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A collection of poetry, prose, photography and artwork composed for the fall term, 1987, by the students of Ursinus College.

The Lantern, the literary magazine of Ursinus College, symbolizes the light shed by creative work. It is named after the structure on Pfahler Hall, which has the architectural design not of a tower or spire, but of a lantern.
I should be sleeping but my dreams, I fear, would be laced with arsenic, with your persona (or is that the mask you wear) so utterly devoid. Further in their wanderings would dreams bring back what once there was before there was a you? Or would they only be in limbo a pause in puzzlement stagnating, like a pond that cannot bear reflection.

Jennifer Healy
PATRONS

William & Libby Akin
Jane A. Barth
Nicholas O. Berry
Biology Department
Baltzer Blosballick
Egon Borgmann
Barbara A. Boris
Laura Borsdorf
Barry Bowers
Adele Boyd
Anthony Branker
Richard BreMiller
Douglas & Nancy Cameron
Hugh Clark
John L. Cobbs
Jeanine Czubaroff
Robert R. Davidson
Louis A. DeCatur
Dept. of Classical Studies
Div. of Continuing Education
Ross Doughty
Shirley Eaton
Juan Espadas
Ingrid Evans
George Fago
Gerard Fitzpatrick
John French
Judith Fryer
R. Scott Gassler
Nancy K. Gaugler
Nancy Hagelgans
Colette Hall
Cindy Harris
Joyce Henry
Ronald E. Hess
Charles A. Jamison
Martin Johnson
Peter Jessup

H. Lloyd Jones, Jr.
Houghton Kane
Sylvia Kane
Brian Keyser
Bernard Lentz
Joyce T. Lionarons
Conrad Meyer
William J. Middleton
Jay Miller
Jeffrey Neslen
Deborah O. Nolan
Beverly Oehlert
Heather O'Neill
William T. & Phyllis Parsons
Peter Perreten
John Pilgrim
Constance Poley
Sally Rapp
Kenneth D. Richardson
Richard P. Richter
Bruce E. Rideout
Carla Mollins Rinde
Vicki Roberts-Gassler
Jamie Robson
William Rosenthal
Patricia Schroeder
Faye Shaw
Christine M. Shelton
John Shuck
Roger & Margaret Staiger
Victor J. Tortorelli
John R. Van Ness
Jon Volkmer
Tina Wailgum
Richard J. Whatley
Nelson M. Williams
Lorraine Zimmer
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Editorial

After looking over past editorials, finding something original yet profound to say is a challenge. Instead, I’d like to mention another challenge, this one being the Lantern selection process. This year the staff faced a particularly difficult dilemma because of the excellent response to our short story contest, as well as our usual contributions of poetry, artwork and photographs. After reading, discussing and arguing over the entries, I feel confident in saying that the deliberation paid off. The magazine before you is representative of the quality of all contributions and my thanks go out to all those who have shared their talent with us.

Congratulations to Rebecca Moore, author of the prize winning short story “Days When You Feel Like Wonder Bread.” The selection process was difficult due to the amount of quality short story contributions we received.

Of course, I cannot thank the entire staff enough for all of their help—none of this could have been possible without them. Special thanks go to Lisa Talarico for all her hard work, dedication and generally keeping the editor calm. Finally, I’d like to thank Dr. Jon Volkmer for all his assistance and advice.

Enjoy the magazine.

Maria A. D’Arcangelo
Darkside

You
Yes You
The One With The Aura
About You
Will You Allow Me
Close Enough
To Touch
You
And Perhaps
You’ll Reveal Your Thoughts
To Me
To Enjoy
As I Enjoy
Your Aura
Yours
Yes Yours

David Burgess
Reflections on a Subway Ride
By Coleen Casciano

My eighteenth birthday was spent in Philadelphia with my boyfriend, Mike. Of all the places we visited and all the things we did, what really sticks out in my mind the most is my first subway ride.

As we descended the stairs, foul odors permeated the air. The scent of rotten garbage, dampness and urine clung to the walls and even lingered on my clothes afterwards. The green and white tiled walls were caked with mud and splattered with graffiti. I stifled a scream as the wings of a blue feathered pigeon flapped in front of my face.

In one corner a Moslem dressed in holy garb was selling relics from the Holy Land. In another corner a bum lay nestled with the Inquirer tucked around his shoulders. The rush of wind from the passing trains blew the littered trash around him.

The security guard at the entrance was a big black lady who looked as though she could level Rocky with a single blow. As a reflex action I smiled at her, but she growled at me in return. Mike whispered, "Col, stop staring, you don't stare at people while waiting for a subway in downtown Philly!" I knew I was staring, but I couldn't help it. I've always been a people watcher. I'd be perfectly content to sit on a bench in a park somewhere and observe the people who walk by. I always wonder where they are rushing to and what kind of lives they lead. To entertain myself I make up stories about them.

With a rush of wind like the passing of a hurricane, the subway clattered to a stop. We crowded on the train just as the doors slid closed behind us. Posters advertising pregnancy centers and equal rights lined the walls. When I got bored reading about orthodontics, I began to watch the people around me. There was a couple across from us who gazed at each other as though they were mesmerized. In her white beaded dress and colored headband, she looked as though she stepped out of the sixties. He, surprisingly enough, was the yuppie type--oxford, penny loafers, squared glasses. He probably only chewed Sticklets, the yuppie gum. I imagined that they met at a ceramics course. He, being the son of a wealthy Wall Street tycoon, was dating this girl to rebel against his parents. She was dating him because he was the best thing that ever happened to her. I felt sorry for her because I knew that he would eventually drop her for the daughter of an oil millionaire.

A large black woman holding a shopping bag and fake Gucci purse was slumped against a window. I noticed a large welt that covered the left side of her face. I imagined her coming home from the night shift to an apartment full of squalling kids and a drunken husband who would beat her later.
There were three school girls on the subway, the only white people besides Mike and me. They looked as if they were on their way home from a shopping spree on South Street. One of them, the least attractive of the three, glanced nervously about her as if she were afraid that someone was going to run up and grab her purse. The other two were deep in conversation. One of them was talking in a loud voice as though she wanted the whole train to know that she had a boyfriend who played football for Temple. I didn’t like the way her friend was eyeing up Mike.

The man across from us was in such a sound sleep that he was snoring. How anyone could fall asleep at 11:30 p.m. on a subway in Philadelphia is beyond me.

There was another man next to him who was listening to a yellow Walkman and tapping his feet vigorously to the song that was playing. He seemed like a happy soul. There was a kindness about him that I liked. He looked like the type that would pick up flowers for his wife for no reason at all.

A young girl next to him was singing softly to her baby. The way she held him so tenderly, I could tell that she loved her baby more than anything. Watching her, I couldn’t wait for the day when I, too, would have a baby to love that much.

The subway lurched and I wondered what it would be like to be stuck with these people on the train during a power failure. Would I really get to know them, or would we remain distant, set apart? They didn’t even realize that I was watching them yet they had each touched my life and I knew them in some way.

When the train stopped, we all got off, each going our separate ways: the young couple to their apartment, the large woman to her squalling kids and drunken husband, the school girls to their dorms. Mike took my hand, bringing me out of my daydream. “Coleen,” he said, “Somehow I feel as though you are a million miles away right now.” I just smiled and squeezed his hand. I had the feeling that somewhere a man with a yellow Walkman was carrying flowers home to his wife, and somewhere a young girl was singing her baby to sleep.
Demand for Love

Hesitant fresh young glances exchanged
While babe cries out in full voice
Demanding the wrinkled nipple
Thirsting for the ivory liquid
To quiet his rumbling gut.

Wide marble blues search the room
For an undiscovered object
Persistent curiosity leaves his elders
Exhausted of their omnipotence,
Devoid of the energy he requires for tomorrow.

Escape the land of wicked dreams
Of monsters haunting sleep.
Feet pad through the quiet hall
Toward safety inherent in his creators
Who lie just behind the thick door.

Forgetting to knock--carelessly rush in--
Abruptly catch his breath as two silhouettes
Pound taught damp skin into one another
Unaware of their small begotten
Raging, jealous within the pit of his soul.

Remembered guilt suppressed for years
Embedded now in the intricate network
Of his cluttered attic--too busy--
Willfully struggling to reach new goals
While urged on with their overpositive enthusiasm.

Soon with his own picket fence,
Dinner parties for two,
Sleeping children exploring mystical worlds
Grandmom and PopPop spoil with gifts of love.
So much beauty ties the generations.

Direction shifts abruptly as nuclear
Becomes couple once again.
Questions fly to those who can answer--
What becomes of an empty home filled with memories?
His demand is persistent as it has always been.
With thunderous black finality
He closes strong fingers around arthritic bones
The string has shred to breaking point.
Silent yank in both directions as
His mentor is pulled, at last, into the light.

She follows the glorious path soon thereafter
To join in the everlasting love of God
And he is left behind to understand,
To accept the unknown flight of the soul,
Praying only for its eternal peace.

Like a small babe he lies curled to his wife's breast
Crying out in full voice,
Demanding the answers he will never hear,
Thirsting for the comfort he has always known
To quiet his rumbling gut.

Lisa R. Talarico
This confusion was nothing new. Trevor lived in a closet of his own fears. He spent every moment waiting for someone to open the door and then everything would become clear and purposeful. Trevor was on the road to pick up his girlfriend, and the engine roared under the unconscious workings of his foot. There were only three hours till showtime.

Trevor rounded the corners at a rather unhealthy rate of speed. He tried to go over every connection, every wire, every note in his head but the memories wouldn’t come. He was the only person responsible enough to take care of a half dozen amplifiers, a handful of microphones, and countless wires. But the only thing he could see was a picture of his parents whom he had just left. They would sit at home sulking over warm milk and reruns of “The Waltons” wondering where they had gone wrong. How did their son end up in a rock band? Eventually Mom, heartbroken because her son must hate her, would go to bed, and Dad would fall asleep in front of the eleven o’clock news. Trevor had tried to explain that playing in a band did not make him a member of the satanic death cult. But reason, for what it was worth, was useless.

At Molly’s house her parent’s wished him good luck, more than his parents had done. As they drove away Trevor was much calmer. Molly could still tell that he was nervous. She reached over and touched his arm.

“Trevor?”

“Yes, Mols,” he said with a wry smile. She hated being called that. The look she gave caused Trevor to almost crash the car as he broke into laughter. After a short drive they pulled into the Jackson Inn. It was Trevor’s favorite diner. He always ate there before a show. From within his linoleum and naugahyde cell, he ordered coffee.

“Don’t want to fall asleep,” Molly said and smiled. He was amazed at how kind she could be. She could never realize how much he appreciated her vain, but valiant attempts to make him feel better. As he looked deep into her mirrored lenses he remembered the argument he had had when he came home from a late rehearsal.

“I don’t understand!” Trevor cried.

“You spend too much time on it,” his father said. “Don’t you have anything else to spend your time on? Don’t you know any nice girls to go out with?”

“Yes, and I do go out with her. Her name is Molly, remember?”

“I’ve heard things about her,” his mother said.

Trevor laughed. He thought about some fat hateful old mother telling his fat hateful old mother “things.” Stories about drug use, lies; stories about psychiatrists, true, but blown out of proportion. He
hadn’t even stopped to glare at his parents as he stomped off to his room and gently closed the door. He slumped down next to his bed and watched everything in its place, the carpet waiting patiently to be the bed waiting patiently to be slept in, and himself waiting patiently to be redeemed.

In the Jackson Inn Trevor sipped carefully at his second cup of coffee and watched Molly scoop up gobs of mint-chocolate chip ice cream. He remembered the first time she had met his parents. She had tried so hard. She had been so nice, and so polite, so nice. But they wouldn’t accept her. They had been outwardly polite, but a rock could have picked up the cruel resentful undercurrents. Now, all the questions he wanted to ask her went crashing through his head like a free-falling safe. Did she really love him? Could he survive a home life that made Auschwitz look inviting? Through the smoke he could see his heart on the table, wrapped in gauze and suffocating. “We’d better go,” he said. They left and drove to the gig. There was an hour till showtime.

The band did their final soundcheck. The curtain closed. The doors opened. People began to file in and Trevor filed out the back door for a cigarette. The chill night air made him feel real. The ground slid away from under him. But Trevor accepted it with the same masking grace and swallowed fear that he always did. No one ever guessed at his real feelings. He covered them up too well. The same way he covered up his emotion for everyone in the band other than Bill. They were just parts of the machine, he and Bill had the controls. Trevor and Bill had been inseparable for the last four years. Their friendship had grown from a shared apathy about everything, everything except music. They were the two intertwining lines of a song: one was meaningless without the other.

Bill came out the back door and sat down next to Trevor on the step. “Cigarette?” Bill asked.
Trevor passed him his last Camel.
“What’s up?”
Trevor shrugged.
“Fight with the ’rents?”
“Yeah.”
Bill nodded.
“Not too happy with you playing that ‘rock-an-roll music’.” He put on an affected British accent.
“What else,” said Trevor, “I think they mentioned something about no college and a shrink.”
“Are you kidding? That’s absurd!”
“I don’t know, maybe they’re right. Maybe I am nuts.”
“Oh sure. Do you really think I would have wasted the last four years cavorting around this dump of a world with a wacko, a head case, a flawed specimen, a refugee from the rubber rumpus room, a loony!” Trevor gave him a look that said “yes.”
“Well . . . maybe,” said Bill. He threw his arm around Trevor’s shoulder and held up his other hand with the first two fingers crossed.
"C'mon, words and music, remember?", he gestured with his hand.
"We have to care about something or we'll go nuts, both of us. Now let's go make some ears bleed." As he got up Trevor remembered his most recent fray with his authority figures.

"Watch it buddy, don't use that tone of voice with me," his mother said. Trevor adjusted the equalization on his stereo.

"Well?" she said.

"Sorry." His sarcasm stung her hair but left her unhurt.

"I'll bet you don't act this way when you're playing in that band. I'll bet you're peaches and cream with your little friends, with Bill or Mol... ."

"Screw you! They care about me more than you ever did or ever could. Ever since I was little you said you would support me in whatever I wanted to do. You lied to me! What gives you the right to decide what makes me happy?"

"We're your parents."

"Exactly, you're my parents. You're not me."

Now it was showtime. As Trevor and Bill went inside, Molly came to the door. "Kiss for luck?" Trevor asked, and pressed her lips hard trying to suck some support from her breath. He climbed up to the back of the stage. In the semi-dark, the little red power lights, and dim glow from the stage lights made the whole scene warm and inviting. Some of the lights winked, beckoning him. Beyond the curtain he could hear high school girls shouting, probably drunk. He hadn't expected this many people, and needed a drink, preferably vodka, but there wasn't time to go out to the car now. He felt exposed. He thought of a TV commercial for anti-perspirant: "Never let them see you sweat." He had always wondered who "them" was. Now he thought he knew. He could pick out some all too familiar voices in the crowd. Mary Stetzer, the class president. She was a model student who despised Trevor because he refused to work up to what teachers always called his "considerable potential." Tony Clapper, who played right next to Trevor in the defensive backfield of the football team and never spoke a word to him. He held these people in utter contempt. Why would they come to see them play?

Trevor stepped onto the stage just as they pulled the curtain back. The weight of his bass tugged comfortably at his shoulder. The neck felt slick and hot, almost sensual in his hand. Trevor's hands went to work. Conscious thought gave way to muscle memory as they plowed into the music like an out of control turbo-charged dishwasher. Trevor caressed the notes out of his bass. His fingers pounded the fretboard like railroad spikes and he felt alive. He felt more alive than he ever had, and he knew where he was going. The music was going through his mind with the familiarity of an old friend. He looked up remembering the crowd, and saw almost two hundred people dancing and jumping all about. Screaming girls were trying to jump on the stage, grabbing at the band's legs. Grabbing at Trevor's legs. The funny thing was that he wasn't afraid. He understood these people. At least for the moment he was secure in what he was doing. At least for the moment all these people were his friends. At least for the moment, and that was a start.
Something Wild

Prowling Prowling
Pacing
Like a panther
Caged
Feeling the scrutiny of
A hundred pairs of eyes
Lonely
Angry
Paranoid
I need to walk
Walk into the night
Without a glance
Walk until I break from the cage
Prowling Prowling
Pacing
Gllaring
Slow and sinuous
Tense
Waiting to spring
I need to run
Run away
Take refuge in something wild
Unleashed,
Free,
... or explode.

Laura Sassaman
After I got out of high school I worked at a local auto parts store. The automotive aftermarket had not been my life's ambition, but I needed a job. A month had passed since graduation and my father was getting tired of finding me on the couch every afternoon when he came home from work. The ultimatum was given: I either found a job within the next six weeks or I could follow my two older brothers into the military. Knowing that my sensibilities could not handle performing bodily functions in the presence of strangers, I decided to check the want ads.

I spent the entire week before the summer solstice rising early every morning in an attempt to get the jump on all the other young, inexperienced job-seekers. I could only conclude that my competition had connections with the newspaper typesetters, for by 9:00 every potential employer I called had already filled the position, thank you. This scene repeated itself until I found an ad that read: "Stockperson wanted. No Exp. Nec. Call Bill." Having as little Exp. as possible I called Bill and set up an interview. As the appointed time approached I walked to the address Bill had given me.

This would be the first job that I would ever have and the prospect of so much responsibility, any responsibility, made me nervous. I walked past the store. I walked back. I stood outside. I feigned interest in a display of oil cans in the window. The lack of nearby businesses made it difficult for me to stall too long. When the store seemed sufficiently emptied of customers I went inside.

I walked to the counter. A fat young man with a Quaker State cap on his head and the name "Jerry" stitched to his torn pocket asked if he could help me. I told him I was there about the job.

"What job? A blow job?"

"Uh, no. The one in the paper for a stockperson, no experience necessary, call Bill?"

He punched the intercom and tossed me a form which I was to fill out while the owner, a Mr. William Wersler, finished a phone call. Having no previous employment, I didn't take long in filling out the form. I checked and rechecked my answers while Jerry made up new lyrics for the Eagles tape in the stereo.

"There's gonna be a hard-on tonight, a hard-on tonight, I know."

Just as I was losing courage from staring at the blank spaces on the form, a tall grayhaired man came out and introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Bill Wersler," he said.

I told him my name and he told me what the job involved (more than I knew) and what it paid (less than I had hoped) and asked if I knew how to drive.

"Yes," I said, "but no stick."
“No shit,” he replied.

He said the choice was narrowed down to me and some other guy and that he’d call later that day.

I walked home, carefully slipped the tie off over my head to preserve the knot and made lunch. I was eating an untoasted Pop-Tart when the phone rang. It was Mr. Wersler asking if I could start that afternoon.

An hour later I was back at the store unpacking air filters, stocking electrical parts and filling orders for exhaust pipes. At five-thirty the store closed; Mr. Wersler asked me if I had memorized the entire inventory yet. He was joking. I reminded myself that if I didn’t really like the job I could quit, but the surroundings seemed tolerable so I decided to stay. Anyway, I had a job. I had something to tell people when they asked me what I did.

After about two weeks I got acclimated to the job but I never really felt part of the camaraderie of Jerry and the other countermen. I didn’t know anything about setting the timing chain on a ’68 Fairlane and I couldn’t settle debates about carburetor adjustments on a ’72 Dart. I tried to compensate by being as conscientious as possible, but it couldn’t make me one of the guys. My suspicion that women were human beings too made it difficult for me to appreciate the Rigid Tool Calendar hanging by the loading dock door. This calendar of scantily clad women was so named not for its effect upon the looker, but for the brand name of the tools the women were suggestively holding. My co-workers sensed my uneasiness with the pictures and teased me.

One day I got diarrhea from having two Tasty pies and a quart of Hershey’s low-fat chocolate milk for lunch. When I finally came out of the bathroom Jerry asked me what I had been doing in there for so long.

“What do you think?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“I think you were taming the snake,” he said and made a stroking motion towards his crotch. “C’mon. Spit or bleed.”

Another time Jerry sprayed starting fluid through the keyhole of the bathroom while I was inside. When I was waiting on customers he’d duck down behind the counter, make farting noises with his armpit and proclaim loudly, “Jesus Christ! Something died!”

One of the benefits of having a steady job was having a disposable income. To dispose of it I began spending my nights at the Captain’s Lounge of the Holiday Inn off of route 100. In addition to the leather-look vinyl captains chairs and barmaids in fish net stockings, this place featured live bands with names like “Cherri and the Big Popper” and “Norman’s Mother.”
The Saturday after the Fourth of July, when “Mother” was finishing up their holiday engagement, I met a young woman who had just broken up with her boyfriend. I asked her to dance. I bought us some drinks. She told me her boyfriend was such a bastard. I told her I worked for an auto parts store. She told be how the bastard had run off with her car, but first he did teach her lots of useful stuff like pouring club soda over battery terminals to loosen the corrosion. I said I liked it with white wine and ordered another round. We danced until closing. I walked her outside to her van. She said I was a nice guy. She opened the door, got in and drove away. A week later I ran into her at a gas station. She and the bastard had reconciled and were getting married.

When I wasn’t not going home with women I was usually getting cornered by drunken strangers who wanted to tell me their troubles. The band would play loudly and I couldn’t hear what the drunks were saying, but I’d just nod my head and be their best buddy. One night I met a father and son from North Carolina who were working at a nearby power plant. They picked up my tab for the whole evening because I had been gracious enough to share my table with them. The son noticed the way I always put my sports coat on before I asked a woman to dance. The father said this was the mark of a gentleman. I didn’t bother to tell him it was where I kept my wallet.

Another night I met the girl who had been the prom date of my best friend. The friend had subsequently dropped out of school and, I am told, is now living in a home for the mentally unstable. Whatever the case, I found his prom date, Pam, dateless on this evening. I had never found her attractive in school. She had been chubby and used to dye her hair a shade of blond that was too light for her complexion. In the weeks since I had last seen her, however, she had let her natural color grow out and cut her hair in a smart new style. She had also lost weight and while she still wasn’t slim, her fleshiness could pass for enticing.

“Do you have any pictures from the prom?” she asked.

“No, Donna has them all.”

“Oh. Do you still go with her?”

“No. She threw me over for some older guy with a poodle and a motorboat.”

“Gee, that’s too bad.”

Pam and I were reliving high school memories when midway through junior year I noticed a bald guy leering at me from the doorway. It was Jerry without his Quaker State cap. I wondered how he would behave in public. This was the first time I had seen him outside of the store. He kept smiling at me as he motioned to someone. I cringed at the thought that he and some of the other guys from work might be out on the town and decide to embarrass me in front of Pam.
As I was thinking of some way to excuse myself and perhaps head Jerry off at the door, a buxom Italian-looking woman took his arm. He led her to where Pam and I were sitting.

"Hi, mind if we join yuhz?" he asked.

"Be our guests," I said.

He turned to the woman and said "Honey, this is the guy at work I was telling you about."

I wondered what he had told her about me. Did this woman know about Jerry’s goosing me with an oil can funnel and giving me the wedgie of a lifetime? Would he recount it for Pam’s benefit?

Jerry grinned and said, "This is my wife, Linda."

Linda and I said "hello" and I introduced Pam.

"Tonight’s our anniversary," Jerry said. "Five years."

I congratulated them and Jerry ordered drinks. It turned out that Pam and Linda both worked for the same knitting mill on different shifts. They talked about piece work rates, and I was left to talk about the store with Jerry. The waitress who served drinks was wearing a mini tuxedo outfit and Jerry made a remark about nice tails. Linda shot him a reproachful look and Jerry looked sheepish. I’d never seen him look that way before. It got late and Linda had to work a double shift the next day so she Jerry excused themselves.

The following Monday Jerry told the guys at the store that he had seen me with a good-looking babe at the Holiday Inn. One of them asked if we had gotten a room with a vibrating bed.

"I bet they made their own vibrations," Jerry said.

I smiled.

Three weeks later our store was short on an order of exhaust from the warehouse so Jerry and I took the van to pick up the difference. Halfway down route 30, Jerry made a U-turn across the median strip and pulled into a Roy Rogers for lunch.

It was two o’clock so there was no one near our booth by the fixins bar. Jerry said he likes the food better there than at Burger King even though Roy was more expensive.

"Do you still go out with Pam?" he asked.

"We’re not actually going out," I explained. "We just ran into each other that night. I guess I wouldn’t mind though."

Jerry nodded.

"Do you and Linda go out much?" I asked.

"No, she doesn’t like to that much. She only agreed to it that night because it was our anniversary."

He looked down at his burger, then met my eyes. "We’ve separated," he said.

"Oh," I said, with as little inflection as I could.

"It’s not what I want," he continued. "She wants it."

"Did she say why?"
"I don’t know. She won’t say anything specific. Lately she finds fault with everything I do. You know when we first started dating, before we got married, she kept a diary of every time we had sex. I seen it. Once we even did it on a clothes dryer."

This time Jerry was not talking about sex to embarrass me, but I still felt at a loss for words. He looked at me.

“I’m flattered that you would confide in me,” I said.

“You’re the only guy from work I ever introduced to Linda. She said she thought you were nice.”

We talked some more and, unable to think of anything else, I suggested marriage counseling.

A week before Labor Day an opening came up at the warehouse. Jerry put in for it and got it. About that time I realized that I didn’t want to spend my life unpacking alternators so I quit the store and enrolled at the community college. The tuition was low but I wanted to buy a car and those nights at the Holiday Inn hadn’t saved me any money. To make a few dollars for gas and insurance I took a weekend job at Pizza Hut. I didn’t know any more about making pizza than I did about selling auto parts but no one expected me to.

While still a cook-trainee I was made closing cook for Friday and Saturday nights. This meant that I had to stay until two or three o’clock in the morning scouring the burnt ziti from the pasta dishes. My hands would smell like pepperoni for three days. This routine plus my school work left me little time to go out. By the second week of classes I realized the Inn would be out for a while.

It wasn’t until the Christmas break and finals were over that I had a free night for my old haunt. I walked through the lobby, past the twin aluminum trees with the red satin palls and twinkling pink lights. Along the entrance to the Captain’s Lounge plastic boughs of holly were strung among the fish nets.

I sat at the bar. The bartender remembered me and asked where I’d been hiding. As he poured me a glass of Riunité Red on the rocks I scanned the room for other familiar faces. In a booth at the far end of the room I saw Jerry. He saw me and smiled back. I couldn’t see whom he was with because a Christmas trees was blocking my view. I could tell she had dark hair and a buxom figure and Jerry was holding her hand across the table. I wondered if he had taken my suggestion of marriage counseling. It had just been a stab in the dark on my part but maybe Jerry was capable of making a sincere effort to save his marriage.

When the band took a break I walked over to talk to Jerry and Linda. As I stepped around the Christmas tree I saw that the woman in the booth was Pam. There was a silence.

“Hi, Jerry. Pam,” I said.

They each smiled.

“What have you been doing with yourself?” Jerry asked.
I told him about college and Pizza Hut and shifted my eyes between the two of them.

“That’s nice,” Pam said, still smiling.

“How are things at the mill?” I asked.

“I don’t work there anymore. Jerry got me a job at the warehouse,” she said.

“Oh.”

There was another silence and we all continued to smile.

“Well,” I said, “I only stopped in for a quick drink. I was invited to a Christmas party at the house of one of the girls I go to school with. Guess I’ll head over there. Nice seeing both of you.”

“Nice seeing you.” they said.

As I walked back to my car I saw an older couple struggling to get a large, brightly wrapped package into the trunk of a car with Florida plates. I gave them a rope I had in my car and helped the man tie it to his bumper. When the package was secured the man thanked me.

“That’s awful nice of you, young man, awful nice.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, and got into my car and headed home.
The Picnic

Come lie beside me.
Gaze toward the sky.
See the clouds ever moving, ever changing.

Sample the cheeses.
Sip the wine.
Taste my wine-moistened lips.

See the sun sink behind the mountains.
Watch the sky glow with color--
The colors of growing passion.

Night approaches and I am weary
Wrap me in your arms
And let me sleep peacefully . . .

Karen L. Miller
INTERNALIZE

dance,
dance you fool
ecstatic destruction
exhaust the pain
make it sleep
kill it with kindness
if you’re able
play,
play the fool
never speak
of real life nightmares
suck them
like jelly through a straw
into the deepest chasm
forget them
if you’re able

Matthew Noll
When you walk into a room, do you notice that people look at you as if to say that the loud paisley scarf that you are wearing is just too gauche for words to express? They are obviously not aware that the damn thing cost you close to $200 at the salon in the latest neighborhood, and that the salesman told you that this particular style was the latest; you could be the first to enjoy it. You thought it was ugly too, the way that the pink and orange rubbed each other the wrong way. But with your traditional pink oxford, you thought the effect would be decent if a little shocking. Apparently you were wrong. It’s been over two years since you made that little transaction and, well, you just haven’t seen any other fools wearing your scarf.

You thought, of course, that this party would be the opportunity of a lifetime to display your fashion sense. This is the party where all the up and coming would be showing off to the -nth degree. You hoped it would get wild and messy. You even came prepared with a bit of the old medication. If things did indeed get wooly, you could participate using the age old theory that if-everyone-is-messed-up-then-why-not-you-too. Besides that, if the festivities got to the point where you would, in another state of semi-consciousness (i.e.: not wildly wasted), be completely embarrassed to be a part of the group, you could always blame it on the drugs. Out of earshot of the boss, of course. He’s been talking about drug tests for months now. Just what you’d need. Your little bottle would probably come back with skull and crossbone stamps all over it. And a small pink post-it note attached that would say in large blotchy-blue letters “F IRED, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.”

But as you survey the room, you notice that there are seemingly thousands of well-dressed inner city executive types. They are all holding what seems to be exactly the same drink in glimmering lowball glasses. They all pivot slightly towards the door as you walk in, and immediately pivot back to their original positions with what you suspect is a slight sneer on their communal face.

Your hostess, the lovely (and mildly stupid) Annete MacMillan comes fluttering over to you. She wraps her dietary arms around you and lisps loudly “So glad to have you. Come right in, dear.” And then she screams, laughs loudly and says “Oh, you card! Wherever did you get that scarf? You always think of something to make the rest of us laugh...you should have been a comedian, you silly thing you...” It is now that you decide that it is a Good Thing that you brought supplies. You are definitely going to need them.
You have been at this party for an hour. Some hairless wimp is asking you where you got that scarf. He’s been leering at you for well over forty-five minutes now, and he must have finally decided that since no other man was going to sweep over and claim you, you were his for the evening. He is a relatively successful CPA, is working on getting his own business, owns a Mercedes and a personal computer. He’s telling you now that he has a time-share place in the country, and how would you like to escape with him. You mutter that, yes, you would like to escape. He does not pick up on the subtle hint that you have just dropped. He keeps talking about his young, urban life. You do not have much more patience for this. Furthermore, you are fully medicated. The drug choice for this evening is a delectable white powder, a vintage year, 1987. Don’t forget to sniff the cork, savor the bouquet, thank you very much. So you did. Annette’s bathroom was very conducive to this sort of thing. Her counter is not all scratched and marked (like yours). No residue in the cracks. After a few minutes in the lav you were grinning at yourself in the mirror and even beginning to like that scarf. When you suddenly remember that just two nights ago you were snorting this stuff off a toilet seat in some club you giggled and proceeded downstairs. Nothing like getting blasted surrounded by all the comforts in the home of Mrs. Clean.

The charming man, who is apparently trying to peer down your shirt, is asking you if your scarf is some sort of social statement. He reminds you that you’re a little young for the sixties to have been your heyday. And are you into psychedelia? He himself, likes 60’s music. Why, he even went to see the Monkees last year, and he just loved it. He guesses that he likes the cleaner groups; he’s not into all that drug oriented music. Frankly, he just doesn’t understand all of its implications, and isn’t it a pretty valid argument for drug testing? Just look at that Jimi Hendrix. Those damn drug tests again. You are sick and tired of hearing about drug tests and you consider telling him that the Monkees were constantly stoned--that they had a little ventilated room where they could toke up--but you decide to ignore his declarations.

Aside from this, your feet suddenly have a mind of their own and are cheerfully tapping to the pop music on the stereo. Some girl with a high babyish voice is singing about diamonds and true love and holding hands, and you are singing along. It occurs to you that you should not, by all that is logical, know the words to this song. This is not your music; this is the mindless drivel that you have scrupulously shunned for approximately all of your life. But somehow the words to this song, so very popular now, have ingrained themselves in your memory. And as much as you try to shut yourself up, the dust particles
doing the backstroke in your bloodstream are shouting at the height of their angelic voices, which all boils down to an overwhelming desire to sing along with this song. Of course, the three Manhattans you've downed aren't helping. They just make it easier for the little guys to swim, and it seems to make them even jollier and more inclined to help you sing. The gentleman who was talking to you is now looking at you incredulously. You think that perhaps he is going to leave you alone, now that you have proven yourself hopelessly insane. You can't decide whether this would be a blessing or a curse. If he leaves you then the safety barrier is ripped aside and your feet would go nuts. And you have this fear of doing the tango alone. On the other hand, he is an obnoxious bore. And he proves this further by breaking into a stupid grin, throwing his arm around you and beginning to sing along.

Through your ever vigilant occulatory system you see all the other guests swing toward you in slow motion. Thousands of blue, gray and black suits, hundreds of pastel silk dresses, they are all facing you and this strange man who is clutching you to his bony side singing at the top of his voice. You feel like a complete idiot, but nobody has bothered to relay this message to your brain. So the lips keep moving and the feet keep shimmying. Your face must be beet red, but you still can't shut up. You're sure that the color of your face must be clashing with the pink and orange of your scarf, but even that thought does not steady you. And now your dear companion is swaying to the music.

With a loud drum beat, the song ends, and mercifully, all the other guests seem to have thought that your performance was intentionally amusing. They smile, or at least bare their teeth and applaud. You smile back, and this moron, who seems permanently cemented to your side, pushes you into a bowing position. Annette the Brainless comes over, gushing about how funny you are. You smile, sort of, and say that it was your pleasure. Your companion asks Annette if she doesn't think that this little gal isn't real fun to have around. Annette exudes Nutrasweet, saying that you've always been a real party animal. She doesn't know how close she is to the truth.

3.

In college you were always the one who suggested the purchase of a bit of a party starter set before the actual party got started. Of course, if it was alcohol, you always had to find someone else to get it. You couldn't help it if you looked thirteen. You also went through your "constantly stoned" phase. How did you manage classes? Well, who really knew? College students always seem to be able to keep it together.
College in the uncertain 80’s was bound to be just a little upsetting, and you must have picked up all your bad habits there. It’s not like you fell in with the wrong people; your friends were all relatively normal. None of you had ever killed anyone, or dealt drugs or anything like that. Unfortunately, your group of friends just seemed to mix well with drugs, alcohol, sex and generalized insanity.

Instability was also a big thing. You weren’t really normal until you had some sort of devastating, emotionally upsetting event in your life. Luckily, this type of thing was none too difficult to come by at college. You permitted yourself to drink yourself into oblivion every weekend for your first two years, drug yourself into an unconscious state a few times--the rest of the time you just got good and stoned--and you even allowed yourself to get emotional over men. You tried to avoid this particular hysteria like the plague; somehow it seemed worse than drunken or drugged up hysteria.

Most men ended up hurting you. They left you in a number of ways. They left you immediately after some sort of pitiful equivalent to sex, with promises to return the next day to see you. But you always saw them first--in the cafeteria, talking to some lovely blonde thing. They never saw you, except for the the next time they happened to be drunk and horny. These men also left you after an attempt at a real relationship. They gave their pitiful excuses and promised to run after you if they could ever grow up. They called themselves all sorts of degrading things and insisted that you were perfect, that you were too good for them. You never said a word during these inevitable tirades; occasionally you agreed with the remorseful male. Some of these men left you before things even got anywhere near involved. This was all an attempt to save broken hearts, you supposed. Either that or else it was a direct rejection. You preferred to think of it as the fear of the male of the species to utter to word “commitment”.

So instead of putting your effort into obtaining a boyfriend, you put your time and money into studying hard and partying hard. You managed both and came out with Dean’s List grades and a party-till-death attitude. The only excuse for not attending a party was lying on the so-called deathbed. And even severe illness couldn’t keep you away, sometimes.

Having finally settled into a major (your third attempt), and making good time at it, also having reached the point of relative stability, you made it through your Senior year with great perspective, charm, and humor. You attracted a few of what seemed like the right boys, but they never stuck around and you didn’t particularly care. Actually, you did care, and your friends knew that you did, but nobody else knew. And that was the whole point.

Graduation was as you had expected it. You were still drunk from the parties, you had your bottle of champagne tucked under your gown, and best of all, you wore the sleazy bustier-and-garter set that sort of matched the lingerie that your other graduating friends were wearing. Pop the cork, drink up.
Somehow you managed to get home from Annette’s party. You also managed to avoid any entangling alliances with that jerk who was singing with you. Actually, the more you thought about it, the more grateful you were to him. If he hadn’t been there, you would have been doing the Fred Astaire/Al Jolson act by yourself. But as it was, you and your happy feet were the hit of the party, at least in Annette’s estimation. And if Annette said so, well then. . . .

How did you pry him off your neck? After the party had dwindled sufficiently, you lunged for the door. He insisted upon walking you to your car, and considering that you were having a bit of a problem motivating your feet, you almost gratefully accepted his offer. However, when he began to suck violently upon your neck, you distinctly remember asking him to please remove his lips from your body. He was obviously unused to this sort of rejection and so you mumbled something about not really knowing him all that well. He looked slightly pacified at that, and in a further attempt to salve his wounded pride, you gave him your phone number.

You managed to avoid all police, and, although you were careening wildly all over the road, you made it to your apartment in one piece. You are lying in your bed, looking at the slightly cracked whiteness of the ceiling. There are a few water stains up there, but that’s all right, you can put up with water stains for the price of the place. Everything begins to swim in front of your eyes, and then you remember to blink. You gingerly turn your head and look at the alarm clock next to your bed. The blazing red letters almost scream at you. You realize what they are shouting is that it’s 2 in the afternoon. You roll over and look at the wall. Then you decide to move.

Movement is not a happy thing for someone suffering the way you are suffering now. Every step sends shivers up your spine and a pounding into your already hammering brain. Thinking hurts too much, so you try to avoid it, at least until after your shower.

As you pass the bathroom you notice a trail of clothes. Apparently you couldn’t wait to get in bed last night. There lies the paisley scarf, the cause of all the evil in the world. You can’t decide whether to burn it and rid the world of the anti-Christ, so for the time being you decide to step on it and cause it great amounts of pain. You can almost hear it scream out, and so you turn around slowly and walk over it again. For some reason this action gives you a burst of pleasure, and you even crack a smile.

The hot water is finally coming on full force, and is in the process of joyously steaming up the mirror. You would usually take off your nightclothes at this point, but you fell asleep in the buff last night. Maybe you couldn’t find your closet, maybe you were afraid you’d get lost in there. It’s all too painful to remember. But the shower is incredible.
Just as you’re stepping out of the water the phone rings. As usual, you run for the phone—it’s so unusual to get a call that you race for the phone all the time. As you pick up the phone, it comes flashing into your exhausted brain that you did indeed give that guy your number.

5.

The voice on the other end of the line is unduly cheerful for this time of life. It lilts and sings out over the miles of cable. It rings into your ears like a siren. You resist the impulse to ask where the fire is.

Yes, you remember him. How could you have forgotten? You still have the rubber-stamp feeling of his lips on your neck, directly below your ear. He is going on and on about something, and you are barely listening; you are just “uh-huh”ing along once in awhile.

Suddenly you realize that you just uh-huh’d your way into a date. Tonight. You begin to mutter, but he is already forging past you, and telling you that he’ll pick you up at 7:30, he has reservations made. You mutter your goodbye’s and mutually hang up.

You walk into your room and look at your clock. The red letters are still flaming, and the numbers are now screaming 3:00 at you. Swell. Only four and a half hours till the big date. You make a casual pass at the clothes in your closet, but when it comes right down to it, who really cares what you wear? This man is a balding fool, and he probably thinks that this date will be his opportunity to impress you and then sweep you away in overwhelming waves of sexual ecstasy. Well, do you have news for him! No dancing fool is going to impress you; you had enough of that in college.

So you put on a huge T-shirt with “Guns for Nuns” stamped on the front. This is one of your favorite shirts. It annoys people wherever you go. Little old ladies look at you in dismay. Real nuns seem to fold their already starched lips even tighter and yank their habits about them. If you could read their minds you think that they are probably asking God for a rather direct lightning bolt. But you still haven’t been struck, and this furthers your belief that God is not not wearing Reeboks (“because life is not a spectator sport” says the ad. Maybe it is and God is having a blast up there.) You trudge downstairs and into the kitchen to look in your lovely puce-colored refrigerator for some sort of breakfast food. It is definitely time to go shopping. You have three-fourths of a moldy and dehydrated cantaloupe, a few drops in the bottom of a jug of wine, and a few slices of cheese. Actually, it’s not even cheese. It’s cheese food.

So, ignoring the breakfast idea altogether you head directly for the coffee maker. Yesterday’s grounds are good enough; you know for a fact that there is enough caffeine in there. As the coffee is brewing you go to the front door and pick up the morning paper. And also as usual, the outside world is falling into tatters at your feet. So you turn directly
to the funnies. The coffee still isn’t done, and you have miraculously found a half pack of cigarettes, so you sit at the shaky kitchen table (wood, of course, no linoleum covered trash for you) and have a cigarette. The smoke tastes slightly stale, but old nicotine is better than no nicotine. The coffee seems to be perking its little heart out, and it’s finally done. It too tastes a bit old, but that could be the coffee or it could be the mug. You forgot to wash it and yesterday’s stains are still hanging out on the sides. But this, all of it, is OK because for all you know, this is breakfast at the Ritz. Your fuzzy little mind is elsewhere.

What the hell are you going to do about the approaching date you have suckered yourself into? You don’t have his number, you don’t even know his last name. Even his first name is questionable, you think that it’s Mike. Could be Mark. So calling and canceling is out of the question. You could stay in this T-shirt all day and not dry your hair and then forget the makeup too. You could play sick, or for that matter, just look real ugly when he arrives. That wouldn’t be too difficult. In order to help you make a decision, you have another stale cigarette.

6.

It’s 6:00, and you are still in the same shape you were in at 3:00. You have one cigarette left, and you know that you’ll be needing more. So you slide into a pair of sweatpants and stick on a pair of sunglasses for good measure. You don’t bother with shoes—it’s summer, and besides, even though the sign on the door says “No shirt, No shoes, No service”, the guy behind the counter knows you and you suspect that he’d give you service of one sort or another, regardless.

The fresh air feels good, and all your neighbors are out on their front steps enjoying it too. Oh well, they’ve seen you look worse. By the time you reach the store you realize you haven’t had a thing to eat all day. You are hungry. Being the health conscious creature that you are, you reach for a candy bar. What the hell, you’ll be eating good tonight. You suddenly remember your diet, but then forget it just as quickly. And a pack of cigarettes please.

Back at home, you look at the clock and it is now 6:45. You guess that you could at least take a shower. Maybe you’ll feel better about this after you’re clean. Another cup of coffee goes to the shower with you. You always did like drinking in the shower. Everything gets watered down, but that’s not the point. It always seemed classy to you. Sick.

After the shower, you even dry and curl your hair. A little more makeup never hurt anyone either. You suddenly realize that you are nervous. You reprimand yourself severely. Imagine, nervous over a date... then you realize that this is the first real date you’ve had in ages. Mostly a bunch of you went out together. You aren’t sure you can handle the one-on-one.
After considering this for a moment, you mentally yell at yourself again. You tell yourself to stop being stupid and to go get dressed. As punishment to yourself and this last-nameless man, you put on a pair of old panties. That'll show you both.

Peering into your closet is a very scary thing. Rows of blouses, hangers with skirts draped and pinned, jackets... it's mass confusion in there. But you manage to pull a nice looking something out. Not too dressy, not too casual. And not real sleazy, either.

By this time it is exactly 7:30. One more quick shot of hairspray and you are ready. Of course there isn't a man born who is ever on time, they're either early or late. But just as you think this, you hear a distinct pounding on your door. Hysteria sets in.

You race casually to the door, open it, and there stands a man. This cannot be the same man you met last night. This man is kind of cute. But as he steps through the doorway he says, "Hi, I'm Mark James. Remember me?" and then he smiles this completely charming smile. Chalk one up for you. You had a fifty-fifty chance of getting his name right if you had opened you mouth first. On the other hand, you'd better erase that little chalk line because your perception of this man was way off. The more you look, the better you like. He still has time to prove himself a jerk, though, and considering the track record of men you've known, the odds are definitely leaning towards that conclusion.

And you were wrong about the hairless part too. A slight receding hairline is far from bald.

You'd invite him in, but then again he already is in. So you tell him to hold on a minute while you get your purse. You stroll to the stairs so as not to appear unused to this sort of thing. Once you get to your bedroom, you search frantically for the purse you packed. There it is under the "Guns for Nuns" shirt. A quick look inside reveals everything that you need for a date--brush, lipstick, wallet, keys. That's it.

Back downstairs you find Mark staring at a picture that a rather bizarre friend once painted for you. He is looking puzzled, and he turns toward you as you hit the last step. You begin to explain that the picture is a direct result of a pleasant acid trip, but you stop mid-sentence, remembering Mark's distaste for any sort of drug-related thing. Before you can think of anything else to say he asks if it's acid art. You are shocked, and try to babble a negative response. Then you hear Mark saying that he'd recognize that genre anywhere, he used to do some of this type of thing. You must really look shocked because Mark grins and asks if this shocks you and you answer truthfully, yes. This worries you. What other shocks does he have in mind?
He escorts you out the door to his car. You are surprised that such an upstanding young man would dare to park in this neighborhood. It is indeed a Mercedes. Convertible. Red. You are thrilled. But you want to remain actively uninvolved, so you don’t say a thing.

He opens the door for you--another surprise. Last time this happened you were going to the Prom and your date shut the door on your lavender taffeta. You nearly killed him and you were forced to dance with a grease stain on your skirt. Something that one never really gets over. The inside of the car smells like a new car, but you know that this particular model is a few years old. This must be the joy of Mark’s young life. Swell, you knew that if you ever got involved that the priority list would probably run as follows: #1--car, #2--you. Then you remind yourself that you are not getting involved.

Mark drives well, even if he is terrifying you, going at incredible speeds. Once in awhile he looks over at you (not that you are looking at him, you just happen to catch him out of the corner of your eye) and smiles that disarming smile. It makes you nervous, because you can pretty well guess what he is thinking about. Him and those lips. You have experience in this sort of thing.

8.

Mark’s house is not a house. It is an apartment like yours. The neighborhood is a slight upgrade, but other than that he seems like a regular city dweller. He lets you in the front door and locks it behind you. You can’t decide whether this makes you feel safe or scared to death. What is he locking out, why is he locking you in? Maybe he’s a mad rapist. You’ve heard about these guys. Mark is strolling in through what appears to be the living room. It smells like fresh paint, and there are bunched up drop cloths everywhere. You smile to yourself, remembering this smell from painting your own place.

Mark is being slick, removing his conservative suit jacket and tie while dextrously pouring the wine. You’re sure that it’s some nouveau California vintage--not real quality. Probably loaded with some sort of extra alcoholic content designed to knock you into the middle of next week so that you’ll be unable to resist the smooth moves of a yuppie operator. You determine that you will drink very slowly.

The wine is very good, actually. In fact, the glass in your hand is drained, as is the bottle. Why do you never keep the promises you make to yourself? Mark is stretched out somewhere behind you on the couch; you can feel him behind you. You are crashed across his chest. It seemed like the thing to do at the time, and you have always been a strong believer in impulse. Thus far, Mark has not tried anything but this is not to say that he won’t. Most men give it at least three hours of tension before the groping starts. But in any case, you are prepared. You have the strength to “just say no” and this time you are sure someone has relayed that to your brain.
Mark is now mentioning something about dinner having to go in the oven. He struggles to his feet, a difficult thing mainly because you are drunken dead weight on top of him. You try to stand up, but succeed only in wrapping your feet in the rug and throwing yourself to the ground. If you weren’t drunk you’d probably try to melt through the floor, but being smashed you only giggle and try to pull yourself up with the aid of Mark’s pant leg. He bends over, and with a great deal of style, offers you his hand. You are finally on two feet--no, four. You are standing on Mark’s toes.

Dinner was a complete success, even though in the process of trying to help, you threw the breadcrumbs everywhere. Mark insisted that the stuff didn’t really need bread crumbs anyway, he thought that the recipe said “breadcrumbs optional”. You decide that breadcrumb is a stupid word. You repeat it about twenty-five times, just to make sure that your conclusion is valid. It is.

The meal was some sort of noodle-meat-vegetable casserole, at least you think that was what it was. You don’t really remember much about the actual feeding process except that Mark was terribly amusing in a Monty Python-ish sort of way, and his British accent was, if not terribly authentic sounding, at least very cute. You think that Mark is adorable. What you remember about the dinner most was the laughter--yours--and a lot of it. You hope that you didn’t sound too stupid, or too fried.

The food in your stomach is, surprisingly, sitting very well. Most of the time alcohol and food had a terrible time getting together in your stomach. The solution to this was easy for you--the hell with food. Just a bottle will be fine. This, of course, inevitably led to drunken foolishness. But then again, if people expect that sort of thing from you, why disappoint them?

At this moment you are sitting on the rug in the living room, chin on the coffee table, a cup of coffee and a divine piece of peach-crumb pie half gone in front of you. You and Mark are earnestly watching MTV, and the Psychedelic Furs are bopping about. You loved this song in college, it had some deep meaning then--“the one thing”--you forget why it was so sentimental. Apparently, the booze is still partying with your brain cells, because you suddenly realize that you have this overwhelming urge to burst into tears.

Mark has noticed your chin doing accelerated push-ups, and being a gentleman, he asks you what the matter is. You tell him that you don’t know, and the dams in front of your eyes suddenly give way. Mark slides over the floor to you and makes comforting motions. You are thoroughly miserable at this point not only because of this unknown disaster taking place somewhere within, but also because you realize that you did not put waterproof mascara on.
Mark is sitting behind you, and rubbing your shoulders. You feel like the beginnings of a loaf of bread, and you hope that if you are, you are Wonder Bread. This is probably out of spite; your mother never let you have Wonder Bread. You are overcome with a large whiff of Mark’s cologne, and you recognize it as Draakar Noir. You have just become the butter on a steamy, toasted piece of Wonder Bread. You remember that you have on your ugliest pair of panties.

10.

Somehow this has been the best evening you can remember, at least for a very long time. You are on your way home, safely tucked in the passenger side of Mark’s car. The silence in the car is pleasant, you don’t even wish that the radio was on. You kind of like the way Mark breathes, so very in-out, inhale-exhale.

After your minor breakdown on the living room rug, you sniffingly asked Mark why he didn’t take you home immediately after the breadcrumb-less casserole. He said that he found you fascinating, and thought that you were an enjoyable person to be with. You proceed to apologize for your behavior, and to protest that you aren’t always so susceptible to the call of mind-altering substances. Mark told you that this statement was so much bullshit. Your mouth hit the floor.

Wherein Mark told you everything about yourself, and forced you to admit your appreciation for being anything but yourself. He even told you that he knew you were fried at Annette’s party, and that he was acting like a fool to prevent you from looking like the only idiot. You asked him rather nastily if he wasn’t in the wrong century, princes don’t rescue damsels in distress anymore, they leave them in the corner with the hallucinogen of their choice. Mark only looked at you and smiled. For some stupid reason, you laughed and smiled back—like you meant it. You did.

And now you’re at your front door, and Mark has given you a kiss on the cheek (surprise!), and he is telling you to give him a call when you feel like getting together again. You grin foolishly and say something about not having any food in the house, and that you’d be glad to eat breadcrumbs from a cereal bowl in a secluded corner, but Mark is already telling you to call him after work tomorrow for dinner. This time you’ll go to a restaurant and let someone else throw the food around.

You say OK, and you mean that, too.
Through Scot’s mists, a browne night
Bird song soothes crazed dragons
And ransoms Stonehenge.

Peg Occhiolini

A tear,
Cried in memory
Of the love we once shared
Makes an unhurried descent,
Then dries.

A. M. O.
In Pursuit of Beauty

Perfect faces gaze at me from the pages of the glossy magazine.

I too want to be perfect.

I locate the helpful hints that will allow me to become "beautiful":

"Apply foundation . . . powder . . . three kinds of eye shadow . . . blend, blend, blend . . . contour your face . . . ."

Forget it.

Suddenly, I love my flaws and imperfections.

If men want perfection, they can buy the magazine, and take it out to dinner.

Beauty isn't worth the aggravation.

Debra L. Ritter
A Walk Down Sycamore Lane  
By Joseph Matassino

I walked along the dirt road at a slow pace kicking any stone in my path, and creating dust clouds that soiled my Sunday shoes. Ahead, holding on to her hat with one hand and my baby brother Michael in the other, mother yelled to hurry me up. In front of her stood my father, neatly dressed, impatiently rolling his eyes at the entire situation. Above us, sycamore trees draped in Spanish moss created a tunnel of foliage by arching their branches over the road. We walked through this tunnel which lead us to the church. Hidden somewhere among the fields which surrounded us were locusts, singing simultaneously as if they too were celebrating a Sunday service. The air hung heavily. It seemed as though it were weighted down by an invisible force, relentless and oppressive. So I was content at the pace that I was walking, even the slight breeze that usually kept me cool was frightened away by the heat.

At the end of the road the trees revealed a ghostly white church which was rather plain looking except for the razor sharp steeple. We trudged up the steps to the front door, and inside ladies sat weakly fanning themselves. The men of the group withstood the heat and occasionally loosened their collars with a strained grimace. We took our seats in the last pew since there were no others to be found. I searched between bodies hoping I would find my friends. Seeing Frankie, I gave him a wave before Mother slapped my hand back down. I spotted Terence off to the right, wedged between both of his parents, but I didn’t dare wave again. Terence was a real character. We always did fun things together, only I was the one who got in trouble for the things we did. Good old Terence. When I looked behind his crooked glasses and rotten sense of humor I could sometimes see a great guy, but most of the time I hated his guts. I noticed the mayor of our town sitting in the front pew. My parents had heard that he’d been in a bar and drank too much whiskey, but I liked him anyway. Our town was about eleven farms and four fruit stands down the road from Florence, South Carolina. Its name was Quiet Haven.

The mass began and from the mouths of almost everyone came the song, “Go Tell It On The Mountain.” I especially enjoyed this song so I always sang it extra loud. The priest walked up the center aisle and stood on the altar facing the congregation. His name was Father McBride. One time we had a parish picnic, and at the end of the day we presented peaches to the poorer people. Everyone felt proud to contribute to the cause, but the only thing Father McBride was able to contribute was himself. He didn’t ever expect any gifts from anyone. McBride had been a friend of the family ever since I can remember. Father Green, who was standing in the back of the church, was a tall thin man who sported a goatee. He lived in Charleston. and was new
to our parish last year. I guessed at this mass he would help distribute communion. On either side of the congregation stood saints from a long gone era. Saint Michael the Archangel and Saint Mary Magdelan looked down upon us with their glazed and uncaring eyes as they stood in the wall, hidden by dust-filled rays of sunlight. At the foot of every statue were brightly colored burning candles, and each flame represented a person's prayer whether it be to give thanks or to ask for strength. I remembered the time after Michael was born when father lit a candle. I wondered if he did the same for me.

The mass continued without me as my mind drifted to the secret meeting my friends and I were to have this evening. My excitement about tonight caused me to feel a twinge of guilt. I did not really understand what we were going to do, but I knew that whatever it was, it would be bad. We would meet at dusk at the entrance of the forest to witness, as my friends put it, the Clash of Good versus Evil. Maybe it was a game of cops and robbers or even stickball. All my friends said they had seen this battle at least once or twice before and waited every night to watch it occur. Whatever it was, they sure kept the secret from me. I was, however, not completely obsessed about this evening, for my mind raced to tomorrow morning where I would sit in the confessional for the first time to present my sins. I was so filled with anticipation about the events ahead that even the painful leg cramps which appeared at the end of the service did not affect me.

There was a repetition of prayer after prayer and song after song, until the music came to an end. Then the crowd quietly filed out of the church to the music of an organist. Outside, Father McBride waited contentedly in the heat, to be greeted by his parishioners and maybe to be invited to a few Sunday dinners.

I was relieved that the mass had come to an end, which worried me. In Sunday school we were taught that going to church was a sacrifice we make for God, and that our time spent in church could not even compare to the sacrifices God made for us. I guessed that my feelings towards mass were something I could confess.

I waited for my parents as they talked to Father McBride. Meanwhile, my friends and I got together to talk about what we usually talked about, which was nothing. But as soon as I mentioned tomorrow morning, they all put in their two bits.

Frankie said, "Father McBride is gonna dig into your mind and ask you why you did all the things you did. The best thing to do," he said, "is to shrug your shoulders and pretend to be really sorry."

"And don't forget," said Terence, "you have to confess everything, including the time you smoked behind the general store, and the time you drank the holy wine last February."

"Did you confess those things?" I asked.

"Sure I did, and I told him you were with me. You can't cop out ya know, because if you do, and lie in confession, then the next time you have to confess you told an untruth the first time."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Frankie added.
What was said in confession was supposed to be private, but I thought everyone knew what I was saying tomorrow. Secretly I hoped and prayed that I wouldn't get Father McBride for confession. I didn't him to analyze my problems. Maybe I was just embarrassed or ashamed because I knew him so well; it just didn't seem right. I was afraid that when he saw me again he wouldn't respect me as much, and instead give me and all-knowing, all-powerful look.

We had begun our trek home. I continued booting pebbles, scattering them in every direction. I decided to make a list of sins to say if I had Father McBride and a separate list to tell Father Green. I heard that Father Green sped through confession so fast that there was no way he could really listen to what you were saying. Essentially, he was just a figure to whom you poured out your heart only to have him call “Next,” as if you were waiting in line at the deli counter. Best of all, he wouldn't make me feel uneasy about my faults. Letting him know the secrets of my life would not make me feel uncomfortable. I really didn't think I had anything worth saying. If my friends were there in the confessional with me they could remind me of my sins, since they seemed to know more than I did.

The rest of the day went by slowly. I spent the day the way I always spent those last few days of summer, sitting in the tire swing in our backyard, swatting the gnats and dragonflies that dive-bombed me. Father McBride was coming over for dinner that afternoon. The reason for his visit was to discuss my first confession. But all day long the smell of ham wafted out of the kitchen window, and all I could think about was the food.

During dinner I sat across from the priest, listening to the importance of giving a good confession. He said to me, “It should be similar to a conversation, each of us contributing our thoughts and feelings about the situation.”

I nodded in agreement, but the more I thought about confession the worse I felt.

“After you give your confession,” he said, “I will send you up to the alter to say some prayers of penance. I’m here to help you, not to frighten you away. So don’t be afraid, there’s nothing you can tell me that I haven’t already heard.”

That evening after dinner, our guest went back to the rectory. On the sofa sat Father, bloated and asleep, and Mother washed the dishes. I finished writing both my lists, and quietly excused myself at 7:30. Stepping out on to the porch, I noticed the sun had disappeared, but it was not quite dark yet. The weather was dreary; it had just rained. Steam was rising from the asphalt on the street, creating a devilish scene. My tennis shoes became wet as I trooped around the house to the bush where I had hidden my stickball bat. If anyone asked where I was going, I would tell them there was a game down the street. Although that might make them curious since it was getting dark. I brought the bat along anyway, slinging it on my shoulder as I whistled to keep myself company.

-40-
I walked hesitantly as I neared my destination, which was less than half a mile away and to the right. To get to the entrance of the forest I had to pass old man Griffin's house. What he called home resembled a shack. I noticed as I got closer that he was outside smoking his pipe, and I didn't want to be seen, because he might become suspicious. So I manoeuvred myself, slithering between bush and tree on the slimy and soupy ground, until I was safely past his view. I thought he saw me once because I stumbled, making some noise, and he quickly turned and looked in my direction. He never got up to investigate. Already this evening I had deceived both my parents and now Griffin.

Sure enough everyone was there when I arrived. They looked upon me with sour faces as if to say, so you had enough guts to show up, huh! No one else had any stickball equipment so I sheepishly dragged my bat along side of me. I took my place with them huddled by the side of the road. I became very nervous when I noticed how serious everyone was. What could cause them to act this way? We moved further away from the road so we wouldn't be seen by any passing cars, and sat among leaves and bushes waiting for ten minutes without anyone saying a word. Never had I been so scared. It was then we began to hear the squawking and screaming coming from the depths of the forest. It became louder and louder causing us to shuffle about uneasily, until shooting out between the trees came a swarm of bats, flapping their wings in the peculiar way they do. I sat in awe of the sight. So this is what we had come to see. But no one stood around to watch.

"Attack!" someone screamed, and they all got up and began to pelt the creatures with stones. A lot missed, but some hit and crippled their wings nearly stopping them in mid-flight. I stood surrounded by mass confusion as rocks and bodies flew around me like I was in the center of a cyclone. The sight of it made me dizzy. A few began to swoop down at our frantic bodies, scurrying every which way. In all the excitement, Frankie tripped and skinned his face. I looked up and saw one bat headed straight for me. The thought of rabies flashed through my mind and the doctor's remedy of twenty shots in the stomach. With the stickball bat tight in my hands, I swung hard, and hearing every vein burst and every bone crushed I smacked the creature to its death. Thump! It hit the ground. I heard cheers of satisfaction as I stared at its twisted, motionless body lying on the pavement. I dropped the deadly weapon.

I raced as fast as I could, panting and sweating. The whole way home I imagined the bat chasing me, hunting me just like I had done to it. Entering the house, I went straight to my room. I sat in the corner of my dark, quiet haven next to the window, so I could clearly see the stars. I swore I would never let anyone know what horrible thing I had done, I thought as I ran my finger down the rotten window pane, making flakes of paint fall to the floor. I lay in bed staring blankly into a dark void, until there was a knock at the door and my mother let in the hall light.
"Are you OK honey?" she asked. 
"I lost the game." I said. 
"It was too dark to be playing ball tonight," she said, "maybe you can start another game earlier tomorrow."

She walked over, lifted my chin, and exposed a tear worn face. 
"Love, you can turn the simplest problem into a complicated world issue. You think too much," she said flatly. "But that's what makes you so special."

She came down and kissed my cheek and left me alone to gaze into galaxies I could only imagine. I think I cried for three hours that night. I had killed another living thing. But how is that different from harming a dragonfly or a bee? I didn't know that answer and instead of finding one decided to try to sleep. Mother was right; I thought too much.

The next morning I awoke, and begrudgingly was sent off by my parents to church. I took my usual route under the sycamore trees, a path I walked a thousand times before, but this time it seemed different. I reached up and grabbed some moss from a low lying branch, making it into a Santa Claus beard around my face. The moss felt the same, and the little red bugs that live in the moss were still there. The trees looked no different. The fields still hadn't been plowed. Sycamore Lane was still in South Carolina. Maybe I had changed. After arriving at the church, I noticed that neither of the two priests giving confession were Father McBride. Father Green was at the face to face confessional. I stood in his line folding and refolding my list of sins. I paged through a hymnal and observed the other confessors standing around me. Some looked slightly nervous, others seemed calm. I wondered how I looked to them. They probably saw right through me: the only murderer standing in line. I waited for approximately thirty minutes, and when I reached the front of the line the church bells chimed eleven times. To my surprise, the older man who was in front of me came out of the confessional with Father Green. Father McBride appeared and entered to prepare himself for the next confessor. Me. I sat for a moment not able to move. I rehearsed my lines and ever so slowly got up to slide the curtain and peer into the confessional. My heart pounded as I walked over and took my place next to him. I shoved the list of sins into my pocket. My sweating, shaking hands told him I was nervous. I was blank; I could only remember the truth. He nodded for me to begin. I swallowed one last time and said, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. This is my first confession."
A Wish

Death,
I am now familiar with your presence;
I accept your role.
I only wish
That others would stop
Desperately trying to reach you,
Beckon you
Before their time to be called forward.
I wish they would stop
Their awful morbid obsession,
Stop baiting you.
I wish they would begin
To see what Life offers
If only they would grab it by the hand!
—Run with it, dive in, experience!
I wish they would begin
To see that life is meant to be lived,
Learning,
Not wasted,
On brooding over pain,
Building
To that awful morbid obsession,
Alive but not living.

Laura Sassaman
Sins of Ommission

I eat my meals alone
    Furtively observing fellow diners
    They sit in warm and cozy packs
Attacking substinance with
    Vicious coyness
Heads thrown back, silent
    Laughter hurling itself
    From tightened throats
Eyes filled with mirth
    Tears of joy threaten
    To break free
I watch as the politics of
    Polite company make
    Their presence felt
And each one struggles
    To remain within
    His given sphere
Careful not to overstep
    The boundaries that
    Have been carefully drawn

I eat my meals alone
    And press my care-worn
    Face to the window
Looking in, and my breath
    Opaques the glass
Body curled, protection
    Against the cold and
    Against the rain
Eyes filled with pleading
    Tears threaten, but
    Go unnoticed
I watch as the politics of
    Polite company
    Send another martyr
To his grave, struggling
    Against the inevitable
    Fate that has been given
Careful not to disturb
    The pathways of
    A cheapened destiny

I eat my meals alone.
My apple is sour in my mouth

Rebecca E. Moore
PESSIMISM

Who can wipe the tears that fall
From my eyes like crystals
For no reason at all?
Yet I feel it is hidden
Deep inside
Pain, hurt, sadness and foreboding...
Of what?
I cannot say, for I've no idea
For certain.
Confusion is my way of thought
The passage of time, a forgotten
Trial of errors...
Gone now are the awakened dreams,
The hope of...one day
Well perhaps never.
One does not know. I do not know.
Endless babble, my hand is drawn
To write...it is a fool who says
Everything but says nothing
At all.
Questions of life in innumerable
Amounts fill my head as I try
To suppress the anger filling
My veins. Till finally, I close
Eyes and fall asleep only to wake
To a new day filled with doubts for
The past, present and future. The
Life of a pessimist will always
Be dull.

S.J.L.
And the Sky Cracked
By Craig DiLouie

We are rebuilding from the shakes. We live in Enasni, Arizona, a small town built around a railroad track, squatting in the middle of a vast desert plain. To the west are purple mountains, to the north, great rivers, and to the east, the Snake, a 749 kilometer long bottomless chasm coursing through the desert—the product of the last shake. The town, in the midst of these natural wonders, is a peaceful community of 3,729 people who have not faced a threat from man or beast for thousands of years. The only threat is from the shakes.

The shakes come unexpectedly; the last one was three years ago, and caused the earth to split and the Snake to appear. The one before was even more horrible. The stars started out of their sockets and some fell to the earth like hail. We have since rebuilt our community, but we are afraid of another one coming soon; the skies always looked bleached and dead before it strikes.

The Calico Coffee Shop sits near the railroad track and is a popular place for the kids to hang out. From its eyes there is no sound of machinery and hammers, only people speaking. Today people are speaking of another shake coming.

“Feel it— it’s coming,” Mr. Bolt says to me, leaning over the blue counter. He taps his forehead, and hisses conspiratorially, “I always know.”

I am not convinced, for we always hope the shakes will never come back. “How do you know, old man?”

Mr. Bolt frowns and I count the wrinkles on his forehead. “There comes the time... when purple doesn’t taste like purple anymore, and red like red. The doors scream when touched, and doorknobs won’t let go— they feel it too, like I do.”

“Superstitions and silly legends, old man,” I say, gesturing with my spoon.

“Watch it there, you’ll poke your eye out,” Mr. Bolt replies. “Then you’ll know.”


“Are you high on somethin’?”

I like to make Mr. Bolt mad. “I’m high on life old man.”

“If you’re high on life, get off it,” Mr. Bolt says. “It’s a hallucinogen.”

I feel funny again, and leave, dropping a few coins on the counter. Outside, the sun is bleeding and I take this as a bad sign. People scatter from the street. I look up, my jaw slack like a drawbridge, and the shake comes.
We buried the dead today. Times are growing savage, and I have one of Mr. Bolt's leg bones to protect myself from vandalism. The shake nearly destroyed us, but it brings wonders we have never seen before: the sandy plain around our town is now an ocean of sand, and three children and a dog have drowned. Strange beasts we can hunt for food live in the ocean of sand. It is a savage time, and it is slow rebuilding.

The three suns make the day burn brightly. The ocean of sand is turning into a plain of glass. The machinery grind to a stop, and the hammers sit idle. Corn is planted but instead of food, savage men sprout and make war with the cattle in the fields and the people of the town. My teeth are ground until smooth and slick.

The next shake comes suddenly. We are not yet rebuilt. There is still too much chaos. I hear the crackle of electricity and then cracks appear in the sky. Children run to collect the giant blue shards.

An explosion—then all is burning wreckage, broken bottles, cans, flaming automobiles, dead horses, and collapsed structures. Clumsy smoke clouds cut themselves on metal pieces and bleed.

All that is left standing are walls. Only the front walls of all the structures in town. I walk through the sagging door of the Calico Coffee Shop on 9th and Main, hoping to find some coffee cups to salvage. To my surprise, instead of seeing the wreckage of the collapsed building on the other side, I see Mr. Wallace at the blue counter serving some customers.

"There was a shake!" I yell.

"There was? My God, is the town all right?" Mr. Wallace asks, dropping a cup to the floor with a shatter. The customers look up in horror.

"I feel... pain. I hurt," I whimper.

A customer puts his coat over my chipped shoulders. "Don't worry about the pain, son. If Man didn't feel pain, he'd eat himself."

"Another one's coming," I whisper, thinking that I must be dreaming, because the room I'm in is supposed to be rubble and ash and smoke. But I'm not dreaming.

Mr. Wallace is at the window. "Oh my God," he screams. I look up, blinded by light. The shop shudders and screams until a final spasm of agony splits the room in two. Colors scorch my arms and the world explodes, a flash in the pan.

I am standing on a green plain, which extends on forever. There is nothing else, only the plain, and the madman who runs naked across the plain. I call his name, but he only looks at me and keeps running into forever.
THE CLOCK STRIKES

Blue and green
Spin upon the axis
As you extend your fingers
To halt the rotation.
The marble continues
To roll
Slipping smooth icy cold
From your grasp.

The clock strikes twelve.

Muscular legs
Jolt forward push harder
Behind;
The rainbow never ends.
Golden coins
Do not exist
For those who lose the
Race.

A moment later
You become conscious of
Another spirit
Clutching the flying chariot
Barely able
To retain the grasp.
She silently falls
Allowing time to slip
Away.

Your eyes follow her to the soil
Of the dark earth--
She thrusts open a new
Grave
Only to have a cloud of dust
Suffocate her deep green
Vision of the world.
Intertwined
Flesh slipping through flesh
Hot wet exhaustion
Drags you to the ground
As she cups your face
Within her offering palms
Then gently smiles.
Again, no words escape her lips
Only soft pleasure
Encircling your mind
And sending you
Into gasping screaming
Ecstasy.

Almost paralyzed in the daze of confusion
You stand for just a moment
Watching a willowy transparent soul
Rise from the smoky brown
Burial cloth.

A thin white hand
Is extended to you
In agony.
She says nothing
Yet you feel the urgency
Of her request.

You move quickly to protect her
From damnation,
Cradle her into your arms,
Hold her with tender caresses,
As she moves through
Your blood
Warming the smooth silk
Which contains your
Essence.
Sweat has stained your skin;
Salt has stained your cheek;
Blood has stained your soul.
You reach for her hand
Yet find instead
Cold grey stone
Surrounding you.
A bitter chill screeches
Through the damp air
As night blackens your pupils
As life falls prey to peace.

The axis props its parasitic orb
Within the boundaries of space.
You walk silently
From her sleep
Knowing she will not dream
Tonight
Wanting to love her
For a moment longer
Walking, head hung low,
Through the cold iron gates.

The clock strikes one.
Invincible
By Matt Weintraub

The heat was merciless as Joe and I pursued each other all over his driveway in a game of one on one. Joe, a lanky 6'2" kangaroo, used his superb moves around the hoop to keep me at bay. Because I gave him a 3 inch height advantage, I had to use my speed to outplay him. Both of us had excellent chances of starting for the high school varsity this year, so we eagerly played everyday after school let out. Sweat poured from Joe’s muscle-toned body as he paused between baskets. Gasping, he said, “It must be ninety-five degrees out here! I can’t believe school started three weeks ago.”

Panting also, I said, “Yeah, I miss the summer already. Do you think this year’ll be okay?” “Okay?!” he said, “It’s gonna be unbelievable, man. I got a couple of letters from Coach Massamino at ’Nova for basketball yesterday. I’m set.” “Yeah but besides that. I hope the parties are as good as they were this summer. It’ll be tough to top Senior Week in Wildwood.” “You must have faith, my boy,” Joe said, “Chicks will be bangin’ down our doors to take us to parties this year. We are the shit this year. Right?” “Yeah,” I sighed, “I guess so.” Joe had me dreaming about this past summer. My friends and I had partying down to a science. We never got caught, either. Now that Todd and Jim had made fake licenses for all of us, we were insured of a party every weekend.

Joe’s laughter snapped me back into reality. He drove hard by my left side and scored the winning hoop on an easy layup. “You dork,” he said, “You got to pay attention.” “I need a little breather before we start the next one,” I said. He ran in the house and got us each a Coke and a towel. I laid my towel on the ground and sat on it while I finished my soda. I listened to Joe’s car radio blaring The Who through the old window of his VW. Roger Daltrey was wailing the words to “Baba O’Reilly.” After lazily arcing four or five shots through the net, Joe became excited as the music rose to a crescendo. He grabbed the ball and jammed it through the hoop while bellowing, “Teenage wasteland, they’re all wasted!” along with the music.

Astonished I asked, “Since when could you do that?” He ignored me as he did it again. This time I grabbed the ball as it rolled toward the street and launched it skyward. Joe intercepted it in midair and slammed it a third time. His red Converse hightops were higher than my waist.
Laughing at my disbelief, he said, “It must be them ankle weights, huh.” He sat down and finished his Coke and said, “I’ve been practising. This is the year I make All-State.” I felt left behind. He saw my face and added, “Don’t worry, we’ll all start. With me, Todd and Jim all dunking, and you and Larry in the backcourt, we’ll be state champs!” Joe and I had lived next door to each other for ten years, and he was always supplying us both with confidence.

Joe was a leader. He was a free spirit when it came to schoolwork. He wasn’t motivated in class because he knew he didn’t have to be. His ticket to college was basketball and his parents knew it also. Mr. and Mrs. Hampton had tried for years to make him study, but Joe was stubborn and refused them. His parents finally relented and let Joe have his freedom.

Joe and I were united with Todd, Jim, and Larry through basketball. Our fathers were all members of the Southampton Kiwanis club, so we had grown up playing midget ball, junior high ball, and now high school ball together. Joe entered us in recreational leagues together and we won many of them.

This time Joe snapped me out of my daydream by whipping the ball at my feet. I ran after it and it rolled into the street. We shot aimlessly for the next hour while having one of our favorite discussions. “Ain’t no way the ’83 Sixers could have beaten the ’87 Lakers. Magic is too tough.”

“Aw, c’mon,” I said, “What about Moses and the Doctor. Andrew Toney was a madman back then. Hey, what’s that familiar smell?”

“Shit! Burn Burgers again! It must be 6 o’clock. After we eat, me and the guys are playing ball up at the rec park. You’re running with us, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I got a lot of homework to do.”

“Homework!? We’ve only been in school for three weeks and you’re already worried. Geez, that’s just like you. Be back here at 7:30 and we’ll go play, okay?” he said.

“All right, I guess,” I said, not wanting to make him or my folks angry, “See ya at 7:30.”

I ran into my house for supper. Mom and Dad were already sitting at the food covered table, while Angela, my older sister, dished out Mom’s lasagna, her specialty. I took off my shirt and was about to sit down when my mom yelled at me, “Cory, you’re all sweaty.”

“Mom, I can’t shower because Joe and the other guys and me are playing some more after dinner, I said.

“Go upstairs and at least put on clean clothes, then,” she said. On the way back downstairs I heard the sound of cutlery being used, and rushed my starving stomach over to the table.

After dinner we cleared the table and sat back down for Oreo ice cream. My dad liked to use this time for our family discussions. No matter how important the topic was, it could always wait until after the meal. He started off, “Damn it, I just can’t get it out of my mind.”
"What's the matter, honey?" Mom asked.
"I dunno. We had another one today. Some kid, the Dennison's kid, had a party this afternoon. On a Thursday, no less. There must have been fifty kids there at least. We had to send four squad cars over from the station to break it up. It worries me. Do you know him Cory?"
"I kinda know him. He plays ball over at Council Rock." I was nervous now. My father is a police sergeant in the neighboring town of Richboro. "Cory, do any of your friends drink?" he asked.
I said, "Umm. I don't think my friends drink, Pop. I dunno."
"Please let me know if they are, okay Cory?" he said.
"Sure Pop," I said. "Can I be excused? I'm supposed to be at Joe's soon."
"What about your homework?" Mom asked, as she cleared off the desert dishes.
"I, umm, I already did it. See ya later." Already out the door, I didn't wait for a reply.
When I burst outside, I could see Todd and Larry playing against Jim and Joe. The game broke up when they noticed me. We happily exchanged high fives and goofy handshakes. Larry, my backcourt mate, must have seen the worry lines wrinkling my forehead because he asked, "Alright Corkbrain. Talk. What is the matter with you? Did your cat die or something?"
They gathered closer as I said, "My pop was asking questions about us drinking. I was shitting bricks."
"Holy shit, he could arrest us!" Jim said.
"Yeah, and how 'bout if we get caught with our fake cards, man. Shit, we're done!" Todd said.
"This sucks, man. What are we gonna do? Yo, I never use mine anyway," Larry lied.
"Will you guys shut the hell up!" Joe yelled. "No one's gonna get busted for anything. Have we yet? Huh?" he asked, jabbing me with his finger. "You're such a pussy! Why do you scare these idiots like that?"
I yelled, "You'd be worried if your dad was a damned cop, too!" My hands clenched as I stepped closer to Joe.
Larry stepped between us and said, "Hey, let's get over to the rec park. The lights should be coming on now. We should make the first game if we leave now." Todd nodded in agreement and shoved me toward Jim's blue Chevy Blazer, our team battle wagon.
I unclenched my fist and glanced over at Joe. He smiled. "You know, you can be such a dickhead," I said.

He laughed and said, "Yeah, Corkbrain, I know. Let's go."

At lunchtime in the school cafeteria the next day, "Yo. I heard there's supposed to be a little get together at Missy Heard's house tonight. Actually, she asked me if I could buy her beer. What do you think?"

"Sounds great," Larry said, "Who's gonna drive?"

Joe took charge. "Let's vote on it," he said, "I vote for Jim." It was seconded by the rest of us. Jim was up in the Tastykake line waiting for his Butterscotch Krimpets. When he got back, we all started giggling and passing sly looks.

Oh no. What's up?" he asked. We told him. By our rules he had been suckerized fair and square.

"All right," he said, "The Blazer rides again. What time should I pick everyone up?"

"Eight's great and don't be late, mate!" said Joe to high fives and laughter all around. We finished our lunch to the incessant banter of the cafeteria with thoughts of the good times ahead. I was in high spirits the rest of the afternoon.

When I got home, the dish of apple slices was waiting at my table setting. My mom was already preparing dinner. We ate early on Fridays so that Angela and I could make plans. I kissed my mom and sat down to my dish of slices. "How was school?" she asked, of course. I said fine. She told me about the mob scene at the Acme because it was "Double Coupon Days" today. Then she remembered, "Oh, Cory, your dad called and said for you not to make plans from 7 to 9 tonight. He needs you to follow him to Uncle Denny's shop."

My dad had what he considered a "classic" car, a 1973 Chrysler Cordoba. Whenever it broke down, which was often, he would drive it over to my uncle's repair shop in Conshohocken. My uncle never charged him and my dad always got his traffic tickets fixed.

Joe answered the phone when I called. "Hey, listen," I said, "I'm gonna hafta meet you guys over there tonight. My dad's car broke down and I have to follow him to my uncle's."

"When is he gonna get rid of that boat? Ya know, it figures. We make plans and you gotta ruin 'em," he said.
“Hey, relax,” I said. “I’m not ruining anything. I’ll just be a little late, that’s all. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“All right man if that’s the way it’s gotta be. I’ll try to save you some refreshments, but don’t blame me if you get stuck with Lisa banana nose Andrews.”

We laughed. “See ya there, dickhead,” I said.

“Not if I see you first!” he said and hung up the phone.

Dad and I dropped the car off at the shop and visited Uncle Denny who lived around the corner. They were reminiscing about the time Dad wore Uncle Denny’s last pair of clean underwear to school so Denny couldn’t go. I listened but didn’t say much. It was about 8:30 when we finally got out of there.

I drove home. I guess I was speeding because my dad said, “You seem awful anxious about something, Cory. What is it?”

I was still nervous from last night’s dinner conversation. So I said, “Nothing, Pop. I’m just going to a party with the guys. I’ll need the car. . . if it’s all right.”

“Whose party?” he asked. “Are the parents going to be there?”

“It’s Missy Heard’s party; the girl I used to date. I think her parents will be around. I’m not sure.”

“Well, I guess it’s all right. But you know how your mom and I feel about this. If there aren’t any parents there, come home. Understand?”

“Yeah, Dad,” I said.

“One more thing, Cory. Promise me. No drinking.”

“Okay, Pop.” I mumbled. I let him off in the driveway and went over to the party.

Cars lined the street. People were coming and going through the front door of the townhouse. As I got out of the car I could hear “Mony, Mony” coming from the house, still fifty yards away. When I opened the heavy oak door the heat was overwhelming. Rolling up my sleeves, I edged my way through the crowd. “Hi, Don. What’s up Dave. Hi, Lisa.” I repeated, mindless of what I was saying. Where is everyone. I wondered. Then I felt a tap on the back. It was Larry, holding two bottles. He offered me one. I thought about it, and said, “Oh, what the hell. Thanks Lar.”

“My pleasure. What took you so long?” he asked.

“My dad and my uncle were telling the classic underwear story for the millionth time. It was pretty corny. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. Where are the other guys?” I asked.

“Oh geez, you should see them. They’re hammered! They’ve been challenging people to canoe races ever since they sat down at the kitchen table,” he said.
“C’mon. Let’s go see them,” I said, and made my way towards the kitchen, sipping my Molson. As I stepped through the doorway, I was gripped by the sound of a very large belch. It was Todd. The team of Todd, Joe and Jim had just won another race; they looked very pleased with their accomplishments so far. Larry and I forced our way through the crowded kitchen to where they sat. Before I could say anything Joe clunked the bottom of his Molson bottle against the top of mine. I had to chug it now or the beer would foam all over me. As I chugged, everyone at the table cheered me on. Done! I got high fives all around. It felt good to be here as I sat down next to Joe. “What’s up buddy?” I asked him.

“Oh not much,” he said with a sigh and giggled. Then Todd and Jim started laughing uncontrollably. Joe joined them.

Jim got up, using Todd’s shoulder as a support and said, “Man, I gotta pee so bad I can taste it!” more laughter from the “Three Stooges.” I watched Jim’s hulking frame bouncing off walls and people as he swayed and reeled his way to the bathroom. He hit everything within a five foot radius of his path. Meanwhile Joe and Todd were laughing and giving each other head butts.

“Man, they are messed up!” I said to Larry.

“Yeah, you ain’t kiddin’,” he said.

“Why don’t you grab us a couple cold ones and we’ll go out back for a while. I can’t breath in here,” I said. “Joe... me and Lar will be back in a few minutes.” No answer. Him and Todd were involved with a girl I had never seen before. They were teaching her how to play quarters.

Jim bowled us over, mumbled something unintelligible, and smiled as he stumbled back from the bathroom. I noticed a little stain on his pants, and so did Larry. We laughed and continued to edge our way through the living room to the glass back door. The stereo system sent shock waves through our feet as we crossed the tile floor. People were dancing to the playful Van Halen song, “Jump!” and two couples were making out on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Once outside I said, “Who are all these people? I haven’t even seen Missy yet.”

“Yeah, me neither. I think a lot of these people are from other high schools. That party gossip hotline must be international!” he said.

“So much for your ‘small get together’ idea,” I said. He laughed. It was much quieter and cooler outside, and we sat on the patio chairs and nursed our beers.

“This is the life,” he sighed.

Assured that the party was still rocking by the din of the stereo, I felt that I was in my element. I had good friends and a great year coming up. Now, it was our turn to reminisce as Dad and Uncle Denny had done.
We were talking about our first championship when the record screeched and went dead. Larry and I were curious. People were streaming out the back door, so we had to wait five minutes to enter the house. Back inside, there had been an accident. Someone had knocked over a glass cabinet filled with tiny porcelain elephants. There remains lay scattered among the shards of glass. Missy was seated at the kitchen table, drunk and crying. Eddie Johnson and Bill Dodge, both football players, were telling the remaining stragglers to leave. They didn’t bother Larry or me because we knew them well. Without thinking, I stooped down and began to pick up the splinters. When it was cleaned up I went over to Missy to say goodbye. She was being comforted by five of her girlfriends. I said, “I’m sorry about your elephants. Umm, you’ll be all right, right?”

She managed a smile and said, “Yeah thanks Cory. You too, Lar.”

“Well, I’ll see ya,” I said and grabbed Larry to go. He added, “Yeah, sorry. See ya later.”

Larry and I went to my car. I said, “What do you want to do, Lar?”

“I’m still drunk. I can’t go home like this, my mom’ll shit!” he said.

“All right, all right calm down. We’ll get something to eat. How’s McDonald’s?” I asked.

“Yeah fine,” he said. We drove out of the neighborhood and onto Main Street. Getting something to eat was a good idea, because I was still a little buzzed myself. I concentrated on the road immediately in front of me when Larry said, “Hey an accident.”

I looked up, and made a quick left to avoid the traffic. It was a big accident judging by the amount of flashing emergency lights.

As we got our food, we saw other people from the party had come here too. I had finished half of my Big Mac when a girl and two guys I knew vaguely came in crying. I intercepted the girl as she was heading towards the bathroom.

“What happened? What’s the matter?” I asked.

She recognized me from the party and stopped crying long enough to whisper, “There was a big accident on Main Street. A truck overturned.” I grabbed Larry, who had a handful of my fries in his mouth, and yanked him out the side door to where my car was parked. I repeated what I had heard as we raced to my car. We weren’t allowed to go past Second Street because policemen and firemen had barricaded it. I parked my car at the Merit station on the corner and we sprinted the last two blocks.
Millions of people were milling around, some crying. We strained forward, closer to the wreckage. The flames emitting from the overturned blue Blazer were still giving off a deadly light; firemen surrounded it. Others ran frantically back to their trucks to get more foam. I saw bodies strewn about the street like discarded match sticks. Medics rushed from ambulance to body to body. Some of the figures were totally eclipsed with reddened sheets. One ambulance sped away from the wreckage with lights flashing and sirens blaring. Another was preparing to leave. I started to push through, but an officer blocked me saying to the crowd of us, "Move back. Please move back."

As I edged forward again, Larry grabbed my arm. I shook him off, but then I saw the look on his face. He gestured weakly, and I saw it too—a red Converse sneaker, size twelve, lying on the pavement ripped in two. Larry and I walked back to the car. He threw up his half-eaten, undigested McDLT. We got in and I drove him home. At his house I said, "I'll call you soon as I get up. Are you okay?"

"No," he answered, "are you?"

"No," I replied and drove away.

I arrived home at 1:30. Dazed, I fumbled for my house key and somehow managed to open the door. I was in shock. I went upstairs and quietly knocked on my parents' bedroom door. "It's me, Cory," I mumbled. "Can I please come in?" Without waiting for an answer, I entered. The darkness enveloped me; it was numbing. For a moment, I said nothing.

My mother flicked on a light. "Oh my God! Look at him, Bill. What's the matter, honey? Are you all right?" she asked, jumping up and pulling me down onto the bed, hugging me.

I said, "There was an accident... with people from the party... don't know who... but Jim's truck..." That was all I could muster. Dad peppered me with quick, terse questions, but my mom shushed him, saying, "Not now, Bill." I must have fainted, because when I awakened it was still dark and I was laying in bed next to my mom, who was asleep. Wide awake, I started to cry.