. I want it to sound perfect when I finally open my lips to say it. My Dad and I love playing the game of posing ridiculous questions for each other.

"If an astronaut was in outer space, spinning around the Earth, could he point to Africa and appear there?" I ask. My hands are tucked under my thighs, legs swinging above the brick ground where my feet cannot yet touch.

My Dad looks up from his usual tuna sandwich, seeming resigned yet amused, all too used to the ditz propositions of a nine-year-old daughter.

"Julsie," my Dad says, "You can't just point to one place and appear there the next second. There is the traveling in-between the two moments."

"Yeah, I know," I reply absently, "but what if you were floating above the entire Earth and could see all the continents like on a map? You could wait until the Earth spun around a bit, and then when your continent popped up you could just pick it and appear there!"

My Dad's mouth twitches a bit as he bites into the pickle on his plate. I finally chance some soup. It is peppery and makes my ears feel warm.

"Have you heard of the atmosphere, Julia?"

"Not really. Well, it's just a

bunch of clouds, right?"

"The atmosphere is made of gases and it surrounds the Earth. It is miles thick."

"Yeah, well it has a couple clouds." I say defiantly.

"Don't be o-b-noxious," he says.

I roll my eyes dramatically. "The air is held in by a gravitational pull," he continues. I lean forward in my chair and sit up straighter at this comment.

"That is what I'm talking about gravity! It sucks you down." I imagine a comical scene of an astronaut with his shiny visor, plunging through cirrus and cumulus clouds to a plateau in Africa with roaming wildebeests.

"Julia, listen," my Dad says, pointing into his eyes with his fingers so I'll look right at him. It makes me giggle. "It doesn't work that way—no way, Jose. You'll learn later about this in science, and the teachers will make sure to plug all this important information into your squishy brain."

I pretend to scowl as he ruffles my hair, but a smile is threatening to break the surface.

"But look at my hands!" I persist. I form each hand into a small cup and place my hands together to form a small circle. I stick my right pinky up and begin wiggling it.

"This is the Earth," I say, looking at my hands, "And this is the astronaut," I wave my pinky enthusiastically.

"And that is your soup," says my Dad, smiling. ■

A World of Pretend by Corinne Mather

“YOU’RE DOING IT AGAIN!”

Katie’s tone was almost darker than the shade of the old pine tree the three of us stood under. The ground was littered with pinecones like landmines and the bright sun spun around it as though it was woven through the needles of the sap covered branches. I turned to face her, slightly surprised at the interruption of our game. Katie’s frown deepened at my lack of a reaction. She appeared to be pretty angry, her face gaining more color under the natural tan of her slightly oily skin, an almost-pout tugging at the corner of her mouth and watery brown eyes.

“What?” I asked. It was a dumb move though, I already knew where she was heading.

“It’s just like always,” she complained. “You’re making yourself the main character, again!”

It was my turn to frown and then I felt the red flow like lava into my cheeks. Katie had been using this accusation nearly every time we began to play any sort of game. It wasn’t as if she was being unjust in her claims. As a younger child I was always rather bossy, and even at eleven I still held on to the childish tendencies. Especially when it came to games.

No matter what the weather, time, or situation, before anything else happened, I made everyone sit down and decide on general information. This particularly grated on my playmates’ nerves as I’d force everyone to answer basic questions about their alternate selves. “Describe what you look like,” I’d say. “What’s your name? What’s your personality like?” The basics.

But that wasn’t really where the

trouble laid in wait. In fact there were times where the planning was almost as much fun for everyone else as the actual games themselves, especially when I’d attempt to draw their characters.

“I want long hair!” my little sister would shout.

“How’s that?”

She’d nod happily and we’d move

“This week not only helped me grow as a writer but also as a person, being able to spend time with people who have the same quirks and oddities as me was invaluable. Spending a week with other hopeful writers like myself gave me a sense of belonging and security I needed as a writer. I loved this week at Skidmore! The classes were informative and hilarious. That was very helpful with my writing.”

— CALEIGH McCUTCHEON

on to her clothes. Breezy was always willing and creative. Unfortunately though, Katie was rather indecisive with many of her decisions when it came to things. She was shy, and in being so bashful she’d block her own untapped creativity. That left the rest of us to try and prompt some responses out of her.

“Well,” I might have started. “What color eyes do you want?” A shrug would often be her reply.

“How about your hair? Length, color...?” She’d shake her head.

I shifted out of the pool of bright sunlight spilling onto my shoulder. It was so hot out, the last thing I wanted to do was stand around.

“It’s always the same,” she grumbled. It was beginning to feel like the

only time she wasn’t feeling timid was when she was angry with me. Guilt dropped into the pit of my stomach, heavy like molasses. “You always have to be the boss of everything!”

“Yeah,” Breezy pouted. If it came down to a fight between Katie and me, Breezy was always more likely to pick our friend’s side. Probably because she

began recalling all the times I picked on her.

“You always make yourself the most important!”

“I don’t mean to!” I protested.

“You always tell us what to say and how to act,” she continued, and I knew she was right. Katie nodded her head in agreement.

“We don’t like it,” she said.

With a bruised ego and wounded little girl feelings I hardened my expression. “If I don’t do that stuff, you two never do anything!”

Which, to a degree, was true. I’m sure now that it was my bossiness hampering my little sister, but with Katie...

“We still don’t like it!” Katie adjusted her lopsided glasses.

“Fine,” I grumbled. I was tired of fighting with them all the time. “Then I won’t tell you what to do anymore,” I shrugged.

Katie visibly relaxed, her shoulders easing and the permanent pout playing around her lips still trapped in the corner. Breezy looked triumphant, ready to face our make-believe world. I stepped back. Katie looked around.

She looked at Breezy, and she looked at me leaning against the big old pine tree we all stood under.

Katie adjusted her glasses. “Now what?” ■

The Woes of the Ugly Duckling

By Maria Mazzaro

Dear Quack, Pip, Chirp, and Ducky,

I hope you are doing well in the country.

I myself love New York City.

Every morning my friends and I swim in Central Park and then we dry on the bank.

It is a quiet life in which we have deep philosophical debates

and flirt with the sensual love doves above us.

Despite my past,

my scorned past made so

by your callous cries of my unrequited beauty,

I am happy.

I relish those days on which I can peruse my inner thoughts of days long ago

and contently accept

my bitter past. I live each day knowing that I am now one of many

rather than many against the one.

Finally,

I am able to thrive.

You who tortured me so with your untrammelled turpitude,

you who had called me names and trampled my pierced heart,

you who I once called brothers—

you are the ones who harbor the blame.

And yet,

I forgive.

I oust you of your guilt, of your remorse, if any there be.

I will hold you in my thoughts

no more.

After I sign my name to this polished parchment

I will then sign away the haunted holdings you had

over my tainted yet untrampled soul.

With my signature,

I sign away all the holdings you may have held over me.

I shall reflect upon your collective image, voice, and words

no more.

So goodbye, Ducks.

And thank you for building my character

and helping me know the person I never want to be:

you.

Signed Forever,

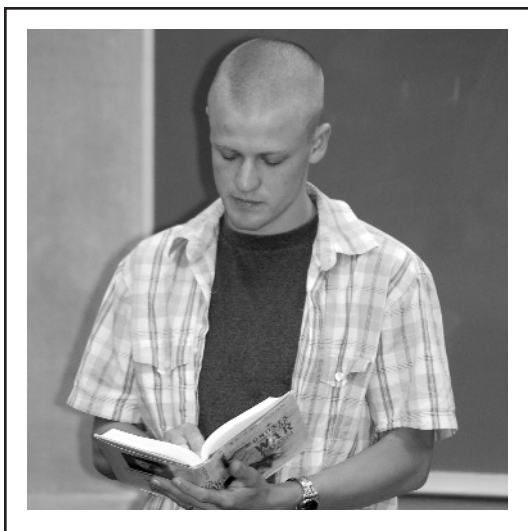
Cornelius Testicules Penelope Anderson

Known by you as "The Ugly Duckling"

It All Started With Chinese Food

by Caleigh McCutcheon

IT IS TWO IN THE MORNING AND I AM watching a movie with my dad. The movie is “Charlie’s Angels,” but neither of us is really watching it, and neither of us wants to admit that we might be watching it. The movie isn’t bad, but the fact that I have an IV stuck in my wrist really sours the mood. We have been here since 6 o’clock last night, and I am in a dreary state of disbelief and uncaring. This damn hospital still doesn’t know what is wrong with me, but what they do know is that my arms don’t like needles, and I am not pregnant. The latter is a



very important question, and I can only hope it is just procedure, because I have been asked at least four times. The first time I was with a female nurse while my dad was doing paperwork: they’re tricky people. But I let them down, answering awkwardly that I was sure I was not pregnant. Later, with each new doctor I was asked again, and each time I became more annoyed. I would like to think that they were asking me so many times because they wanted me to be

pregnant, then they would have a better clue about what was wrong with me. But I know what they saw: a teenage girl with stomach pain. For doctors, they are very narrow minded, because do I look pregnant? I don’t think so.

All of this happened when it was still Friday night, and after waiting a couple of hours, I was finally seen to. The first thing they had to do was to take my blood. Some woman, blonde and cheery, came in prepared to take my blood, and all she needed was a vein. Like all normal human beings I had

veins, but tonight apparently my body did not want to share. I first got worried when she couldn’t find a vein, because I myself could spot several. Then she missed the veins, jabbing an uncomfortably long needle into my arm. When she finally found one, nothing happened. The needle was in my arm, but apparently there was no blood coming out. She laughed at the bad luck, and tried again in my wrist, but that also failed. When she decid-

ed to switch arms I was really starting to not like her. Exasperated, I mentioned how my feet were covered in veins, why couldn’t she just stick me there? She laughed like I was kidding and said she didn’t like feet. I was very close to telling her what I didn’t like. Finally, after another couple of jabs in my left arm, she found a vein, pumped out some blood and left. Then they decided to hook me up to an IV, and someone else came in, quickly attached me to the waiting IV, and

left. About twenty minutes later I realized my arm was cold. My whole arm felt frozen. We called in a new nurse, a guy obviously on the night shift, and he said something about how that was normal. My dad was not convinced. So we flagged someone else down and this nurse took one look at my arm and realized the IV was pumping the fluid into my arm muscle, not into a vein. This had been a waste.

She took out the IV, and managed to find a vein in my right wrist, starting the IV process all over again. When I had arrived here originally at nine o’clock Friday night, the pain in my stomach that had begun around five had already gone. I felt fine. But would they let me go? Of course not, they needed to take some expensive CAT scans first. Maybe this was so my dad felt included. After all, this was on his time and money.

So as I watched “Charlie’s Angels,” I got to drink a bucket-load of Crystal Light, which is basically diet kool-aid, in preparation for the CAT scan. The Crystal Light was actually just for flavor, the real stuff I was drinking was syrup that would apparently light up my body in the CAT scan. It really starts getting to you if hours ago you were unable to finish dinner because your torso felt like it was ripping in half. So after I did my best to chug the orange colored sludge, I was informed that there was a line for the CAT scan at three in the morning on Friday night. Drunken college kids apparently get first dibs on the fancy machines. So I had to wait, and wait, and meanwhile the dye ran through my veins before I even got a spot in line. So after a few trips to the bathroom I had to

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drink the crap again, the staff promising me an opening with the CAT scan. At this point, however, I was

the staff had yet to tell us what was wrong with me. Almost sheepishly a doctor came in and explained what

had happened. It was apparently a common problem in women, he said, known as an ovarian cyst. As I explained to my friends days later, something in my ovaries basically exploded.

people were right. I mean I wasn't technically pregnant but the problem had been in my ovaries. Strange.

We arrived home, exhausted and starving, my younger sisters still asleep. One had totally forgotten we had even left last night, and the youngest was never aware that we had left at all. They seemed rather excited by my experience; I just wanted my mom, who was away for the whole weekend. Sometime later my dad called and informed her of what happened, but her reaction was unexpected. She knew exactly what an ovarian cyst was, she had had two separate ones, and they apparently ran in our family. My mom even had painkillers up in the closet for just such an occurrence.

What began as a normal Friday night, with Chinese food and a movie with my family, ended up being a terribly long and ultimately uneventful night. This process had given me no new ways of looking at life, no sudden appreciation for it. If anything it gave me less confidence in hospitals. At least now I had homework and school to look forward to. ■

"This is the first time I've ever done this sort of thing. I was honestly shocked at the entire friendliness of the group. The teachers were great, the classes were wonderful and the readings were good. The student readings we did in an impromptu fashion were chuck full of great commentary and immense peer support - certainly a large highlight!"

— GRETCHEN HOHMEYER

just wishing that this stuff had caffeine in it.

I had been told earlier by an unwilling assistant that they thought I might have appendicitis, the pain meaning that it was going to explode, and I would therefore die if it was not removed. The CAT scan was needed to see if my appendix was in fact enlarged. Then, if confirmed a surgery would be set up immediately—yeah right. Obviously they felt certain it was not appendicitis because this whole process was not sped up at all. They seemed quite confident that I wouldn't suddenly die while waiting in line for my turn with the CAT scan. Lucky enough, I ended up having two CAT scans. It was around three in the morning, but I was just glad I got to lie down while the machine buzzed and clicked around me.

Sometime later I was rolled back to my room for the night, and I finally fell asleep, my arm resting on a pillow so I would not tug on the IV. It was seven in the morning when my dad woke me up so we could get out of there as fast as possible, but

ed. But by the time I got to the hospital the episode had already ended. The two hours I spent rolling around on my floor at home, unable to walk or twist around, had been the worst part. The pain that made me almost black out was from a small ball of tissue in one of my ovaries that suddenly decided to pop. All women apparently can get ovarian cysts, but most never pop, and only the big ones hurt. They warned me that it would most likely happen again and for some reason we thanked them. We had to flag down another nurse to get the IV out of my arm, which was very painful, but we finally left the hospital. I was exhausted, my arms were sore, and I was very hungry, but I did have both my ovaries and my appendix, so I guess something went right.

But in the end it seems the hospital



A Letter To Myself In Case I Forget

By Gordon Reed

YOU ARE GORDON PENN REED, BORN October 22, 1992 to Annette and Robert, younger sibling of Susan.

“Last night we all sat in the lounge in the dorms and read our writing to each other. Not only did we get practice reading and critiquing literary work, but we grew closer and more comfortable with each other as well. Everyone is talented and friendly.”

— CASSANDRA HARTT

You first lived on Battery Park City, playing but disliking Little League baseball, running around on the esplanade, gazing at the Twin Towers, eating ice cream in the sandbox, and going Uptown to Trinity school.

When you moved uptown, you found poetry and found that unfamiliar settings can be tough to adjust to. The lower school is nice to you, a perfect balance between interesting work and low expectations for children. You struggled through middle school, finding much of it pointless except your own writing and your best friends. You walked through halls of unconvincing motivational posters. “The best thing about you is that you are you.” You wonder what the fuck that means? You wonder what’s the point if that’s what life amounts to?

You lose your Grandfather, the closest family member you’ve lost yet. It’s hard to get through, sitting in the back of the church peering at

his open casket, a body once moving and well. You were too scared to get closer. However, you keep on

pushing and arrive in high school later that year. You make friends fast, abandoning some of the old but keeping the essential ones. You make it through this year,

perhaps having a bit too much fun.

This is written smack dab in the middle of your high school experience. In the past year, you’ve lost three good friends to a heart attack, a terrible accident and a suicide. You stay strong, realizing their pain is over and that there is no turning back the clock because time is measured in sand.

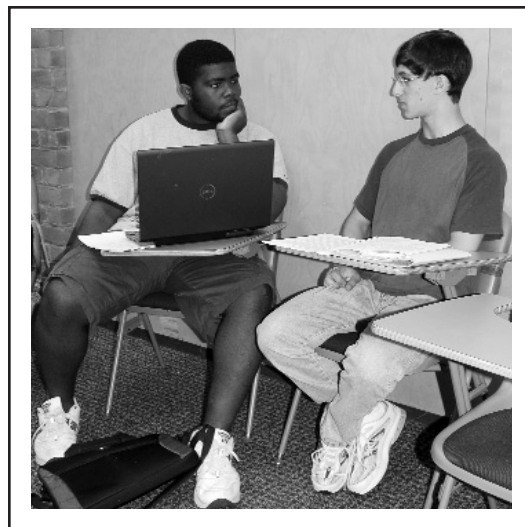
Always remember spending younger days in the park, on the swings. Always remember walks down the esplanade.

Always remember the Towers as they used to be. Always remember Joy McCormick’s pre-school. Always remember Downtown Day Camp. Always

remember holiday trips to your Aunt Gerry’s house in New Jersey.

Life is a strange ride, memories lost and dreams dashed. I can’t imagine it myself, but since I’m you I have personal interest; if you forget please look at this. Remember all these things. Remember Granddaddy in Texas and how your Uncle Jay drove you around Texas in the front seat, even when your mother didn’t want you to. Remember your family in California and their many, many cats, especially Wheatie the gray tabby, the favorite of them all. Remember your parents and how, despite getting on your nerves at worst and healing your heart at best, that they always had the best intentions.

You are a writer. You are an actor. You are a wrestler. You are a lacrosse player. You are a Trinity student. You are a son. You are a brother. You are a Reed. You are inconsistent. You are annoying. You are funny at times. You are dumb at times. Most importantly, cliché as it may sound, you are you and that sets you apart from the rest. ■



The Waters of Time

by Maddie Rojas Lynch

THE WAVES CRASHED LIKE CYMBALS ONTO the golden, grainy shore. She gazed towards the horizon, the wind slapping her face pink and detaching her fiery red curls from behind her ears.

“You have such beautiful hair,” a babysitter had once cooed, her tone as warm as the rich hazelnut highlights, interspersed in her locks from cart-wheels under the sun. “Just like Connor’s.” Charlotte was immediately filled up with eternal happiness. The idea of being just like Connor made her grin like mad.

In her right hand, she grasped tightly onto the little green army man in her small fingers. Her tiny painted nails burst with orange and pink hues, a mirror image to the evening sky.

“Go on, Charlotte,” her mother encouraged, making forward motions with her hands. Her voice was light and cheerful but her face revealed her true thoughts. She was begging her, pleading with her to have fun. She had watched her daughter’s heart break into a million pieces, the shards piercing her own heart as Charlotte’s face fell every day. She tried to tell her it was just a phase. How could she make her understand that one day, one day soon, he’d grow out of that phase? One day soon he’d hold out his arms for her to jump into once again.

Charlotte arched her back and thrust her round belly out towards the Cape Cod Bay, announcing her presence and competing for attention with the roaring waves. As gracefully as a dancer, she lightly raised her left foot and dipped her big toe into the blue-green foam. The water’s iciness bit her, like a thousand tiny teeth nipping at her plump toes. She shrieked and jumped away from the bitter, blue torture. Her hands opened up and splayed out, as if to push the ocean away. In doing so, she launched the little green army man out into his first maritime adventure.

“There are twenty-five men here,” Connor informed her on a warm July evening on their front porch, opening up his yellow toy bin covered in Power Ranger stickers. Charlotte’s heart pounded in time with the cricket’s song, the music of the night. “I’ll still have twenty-four of them. But I’m letting you have him.” Connor shoved a plastic soldier in her face, thinking he could get a laugh out of scaring her with the army man’s stern expression. But Charlotte had launched herself onto him, her arms claspng fiercely around his waist, determined to never let go. He paused and then hugged her back, because she may have been his little sister, but as little sisters go, she was all right.

It had been a year since she received the toy, and not once had she taken him out of her sight. Now Charlotte watched in horror as the little green army man twisted and turned in a bizarre dance of doom, finally landing with a loud plunk, being picked up by the wailing waves and washed into the gloomy waters. There was nothing she could do but scream. So she did. She screamed and wailed and bawled, alarming tourists who peeked up from their guidebooks to find the source of the disturbance. Tears rained down her face, sobs raking through her body and ripping at her chest as her family ran towards her. She turned and saw him, and hope burst through her like a ray of sunlight peeking out from a gray cloud. She knew that he could make it better, if there was anyone who could make it better, it was surely him. She

dove into Connor, enveloping him in her embrace, trying to make him feel what she was feeling; trying to make him understand that she needed him. And for a moment, just a moment, he understood.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stroking her back in relaxing circles. “My man,” Charlotte cried,

“I never knew there were people out there who love writing as much as I do. Until now. The New York State Summer Young Writers Institute is an experience every aspiring teenage writer should have. Every single person cares for not only their own writing, but everybody else’s as well. It’s an environment full of writing and empathy. And I’m a big believer in writing and empathy.”

— KATIE LASAK

“He’s gone.”

And then his shield went up. The shield he had built from growing insecurities, dreams broken, pressures of the present and nightmares of the future. Realizing she was not in any physical danger, he pushed her away, and again, her hope was shattered. She was so numb that she barely felt her mother scoop her up, whispering in her ear.

“He’s back,” her mother said, pointing to the little green army man who had indeed been washed up on shore. “Look sweetie, he’s back.”

Charlotte’s eyes bugged out of her head, not believing what she saw. She tilted her head, peering up at a friendly face, and for the first time in months, Charlotte exchanged a genuine smile with her mother.

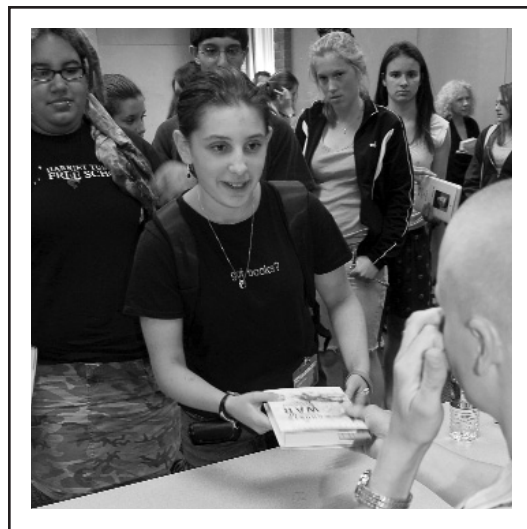
“Sometimes all it takes is a little time.” ■

My Last Letter

by Perry Ross

Mom,
Set the other letters down underneath mine in the wicker basket nearest the front door.
Remember to close the door.
Be sure to lock it.
Take a seat on the second step on the staircase in the main entryway.
Let your feet touch the floor.
Think about me.
I know you've been longing for a call.
I know you're worried.
I know you just need to hear my voice.
I know you.
But this is the only way my voice will be heard.
Rest your head against the newly painted white walls.
Let the tears fall but
Think about me.
Hear my voice through my words.
Reassure yourself that this is me. This is my voice.
Listen to me as you read each line. Let your eyes scan the page.
Hear my voice crack when you ask me how things are.
Hear me whisper I want to come home.
But know I can't.
Feel me hug my arms around your weakening body as it slips.
Feel my fingers intertwined with yours.
Feel me pulsing your hand.
Know that I am scared.
Love me for the wrongs I have done.
Love me for hurting you.
We only have the future, mom.
Tell daddy I'm still his baby girl.
But first make sure he is sitting in his office,
Legs up on his white leather couch.
Reclined.
Give him this with a glass of wine.
Take his glasses off, and take your glasses off.

Hug each other. Kiss each other.
I'll close my eyes.
Tell him that it's going to be all right.
Assure him that it's going to be all right.
Bring my brothers down to the basement.
Sit them down on the big auburn couch.
Let them yell.
Let them cry.
Let them cope.
Make them rest their heads on your shoulder.
Scratch their backs.
Be our mom.
Walk up the stairs near the kitchen.
Hold the railing.
Walk towards my bedroom but walk slowly.
Listen to the music playing while I shower.
Smell the burning when I straighten my hair.
Yell for dad. Wait for him.
But let him take his time.
Together, walk into my room.
Hold hands.
Lie in my bed.
Sing me a lullaby.
Let dad snore.
Close your eyes. Ignore your vertigo.
Goodnight, mom.



Nai-nai's Kitchen

by Abigail Savitch-Lew

ON EXAMINATION DAYS, I LIKED TO LEAVE my host family's apartment early in the morning to sit in the courtyard by the North Gate of the Yucai school. There, in the company of strangers, I would prepare for my oral presentations. On the fifteenth of August I brought along my yellow teddy bear and the Chinese figurine I had bought for a friend. Sitting on one of the stone benches in the brick-paved garden and holding a doll in each hand like a much younger child, I would practice my skits till eight o'clock.

The fifteenth of August was the bluest day in Beijing that summer. Walking under crusty trees and stepping on and off buses at You an men wai boulevard, I could smell the sidewalk salts of autumn. At noon, after completing my exams, I twirled in the courtyard outside the language classrooms, crying, "It's fall in Brooklyn!" That very evening, my classmate Jake said, "It's summer in Minnesota! This is the homiest day so far, if that is even a word!" But when you are nearly seven thousand miles away from your hometown, words like homiest make perfect sense.

For five weeks I had worked very hard to make my host family's apartment my home. I tried to sneak into the kitchen and wash dishes before my host father could shoo me away. I built block towers with my three-year-old host brother while understanding less than half of what he yelped in my ear, and I tasted nearly every dish my host parents cooked. There was also Bing Song, my father's first cousin, who lived in a more upscale apartment with a chandelier and pink walls. He had tried to show me with gifts of expensive clothing and evening meals of Peking Duck with his worldly, English-speaking guests that his home was my home.

By my sixth week in Beijing, I

sometimes grew tired of straining to assimilate. Sometimes I had to abandon my Chinese foster home and my father's Chinese relatives, and become a wanderer in Beijing, with only a pineapple bread patty and a yellow bear in hand.

On the fifteenth of August I was not alone in the park, but was in fact accompanied by fifteen to twenty Chinese elders spread at a distance from each other and practicing morning tai chi. The two women nearest to my bench paced between the rows of

"At first, I was just going to treat the program like school. I knew I was going to enjoy the writing, but I wasn't sure about the kids. I ended up befriending, or at least getting comfortable, with most of the kids here. I ended up really loving the program, and not just the work."

— NATASHA GROSSMAN

modest flowers, and I could see they were watching me. One had thin cheeks, and the other's face was soft and red like clay. Did the childish performance by the ethnically ambiguous girl with incorrect tone pronunciation amuse them? Were they irritated by the mumbling intruder? Eventually the thin cheeked woman approached me, and I stopped rehearsing and looked up. Was the proper address "a-yi hao" or "nai-nai hao"? The proper title depended upon her age, and I could either disrespect her by calling her what literally translated as "mother's younger sister" or dare to dub her "grandmother." There were two options.

"Nai-nai hao," I breathed. "Hello Grandmother."

The woman smiled and the smile made her haggard cheeks look younger, and I prayed I had made the

right decision. "Ni hao," she replied. I expected her to inquire from what country I was visiting and what I was doing in China, seeing as I was not at the Olympics but in a courtyard by The Temple of Agriculture, surrounded by elder people molding the air with firm hands.

Instead, she asked if I was cold.

"A little cold," I replied in her language. "But still good."

"The stone you are sitting on is wet," she was saying. I leaned forward, struggling to comprehend. "When

your clothes get wet you...warm. And warm is...you will get sick. You should protect...a towel. Don't get sick." I assured her that I was fine and anyway, that I had no towels, although I wasn't entirely clear on why I needed one. At this point the other

woman approached and withdrew a folded plastic bag from her jacket pocket. "Yong zhe ge, yong zhe ge," she was whispering. "Use this."

I tried to refuse but soon she was flattening the plastic bag on the unoccupied portion of the bench and demonstrating how a person should sit on a plastic bag in order to avoid getting their pants wet so as not to catch cold. Although she was a wholly different person from Yen Yen, my Grandmother, when she spoke she reminded me of the four foot ten immigrant I loved, who lived in Chinatown, Manhattan and who I had thought about to no end since arriving in China. In my mind, Yen Yen was the unbreakable link between the country that was now fostering me and the country I had left. When the woman spoke and reminded me of my

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Grandmother, I complied and sat down on the plastic bag, and accepted a second bag to wrap over my books.

“Xie-xie nai-nai, xie-xie, xie-xie.” I thanked the two women, hoping the expressiveness of my face would make up for my lack of vocabulary. The women were pleased and returned to their stretching rituals. I tried to resume my rehearsal but found myself distracted by the crinkling of the brown plastic bag under my butt and when I looked up from the faces of the yellow bear and the doll, I saw that the round-faced woman who had given me the plastic bags was still looking at me as she swung her arms in circles. In New York City, staring is an offense excused only in children, but in China staring is so common that it is not the stare itself, but the hostility of a person’s eyes, that I know to observe. On the woman’s marked face was benevolence, tenderness. The courtyard smelled like the clay-color of her face. I asked myself why I was not talking with her when she was showing such interest in me, through her plastic

bags and her staring. I thought of all the evenings I had irritated my host family by asking questions about their daily lives, the type of inane, loving questions my parents and I ask one another like, “Did you get trapped in voice mail land again?” and “What do you plan to eat for lunch tomorrow?”

Eventually my host sister complained that my questions made no sense and were not the sort of questions most people asked. I couldn’t help myself because I was obsessed with practicing my Chinese and thirsty for a sense of connection with the people around me. I was desperate for communication. I was talking to more street guards, more shopkeepers, and more old people than I ever had in Brooklyn, but nothing seemed enough. I was never alone, and I didn’t know where to cry out of the homesickness that had begun to gnaw at me, so I would cry on the crowded buses. How was it that in the midst of so many people, it was so possible to drift into isolation?

There was something in the clay-face of the woman with the plastic bags in her pockets that caused me to approach her. Before I could ask her anything, she asked me where I was from, and where I was studying and why. She said she had seen a group of white and black teenagers learning Taiji by the Yucai school, and she demanded to know why a group of healthy young people would be practicing an old woman’s sport. With a nod at my backpack, she said that you could

not learn Chinese out of a textbook, that to understand it you had to talk with Chinese people, to converse on Friday mornings in such courtyards. She wanted me to come back all the time and practice with her. I accepted the offer and expressed my regret that I would be leaving in eleven days.

I asked her if she was from Beijing.

“No, I am from wen zhou,” she told me in Mandarin. “I grew up in wen zhou. I lived with my father, mother, a sister, and two brothers.”

“I am staying with a Chinese family in Beijing,” I told her. “They are from wen zhou, too. I hear it is very beautiful.”

“Beautiful it is, but there is sickness. My mother died when I was six years old, and my father when I was sixteen years old.” Her brothers and sisters had passed away, too. She was the only one still alive from the household of her childhood. “I was very alone. There was only me,” she said. I understood, but she repeated herself in as many ways as she could, as if it was too important a thing for me to misunderstand. “I was always alone. I had no one.” She was smiling.

“Do you live with anyone now?” I asked.

“I live with my son,” she said. “I live right over there.” She pointed at the tenements outside the North Gate with their cracked and curling red roofs. I was invited to have dinner with her and her son. She described how to enter the hutong. At about that time I glanced at my watch and saw I was already ten minutes late to my eight o’clock examination. I had to interrupt her. “Feichang duibuqi,” I cried. “I’m sorry. I must go take a test. My test has already started. Thank you for



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talking with me, Nai-nai. Thank you for telling me your stories. Thank you for helping me practice my Chinese. Thank you. I don't know how to say..." She touched my arm.

"Go, go. You have a test. But come back. Come back tomorrow." She spoke slowly and clearly, with special emphasize on the tones, so that I could comprehend with less difficulty. We took hands. "You can not learn Chinese in a textbook. You can learn Chinese by talking with Chinese people. Come to the courtyard again, and we will practice your Chinese."

"Yes," I said. "I will come back next week. I will come back and practice." I waved as I turned toward the road. I waved till the trees obstructed my view of her, and then I ran as fast as I could past the Temple of Agriculture, the soccer fields, and the buildings of

back to the Northern Gate courtyard to look for her twice, once to say a terminal goodbye.

On our first day in Beijing, I wrote in my diary that it was moving to see the underwear hanging on plastic hangers from telephone wires from the streets, to see the old men grouped around games of Chinese chess, to hear the soft laughs, the softer patting, and to watch the tiny grandmothers protecting even tinier children. "I feel so at home among these people," I wrote. "And I want to know them and let them know I am one of

them." My whole experience in Beijing was driven by the two-fold desire to know the people of China and to be recognized as brethren. I wanted them to know my grandmother

had been one of them, and I wanted to prove to myself that we were family because wo-men dou-shi ren, we are all human beings. The quest to prove that I belonged became a quest for homes to belong to, and in the sixth week of my stay I had nearly reached the conclusion that the only home I could belong to was my American one, in Brooklyn.

And yet, hadn't China welcomed me every step along the way? Hadn't my host family and my Uncle Bing Song brought me home, and hadn't



the clay-lady invited me to dinner?

The night before my return flight, my Uncle Bing Song's family took me out to his favorite western restaurant. At the time, I was disappointed that I could not enjoy one last Chinese banquet instead, but now it is clear to me that he was employing all his resources to help me feel as if at home. It was a meaningful goodbye. And that night when I returned to my host family's apartment, my host sister and I said goodbye till two a.m. in the morning. We threw life sized stuffed animals at one another, explored the hidden treasures of her bedroom drawers and shelving, and struggled to comprehend how the five-person family we had so strenuously pieced together would now be losing its latest member.

I never again found the woman I met in the courtyard. She left me wondering about loneliness, about displacement, about what it would be like if I could never return to Brooklyn. What did she do while her son was at school? How did she survive her aloneness in the vast city to which she didn't belong? ■

"I think every student attending the institute has, at some point, been labeled as a geek, a nerd, an outcast. Having 36 geeks attending the same program saved us from those ideas. The message shared between the students here is 'you are not alone.'"

— CHLOE BARKER-BENFIELD

the Yucai school. I was running away from her; I was reminding myself that one should never walk into the homes of strangers, and that Nai-nai's home was no exception. Nevertheless, all I wanted was to smell the grease of her narrow kitchen, to remove the nubs of snow peas with her son at the kitchen table, and be fed shrimp and bac choi in a bowl of hot rice. I assured myself that I would visit her the following week a few times so we could continue our dialogue, and I did go

Untitled

by Alexander Scanlon

Dear Maria,

When you receive this letter, it will most likely be far past Christmas. I know it is long overdue, and I should have told you this in person, but Merry Christmas...I love you. Do you remember holding each other through the nights; me hugging you close so that you wouldn't toss in your sleep? Of myself always snoring and causing such a bother? I never really apologized for that, and the many sleepless nights I must've cost you. More vividly than anything else though, Maria, I remember when I promised you that I would love you forever. I know that I said it moments before we were both accepted into the world of dreams, yet I meant it. I mean it. I know I was more self aware at that point than I ever had been in the past. Could it really be that distance became the cleaver that rended our conjoined hearts?

Love lasts forever. I don't know much about love, hell I still don't even know what I want to be in life yet, even after getting into college. But I'm convinced that love can never dissipate. As much as you try to wish it from your heart, to work so hard as to make it ooze out your skin in every tiny bead of sweat, love never really leaves you. You might think that it has fully been purged from your body, and then one day it will resurface...free of the forced strangulation. Time has given me the opportunity to think, if nothing else. What else would we be if we never were able to solve life's hardest questions, even if they take a lifetime and over again to answer?

Love is not something that exists, Maria. Any scientist would easily agree on that. It is not tangible. Not something that will comfort you, that will tell you it cares, and of course not accompany you through your darkest nights. It is instead the philosopher who will preach to you that love is more real than reality. Though we may see the meandering stream that runs through a valley, we cannot feel it inside us. Love is different. It is something with no shape, form, or any measurable quantity...yet it does exist somehow. Love is something that can't be removed from your body without killing you. It is stored in the empty places that sunlight, lightning, the cold and the probing thoughts of others may never reach. It is, I know it to be true, irremovable. It is this love that has slumbered in me, suppressed yet still very much alive and now awakened, that has driven me to write this letter to you. Maria, would you ask death of me to forget the love that has built up in me towards you over these many years? Simply because our lips may not caress every moment of every day, in a life we both wish that we shared? True love sidesteps any physicality, my dearest. Let it only be a promise for a more joyful future, one that I know can be ours...no matter how grim things seem now. Love never fades, Maria. Months of picturing your face has told me this much.

May someday our desires come true,

Daniel

Welcome to Continental Airlines Flight 22

by Soniya Shah

“IF WE NEED TO MAKE AN emergency landing, you are instructed to use your seat cushion as a flotation device. Chances are it will not save you, but if you do survive the crash you are welcome to keep it as a souvenir, free of charge, but part of your ticket cost covers those seat cushions.”

The flight attendant is young, in his mid twenties, with



pale blonde hair and emerald eyes; he keeps making eye contact with me. The plane smells stale and of Lysol. I wonder who threw up on the last flight. It will be a seven hour flight to Peru on Continental Airlines. I am afraid of flying and his speech is not making me feel any better. The obese man next to me wearing a gaudy gold class ring is chuckling away, eating a sub and lettuce is falling out of his mouth. Beads of sweat drip down his face.

There are more important things to worry about than

obese lettuce man. The flight attendant introduces himself as Tony. I pick my lip as he talks and curl my hair around my index finger. I cannot stop fidgeting. I do not think he realizes how claustrophobic I am. There are still passengers entering the plane and I remind myself I can leave the plane at any time.

Actually, I wish I could. But since my family is in the row behind me in reality I cannot do that.

Someone announces they are finally shutting the doors to the aircraft and I close my eyes for a few seconds and pray. Tony begins his spiel again for the new passengers. We are supposed to be amused.

“Welcome to Continental Airlines Flight 22. Here at Continental, we are all about your comfort, safety and most importantly your money. I would like to thank you on behalf of all our CEOs for the large paycheck they will receive at the end of this year,” he begins.

I can hear chuckles behind me. I grip the seat handles and will myself to listen. I have flown a thousand times, but I need to prepare myself every time. There could be an emergency.

“Our number one priority is your safety. Please take the time to fasten your seatbelts now. These seatbelts work just like regular seatbelts. They are not special airplane seatbelts. We do not make them in the United States. They are made in China just like everything else. If you don’t know how to fasten a seat-

belt, then I suggest you do not go into public unsupervised,” he says as he demonstrates how to clasp the seatbelt.

I fiddle with the seatbelt. What if we crash and I cannot release the clasp? What if I cannot escape the plane? What will I do?

“Under no circumstances are you to walk around the cabin if the seatbelt sign is illuminated. I understand you may have to use the bathroom, and I know you will not comply with this rule. But it is standard procedure to tell you this. In case of an emergency, oxygen masks may drop down. Please put your own mask on before assisting anyone else. After your mask is on, you may assist a young child. If you have two young children, decide which one you love more,” he grins right at me. I wish I could flirt with him but I am too nervous. This is no time to flirt, but could those eyes get any greener? We begin to taxi in a large circle at JFK airport.

“It is important for you to put your seatbacks in the upright position and stow your tray tables. If your seat does not lean back, the person behind you is secretly thankful. I cannot switch your seat since the flight is full. The left wing is open if you would like to sit there instead. As you can see, we have six emergency exits in this plane,” he says. I continue to grip the handles of my seat. I am sitting two rows from the bathroom and the odors drifting toward me are not making my situation better. Are we there yet?

“If you are below the age of fifteen you should not be sitting

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in the emergency exit rows. If you are in those rows, you have now made a commitment. You will be the last to leave the plane, even after the pilot and myself. If you are playing a game of Sudoku as I talk now, I suggest you stop because this is actually important. The passengers in the emergency exit rows will assist you out of the plane. Giant yellow rubber slides will come down and you will be expected to slide down these in the event of an

"The institute is somewhere I can be myself without any reservations. The people in attendance are always awesome and stimulate creativity so my writing flourishes."

— JORDAN FERRIN

emergency landing. You can have fun when sliding down these. It is like being at an amusement park. Please be sure to remove heels before sliding down," he continues.

I do not understand what is so funny. What if we actually crashed? Would these people know what to do? I feel my claustrophobia intensifying. The walls of the plane are too close. The windows are not large enough and most people have the shades drawn. Through the ones that are open, all I can see are the lights of the city that never sleeps. There is no way I will be able to sleep on this flight. There are too many dangers. Besides, obese lettuce man has moved onto eating chocolate. His fingers unwrap a gooey mess of caramel and peanut butter. His lips smack and he shoves the entire bar into his mouth. He is not a quiet eater.

"There is no smoking allowed in the bathrooms. Yes, those smoke detectors do actually work. And I

don't advise testing them. There are wonderful seats on the right wing where you can sit and smoke. I hear the breeze is satisfactory out there," he keeps talking. "It is now time to turn off all electronic devices, including cell phones. Do not turn these back on during the duration of the flight. I have tracking equipment that will pick up your cell phone communication."

He grins so people know he is joking. I must keep my phone on. If there is an emergency, I need to call for help. People should know my location.

"There is a help button you may press if you actually need assistance. If I don't immediately respond pressing the button more will make me agitated and chances are I will not come over. If I do, I will bring a cup of ice

with me and you will become cold very quickly," he laughs. People are still hanging onto his every word and I question if he is paid to do this. We are still traveling in circles, so he continues to talk and make jokes.

"For your convenience during the duration of this flight to Lima, Peru, we will provide you with some refreshments. You must be above the age of twenty-one to purchase alcohol, and yes, it does cost too much. I am required to call all your liquid consumption beverages as opposed to drinks because beverages sounds fancier. You will receive airplane food that you don't want or need to eat. I don't cook these meals and I also have to eat them. I know they aren't appetizing and I apologize in advance for any food poisoning. Before I come around with your refreshments, I will hand out earphones. If you have brought your own I suggest you use those because I have seen the earwax on these. You could make a nice little

candle for your grandmothers."

I wonder if I can use the bathroom. Probably not.

"Since this is a long flight, there are televisions stationed throughout the plane. There will be a variety of movies playing that you probably never wished to see, but now is your opportunity. There is elevator music provided on channels five and seven. We are expected to have a turbulent flight so if it is necessary to get something from the overhead compartments, please be careful. I am not trained or required to perform first aid. I will remind you again at the end of the flight to not forget any of your personal belongings. They will not be returned to you. Instead, I will distribute them among the other flight attendants and keep the best things for myself," he says. When will he be done? When will we take off?

"Last but not least, we have provided itchy blankets and miniature pillows for your comfort. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you during this flight. Again, my name is Tony. Thank you for choosing Continental. Tips are appreciated," his conclusion is followed by a round of applause.

The plane finally begins to take off. I close my eyes and imagine the mountains of Machu Picchu rising in the misty fog of a Peruvian morning.

"Excuse me, sir. I need to use the bathroom," I say to obese lettuce man. Chocolate is stuck in the creases of his mouth. He is holding a full size bag of potato chips. He manages to wiggle out of his seat and into the aisle.

"You be careful in there, young lady," he wiggles a sausage finger at me. "Don't get stuck."

I smile at him but as I walk to the bathroom I realize the door could jam. What if I can't get out? No one would hear me. I return to my seat. Six and a half hours to go. ■

Crafting the Essay and Other Adventures by Catherine Shattuck

With pencils that change color
We draw eyes under the influence
And gravestones on my father's brain
The biography of a dress lays discarded in a corner
Because we are too busy with unicorns,
Duct tape and playing cards to
Consider the lobster
For all its literary worth

On the wall a whale rides past the bricks
And a boy falls off his chair
Bored by what we see before us
We begin to pass around our exquisite corpse
Enhancing it, improving it
Until it becomes a tangled mess
And spontaneously combusts

The duct tape stands and walks out the door
Searching for perfection that will take us all the
way to Gatica
Or at least to prairie home companion
Where we will listen to the most unwanted
Opera singers on Labor Day
At Walmart
Laughter echoes off the walls
And bursts into flame again
Together we rave
Bursting colors of light create a vortex

Go spend your time in Istanbul
And eat some American pie
Die, die, die, die
Live, live, live, live
Sex, sex, sex, sex
More, more, more, more

Everybody says it
Just don't get lost trying to find the pasta
You may end up with cereal instead
Eating it for every meal
With your bright and shining soup fork
We wish for chopsticks
For we are only babies buying babies
Driving out on thin ice

Me talk pretty one day
Says as in Wonderland
To something like the butter
The manliest of them all

It's the end of the world as we know it
With pride the towels dangle off our shoulders
Thursdays really grind my gears

I remember
This I believe
Or this I do not believe
I almost saw this girl get killed
But I'll eat what he's wearing
Just don't touch that tree
You may end up in a blanket
Lying together in the grass

We clash and we are the rinas
Wearing pajamas and lanyards
So drag out your love tape
To circle the soft serve
And end up back at sunrise
It is here we quote the raven
And toast with plastic cups
If you haven't started writing by now
This is the time to begin.

Untitled

by Anita Sicignano

I WAS BORN IN VENICE IN 1491, THE ONLY daughter of a minor nobleman. We were not the richest in the city, but we were very comfortable; I had all that I could ever desire, and was used to receiving something as soon as I demanded it. My brother Claudio had been forced to take up the violin as a child, but dropped it as soon as he persuaded our father that his talents lay elsewhere. Unknown to my family, I had taken his violin and taught myself how to play based on the lessons I had seen him receive; I loved it more than anything in the world, the place I was transported to when I played. I knew that I had so much more to learn, and I decided to be brave and begged my father to send me to a well-known music school in the city; it only accepted boys, but I knew that he could pull the strings that would allow me to get in. He completely refused, saying that the only reason a girl should be away from home was if she was in a convent; I was devastated, and, being the spoiled girl I was, refused to eat for a week. My parents became terrified that I would die, and my mother finally convinced my father to allow me to go to the school.

I was jubilant; I immediately gave up my hunger strike, polished my brother's old violin, and prepared myself to have the most amazing experience of my life. I was only sixteen when I left...I wonder if I would have been quite so eager to go if I had known that I was never to see my family again.

My first day was a rush of tours, watching lessons, and demonstrating my skill on various violins that felt much different than my own, with boys my own age and older gaping at me the entire time; I had never associated with a male outside my own family, and eagerly lapped up this new-

found attention like a silly schoolgirl. As the day went on, I became increasingly full of pride. Despite my lack of formal lessons, all the teachers who had heard me play had complimented me on my style and tone, and were shocked to hear that I had taught myself. They did not seem to know what to do with me; I demanded to have a teacher that truly challenged me, and I was just beginning to believe that the entire experience was to be nearly effortless when Nicolo stormed into my life with his black cloak billowing out behind him.

He was a genius...there was no other with his talent, his drive, his passion; he took one look at me, in my purple brocade dress, my long, luxurious wavy hair, pouty pink lips, and proud dark eyes, and laughed.

"You expect me to instruct this little girl?" he asked the master disdainfully, wrinkling his nose at me as if I had a foul odor (which I certainly did not, I was a purchaser of all the latest perfumes), his thick dark eyebrows lowering over his glinting black eyes to give him quite a sinister appearance.

"I am *not* a little girl!" I snapped, putting my hands on my hips and glaring up the seemingly endless distance between us; the top of my head was level with his shoulder. "I am sixteen years old, my father is the richest in the city [this was a spur-of-the-moment lie], and I have natural talent. What have *you* to say for yourself?"

"I am twenty-two years old, my father has been dead for eleven years, and I am considered one of the best violinists in Europe," he said coldly, looking down at me as if I were the lowest worm that he did not wish to step on, in fear of soiling his shoe. "And if you are going to maintain your present attitude, there is absolutely nothing I can teach you." With that, he turned on his heels and stormed out of

the room, his traveling cloak hitting me in the face as he did so.

The master and several other teachers stared at the place he had been in shock, not seeming to know how to react; without knowing what I was doing, I took off after him, my footsteps echoing in the stone corridor. Being raised with five brothers, I had never been very lady-like, and I put that fact on display as I ran down the hall, nearly tripping over my dress several times; not wanting to fall, I grabbed great fistfuls of the material so that the skirt was raised to about the level of my knees, and screamed, "Wait! Please, comeback! I'm sorry!"

He stopped abruptly, allowing me time to catch up with him. He simply stood there, his back to me, as I tried to catch my breath and think of what on earth to say to this terrifying man. "Well? Have you anything to say to me? You are presently only wasting my time," he said uncaringly, not even turning to look at me. I noticed that his long black hair was loose, damp and tangled from the rain outside.

"I apologize for my behavior," I said levelly, trying to keep my temper under control. "I was told that you are the best teacher to have, and I am very eager to learn; if you would care to teach me, I would be the most attentive pupil." I racked my brains for his name; the master had surely told me at one point, but I just could not place it. Suddenly, it came to me; "Nicolo," I whispered, and then cringed; my un ladylike nature had struck again.

He slowly turned around, seeming to have to cast his eyes so far down to look at me; I realized that he was staring at my silk stocking-clad legs, and immediately dropped my dress, smoothing out the wrinkles my clammy hands had created. "Very well," he said brusquely, raising his gaze to my face, his cold onyx eyes boring into

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mine. "I will be your teacher, but only if you obey my every word; any disobedience whatsoever and I will move on to someone more serious about the violin than you. You will practice for seven hours a day under my guidance, and I shall instruct you in theory for two hours; the rest of your time will be spent practicing on your own. I will not allow you to begin a new piece until you have perfected the one I have given you to my approval; you can take your meals with the boys, but you must take no more than twenty minutes for each. I will wake you each morning promptly at five o'clock; when you retire at night is none of my concern. And one last thing," he added, just as I was about to ask when I was to bathe and relieve myself. "Never call me by my first name again; you shall address me as Maestro Rainieri, or not speak to me at all, which is preferable." He seemed to feel that he was done talking to me, and started walking down the hall again, beckoning me to follow him with a wave of his hand.

"Maestro," I began in my most demure, docile voice, having to almost run in order to keep up with him, "do you know where my room is? The porter had told me that he would put my trunks there, and I would like to refresh myself before we begin."

"You will have little time for refreshing yourself anymore, girl," he said indifferently, turning a corner so sharply that his cloak hit me in the face again. "And your room is adjoining mine. I am not happy about it either," he said quickly, when I had gasped in shock and protest. "I have no desire to be kept awake all night by giggling and candlelight under your door as you write in your diary or whatever it is girls your age do, and if you welcome any of the boys into your room, I will see to it personally that you are thrown

out of this school immediately."

"I would never dream of doing such a thing," I said defensively, trying my best to keep my tone calm and not in the least bit rude. "And I do not keep a diary, so you shall not be troubled by me in that aspect. Maestro," I added hastily, when he looked at me pointedly with his eyebrows raised.

We continued walking (or in my case, running) in silence, although I occasionally heard the sounds of music or laughter from behind closed doors. Finally, after climbing several flights of stairs, and walking what felt like the length of the entire building, we arrived at a wooden door, the wood looking pale and new against the old stone of the walls. Nicolo pulled a key out of the pocket of his cloak and unlocked the door, at least having the decency to hold it open for me to enter first. I did so, and was immediately struck by how barren it was: there was a sparsely-made bed, a trunk, a violin case, a wooden music stand, a small fireplace, and one grimy window. "This is my room," he said rather unnecessarily, gesturing around the nearly-empty space. "I just got in today from Verona, which is why it looks as if no one lives here. Your room is through that door." He handed me a small silver key, which I clutched tightly in my hand, looking around the room in a combination of disgust and anticipation. "When we are not together, I expect you to only bother me for something incredibly important. I have been told that you are special in some way and require private lessons, although there are no more available classrooms, since the year is already underway...that is why we must have this arrangement."

"I do not mind, as long as you are teaching me," I said in a small voice, keeping my eyes on the dusty wooden floor. If he wanted me to act like a meek

little girl, I was perfectly capable of doing so; if that was the only way to get him to instruct me, then I would just have to pretend to be afraid of him.

After a moment, I looked up to see that he was staring at me, his black eyes softened considerably. "What is your name, girl?" he asked, in the most gentle tone I had heard from him yet.

"Caia La Rovere," I answered, sensing that I was breaking through some kind of barrier he had set up against me as soon as he had laid eyes on me. "I would like to apologize once again for my behavior earlier, Maestro—"

"It's all right, girl," he sighed, sitting down on the end of his bed and putting his head in his hands. "Go freshen up, or whatever it was you wanted to do; come back in here when you are done, and we will begin."

I stood there watching him for an instant; his long black hair fallen over his face, long legs stretched out, boots covered in mud, still wearing his traveling cloak. Luckily, I came to my senses and quickly ran to the door of my room, fumbling with the key in my rush to unlock it. Once I got inside, I hastily closed the door behind me, hoping that the fact that I practically slammed it shut would not anger my Maestro any.

My room was just as bare as his was, although it looked like whoever readied it had tried to keep in mind that a lady would inhabit it, and a noble lady at that. There was a small mirror, a chest of drawers for the multitudes of clothing I had brought with me, and a little basin filled with water. I sighed in relief, and washed my face and hands, finally able to remove the grime of the canals from my pale blossom-colored skin. I looked in the mirror, examining my reflection. My thick, wavy dark brown hair hung down to just below my full breasts, which I realized were rather exposed

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in the dress I was wearing; my dark eyes, framed by thick black eyelashes, looked just as quick and clever as ever, my thick dark eyebrows that I detested yet my mother maintained gave me my beauty adding to the sharp character of my face; broad, high cheekbones, a pointy chin, full pouty lips...I looked every inch a beautiful,



clever Venetian girl. Yet, somehow, my new Maestro saw me as an insipid, silly thing, and from his manner obviously did not find me much to look at, either. Perhaps it was because I was so much smaller than he was; he probably could not help but think of me as a child, rather than a woman.

I opened my violin case, which was lying next to one of my five trunks, and carefully rosined my bow, examining the polished reddish wood of the violin. It could not have been the best of instruments, but I was sure that my father would not buy one of his children anything of poor quality. I carefully picked it up by the neck and held it and my bow in one hand, crossing

the room and gingerly pushing the door open with the other.

Once I entered the room, I was so proud of myself for getting inside that I didn't at first notice that Nicolo was lying sprawled out on the bed, arms dangling off the sides of it; however, once I did, I jumped a good three inches in the air and squeaked with alarm. When

this did not cause any reaction from him, I cleared my throat in an I-don't-mean-to-intrude-but-I'm-standing-here way, which also did absolutely nothing. Holding my breath, expecting to be reproached at any second, I slowly walked over to him, cringing at each creak of the floorboards. I suddenly found myself leaning over him, peering at his seemingly sleeping face: his eyes were closed, and I noticed for the first time that his eye-

lashes were just as long and dark as mine; his nose was slightly crooked, as if it had been broken at some point; his lips were parted slightly, and his breathing was deep and even, further convincing me that he was asleep and therefore causing me to relax considerably. I unabashedly studied the face of whom I suddenly realized was the most inconceivably beautiful man I had ever met in my young life, and who not only was I to spend nearly every moment of the next few years of my life with, but also seemed to think very little of me. He had very high cheekbones, a strong jaw; the shadow of a beard showed on his pale skin; his magnificent mane of thick black hair was spread out

around his head like a halo, and I forced myself to resist the temptation of touching it, or just touching *him*.

"Time for you to go back to your little room, Caia," I told myself under my breath, and regretfully turned away from him and started tiptoeing to the door of my room, suddenly feeling like I needed to be alone, and perhaps start a diary.

Just as I had my hand on the doorknob, he barked out, "Where are you going, girl?"

I spun around, to see him sitting up and showing no signs whatsoever that he had been deeply asleep only a few seconds ago. "Back to my room, Maestro," I explained, wondering how he could get me into trouble for this; I was quite sure he was capable of finding a way.

"You...erm...seemed to be asleep"

"Then you should have woken me," he said testily, rising to his feet and running a hand quickly through his hair. "Don't be so foolish, girl; there's no need to be afraid of me."

Oh, really now? Isn't that what you want? But of course I would never say such a thing to him; I simply bowed my head and said, "Yes, Maestro," hating myself for being so subservient but knowing that it was going to be worth it eventually.

"All right then, girl, play your scales," he commanded, looking at me as if he was increasingly doubting the state of my sanity.

"Which ones?"

"All of them!" he shouted, as if I should be able to read his mind. "Unless you are not capable of doing so?"

I sighed, and began to play, starting with G major. This was going to be an awfully long education. ■

Selfish

by Alexandria Speller

It must be hard for
him
but the selfish part
of her wonders
if he thought of what this
would do to her

It was just the way
he was born.
And that's what
he tries to tell her.
If she was listening
he couldn't tell.

Everyone is calling
him brave, commending
the courage he must have
to expose himself to an unforgiving
world.
Yet all she sees, all she would
ever see is the coward that
couldn't do it in the first place.

She didn't understand
how hard it was
for him to hurt her.

Things only got worse,
he brought to her someone
he was so ignorantly calling
his first.

She slapped him.
He knew he deserved it.

They were in love.
They were once in love.
She loved him.
She still loved him.
But he so elegantly explained

he loved her
still did.
Just never could be 'in' love
with her.

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continued from page 44

She slapped him.
So hard her hand
stung.

'In' love, not
'in' love.
That was fine
for him.
But what she felt
and still feels
for all she tries not

She is not some
made up piece of fiction
used to put off family and friends.
And if people want to label her
Selfish
her defense is at least

People could call her selfish

if she was selfish

He deserved it.

he wanted it to be real
wanted to match the feelings
that he knew for her
were and are real.

she didn't use him.
He knew she had a face,
real feelings
and that all he had done
was take advantage.

he didn't correct them.
But he knew that

Rosebud

by Beal St. George

I FEEL REMOVED. SHE SITS CROSS-LEGGED at the other end of the bed, blankets curled around her, looking small and hurt. She has transformed into a tiny, wounded flower, a soft white rosebud, petals damaged. Her graceful, dancer body, usually structured and strong, has collapsed into merely a silhouette. Giant, sad eyes stare at me, and I wish I could understand.

“Just tell me.” I hug one knee and

“The energy here is intense. It’s the most satisfied I’ve ever been with my writing.”

— ALEXANDRIA SPELLER

try, with difficulty, not to let my mind exaggerate, promising myself silently: everything is fine, she’s going to be okay. She is one of the strongest people I know. But not today.

She shakes, shivering in the wind of our mood. I know she has something to say, and I know she wants to tell me what is gnawing at her, what strange chemical has the power to deconstruct her tough body. When she had called me, earlier that day, I was still in my own life. I had chattered a bubbly hello into the phone. The person on the other end of the line was always so vivacious, happy to hear my voice, but today she had sobbed into my ear.

“I need to fucking talk to you right now,” she had told me, her firm voice cracking; she was broken. “Can you come over?”

Because I loved her, it was okay to throw my life into suspension. I had been spending the day like you do in summer, using it freely, squeezing out every drop of happiness and sun. I found myself dropping everything, however, in the name of the strongest friendship I have ever had.

“I’ll make it as soon as I can,” I explain.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

I reply, “Yes, it’s fine.” We hung up. Her phone call twisted my stomach a million times. Nothing was fine. But, feeling uneasy, I told everyone otherwise.

I could see clearly as I pressed buttons on my phone, but my mind was a blur. I left my friends sitting in the late afternoon sun and walked north. The phone rang four times, and my dad answered.

“It’s nothing,” I lied, when he asked what was wrong. He required a bit more explanation. “I’m fine, but she isn’t,” I

told him, seeking the answer I didn’t yet have.

And he drove me all the way to her house.

She answered the door and pulled me into her, and I smelled her familiar shampoo, could feel the tears running down her face. We stood there, her hands around my waist, holding tightly; my arms gently cradled her head as her body shook with sobs. I wished I could have given her whatever she needed. If this could have healed her, then I would never have needed to know what was wrong. She was standing on one of my feet, rocking, and neither of us noticed. She squeezed me, then let go. I followed her down the silent hallway to her room.

I watch her as she sits on one end of her bed, and I feel distant. I cannot get as close as I want to be; I am stuck outside the land of tears.

I am asking her, gently, to tell me what’s wrong. And then she meets her sorrow head-on, starts talking. She describes the kind of love she has felt for the past year, sensitive and passionate, for a friend whom she knew felt the same magic. This love is soft cheeks and tender understanding. She fidgets, telling me about the kind of

love she felt last night when the two held each other so tightly that it brought pain to her chest. She confides in me what it was like to be in her presence and what it was like when their bodies touched, linked by friendship and obsession, two hungry souls. Love has always been fascinating to me. What other emotion can build and deconstruct sheer bliss in the space of a few seconds?

It is so mysterious, how the best feelings quickly change into the worst. I press a tissue into her fragile hand. I can see in her delicate face what it is like to have your love turn away from you. I can hear in her quiet voice what it is like for someone to tell you that this was only a release, that she has gotten it out of her system. She is holding my hand. *I have gotten you out of my system*, she has been told, and I feel so sorry for her. I wish I could find the girl that helped her grow, then crushed her petals, pulled them out, and ran, leaving remnants of my friend like crumpled tissues on the floor.

“Don’t,” she warns me, “Please don’t. I love her so much.”

I love you so much...

But she has entrusted me with this secret. Now we are both torn between the love she feels and the pain that tugs at her. Her sad eyes are cast toward the floor, she is folded up, wilted. That is how you look when you really lose someone.

So I don’t say anything. For days, I systematically avoid any interaction between her friend and myself. We don’t make eye contact, but every time I see her, my throat fills with a million questions and I want to burst open, asking everything. How can love vanish so quickly? Where can you find cruelty in your heart? Does it course, metallic and cold, through your veins? But I never get any answers. We are all quiet here. ■

Memoir of a Moment

by Seán Toomey

MY BIRTHDAY IS ON FEBRUARY 21, during Winter Break. For my 16th birthday, my dad, myself, a close family friend, Pascal, his son, my lifelong friend, Skylar, and another family friend, Luke, set out on a daunting expedition: live in my family's cabin in the Maine woods in cold, cold February. I thought of it at first as a Man versus Nature adventure, where we would conquer the unstable and freezing conditions of a Maine forest. But it was something else entirely. It was a marriage of Man and Nature, an acknowledgement that we are one and the same.

Every day we were there we got outside on our snowshoes and started walking. It was breathtaking, the forest of needled trees stunning as we walked along the ice of the frozen river, bringing to

mind frozen tundra. The beauty of nature is something else for someone who has grown up in the urbanity of New York City where seeing one star on any given night is a surprise.

One afternoon a blizzard hit. It snowed all through the night. Snow has always seemed magical to me. It is frozen water, yet it lands lightly on our faces. To me it has always been a great joy, one that I don't experience as much as I should living in New York. Waking up the next day was wonderful; the elegant majesty of needled trees covered in snow is something everyone should get to see at some point in their lives. As much as I love the hustle and bustle of the city and I understand the attraction of suburbia, this is something everyone should experience.

That night we went down to the

river, lay down on the ice and looked up. We had flashlights and a map of the heavens. Every single constellation was vividly displayed across the night sky; the sheer power of the universe was mesmerizing. It caused a feeling of both significance and insignificance. We are so very small in such a very large place, yet we are the only intelligent life we know of. I feel like that gives us a certain mandate to not cause nuclear Armageddon or hate each other. We are the only ones we know of to possess the gift of intelligence. It is a noble cause to preserve it. Faced with the inconceivable enormity of the universe our wars and pettiness seem absolutely and unequivocally stupid and insignificant. The beauty we saw that night is a powerful argument for simply living in peace. ■

"The classes were very creative and allowed me to look at my work in completely different ways than ever before. Mingling with other writers, combined with informal classes, created a comfortable atmosphere for learning."

— LEIGH GIALANELLA



Canoe

by Lydia Youngman

I remember
they wouldn't let me carry the canoe.
Although I persisted
they only let me carry the fishhooks
and I got them stuck in my hand.

"This was my second year attending and it was even better than the first year. I have become a more focused writer and thoroughly enjoyed my time here. Everyone has given supportive feedback and I feel more accomplished as a writer now."

— SONIYA SHAH



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The New York State Writers Institute celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 2009. Created in 1984 by the state legislature to draw attention to writing and the artistic imagination across the state, the Institute has emerged as one of the premiere sites in the country for presenting the literary arts. Over the course of three decades the Institute has sponsored readings, lectures, panel discussions, symposia, and film events which have featured appearances by over 900 artists—including six Nobel Prize winners, and 90 Pulitzer Prize winners—and has screened more than 600 films, from rare early prints to sneak previews of current releases. The Institute is a major contributor to the educational resources and cultural life at the University at Albany, where it is located, as well as the surrounding community. It is also identified by the writing and publishing communities as a place dedicated to promoting serious literature, where writers and their work are held in high esteem, where being an invited guest is considered an honor, and where talking about books is celebrated as the best conversation in the world.

Further information about Writers Institute programs may be obtained from its website at: www.albany.edu/writers-inst.

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