



Branches

volume 14



Cover Art
Amber Watts

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Deep South
Ann Locklear

Awarded first place by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.

Abby Steals a Poem

By: Robert Hamby

This poem was awarded first place by the literary editors of *Branches*.

She is kneeling nearly naked on the carpet
pouring over the pages, her brown eyes
splashing on each sheet.

Suddenly she pauses, and waves one
over her shoulder like the flag of a country
she's fond of.

This one is good but it sounds
like a guitar that's lost its tune,
stored in a humid room,
its strings are stretched out

she says, and then
what is it with you and parking lots?

Really it's empty parking lots
or pockets, I reply, grabbing a frosted
bottle of vodka from the freezer.

There's a lack of weather here,
a dead space between seasons.

they're nice,
do you want a smoke? she asks
slowly folding a poem
that holds her tangled
between several cursive
horizontal lines.

The one where she is a small room
with large furniture
and above the couch I wrote about a painting
with a field
a few blue flowers
and a black bird
flying toward the foreground
staring straight out at the opposite wall.



Sound
Amber Dillingham



Taste
Amber Dillingham

Old Crow

By: Matt McGuire

This story was awarded first place by the literary editors of *Branches*.

Cold Beer Bradford sank deep in his easy chair, staring intermittently at the yellow-white walls bathed in shadow and the boob tube, counting the minutes till the sun rose, sucking on a bottle of cheap bourbon with seven cigarettes smoking in various states of smolder anywhere between just lit and junkbutt. He'd napalmed the left arm off the same chair two weeks before when, in a state of extreme drunkenness, he had passed out and tipped over his stolen Ramada Inn ashtray. The flames had awakened him but he was too trashed to do anything about it. The fire went out eventually, much like the fire under his North Georgia ass had fizzled out ten years before when he'd fucked himself out of Florida and headed west. He was hoping for a similar end to the heat of the hot seat he was in now. The television in his borrowed, one bunk barroom was tuned to Information Channel Two, and through the static and a fourteen-day drunken haze, he attempted at times to educate himself on the doings of the do-gooders in Loss fuckin' Angel-eez.

Cold Beer squinted his 80 proof eyes, ran a hand through his greasy, foot long salt and pepper Sam-Elliot-Roadhouse-era hair, licked the ragged lips that hung limp over a missing partial on the left side of his mustached mouth and lit another coffin nail. Bluish-gray smoke hung heavy in a half-circle round his head as he set the bottle of Old Crow he was nursing down on the brown, bong-water-stained carpet and with great difficulty tilted his head a full three inches forward to try and read the strobeline disco-text running across the screen faster than a fat cop to a donut shop.

DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM? ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS CAN HELP. CALL 213-555-1212. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

"The hell I ain't," he thought as he picked up the telephone that rested on the opposite side of the chair from his now-neglected bottle of spirits. He had been holed up in the summer season apartment of his ex-good friend and former pot-boat buddy Key West Jack for three weeks. Key West Jack had told him that he could use the place to try and sober up a bit before he went to court in May. It was April 20th and he had gotten about as sober as a shitfaced Alabama shine-runner, and he wasn't only facing DUI charges this time. He had five first class felony drug indictments thrown in the mix that made his Superior Court cocktail full of bitters and him low on friends. That, and the fact that he had used Key West Jack's phone to call long distance to every ex-girlfriend, fiancé, desperate housewife and tavern wench he'd left in the last ten years holding a baby or a busted beer bottle—to no avail. He was looking to run, but his options were about as slim as his six-foot, hundred and sixty-five pound frame. So he'd walled himself up with a dozen half-gallon bottles of the bad stuff in the oasis Key West Jack had loaned him, determined to drink himself to death or die tryin'.

Cold Beer dialed the number of the AA hotline slowly, searching in the silver halfflight of the television set for the right numbers. Five-five-five-one-two-two-one. "Hola?" came across the crackling line like a greeting from Guadalupe. "Aloha? What the fuck? Is this Hawaya? I want AA. Is AA run by Hawayans?"

Click.

Five-five-five-two-one-two-one.

"You have reached the office of Glenwood Greengables, LLC. If you'd like a quote on an outstanding life insurance policy or a 401k as solid as the sun-up, please press one now."

Click.

Five-three-five-one-two-one-two

"We're sorry, but we cannot complete your call as dialed. You must first dial a one or..."

Click.

Five-five-one-one-two-two-one

"Share your decision with a company that really cares. Cremation is much more cost effective than coffins. Here at Heaven's Gate Crematory and Topless Bar, we care about YOU. Located at the corner of Sunset and..."

Click.

Five-five-five-one-two-one-two.

“Alcoholics Anonymous. Remember, you’re not alone.”

“Yeah. I wanna quit drinking myself to death. You got any ex-drunk lawyers signed up down there?”

“For a list of meetings in the greater metropolitan area, press one. For a copy of our basic text mailed to your present address, press two. For more options, please press three.”

Three.

“For a meeting schedule of your area, press one. To hear an automated reading of the twelve steps, press two. To speak with a member of AA, press three.”

Three.

“We’re sorry, but all our members are fielding calls at the present time. Your call should be answered in (computer voice) 3 minutes. You are not alone.”

Click.

Twenty-two years. It had been twenty-two fucking years since Cold Beer had first tasted poison, and a state of cold-blooded inertia had set in that he couldn’t shake. He usually rose around 3 a.m when the night terrors assailed him. Well, if you could call it rising—he rose his hand from the down side of the Lazyboy where he’d passed out the night before and rose the bottle to his mouth. A pine box and a state funeral were all that waited for him at the end of the long, black tunnel he was stumbling down without the hope for a gold lode or a set of headlights at the end. Sometimes he would halfstand in front of the bathroom mirror, peering into his own red, rural route eyes and curse himself for a coward. There was a half opened box of Zim’s rat poison wedged in between a silver packet of razorblades and a bottle of Roloids on the bottom shelf of Key West Jack’s medicine cabinet. He would make port on the good, cool porcelain sink with one eagle-world-and-anchor tattooed arm and alternately open and close the mirror door of the medicine cabinet with the other, cursing a blue streak and damning to hell the demons and the angels tugging by turns at his soul. He’d stand there, pray a little, cuss a little, make a decision to do the thing and then cave into himself like a mineshaft without enough timbers—he’d always end up back in the Lazyboy looking for oblivion and finding the dull edges of old memories. He’d been a man once—he’d raised soybeans and corn on a sharecrop plot that his half-Apsáalooke father had left him back in the Georgia low country. He’d even raised a small herb garden and a few tomatoes for his young wife to can before winter. Genevieve. Genevieve Masterson was the prettiest little piece of heaven in Clarke County. They’d gotten married while he was still known as Tommy Ray Bradford in the late days of High School and they had sworn to love each other to the end of the line. When his number came up in ’67 she drove him to the bus station where his outbound was Paris Island, coach and crammed to the guts with pink-faced, blue-eyed and green-minded Georgia boys. He’d volunteered for the Marines to have an extra six weeks with Genevieve. Uncle Sam cut it to three after Tet and he’d barely had time to put a bun in the oven before he had to say goodbye. Genevieve said they should be careful and wait till he got home, but Cold Beer wanted her to have a living piece of himself always, just in case she got a letter and a folded flag at her doorstep instead of a dress blues-clad war orphan. She told him that day in the cool, pre-spring mist, amid the exhaust fumes of the bus depot and the tears of the departing, that she’d be true and wait for him. To the end of the line, she said. She meant every word.

Cold Beer kept his purity intact amidst the opium, the blood and the almond-eyed whores and kept his ass attached to his body through nine desperate months in a triple-canopied green hell until he was the one that got the letter. Genevieve and his still-born son had both died of complications from childbirth in the Clarke County Hospital at 3 a.m. on November 19, 1968. He read the letter six times and then dropped stone dead. Not died from lack of breath or a bullet, but died to hope. He was three bells and a wakeup from coming home but now he had jack Christmas to come home to. That night he dragged his dumbfounded and tear-stained soul through the heavy monsoon mud and into the enlisted man’s watering hole and died some more. He was so dead to the world and the war that he slumped into the Captain’s office the next day with Schlitz and Jim Beam on his breath and volunteered for another tour of duty. He served three tours in South Vietnam and earned two silver stars and four purple hearts—he had to crawl through a red jungle of paperwork and tin general ass to stay after he’d caught that final piece of Chinese steel in his knee—he eventually got tagged onto a Force Recon outfit

running ghost ops in Cambodia. When he returned from duty in 1972, a spent shell casing of a soldier, he laid those medals at the foot of Genevieve's and Tommy Jr.'s grave and did his best, for the next twenty years, to make life roll by with John Barleycorn in the driver's seat and himself passed out in the back, sporting a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs.

Cold Beer rode to ruin with the Outlaws, the In-laws and ducked the law dogs round the east coast during the lude-laced and liquor-dampened blur that was the underbelly of middle-seventies Americana. He'd ended up piss-down in Florida round the bicentennial running pot for a half glass-eyed Cuban named Quevedo until he'd burned two too many bales and far too many bridges to stay in the land of Margaritas and bikini-clad, coke-nosed disasters. That's when he'd headed for the left coast and discovered that crystal methamphetamine not only allowed a man to drink all he wanted, but coupled with a long pistol or a sawed-off shotgun and his old biker black book he could make a decent living and not have to sling green, gummy hundred pound hay bales over the side of a skiff and get cussed at in Cuban. His goose hung high and the money flowed west for nigh on a decade until his number came up in the California DEA's office and he got popped by a gaggle of ChiP's while transporting a limitless load of pure crystal go-getter in his newly-bought Aston Martin—he blew a .25 to boot. The criminal division of the IRS quickly confiscated the Aston Martin, his cobalt blue '73 Harley Police Cruiser, his chromed and K.C.'ed Chevy Dually, his dual snakeskin suitcases full of Ben Franklins, his luxurious double-wide mansion outside Indio and his gun collection. He kicked the gak in the L.A. county pen and called in two old debts to make bail and put a roof over his head until his court date. That's how he'd ended up in Greater Hollywood in Key West Jack's one-armed Lazyboy at the end of a frayed and hope-destitute rope.

Cold Beer shook the cobwebs from his head and tried to stand. He stood there in front of the Lazyboy for a full five minutes, letting the room spin till it got tired of itself and then he stumbled over to the television and flipped through the channels. He settled on one with a black shades and white suit-clad black man waving a worn brown Bible over his head and shouting into the camera, "His Way is the only Way Out; Y'all gotta get Right, or get Left!" Forty or so odd pale-faced choir members sat behind the preacher in starry-eyed rapture, soaking up everything the gaunt, garrulous prophet was hurling out at him; gamma rays filled with the gospel of Good Orderly Direction flowed past him and out into space as the seven o'clock sky turned slowly from blue black to burnt orange. A seven-digit number flashed on the bottom of the boob tube, and doing his best to still the shit brown and cigarette butt strewn sea waving under his holey sock feet, he staggered back to his one-armed Lazyboy, aimed for the middle and crashed down backwards, picking up the receiver of the phone in the process.

He glanced quickly at his attire: a crusty K-mart wifebeater and a pair of crotch-strangling Wrangler jeans he'd worn so long that they looked plastered rather than painted on. "Well, hell, it sure as shit ain't Sunday go-to-meetin, but I ain't aimin' for sainthood." He took another long draw off the Old Crow for his liver's sake and started dialing the flashing red numbers on the screen, aiming for the middle and cursing a blue streak under his liquor-scented breath.

Far to the east, the red golden sun came up over the horizon, illuminating the waking streets that ran between the stucco, glass and steel structures of Los Angeles proper—spires and satellite signals flying up towards an expectant sky. Brooks Brothers-clad citizens sat in slow-moving traffic jams as the small hour hopeless dope fiends and their dollar-bill knot hollow slavemasters turned in for the day to recharge their desperation for the next night of crack rock religion. Somewhere in the western distance, a gull cried as the first few beams of light peeked through the yellow blinds of Key West Jack's street-view window, giving a holy luster to Cold Beer's limp left hand hanging down beside the burnt-off arm of his easy chair, the green plastic receiver of the phone lying just below his slowly paling fingers, a staccato, alarm-like busy signal reverberating in the dead air as it lay next to Cold Beer's empty bottle of Old Crow.



Self Portrait
Kristina McPeak



Portrait
Ross Helton

Oeuvre

By: Earl LeClaire

I wanted to tell you about
sound waves bending in space,
the circular configuration of time,
my theory of parallel universes,
of the struggles I've had with philosophy
that have left me with little belief in anything.
But life interferes, daily.

So, instead,
I'll have to tell you of
the cantaloupes at the market, so round,
so overpriced and out of season;
of the sound I listen for as I strike each one
to find the ripest of what, in this winter month,
should not be ripe at all.

And about what is fixed every day:
the way the mountains smell in the morning,
the silence when the wind stops
and snow covers the ground;
the way, at night, deer suddenly appear
in the moonscape, like apparitions,
and make for the duck pond and the corn.

I wanted to hand you my heart,
not at the end of a spear,
but in my hands, a still-beating gift,
proof of all I've ever said and done
in the name of love.
Instead, I'll show you the following scene,
true in its composition:

me, standing at the stove
preparing breakfast while the cat
sits by the door, waiting to go out.
I'm half paying attention to what I do,
As I listen to Mozart entering the city of Lintz
And wait for that singular hour,
when you come downstairs

dressed for the day.
And it is enough, that and the meal,
the sun through the window,
the shells I've collected in a bottle on the table,
you sitting to your cup of steaming, lemon tea,
your eyes, flashing and your smile.
That is enough; it is more than enough.



Self Portrait
Andrew Carswell



Self Portrait
Lindsey Sherrill



Self Portrait
Bradley Williams

Make-Believe Mother

By: Madeline Marie Rizze

I have always been haunted by the fact that I have another set of parents out there. It's not that I never dreamed of having a perfect family, being reunited with my biological mother and father and living happily ever after; instead my thoughts dwelled only on her. The reason I put so much emphasis on my birthmother is not for any better reason than for her physical description. At the age of 20 she was 5'3", medium build, fair with freckles, reddish-light brown hair with blue eyes. Other than the blue eyes, that might as well be describing me. My entire life I have always been aware of the fact that I looked nothing like anyone in my family; there isn't even anyone with a tint of red in their hair. I believe it is for that reason that I identified so much with my birthmother instead of my birthfather. It's the hair. The written description can't tell me if I have someone's nose or chin, but it does tell me that I have the same hair as her.

Throughout my life the way that I have imagined her has always changed, constantly growing right along with me. The one thing that has been set in stone for me is the way I imagine her hair, long and wavy, always beautiful in a messy sort of way. Her face has always been hard for me to picture. I've never met someone who I even slightly resemble so to imagine someone that could truly look like me is no easy task. I mainly pictured her like a paper doll. Her face has always been ordinary, easy to change and mould into whatever I please. I change her personality as easily as you would change a paper doll's clothes. Everything I know about her is superficial and unimportant, so it has always been up to me to make up the rest.

As a child my interests were in animals, like every other five year old, and I wanted to be a veterinarian. Therefore, I imagined my birthmother as an animal lover. I saw her as kind and loving to all creatures. I would picture her living in the country somewhere, owning lots of land so she could have a barn full of animals. I would think of her in dirty overalls, with her hair in braided pigtails, which made perfect sense given her outdoor profession. She would be nursing a lamb to health, feeding it from a bottle. When I was five, I was just sure that she was smart and gentle and the most caring person. I cannot recall one single time that I even considered the fact that she could be a bad person; I only thought good things about my birthmother. I didn't necessarily think of her often at that age, but I did think of her, and knew for a fact that one day I would find her.

As I grew older and stranger, I used to tell people that I was adopted because I was actually an alien. I didn't really believe this, but I loved to speculate the possibility of being someone who was really rare and different. I would think about having a home planet instead of a home state because anything seems more appealing than the great state of Ohio. I could imagine a grand homecoming where a whole planet would celebrate my return and ask of my adventures on Earth. I didn't go so far as to imagine an alien family, but it was implied. I had a flair for imagination, and I can only imagine what my friends and classmates thought of this idea.

Around the age of nine, like so many others, I fell victim to pop culture. I started to be concerned with looking cool and listening to cool music. For the first time in my life, I gave my make-believe mother a specific face and name. I used to wish, that out of everyone in the world, out of all of the possibilities, my birthmother was the singer Jewel. I can remember camping out in my backyard with my best friend in the entire world, Katie Doss. My father had helped us set up our tent, and from dusk until dawn we stayed out there talking about our hopes and dreams.

Katie talked about how she was going to marry Zach, the youngest brother from Hanson, and I told her all about my secret wish that Jewel, my epitome of everything one could aspire to, could be my birthmother. I spent plenty of time thinking of what my life would have been like if Jewel had been my mother and had kept me. Watching networks like VH1 only fueled my fantasy. I imagined us playing guitar together and even living in a van together (which I had learned that she really had done for awhile). I knew her parents were folk singers and that Jewel and her father could yodel, and as lame as it sounds I imagined all of us yodeling together. I could picture us all together, writing songs and

learning new instruments. At this time I really started to think of my birth mother more often and ask more questions to myself and to my parents. I wanted to know what she was really like, what the circumstances were surrounding my adoption and would she want to meet me as badly as I wanted to meet her?

When I was around twelve, I went through a hippie phase. I was really into bell bottom jeans and peasant shirts. Like myself, I made my birthmother go through the same transition. I pictured her as the ultimate free spirit. She couldn't keep me because I would have kept her grounded, and she wanted to touch the stars. I imagined her as someone who was always having fun, always doing something out of the ordinary. Her free-flowing hair matched her free-flowing personality. If the notion struck, she would jump in her VW van and just drive to somewhere new and different. This version of my birthmother was more cultured, having seen most of the world for herself instead of reading about it as I always did. My birth mother was the ultimate in hippie morality: she was someone who loved everyone for exactly who they were and would never judge anyone or try to change them. She was someone who had seen and done everything worth seeing and doing. She was everything a twelve year old girl would want to look up to.

While I was in high school, I wanted to be a doctor. My favorite show was *Scrubs*, so I pictured my birthmother as a doctor running down hospital hallways, trying to save lives but always with enough time to make some hilariously witty remark. It was easy to picture her in the usual doctor's gear, lab coat, scrubs and stethoscope, her hair remarkably lovely despite the drama of every life-saving moment. Most of her personality traits had survived since my childhood. She was gentle and loving, always willing to help anyone in need, be it animal or human. I always pictured her as intelligent and easy going whether she had mud on her overalls or was living in a van. Once I started community college that view started to change.

Moving out on my own and experiencing life's realities changed my perception of my birthmother. As it was my first year in college, I hadn't the faintest idea what I wanted for myself, so I used what little information I had on her to mold her. I knew that her major in college had been business, so for the first time in my life, I applied some practicality to her image and made her a business woman. Instead of being free spirited or even witty, I saw her dominating the business world. As a CEO of some huge conglomerate, there wasn't time for witty banter or random trips to Europe. I pictured her free-flowing hair wrapped in a tight bun, a more business-like look. I still saw her as a good person, just as a more serious person. I thought of her as a person of consequence, someone with achievements to her name. As an 18 year old, it was a lot to live up to. For the first time, I started to really judge myself by what I thought her opinion of me would be.

I had thought that I would be able to find her when I turned 18. When I finally worked up the nerve to call my adoption agency (six full months after my 18th birthday), I learned that in the great state of Ohio you must be 21 to have that information released. It was a huge blow. After thinking for all that time that 18 would be the year and after the past six agonizing months of trying to call, it was not what I wanted to hear. After that I focused too much on thinking about how she would look at me. I would try to sum up my life in terms that would be easily communicated to the stranger who had given life to me, and every time it sounded terrible. "Hi, I'm Mady. I moved out of my parents' house when I was only 17 to live with my 19 year old boyfriend, Nathan. We live in the smallest trailer in the trailer park, and I am currently attending a community college." I would say this to myself and just feel ashamed. I couldn't imagine facing her. I thought about her all the time at this point, judging every single decision by some imaginary standards that I had given her to impose on me. I was miserable at the thought of introducing myself to her, even though I was actually doing really well for myself.

While at Tri-County Community College I gained some perspective on my situation. I was doing really great in all of my classes, and I had realized I had two true loves in my life: Nathan Crocker and English, my new major. I took pride in my baby steps toward a better life for myself and started to see my life as it really was, something to be proud of. My acceptance to Appalachian State University really made me feel accomplished. It was my goal to move to Boone, and I made that happen. I wanted her to be able to look at me and not be ashamed to call me her flesh and blood, and I think she should be able to.

Now with my twenty-first birthday looming around the corner, my perspective has changed completely. Instead of wondering if I will live up to her expectations, I now wonder if she will live up to mine. I have had a lifetime to build her up and make her into

something spectacular, someone special, but what if she isn't? I look at women who pass me in the supermarket or are behind me in line at TJ Maxx, and I ask myself "Would you be okay with it if she were your birthmother?" Nine times out of ten, the answer is no. I know that I'm a good person and that I have a bright and happy future ahead of me, but what if she didn't? What if she turns out to be a mean and bitter middle-aged woman who doesn't want to meet me and hates her life? These are the questions I ask myself now that I am old enough to even comprehend that possibility.

I know she's probably not a peaceful veterinarian or from another planet. She couldn't be Jewel because Jewel was only 14 and living in Alaska when I was born. She probably isn't a well-traveled hippie or a humorous doctor. I know she probably isn't an aggressive business woman cornering the market on some good or another. The one thing I do know is that she is my birthmother. Whether she knows it or not, she has always been there for me, always been who I needed her to be. She's been a role model I could make perfectly to my own standards, someone to aspire to. She has changed with me throughout my entire life, and I can only hope that the real woman is as great as I have always imagined.



Untitled
Nora Halsey



Red Riding Hood
Ann Locklear



Kimra Stevens

The Sock

By: Liz Ammerman

There's a sock on the floor
Almost black
Like the boy's size six foot
Ran it through the mud
Shoeless

How many rules
Have been broken
By that single sock

I should be very angry;

I guess at another time
I'd have called him
Out of his bed
To "pick that up!"

But what I'm thinking now
Is quite different

Someday
There will be no more
Socks on the floor,
Dirty or clean

That sock means to me
My sweet baby boy
With his mischievous laugh
And gentle eyes
Lies slumbering
Safe in his bed.

So I smile
And hug him in my heart
And kiss his soft cheek
And thank God for
His dirty little sock.

There to remind me
That
One day
My son will be grown
And leaving his sock
On some other floor.



Still Life
Amber Lee Randel



Still Life
Heather Smith

Hello, Is Anybody There?

By: Forrest Yerman

Characters

ALEX, early twenties, dressed casually

GRAHAM, early forties, polished clothes, well fit, and expensive

JAMES, elderly, the butler

DR. NUDLESTEIN

NEWSPERSON 1 and NEWSPERSON 2

DOCTOR 1 and DOCTOR 2

Scene 1

At Rise: GRAHAM is lying on the floor at C stage, talking on his hand held.

GRAHAM No, I'm lying down...why? Lately my head feels so light—so I lay down on the floor to let more blood flow into it...my head...what's that...what...listen, the connection's dying...what...(loudly)...I said the connection's dying...what...you're elections lying...listen Hyunmin, I'll have to call you back...(loudly) The connections dying...Hyunmin...hello...Hyunmin, are you there...(takes phone away from ear with an aggravated look)...it's dead. I still can't get enough of you, though...

ALEX enters from a window UC.

ALEX Oh, Graham...what are you doing on the floor...(moment of silence. GRAHAM gets up off the floor, walks to ALEX and gives him a hand shake, ALEX hugs)...it's so good to see you.

GRAHAM Ahh, Alex, you're here—pleased as well to see you, brother, and what an appropriate entrance for your long, long absence...just how long has it been?

ALEX Well, it's...what day is it?

GRAHAM (looks at hand held while speaking) It is precisely Wednesday, the thirteenth day of June, in the year two-thousand and eight, at eleven hours and forty-three minutes, and...fifteen seconds...and a beautiful day as well...Who knows what tomorrow, Thursday, the fourteenth day of June, in the year two-thousand and eight, will bring.

ALEX Okay, today is Wednesday the thirteenth of June, two-thousand and eight, and I left on a Monday, back in eighty-nine...it was the tenth of August, I remember because that's your birthday (lightly punches GRAHAM's arm), and you had already left home by then—you were on the east coast going to Princeton...

GRAHAM No, it was Harvard...

ALEX No, it wasn't Harvard, that's where I went to school—you went to Princeton.

GRAHAM I'm stumped, brother...I know, it's sure to be in my FaceSpace profile...(fidgeting with his hand held)...just give me one minute...okay...here's my profile...now down, click here, yes, click there, yes...loading, loading, loading...aha! it was Princeton...

ALEX See...hold on, how the hell can you forget where you went to school? (GRAHAM shrugs his shoulders)...really?...(GRAHAM shrugs his shoulders again)...anyway—I left then, and now it's now, so that means I've been gone for a long time, huh, like sixteen years?

GRAHAM Brother, give me those dates once more and I will calculate on my dear, dear HP iPAQ 211 Enterprise Handheld, which allows me to maximize every precious second of my life as an important figure of the great get up and go, if you know what I mean (lightly hits ALEX in the shoulder), so that no time is wasted. It runs all the crucial applications while I'm out of the office, or my home, or anywhere I can't bring my darling, beloved seventeen-inch Mac Book Pro—the silver one, with the two point six Giga-hertz Intel Duo two processor chip that fills me with joy at the endless capabilities of media, media, media...

ALEX Wow...you really are attached to that thing, huh?

GRAHAM It keeps me connected.

ALEX To what?

GRAHAM To what...huh...I never...to what—ha!...to the world, Alex, it keeps me connected to the world, to the twenty-first century, buddy boy, which I guess you missed out on while you were out gallivanting in the jungles of the Caribbean, I suppose...

ALEX (Laughing) The jungles of the Caribbean...

GRAHAM Oh, I don't remember exactly which exotically foreign jungle it was this time, but you get the point...

ALEX I don't get the point at all—I was in school the whole time—remember—I'm young—I've been away at school for a long damn time and...

GRAHAM Well, obviously they didn't teach you any manners now, did they?

ALEX Whatever, Graham...How could you forget that I was in school, though, I mean, I just graduated from college...how could you forget that?

GRAHAM Huh, forget what?

ALEX You weren't even listening?

GRAHAM No, no, I was listening, I just forgot what you said, that's what I said, I forgot.

ALEX Whatever, Graham. I don't want to argue with you, all I was trying to do was to defend myself when you said that I was "out gallivanting in the jungles of the Caribbean"—I was not gallivanting in the jungles of the...

GRAHAM Okay, okay, maybe I should have worded myself better than to say "gallivanting," but the point is...

ALEX Your point is that I was in the Caribbean for the last sixteen or so years of my life when in fact I've been in school, where I earned a degree, with honors, in communications and a minor in theatre, and not in the goddamn jungles...

GRAHAM Language, Alex...

ALEX Of the danged Caribbean.

GRAHAM Anyway, Alex, I don't see why you must insist, it's a silly argument, so come over here, brother, and let me give you a welcome home present.

GRAHAM hands ALEX a brightly wrapped package.

GRAHAM Ohh, are you going to enjoy this more than anything you could ever had dreamed of, especially after the years of isolation you've suffered out there...out in the jungle...

ALEX What the hell is it?

GRAHAM Oh, joy, you're excited—I knew you would be, but it's never easy to gauge one's reaction to an opulently expensive and obscenely experimental gift, oh so difficult, but I must never give up my generous nature...

ALEX What the hell is it, though?

GRAHAM Ahh, it's certainly, positively more than I expected, brilliant...(turns away from ALEX, bringing out his phone and pushing buttons, then brings it to his ear)...yeah, hey, let me speak with Jackie, oh she's not...she does...uh-huh...alright, bye now...

ALEX What the hell is it, Graham?

GRAHAM Hey, Jackie, darling, how is everything? Great, you'll never guess...yup...yep...ohh, yeah...okay, so you did guess, so what...anyway...yeah, he loves it...

ALEX Graham, what the hell is it?

GRAHAM No...oh, oh, yeah...well, I just wanted to call and let you know he got it, but I'll be seeing you soon anyway, so I'll tell you all about it a second time when I see you in person later this evening, at around six-thirty, like we planned last week on Friday when we had lunch together at Wong-Feng's and you got sick the next day but I didn't, but then the day after that I got sick, remember that...yeah, never again, huh...okay...(makes kissing noises)...bye.

ALEX Graham, What the hell is this damn thing!?

GRAHAM It's a headphone—we can go and get it installed as soon as you've washed up and had some pea soup, brother, and no sooner, so I suggest you hurry up if you want to try it out today...

ALEX What the hell is a headphone?

GRAHAM I do wish you wouldn't swear so much, what if mother can hear you...

ALEX Just leave her out of it. If she hears it she hears, it wouldn't be the first time...and what the hell is this thing?

GRAHAM This thing, as you so call it, is, as I said, "It's a headphone." As you may know, I work for an institution which is interested in advancing the advancement of technology to connect the world together into one great big happy cellular family...and this is the newest

advancement that is going to revolutionize the connectedness of every individual on the planet...is there something you don't understand, dear brother?

ALEX What the hell is it?

GRAHAM It's a head ph...

ALEX Yeah, yeah, I know, it's a head phone, but what in the hell is a head phone?

GRAHAM Ah, you don't understand, and of course not, you've been eating fresh papayas and watching the sun rise and set over the turquoise-clear waters of the Caribbean...(GRAHAM's phone rings) Ah, it's Jackie again, I wonder what it is that she has to say...Hello, Jackie darling, how is everything...excellent...oh you wouldn't believe it—he doesn't understand...no, no...heavens, no...no, he's just been living with natives for the last sixteen years of his life in the Caribbean...yeah...oh, yeah...so he isn't up to speed with the modern world, but he's got a good connection for getting up to speed...no, me...okay, well, I'll see you later this evening at around six-thirty, like we planned last week on Friday when we had lunch together at Wong-Feng's and you got sick the next day but I didn't, but then the day after that I got sick, remember that...yeah, never again, huh...okay...(makes kissing noises)...bye.

GRAHAM Good heavens, Alex, you look terrible, you really should...

ALEX What...the hell...is it!? The goddamn head phone!?

GRAHAM I absolutely refuse to answer you if you're going to behave in this fashion...I'll just leave you alone to collect yourself...I will send for James to bring your belongings up to your room, or would you prefer to sleep outside as you must have in the jungle...I'll leave that up to you.

GRAHAM exits to CL. ALEX sits down in a chair, facing audience, grabs a remote control nearby, points at an imaginary, or real, television.

NEWSPERSON 1 So, if I'm correct Dr. Nudelstein, these reports are showing that all over the country people are getting dumber and dumber, and that it's unclear exactly what the connection is?

DR. NUDELSTEIN To the best of our knowledge, that is our best guess so far .

NEWSPERSON 1 What is?

DR. NUDELSTEIN What?

NEWSPERSON 1 You said, "To the best of our knowledge, that is our best guess so far"...what is your best guess so far, Dr. Nudelstein?

DR. NUDELSTEIN That is a good question and one that I will get right on...but I'd like to point out that we are working very hard at trying to synthesize all of the data we have collected into a five-minute long YouTube video so that everyone can watch on their Blackberrys and their I-Phones, or any other type of digital hand held device that they may have, which so conveniently allows all of the worthy citizens of this great and connected nation to connect, instantaneously, to the world wide web, YouTube, Google, my personal blog, understanding the

understandable and the difficulty of such, and the millions of other informative and entertaining web sites of endless potentiality for connectedness of the whole wide world.

- NEWSPERSON 1 Well, this is all very sensational, Dr., and I'd like to bring on our other guests, two eminent sociologists from Yale University, whose names I can't remember, but if you'll give me a moment, I put their names into my new I-Phone this morning...
- DR. 1 That's fine, Monica, we don't mind being nameless every now and then...
- NEWSPERSON 1 Okay, then what do you think of Dr. Nudelstein's findings, either of you?
- DR. 2 Well, at this point we are trying to make the connections but the connections just aren't there...there's no connection.
- DR. 1 My associate is quite right, Monica and Dr. Nudelstein, we have absolutely no idea...
- NEWSPERSON 1 No idea of what, exactly?
- DR. 1 I don't understand.
- NEWSPERSON 1 You said, "My associate is quite right, Monica and Dr. Nudelstein, we have absolutely no idea"...what don't you have an idea of Dr.?
- DR. 1 & 2 We have no idea, Monica.
- NEWSPERSON 2 Wow, Monica, that's really quite the sensational story you have, one worthy of any number of journalism awards and hopefully much higher ratings for this show, which would likely mean better stock options and shares for all of us from channel twelve news...We'll join you after this brief commercial break to talk more about Dr. Nudelstein's study on America becoming dumb and what we might be able to do about it, once we can find a connection.
- DR. NUDELSTEIN Oohh, Brad, hold just one moment, I'm receiving a phone call that could be from the lab back home, possibly with breaking findings on our study...hold just one moment, please.
- NEWSPERSON 2 Wow, really amazing, Dr. Nudelstein is on his cell phone—which looks to be the new instinct from Sprint that allows Dr. Nudelstein to connect to high speed internet access landscape text entry, an easy to use touch screen interface, Blue Tooth compatibility, a two point zero mega pixel digital camera, along with Sprint Power Vision technology to keep plenty of multimedia sources close to hand, really an amazing phone...let's go to Dr. Nudelstein and see what's going on.
- DR. NUDELSTEIN Yes, hello...oh, hey Frank...no I'm at channel twelve news...okay...the usual...no, just the usual...I know Frank, but I'm on the television...yes, the usual...okay, thanks Frank.
- NEWSPERSON 2 Well, Dr. Nudelstein...
- DR. NUDELSTEIN Oh, that was just Frank, one of our many assistants calling to see if I wanted anything for lunch.
- NEWSPERSON 2 Well, did you?

DR. NUDELSTEIN Ah, yes...I asked him if he would get me the usual.

NEWSPERSON 2 Sensational, and if we had the time we would get to the bottom of this and find out just what Dr. Nudelstein is having for lunch, unfortunately, though, we've just got to go to our commercial break, where our sponsors will give you, the American people, the best advertisements for the best products for you, the best people.

Cheesy news-channel-music.

Fade to black.

Scene 2

ALEX is sprawled out on the bed with his eyes closed, listening to music—John Coltrane's "I'm Old Fashioned." GRAHAM barges into the room DR talking loudly on his cell phone.

ALEX What the hell are you doing?

GRAHAM Yes, he is...yes...yes all over again...I've got it...okay...no, make it just a few.

ALEX Graham, sit down; turn that thing off...

GRAHAM I see you haven't dressed (sniffs) and you haven't bathed, either...and you left your gift in the smoking room...do you know what you're doing to our dear old Aunt Melinda?...*(silence)*...well, do you?

ALEX What the heck are you talking about?

GRAHAM Ah, with the language still...and what is this music?

ALEX I said heck, dangit...and this music is John Coltrane and this song is my favorite of his...it's called, "I'm Old-Fashioned..."

GRAHAM Sure thing, brother.

ALEX So what the...what are you talking about? What am I doing to our aunt?

GRAHAM *(looks at his phone)*...it should...any minute now...*(GRAHAM slowly brings his left hand up very slowly, looking at ALEX; ALEX stares back in confusion and slight fear, after about ten seconds of this, GRAHAM gets a surprised and joyous look, looks at ALEX then at ALEX's waist, then back at ALEX).*

ALEX *(laughing as he talks)* What the hell is going on?

GRAHAM Your pocket...

ALEX Your pocket...

GRAHAM No, your pocket—I have so many pockets—your front, right pants pocket, Alex, don't you feel anything...?

ALEX What?

GRAHAM Oh, for God's sakes, Alex—I can't believe you don't have your own personalized ring tone to ring out true to the world who you truly are... or is that not something they do in the Caribbean...but to not

even have it on vibrate, not to have the ability to have the slightest, slightly pleasing, but ever so slight tremor to alert you that someone, one of your friends or relatives, or perhaps a new acquaintance, placed in your new acquaintances folder in your Blackberry or I-Phone, or other hand held—or even your new head phone...

ALEX Enough with the damned phones, and especially enough with the head phone!

GRAHAM I'm truly sorry, brother, but I was only trying to bring attention to the simple fact that your cellular telephone is receiving an incoming transmission, possibly in the form of a twenty-first century telegram, known in these times as the text message.

ALEX Huh?

GRAHAM Check your pocket, you sun-bedazzled fool.

ALEX checks his pocket, nods his head once.

ALEX How the hell did you know?

GRAHAM I saw the light there at the top blink three times through your pocket—I have very keen senses, like a doe deer, or possibly a buck deer if they too have keen senses—I also have a very keen sense of the times I live in, like Bill Gates or Darth Vader in those Star Wars films by George Lucas, the guy with the beard who did a bunch of wonderfully delightful movies then delightfully remade the original Star Wars films even more wonderful. So I, like a mother wolverine sensing danger close by her young papoose, my senses picked up the signal, while yours, like a piece of moss or lichen, moistly clung to the rock you cling to, experiencing nothing which is not in connection with your rock, were in complete disconnect with what was going on in your pockets.

ALEX You're fucking crazy...do you realize that—bat shit crazy...

Silence

GRAHAM My, god, aren't you going to see who's calling or texting you?

ALEX If I do...if I do, will you turn your phone off...okay, if you'll turn it to silent...for five minutes...goddamnit I'm your brother and I've been gone to school for the last sixteen years and all I want to do is sit and talk with you and listen to this music and connect with you like we used to.

GRAHAM Okay, check your phone and as soon as you do I will turn my phone to silent for five minutes, at the end of which time I will turn my phone back on, though we can continue with the brotherly connection, even with our modern technologies...isn't it wonderful...isn't it wonderful, brother?

ALEX looks at his phone, then chuckles, his finger goes to push a button and GRAHAM quickly grabs ALEX's hand.

GRAHAM My, God! don't you dare delete that message!

ALEX It's a text message, I loathe and detest text messages—they're always so pointless and shallow... they're ridiculous.

GRAHAM What! How could you just delete a message that could influence the rest of your life, that could bring a ray of sunshine to your normally dull life, that could be a friend in distress...how could you possibly do such a thing?

ALEX It's easy, and if you'll let go of my hand I will show you how, which might possibly influence the rest of your life...

GRAHAM Influence it straight down the drain. And no, I will not let go of your hand, that message happens to be very important, so check it, please.

ALEX How do you know what the message is about?

GRAHAM Just check it and I will turn my phone off and we can, as you say, connect like brothers... please.

ALEX Fine.

ALEX What's this all about?

GRAHAM What does it say?

ALEX It reads... "Dear Alexander, You are an incorrigible brat, I wish you would have stayed in the Caribbean with your father. How dare you run out like that and then come back, through the window as Graham told me. I absolutely insist that you may not see me until I allow it, though we may stay connected through text messages—I don't even want to hear your voice. I suggest having a go at the present your brother bought you—you have no idea what that meant to your brother for him to give you such an extremely experimental and innovative device that could establish the most perfect, most instant connection this world has ever seen—it really should have been Graham's, but he insisted that it go to you, as he felt he owed you something as your older brother. You snooty, snooty, snooty, little brat! Why don't you go back to the Caribbean with your father!" And then there's a string of emoticons that are all rather unpleasant...is she okay, Graham?

GRAHAM What?

ALEX You know...is Aunt Melinda doing okay? Judging by this message it doesn't seem so.

GRAHAM She's just angry with you...and with our father...she's angry that you and dad split and she blames mom's death on you.

ALEX What the hell did you just say?

GRAHAM "She's just angry at you...and at our father...she's angry that you and dad split and she blames mom's death on you."

ALEX "Mom's death" ...what do you mean—"mom's death"?

GRAHAM What else could I mean?...she's dead...how could you forget that—I know how...

ALEX She's dead...

GRAHAM You forgot when you broke all connections with your family and loafed away half of your life in the Caribbean...

ALEX She's dead?

GRAHAM We knew when you didn't respond to the FaceSpace message about mom's funeral that you had washed your hands of your family, you had disconnected from your family, just like dad did...

ALEX When did it happen? How did it happen? Why the hell didn't anyone let me know? And dad doesn't live in the Caribbean...does he?

GRAHAM Like I said, we guessed that you didn't care about us anymore when you didn't respond to the FaceSpace message...

ALEX You sent out the news of our mother's death on some fucking internet dating service...

GRAHAM FaceSpace is not an internet dating service, for your information—but, yes, we sent out news through the most reliable and expedient means of communication that are possible in these days—FaceSpace—and you were the only one...

ALEX I don't have a FaceSpace profile, goddamnit; I hate FaceSpace...

GRAHAM Well, you can't expect me to know every one of my FaceSpace friends—there are thousands—so I just hit “send to all” and that's that—it's not my fault if you just won't connect with the times...you can't blame me for the foolish way you've spent the last however long it was lounging on a white sand beach, eating fresh fruit, mating with the natives, basking in the sun, smoking huge marijuana cigarettes...you just can't blame me...

ALEX jumps up from his bed in a rage, pushes his brother across the stage into the wall CR violently and holds him by his arms, yelling into his face.

ALEX I sent letters every holiday season and at least once a month...I assumed you'd never read them as I stated in my first letter, during my first semester at college that I was rebelling against technology and that my only means of communication with you and my whole family would be through letters...even though I never received any replies, I still sent them—I must have sent hundreds of them. Did you ever realize that the letters were addressed from Cambridge, Massachusetts?

GRAHAM (yelling back) Letters...why in god's name would you send us letters...what, were there no computers anywhere near you, did you not have a cell phone to call us...

ALEX Aren't you listening to me?

GRAHAM Letters! seriously, Alex, get with the times.

ALEX Did you not receive my letters?

GRAHAM We received letters addressed from you, though they weren't addressed from the Caribbean so we threw them away—we were afraid they were letters from the Unabomber or some terrorist organization—we're connected with the times, Alex, and we know what kind of fruit cakes are out there, fruit cakes who hate people like me and Aunt Melinda, who hate our ability to take bad reception and roaming in stride...you should have sent me messages on FaceSpace or texted me...

ALEX You're fucking crazy! I'll kill you...

GRAHAM It's been more than five minutes—can I turn my phone on now, please? And will you release me?

ALEX drops his hold on GRAHAM and steps back in shock.

GRAHAM Alex, I'm worried about you, I've been worried about you, especially when you never responded to the FaceSpace page...

ALEX I saw you, everyone...mom...two years ago on Christmas, how the hell could you forget that...

GRAHAM (looking at his phone and not ALEX) I find it very difficult to keep track of all the people I see, and especially since you won't be my FaceSpace friend, it is even more difficult to stay connected with you...

ALEX You are a goddamn lunatic. Do you understand that, is what I'm saying making a connection, or do I need to text you (shouts) that you are a goddamn lunatic?

GRAHAM What's that? I was just checking to see if I had any messages.

ALEX Damn it, Graham, I'm right here—why do you pay so much attention to that gadget when I'm right here? I haven't seen you in two years, and I haven't lived in this house for sixteen or so years...turn that shit off and talk with me, help to understand everything that's happened...mom's dead, dad's living in the Caribbean, Aunt Melinda hates me, and you're acting like an absolute idiot. What in the hell has happened here?

GRAHAM It's not my fault—don't try and blame everything on me—you decided to leave, you decided that this life wasn't good enough for you—you decided to move away to the Caribbean, abandoning your mother, your aunt, and leaving me to take care of them...don't blame me.

ALEX I'm not blaming you, I just want to know what the hell has happened to the world. I want to know how you could not try harder to let me know our mother has died—fucking try harder, how all you did was fucking FaceSpace my non-existent profile. I want to know why you and Aunt Melinda think I've been living in the Caribbean since the age of five when mom and dad sent me to boarding school. I want to know what you've been doing over the past sixteen years. I want to know where our father is, and if he is in the Caribbean, I want to know why I'm just now finding that out. I want to know why that damn gadget is more interesting than me. I want to feel the connection I used to feel with you and this house. I don't want the connection I used to have with mom to just die, the same as dad—and I want to know how and what and when happened to mom...I just want everything to be like it was when we were kids...everything was so much easier then.

GRAHAM (GRAHAM messes with his phone, not looking at ALEX) I understand everything you're going through, Alex, and I want to help you, I want to help bring you back to the world you used to live—it must be hard to come from such an easier way of life...I want to see you with your head phone, and I want to talk to you on it—I want to see how you like it, and I want to see your database of friends and associates grow and grow and grow—I want to see your name in my

FaceSpace profile—and perhaps I should have looked for it earlier, but I didn't, but I will now—I just want to see you turn into me, be happy like me, and have an infinitude of connections so that when you get feeling down and confused like you are now, I will know that you have thousands of numbers you can call to receive instant consolation...I just want you to be happy...

ALEX I don't want thousands of numbers I can call, I want your number to call, but more so, I want to be able to talk to you in person, I don't want to tell someone all my problems over the phone. I want...I've got to get out of here, you're absolutely nuts...maybe I should go to the Caribbean, especially if dad's there...I bet I know why he's there, too, now.

ALEX quickly leaps out of the open window UC, GRAHAM looks up from his hand held with a mildly surprised look, shrugs his shoulders, looks back down at his phone and laughs. GRAHAM gets up and looks around the room, picks up remote control and turns on a television, sets down remote, and looks at his handheld, chuckling, sighing, smiling and frowning, going through a wide range of emotions.

NEWSPERSON 1 Good evening, viewers, and thank you for tuning in to channel twelve news, the news channel that keeps you, the American people, connected to literally everything in the entire world in thirty minutes eight times a day. We were going to bring Dr. Nudelstein back on tonight for our cover story of why and how so many Americans are suddenly becoming dumb, at least, so the study says, but we've got something so much more interesting for you folks tonight, something wonderful that everyone in the world could use so badly, especially in the hectic, war riddled world we live in—the head phone. If you haven't heard of it before, then by all means, stay tuned, this may just save your life; and if you have heard of it before, and have been anticipating more news, then you're in for a treat tonight—so men, cancel your dates, women, tell those babies to stay put for just thirty more minutes, Death, take a break for half an hour, you too Pope, because you're not going to believe how incredibly, amazingly, technologically, globally, life-savingly important tonight's broadcast is—more important than, dare I say, the live coverage of 9/11, presidential elections, even more important than one of channel twelve's series-premiers, finales, or just a normally scheduled program...ladies and gentlemen, children and elderly, dogs and cats, flip phones and razors, Blackberry's and I-Phones, you don't want to miss tonight's broadcast, so please stay tuned while we go to a commercial break, please, for the love of God and instant communication, stay tuned in to channel twelve news for today's connection with tomorrow's future. And we'll just mention again to look out for Alex Yerman, who is supposed to be a category pumpkin orange on the Fox Violence Threat Alert. He hasn't hurt any people yet, but he did destroy a Verizon store thirty minutes outside of Boston around Needham. We'll be right back, folks; we're here forever.

Cheesy news channel music plays along with the music from GRAHAM's hand held as he answers his phone.

GRAHAM Hyunmin...hello...Hyunmin, are you there...

Fade. Fade from cheesy news music to John Coltrane's "I'm Old Fashioned" after lights are out and house lights come back.



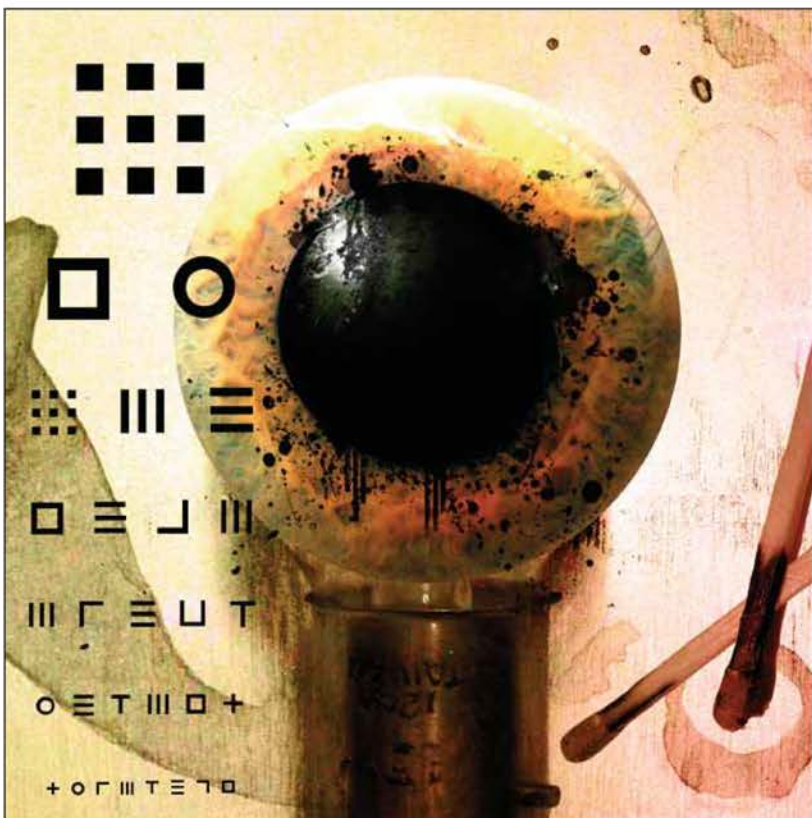
Self Portrait with Color
Ethan Swanson



Self Portrait
Ethan Swanson



Thomas' Playground
Lauren Tucker



Eye
Amber Dillingham



Collage
Ann Locklear



Dawn
Lauren Tucker

Dinnertime

By: Stephanie Estep

Everyone sat around a beautifully laid table. There were my friends Hannah and Martha, their brother Justin, and then there was Mrs. Vicki and Mr. Lee. The tablecloth was cream colored, and everyone had a cloth napkin. Here Mrs. Vickie was asking Martha about a project she was doing in school, and there Mr. Lee was talking to Justin about the new wooden sword he had made in shop class. There was no TV on, and no one had a glass of wine or beer in sight. The only bad part was, with everyone watching, I had to actually eat my greens.

"Hey, do you want to build a tent in the living room to camp out in?" Hannah asked me. I did a bit of a double take. Does she mean in the actual living room? Are they really allowed to play in the living room like that?

"Sure," I replied, trying for nonchalance.

"Oh, and my mom said we can play dress up with her nightgowns later," Martha enthused. I smiled and hoped they didn't see my confusion. Okay, so this is their normal.

"Eat your dinner and go on upstairs, kids. Try not to bother me and your step-dad watching TV." My mother bustled around the table making sure we all had drinks and utensils, then slunk out of the room. My brothers and I looked at each other and then down at our dinner. Without any debate, we all put our green beans into our napkins and set them on our laps for the dogs to take care of.

"So, what are you doing tonight?" I asked the other two hopefully. It got so lonely in my room all the time, and I envied my brothers their togetherness.

"We have to do our homework," Josh replied. But seeing my lip begin to quiver, he quickly added, "Maybe after that you can come to our room and watch some TV."

"Do you think you could read me the Strawberry Shortcake book before bed?" I asked hopefully. They exchanged that good grief look they had whenever I asked something girly. I thought for sure they'd say no.

"Maybe, but only if you finish dinner fast so we can do our homework early." With this reward in sight, I made short work of the mashed potatoes and macaroni left on my plate. Man, I couldn't wait to know how to read. It would really cut out the middle man. Occasionally I would look toward the living room when I heard my mother and her husband start to laugh over something on the TV. But I didn't give much thought to them. After we were set up with our dinner, she never came back out and usually just hollered up the stairs when she wanted us in bed.

"No, I ran away. I'm going to a friend's house, and just stopped in for some food." The lady at the diner looked at me quizzically and asked me what my friend's name was and where she lived.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure where, I remember it's a long drive, and you go over a bridge, but I already went over a bridge on my bike and it's been an awful long time, so I must be close. Her name is Hannah May Burns, isn't that a great name? I wish my name could be a sentence like that, don't you?"

"What about your mom and dad? They must really miss you by now. It's getting pretty late."

"Naw, they probably already passed out in front of their movie. I bet they don't even know I'm gone yet. So how much for some chicken? You don't mind quarters, do you?"

"It's on the house if you give me their number. I'll just call in case they're worried." With that, she stuffed me with fried chicken and called my mom to get me.

Look at her, she's just so wobbly when she's like this. I bet she'll pass out right into her pizza. Or maybe she'll make it to the couch tonight. I've got so much algebra homework to do, I don't have time to take care of her. I wonder where Jon and Josh are. Probably out with their cool friends. I can't really blame them, like they said, they took their turn, now it's mine. I can't wait till I'm old enough to go out at night. But then who'll take care of her? Oops! There goes her glass of wine. I better get a towel. Man, we go through more glasses, you'd think she'd wise up and start getting plastic. Or even sippy cups. Whoops! Face first into the pizza. What a mess. I hope she doesn't pee on herself tonight, I hate cleaning that up. But at least it's better than the crying jags.

"Stephanie, baby doll, what are you doing?" I looked at Chad, exasperated. "Isn't it obvious? I'm trying to get this house clean before you bring home the Christmas tree."

"Wait a second," he complained, sensing a trap. "At Halloween you cried when I brought home the pumpkins without you helping to pick them out. Aren't you gonna do that again over the tree?"

"Don't be silly," I huffed, fluffing the couch cushions in a flurry of motion. "This is totally different. There is no way we can bring a Christmas tree into the house like this. It looks like a dump! We need to start setting our traditions for our family."

Chad looked around our unusually pristine house, "Stephanie, you do realize the baby's not born yet, right?" he questioned as I scooted him from one part of the kitchen to the other while I swept imaginary crumbs off the floor. "In fact he's not even gonna care about Christmas for a couple of years."

"That's not the point," I declared. "We need to perfect it now, so when he can remember it'll be good." Just then another hormonal surge hit me and I swiped at the tears gathering while reaching for the Windex. "Why are you still here? It's the day after Thanksgiving, we have to have that tree today! You are gonna go, right?"

Wisely, he argued no more. At the sound of near hysteria in my voice, he simply kissed me soundly on the mouth and made his way to town to hunt for just the right tree. The bruise on the side of his head (the result of a Lifetime channel fight he had lost) had taught him not to argue with me when I got like this.

A round cake pan sitting next to a perfectly lopsided chocolate cake. It has blue sugar crumbs and a healthy portion of multi-colored sprinkles. The distribution is haphazard and reminds one of fireworks on the Fourth of July. A little boy has pulled up a chair on which to stand and stare at his accomplishment. His shirt is liberally coated with flour and wet stuff of unknown origin. His feet are bare and coated with something sticky looking from the floor. His face is filled with pride as he stares at his creation. His lips are smeared with frosting, and sprinkles have stuck themselves to the corner of his grinning mouth. His hair is liberally smeared with more frosting and sprinkled with a healthy bit of flour on top. He stealthily looks around and hastily takes a swipe at the edge of his cake with grubby, sticky fingers.

A young woman is staring down at her son with the same look of pride in her eyes. One hand is holding a butter knife to the cake as if wondering at which angle to make that first important slice. There are little flecks of chocolate in her long hair and across the front of her shirt.

Behind her sitting at the kitchen table is a man. He is nervously fingering the table cloth and drumming his hands across the top. He repeatedly scratches the top of his short brown hair and then drops his hands to his side in a sort of nervous tic. He glances in the direction of the duo with pride. Next he steals a peek at the cake with dread. His dark eyes glance at the cabinet, spying the stash of Maalox inside.

I don't want to do it, I can't tell her, she's gonna hate me I know she is. But I can't go up there this year. I just can't bring myself to do it. I know I should, but it makes for such a depressing holiday. Maybe if I promise to come up later. I just don't want to see her like that again.

"No, Mom, I don't think I can come home for Christmas this year. Yeah, work won't let me take off long enough. But I'll be up soon, and I'll bring Devin...Yeah, we miss you too...I know, I'm really sorry about Christmas. Is Josh still helping with the bills? Well, that's good... Yeah, I know it's not enough, if I could send any money I would...Well, I've gone back to school. No, I told you about that a couple of months ago. I promise I did...we'll come up to see you when we can...Mom? Mom, are you still there? Hey, Josh did she pass out? Well I figured it being almost 7:30... So are you gonna move out any time soon? You can't take care of her for the rest of your life... Yeah, I know, but she's 45 years old, if she can't take care of herself by now, you staying with her isn't gonna help her... Well I've gotta go, dinner's ready and the family's looking restless... Love you too."

Devin concentrates so hard on measuring out the baking powder, or rolling out cookies with the rolling pin. He can't really do any of it successfully yet, but I can see how determined he is. It is so cute to watch him taste every ingredient, never quite sure what to expect, but usually unpleasantly surprised. Like that first taste of vanilla, and the confusion over how something that smells so good can taste so awful. And really Momma, why would we want to put something that tastes so bad in food we're supposed to eat? Or when we're making frosting, watching him take surreptitious swipes at the bowl when he thinks I'm not looking.

I love that contented look on his face when whatever we've made is out of the oven and cooled. Sitting in front of us are two tall glasses of milk and piles of the fruits of our labors. For about ten minutes I don't tell him how much he's allowed to have, or that he'll spoil his dinner, or that it's too many sweets before bed. I just let him eat as much as he wants and chow down with him knowing that bouncing around in his head is the knowledge that we have created something out of a bunch of little nothings.

"Can we eat in the living room?" Devin asked hopefully.

"Not tonight," I replied. "Tonight we're going to sit at the table." I looked over at the piece of furniture in question. It was cluttered with all manner of paraphernalia. From books and mail to empty glasses and little bits and pieces of things which had been found on the floor and weren't exactly trash but didn't really have a permanent home. I looked at what I had bought that day. A brand new table cloth. And not the vinyl kind either. This one was fabric and cream colored, and was just what we needed to start having family meals at the table.

"So do you want to help me clean off the table?" I asked enthusiastically. "I got something pretty for it and it'll be fun to eat with it on!" I kept an upbeat tone to get him more in the mood, and it seemed to work.

His eyes got real big, and a smile broke out on his face. "You got some clothes for the table?" he inquired, looking over the package I had pulled out of the bright pink bag.

"Yep! And as soon as we get the stuff off we can put the clothes on and eat at the table! Won't that be fun?" Devin nodded his head vigorously and helped me set to work. Chad was recruited to find a home for the misplaced knickknacks. Soon we had actual place settings and a very official meal, complete with cloth napkins. When we had all sat down and grace had been said, I looked around the table at my little family. Here Devin was chattering aimlessly about his fun day at Granny's, and there Chad was asking me how my new classes were going.

"Hey Momma, let's read the train book after dinner!" Devin suggested with an impish grin.

I smiled and closed my eyes, listening to the clinking of silverware against glass. *Perfect.*



Flow on the Parkway
Sarah Johnson



Monkey Business
Ann Trotter

The Sky is Never Dark Anymore

By: Anthony Alderman

The sky is never dark anymore,
I mean black,
not even at this early hour
not in this age.

One thousand years ago,
how they must have shined,
the ancients surely knew they were
suns of far off skies.
Even fifty years ago,
before endless traffic lights
ushered endless head lamps,
it was surely grand.

But now,
now the sky is ringed with a permanently,
faded, blurry, dull haze and
a surrounding light eases its way into the
sky,
pushing the night higher into the ether
where the last remaining stars speak.

And those traditionalists,
those old souls,
expound on old things,
speak of love, great love,
not really passion so much,
but of patient sacrifice,
of measured persistence,
of the end of long journeys with friends,
which restart as soon they end.

And as they speak to one another,
to the Earth, and occasionally
address the Moon,
this morning at two o'clock,
I am only half-listening to their
discussion of maidens and bears,
for I am thinking of you,
whose heart is as bright, as bold, and light
as any love-sick maiden sorrowfully
reaching into the sky

And I ponder,
as they speak of various civilizations,
that I
can hear but not touch,
can listen but not speak,
can comprehend but not understand,
and you seem a creature of their race,

at once here, tangible, and solid
yet as awful,
as incomprehensible,
as remote
as any twinkling, midnight light.

Such thoughts can harden
a heart that's searched for years,
a heart that's bended its knee
a heart that has won quest after quest,
a heart that has laid down treasure upon
treasure,

And frustration blurs my vision,
clouding my pupil's periphery, with
the gray matter of resentment
until there is only a constricted sky,
where a soft light slowly glimmers
though it is kind, my soul begins to quake
for it looks at me, and I'm small,
infinitely small,
pitifully,
pathetically small,
and it speaks softly
with such majestic and unconscious power
that I cannot
breathe,

Spoken, the words were unheard
for my ears balked at the terrible tongue,
but now,
the moment gone,
the eye expanded,
the resentment released,
its words return in human tongue,

keep listening

I refill my pipe and look back up.



Untitled
Amy Frady



Sky Scraper
Briana Boone

A Distant Rumble

By: Sean Kilbrew

A rumble in the distance. The ground shakes. An alarm sounds, waking the entire camp.

Sitting around a dinner table with my family, everyone is laughing. Small conversations take place amongst different groups. Rumble.

"I'm so glad you're able to be here for Thanksgiving," one family member says to me through a mouthful of stuffing.

Even though I am tired of hearing that statement, I reply with a smile and a nod. Rumble. This time I hear it. I look around to see if anyone else noticed. Rumble.

"Something is wrong," I say to myself. I get up and walk outside, nothing. No panicking children, no worried souls. Now I know something is wrong.

SMACK! A picture on my wall falls and hits me on the head, waking me from my dream.

<I knew it was too good to be true> I think. The warning alarm is blaring, and the constant rumble grows louder.

"Jimmy! Jimmy, wake up!" My roommate has not noticed the chaotic turn of events. "Jimmy!" I throw my boot as I yell at my buddy sleeping four feet from me.

"What?" he yells back and returns the boots with a forceful throw.

"The alarm, dude, mortars are incoming!"

A loud boom, followed by a rumble, and the realization dawns on my half-asleep friend.

"Oh shit!"

As we scramble to find our sandals and shirts, the sound of panicked running outside becomes prominent. Another impact. Rocks and dirt rain down on our trailer. Our door flies open and Jimmy, a skinny, acne-covered computer geek from Sanford, North Carolina, is in mid flight as he jumps on to the gravel path outside our trailer. I am two steps behind as I grab the door on my way out.

Outside, everyone is running toward the bunker. The bunker is a cement enclosure that can hold ten people comfortably, though we usually fit twenty-five. The bunker has sandbags stacked all around its perimeter to ensure proper protection. It could not withstand a direct hit, but it will stop any debris from an impact, or so we hope. We hope there is a protective bulletproof blanket covering the door, just in case. Inside the bunker, there is one fluorescent light bulb and one sleeping cot used for seating. The ceiling of the cement enclosure is about five or so feet off the ground. The gravel and dirt inside the bunker has been shoveled away to some extent, so as to allow for us taller boys to have some head room. The effort is trivial at best.

As we squeeze into the ridiculously overcrowded bunker, some people are laughing while others crouch and cower. Twenty-plus pajama-clad soldiers are squeezed shoulder to shoulder in the bunker. Only about six people can sit on the sleeping cot. The rest of us have to stand or crouch or sit on the ground. The best option at this point is to find the most comfortable position and stay there. After about ten minutes, claustrophobia starts to set in, even for those of us who have never before experienced the symptoms. The shrapnel continues to rain down on the ground outside. More mortars and rockets come over the fence and onto Forward Operating Base (FOB) Rustamiyah, Iraq. Commonly referred to as Rocketmiyah or Mortaritaville, FOB Rustamiyah is in southeast Baghdad and gets hit with rockets and mortars, on average, about 370 times a year. We are used to this kind of thing, but this particular incident will prove to be life changing.

"Is everyone alright?" a superior of mine yells. A chorus of yeses and groans rings out. As the sergeant begins to get a headcount of the people present in the bunker, another close impact shakes the ground.

"That was a close one," one of my compatriots says.

"A little too close for comfort," I reply as the shrapnel rains down on the bunker.

BOOM! An incoming rocket hits right outside the bunker, down the makeshift alley twenty meters away from my bunker. Everyone drops to the ground, people are falling over others. We can only wonder what just happened and what it may mean for us.

“Help! Help us,” the people from the other bunker scream.

Everyone in my bunker rushes out and heads for the other side in an effort to be of assistance. Some go for stretchers off the backs of some of the trucks just outside our living area. Others run straight for the blast site. We arrive at the blast site and the initial shock of what we see is overwhelming. Staff Sergeant Pickett had taken most of the blast. His body is riddled with shrapnel; the blood is steadily streaming out from wounds. Sergeant First Class Spence’s leg is almost completely severed; it hangs on by a thread of skin. The other dozen or so soldiers in the bunker are not as severely injured, but everyone has been hurt in some fashion.

The stretchers arrive. Sergeants Pickett and Spence are loaded onto their stretchers. As they are carried off, some of us make our way into the bunker to assess the damage. Private First Class Beck has been hit in the foot with shrapnel; Sergeant Rush has taken some to the hand. Others have broken arms and concussions. Fourteen people are injured due to the blast. We begin to help everyone out of the bunker and receive word that the medical helicopters, termed in military lingo as MEDEVAC, are on their way. A few moments later and all persons are accounted for. Those who are not helping with the immediate cleanup and damage assessment, including me, are told to go on about their day, but they do not tell us how.

How does one just go on about their day after an incident such as this?

Most of us go back to our rooms and try to watch movies or listen to music. Some others try to sleep off the horror of the event. A group of my buddies and I go to the Post Exchange (a small Wal-Mart of sorts) and the makeshift mall, in an effort to keep our minds off the situation. This, needless to say, is a mission impossible. A few hours pass and we find ourselves sitting in the makeshift movie theater waiting for any kind of news on the status of our fallen fellows. Some people cannot get a grip and have to go outside to get some air. Moments later a superior officer comes in and settles everyone down. He begins to speak.

“Sergeant Spence’s leg is in pretty bad shape. We don’t yet know if he will be able to keep it. As for the fourteen other injuries, Beck and Rush are in the hospital and the others are at the aid station getting checked out. And for the bad news, guys...Staff Sergeant Pickett didn’t make it. He died on the operating table.”

Cries are heard all about the building. His teammates are crying the hardest. One soldier is a good friend of mine. His name is Phil Smith, a three-hundred-pound teddy bear, and he is crying the loudest. He was directly under Pickett in the chain of command. Fellow comrades rush over in some futile effort to comfort him. My head drops into my hands and the tears flow. All I can think about are the times I got to share with Pickett and how I will never get to see him again. He was so loved by everybody who got to know him. He always will be. Some of the soldiers cannot handle the shock and begin screaming. Others slam their fists into the cement walls. Most people just sit in silence. We always heard the stories of soldiers dying in battle, but we never thought it could happen to our company. Even worse, it happened in a place where we were supposed to be safe.

I walk outside to get some air. During my attempt to regain some composure, a friend of mine offers me a cigarette. I accept the gift in a rare break in my normally tobacco-free lifestyle. I light up and inhale the harsh substance. It serves absolutely no purpose, but so as not to be rude, I finish my cigarette.

An alarm sounds and I awake from the most vivid dream I have ever experienced. The rumble still echoes in my head as I stir around in my bed. It is months after the attack, and I still cannot shake the memories. Is it even possible to do so? The thoughts do not hinder my daily life or cause me to think bad thoughts. They are more of a constant reminder that the world is bigger than miniscule problems. No daily problem can be worse than losing a father, a son, or a husband to war. I will take the rumble in my dreams as a blessing in disguise, an ever-present souvenir, of sorts.

A Tandem

By: B. Riley Hanson

of our modern planes and modes of flight
a successful tandem I've never flown
to leave the runway - out of sight
skies blacken and my plane is blown

but when my eyes open again
the ground is at my feet
they walk to find a newer plane
a fitter partner in my seat

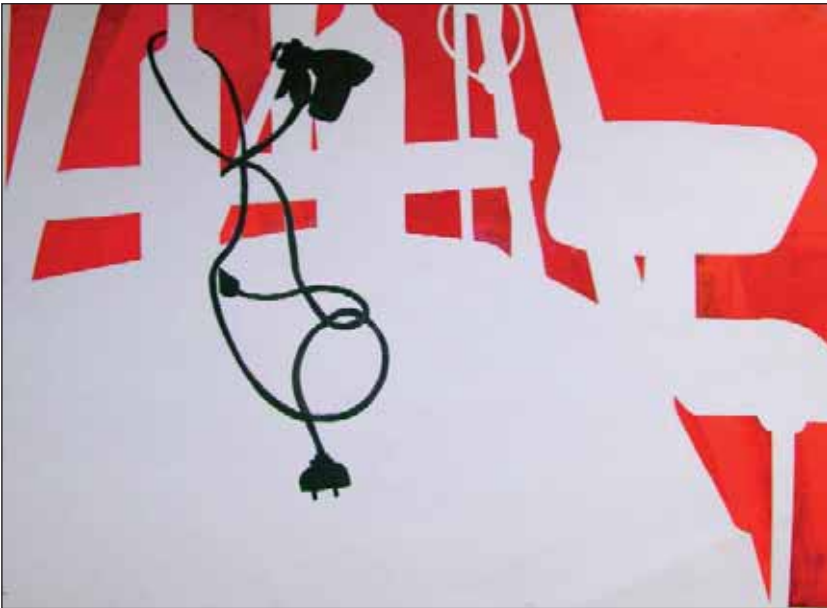
convention says restrain my dreams
with prudence as a basis
but oh how exhilarating each takeoff seems
and how beautiful new faces



Collage
Heather Blevins



Ordinary Day
Karen Yost



Negative Space
Christine Bolick

Hey-Day

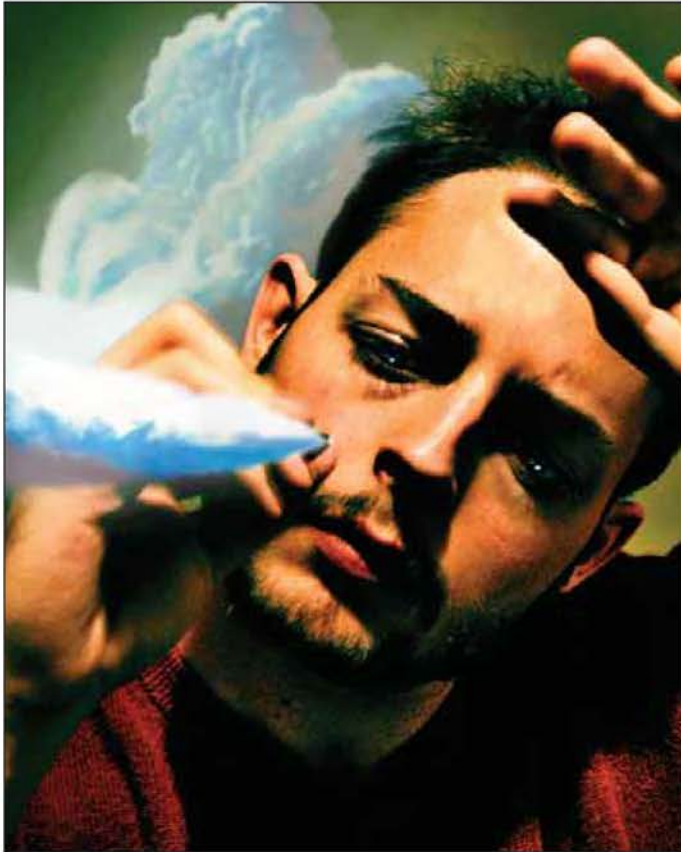
By: Nancy Posey

“ . . . have you eyes?
You cannot call it love; for at your age
the hey-day in the blood is tame. . . .”
Hamlet, 3.4.68-70

O Hamlet! What do you know of love,
you who toy with that flower child one moment,
then ship her off to a nunnery the next?
You dare judge me, charge frailty to my sex,
just because I'd rather choose incestuous
sheets than sleep alone. Thanks, by the way,
for noticing my dexterity. You've read too
many books, seen too many plays if you
believe Gonzago's wife was less than true,
swearing an oath to live alone in widow's
weeds. Is it so strange that I should turn
from grief to love, no sin involved? Why,
you yourself have turned to madness,
straight from melancholy in half the time.
For now, I'll seize the day; Hyperion's dead;
why can't I love a satyr if I choose?



Flower
Samantha Seacrest



Self Portrait
Andrew Poss

We Are Our Commas

By: Mandy Simmons

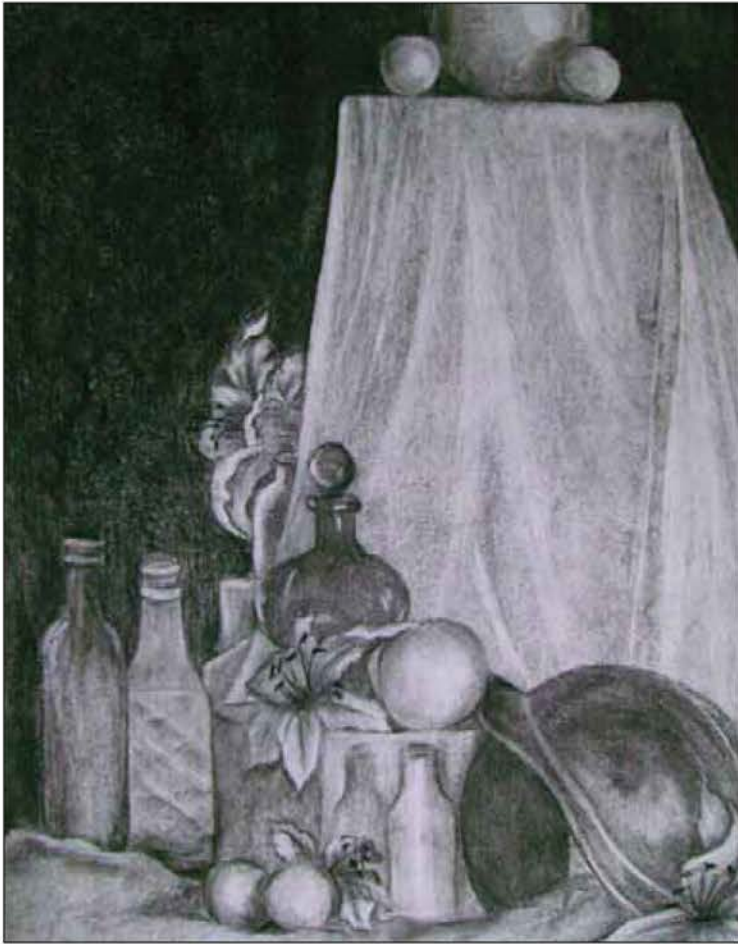
The things
we have
in common,
separated
by commas.
Pauses in
similarities.
Like letters
written
in dark.



Still Life
Heather Smith



Taste 2
Amber Dillingham



Still Life with Helmet
Christine Bolick

Arsonist Notes

By: Patrick Chapman

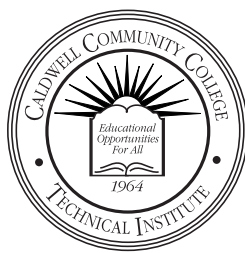
He wrote a strip show blues with his arsonist notes,
Played a hound dog dirge on a cello strung with rope.
Poured bourbon in the bath and shaved his face with photographs,
Wrote prison letters in the rain and slept on Pennsylvania tracks.

He was spoken for; it slithered from her mouth and cigarette.
Her wilted flower voice smelled like post-Depression debt.
Bread lines stretched around her uncommitted, cloudy eyes,
But she kept her hemlines low and purred hilarious goodbyes.

They were strung together, bellicose and between them, ancient things.
Like Seven Wonders wonderful, but mostly gone, extinct.
They liked to call us matadors and ransom our regrets,
Until we'd lost murder to murderers, lost our dying unto death.

She sang marbles in our ears, the operas of the underworld,
She roared shipwrecks and commotion from the Occident, returned.
In our dreams she was the girl who called her parents by their names,
Or maybe grew up in a brothel or a barracks or Japan.

And I hope some Sunday evening they'll be married by a priest,
With a collar made of ivy and a Bible bound with teeth.
And nefarious, the distance between where they met and me.
Some things are far enough away you strain even to believe.



**Caldwell Community College
and Technical Institute**

**2855 Hickory Boulevard
Hudson, North Carolina 28638**

828.726.2200, 264.7670

www.cccti.edu

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