To the Reader:

We didn't know what to expect when we were given the opportunity to be the editors of this year's *Lights & Shadows*, but when we saw the knee high stack of portfolios and submissions we knew we had a large task ahead of us. As we began slowly making our way through, we found much of it to be such quality writing that it became more like pleasure reading than actual work.

Editing was a true learning experience. We had to get over the fear of hurting the feelings of those we consider to be friends, writers we have tremendous respect for. We learned to agree to disagree on pieces for which we had differing opinions.

But for the majority of the pieces, we had no disagreements. The works in this year's edition represent the continuing tradition of literary talent at UNA. Two contributors in particular, Sarah Carpenter and Nathan Pitts, provided such consistently good work that the question wasn't whether to use their pieces but which ones to use. We chose to award these two students with the Patricia Robinson Prize, which is given every year to the student or students who provided the greatest overall contribution to the magazine.

In this edition, we have topics ranging from the most dynamic, such as murder and betrayal, to the most subtle and calming, such as those in the section entitled "Meditations on Nature." We are certain there is a selection to suit any taste. So please sit back, relax and get ready to laugh — and maybe cry just a little — as our contributors share their ideas, their personalities, and their souls in sentence form.

Enjoy!

Jennifer Butler and Lisa Roper
Table of Contents

Literary works

Gwen Bentley
“The Wolf at the Door” ...........................................56

Jennifer Butler
“Worth a Thousand Words” ......................................2
“Antonia” ................................................................46

Sarah Carpenter
winner of the Patricia Wood Robinson Prize
“After ‘Arles, View from the Wheat Fields’
by Vincent Van Gogh” ........................................1
“Chronology” .....................................................10
“Clumsy Girl” .....................................................45

Nikki Dee Corum
“Speculation” .......................................................55

Crystal Dill
“Priestess of River Road” .........................................57

John Givens
“Outcast” .............................................................66

Candace Herron
“Beach Exploration” ..............................................34

Paula Jacobs
“Hunting Story” ....................................................30

Tim Kelley
“Breathing” ..........................................................37

Elysia Morasco
“Listening” ..........................................................27
“Pompeii” ..........................................................33

Nathan Pitts
winner of the Patricia Wood Robinson Prize
“Presently Speaking” ..............................................9
“What [Superstition] Could Save” .........................47

Lisa Roper
“Just One of Those Days” ......................................8
“Floundering” .....................................................67

Artwork

Leslie Brown
“Untitled” ............................................................18

Lavonia Martin
“Death Study” ....................................................19

Emily Godwin
“French Blue Dream Existence” ............................20

Christy Sherrill
“Beautiful Monk” ..............................................21

Joshua Mattox
“Proof of Existence” ............................................22

Brannon Burcham
“Looking Back” ..................................................23

Brannon Burcham
“I Don’t Remember Falling” ..................................24

Leslie Brown
“Untitled” ..........................................................40

Leslie Brown
“After Adrian Arleo” ..........................................41

Beth Bachuss
“Without Vase” ..................................................42

Daniel Nelson
“Existence” ........................................................43

Leslie Brown
“Bottled Up” ......................................................44
After “Arles, View from the Wheat Fields”
(by Vincent Van Gogh)

On a sepia morning
When the smokestacks
Spew their earnings
Into the sky,
We breathe deep of the smog
And amble through a good day's work.
Some of the younger ones
Don't remember
A time when the wind bore no taint,
When we didn't pay rent to the boss.
But on a sepia morning
When the breeze cools our sweat
And blows the brown smoke away
We breathe deep.

— Sarah Carpenter
Worth a Thousand Words

It had been one of those mornings when the sun shone so brightly through his window that, for a moment after he woke, he thought his wife had fallen asleep while reading and left the light on all night. But he quickly realized that the rays of light that hit his bed were not the kind that came from a bulb inside a dusty fixture but rather were full of the warmth of a lazy Saturday morning. He remembered the first time he had felt this. Until he was 17, the lone window in his bedroom had faced west, so the only light that came into his room in the morning was indirect. After his older sister had moved out, though, he inherited her much larger room, which had a window that faced decidedly east. On the first morning he woke in that room, his parents were already gone for the day, and he spent the day driving dirt roads in his junker '48 Dodge with his best friend. Ever since then, being awoken by a roomful of sun promised a day of exhilarating freedom and calm.

But this particular day, Adam Brewer was bored. His wife had left early that morning to meet a friend for breakfast, and then she had gone directly to her aerobics class. That had to be a sight to see, a room full of twenty-somethings bouncing around in leotards with his 60-year-old wife bouncing along with them. Outbouncing them, he imagined. He'd have to go watch sometime. But right now it was almost 2 pm and if he wanted a home-cooked meal for supper, he needed to get some groceries so he could start cooking it. He hunted for his cap, a necessity for even the smallest journey, and when he found it in the refrigerator in the spot he had meant to set the bologna, which was now on the coffee table, he got in his pickup and drove to Piggly Wiggly.

Adam was a man of the world; in his 22 years as a Little Debbie truck driver, he traveled to large cities and stocked their huge grocery stores with America's favorite snack food. Walking into the Piggly Wiggly where he knew all the cashiers and their parents contrasted sharply with the cool formality he sensed in those superstores. Here, nobody looked away awkwardly when he smiled at them. As he walked past the snack food aisle, he paused to put a box of swiss rolls in the cart. For a year after he retired, he couldn't bring himself to eat anything he had once hauled behind him, but the swiss rolls had grown on him again.

After he filled the cart with all the necessary ingredients for chicken and dumplings and a few other things they needed, he checked out. The cashier was Lacy, his niece Jessica's best friend. Lacy thanked him for the help he had given her with her math homework. "You're a quick learner," Adam said. "I bet you would have figured it out soon enough. I just hurried up your figuring."

"You hurried it up a lot," Lacy said over the steady beeps of barcodes being run over the laser sensor. Lacy was one of the few people outside Adam's family who knew just how well-educated he was. In a casual conversation with him, a stranger would never guess from his easy manner and modest tone that he held a degree in anything. His hearty laugh reminded people more of their quirky uncle who refused to completely grow up than the college grads who sat behind the desks in the accountants' and lawyers' offices.

"I can't wait until I get off work in an hour," said Lacy. "Jess and I are going to a movie with some friends. School has been so hectic the last couple of weeks that we haven't had time to have much fun on the weekends."

"I know that my duty as an old man is to tell you that you don't know what hectic is and that this is the best time of your life." He leaned toward her and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "But you know what? I like being retired a awful lot." Lacy smiled, glad to know that her friend was actually as happy as he acted. "But don't tell anybody that I told you that." Adam said with a loud, unrestrained laugh. "All those grumpy old people would have me lynched if they knew that I spilled the beans about how much fun we're having."

"It'll be our secret. And that'll be 857.94."

Adam pulled out his debit card, which he had gotten as soon as the local stores had started accepting them. He hated change for the sake of change, but he instantly embraced anything that actually simplified his life. Adam pushed the cart out to the truck, refusing the teenage boy who offered to load up his groceries for him, and he drove home to cook supper for himself and his wife.

Laura walked in the door an hour later, looking tired and sweaty and gorgeous. It would be easy to forget when she looked so beautiful that she had been a brilliant lawyer who every pros-
ecutor in the state had dreaded going up against. But his momma had taught him better than that. He grew up in a time when women had little chance to have any career other than motherhood, but his mom’s intelligence and strength had adequately prepared him for the changing attitudes that were to come.

“Hey babe,” Adam said and kissed Laura. “How was your aerobics class?”

“Disheartening. But at the restaurant I met an old friend of mine. Remember Matt who I went to high school with?”

“Hmmm ... Matt,” Adam said hugging his wife from behind as she investigated the contents of the pot on the stove, “That skinny boy you pined away over your senior year?”

“That would be the one. You know, you’ve really saved me a lot of trouble by getting supper ready,” she looked up at him with a charmingly hesitant grin, “because I invited him to eat with us this evening.”

“Well I don’t know what to think about that,” he said teasingly as he hugged her more tightly. “I slave away all day preparing a romantic meal of chicken and dumplings for my gorgeous wife only to find out she’s invited her old flame.” Laura knew he was feigning this cliched jealousy. Matt had eventually decided he did love her after all while they were in college. He had conveniently discovered this love a month after she had started dating Adam. Even then, Adam had too much respect for her to doubt her fidelity or try to fight for her.

“You know, he became a very successful dentist,” she played along.

“But where would his business be without people to deliver the cakes that rot out kids’ teeth? See, all those years I had the power to cut off his clientele. Who’s the real man now?” She laughed, and as they started setting the table, she gave a summary of the conversation she had with Matt in the restaurant. He had three kids and eight grandchildren, all of whom he talked about with pride. When she had suggested that he and his wife have dinner with them, he told her that he was divorced but would love to spend the evening catching up with an old friend.

An hour later, a knock on the door signaled their guest’s arrival. Laura let Matt in, and he looked around, taking in the homey atmosphere; the stone fireplace was the centerpiece of the living room, and the furniture was made of soft fabrics and rich, dark woods. It was the kind of living room that made you think of Christmas Eve and soft music and happy families.

Matt was sharply dressed. His standard blue suit and neatly combed hair made him look as formal as a dentist office or those big city grocery stores. But his smile was genuine and his handshake was firm as he greeted Adam with a “How ya doing, old man?”

They didn’t see the need to engage in too much pre-dinner small talk; they were all too hungry for that. Over dinner they talked about their pasts and their careers and their kids. When Adam revealed his former occupation, Matt tried not to look shocked, carefully holding his face in an overly-blank expression and nodding slightly. He had known that the man Laura had refused him for and married was a college math whiz who had come from a family of math whizzes. But the man who was now sitting across the table from Matt was not what he had expected. How could the beautiful and brilliant Laura Balentine end up with a Little Debbie truck driver?

Though Matt did an admirable job of not looking disgusted, Adam had been in this situation enough times at high school reunions to know what Matt was thinking, and he had always found that it was best if he started answering before anyone got up the guts to do any asking. “I never cared much for being cooped up,” Adam said. “I’ve always found I’m a lot happier with time to think about whatever I want, and truck driving gave me that. I enjoy doing my friends’ taxes for them, and I do a lot of reading in my spare time. I just never could have stood sitting in an office all day.”

“Yeah, and having a wife who’s a lawyer gave you the luxury of doing whatever you want,” Laura added.

“Hey, no argument from me,” he said, putting his hands up in surrender. “I’ve always loved the idea of being a kept man.”

Adam noticed that Matt’s eyes took on a faraway look as he listened to their banter. It was obvious that watching their ease with one another was making him uncomfortable; he couldn’t hide his jealousy quite as well as he had earlier hidden his shock. Adam was usually very slow to anger, but this annoyed him a bit. The man had squandered his chance with Laura, only showing
interest in her when she had found happiness with someone else. But that was a long time ago. Adam held no grudge against him for attempting to take her from him all those years ago, and it was long past time for Matt to move on, too.

“Matt, did you know that Adam whittles just like your dad used to?” asked Laura. When that piqued Matt’s interest, Laura insisted that he be taken into the bedroom to see Adam’s woodwork, causing a combination of humbleness and hospitality to overtake Adam’s annoyance.

“I just fiddle with it a bit for fun,” Adam said. “You’re welcome to take a look, but it’s really nothing special.”

“Don’t listen to him. Even he knows his stuff is really good,” said Laura, as she took Matt by the arm to lead him out of the room, with Adam trailing behind them.

The three of them walked into the bedroom. The prominent feature of the room was a shelf which went around most the bedroom about five feet off the floor. The shelf was continuous except at the place where the bed’s headboard was against the wall and where it stopped for the bedroom’s large window which was on the opposite side of the room as the bed. The shelf was covered in wooden figures of all kinds, everything from little wooden people and boxes with intricate carvings to quirky gadgets such as tiny working catapults and piggy banks that made goofy motions when money was put in.

“Wow, sure puts my dad’s old crooked boxes and spoons to shame,” said Matt. He walked around the room to look at the figures more closely. Laura immediately showed him her favorite piece, the one Adam had made her for their 30th anniversary. He had worked on the replica of their wedding cake topper for two months. Matt held it in his hands and examined it. This was by far the most detailed object in the room, with the intricate folds in the bride and groom’s clothes and the dozens of flowers on the arc the couple was standing in front of.

“That’s really amazing,” Matt said softly. “I can’t imagine the time and effort this must have taken. It’s quite a present.” Matt quickly handed it back to Laura and found another object to focus on. “Is that a mermaid?” he said as he approached the figure sitting to the right of the window. “My granddaughter Misty loves mermaids. Been crazy about them ever since she saw that Disney movie.” Adam suggested that he take the figurine to give to her, but Matt thought that it had taken Adam far too much time for him to just give away. When Adam insisted, Matt took out his wallet, asking to at least give him some money for it.

“Don’t even think about it,” Laura said. “Wait a minute. Are those pictures of grandbabies I see in that wallet?” Matt beamed and showed them the photo of 4-year-old Misty. Laura put out her hand to hold the wallet so she and Adam could look through all the pictures; Matt seemed to show the slightest hesitation for just a moment but gave the wallet to Laura.

Laura flipped through pictures of adorable children and awkward but happy-looking adolescents as Adam watched over her shoulder. When she reached the last page, which showed a toddler sitting on the Easter Bunny’s lap, the picture dropped slightly out of its plastic, revealing another photo hidden underneath. The picture had fallen just enough to show the top of a head. Blonde hair with a distinctive barrette fastened on one side.

A copy of that same picture was in one of their photo albums, and Laura still had that barrette.

Adam saw Laura tense slightly, but she just smiled and said, “They’re beautiful, Matt,” and handed the wallet back to him. They both looked at their guest, who was standing in front of the bedroom window.

“Thanks, I think so, too,” Matt said. He turned and looked out the window over the rolling field to the full moon that was just rising over the horizon. “Quite a view you have here. The sunrises must be beautiful.”

“Yeah, they are,” said Adam.

A while later, Matt, carrying a small wooden mermaid, walked out the front door and got into his Lexus, and Adam and Laura began quietly clearing the table. As they moved around the kitchen, Adam started pondering what gift he should give Laura for their next anniversary. He suddenly felt the need to outdo himself.

— Jennifer Butler
**Just One of Those Days**

Because sleep rarely comes  
To roommates of nymphomaniacs.

Because rush hour is only a name  
And cars run out of gasoline.

Because long walks invite rain  
And backpacks are not umbrellas.

Because the professor is a troll  
Who locks the gate to his bridge.

Because conveyor belts bring homework  
That even dogs won't eat.

Because bad days are black jelly beans  
Infrequent but inevitable.

— Lisa Roper

**Presently Speaking**

on the Dance of Life by Edvard Munch

Between  
who I once was  
And  
Who, I'm sure that  
your will  
will force me to be  
We dance  
holding the present  
in place.

Around  
Us, dance others  
Wild and brief  
like  
the many  
Waves  
While we are  
buoys drifting  
away.

Below  
The horizon of the sea  
Soon  
our star will fall  
drowning  
the light  
that is fueling my future’s reflection  
that I see on the surface  
of your eyes.

The cacophony can not reach  
Our bodies  
The honesty of silence speaks  
Truer  
than the words  
that will force us  
Apart.

— Nathan Pitts
Chronology

Heather was waiting, posed against the rack of tool shelves in the utility room, when Rick should have been home. She got ready a full fifteen minutes before she usually heard him at the door, just in case he got out of the office by eight for a change. And then she stood there for twenty minutes while her toes went numb in the pointy-toed shoes and an early fall breeze blew through the hip-length lace gown.

She flexed her toes and twisted to look over her shoulder at the sunflower-face clock hanging over the washing machine. 9:00. He'd be here any minute. Heather put her head close to the window screen, but she couldn't hear the whoosh of his Ford Ranger coming over the hill. At 9:07 she tottered into the bathroom to relieve her bladder, and stopped at the stainless steel kitchen sink to fill it up again.

She checked the sunflower again as she re-entered the utility room. Ten after. He could have at least called to say he'd be late.

At 9:15 Heather turned the white plastic laundry basket upside down and sat on it. For a while she tried striking various sexy poses there. A woman could do a lot more sitting than standing, after all.

At 9:30 she gave up the fight and ate a slice of chocolate pudding pie for supper. She left the buttermilk biscuits she'd made for Rick's supper in the oven, but she took out the baked chicken breasts and wrapped them in plastic wrap, smoothing out all the clingy wrinkles before she put the package neatly into the left-forward corner of the next-to-the-top shelf in the refrigerator. She put away all the vegetables, too, in neat Rubbermaid containers — the whole set of them had been a gift from Rick's parents at Christmas two years ago. The green beans were a little sloppy; Heather should have drained them better. But the baked onions were just tender enough, and they would be just as good tomorrow for lunch, heated in the microwave with the layers pulled apart and butter melted all over. Rick liked onions. On their first date, Rick had ordered the fried onions at Hank & Mary's, and then his breath had smelled so strong that he had been too shy to kiss her goodnight. Next time he'd arrived armed with two boxes of Tic-Tacs. How long has it been since Rick had sweetened his breath for her?

The pie stared at her from the counter. Heather made a cursory attempt at pacing the craving away, but she was too unsteady, her weight thrown toward the counter by four-and-a-half inch heels. She tottered back to the small white and pink bedroom she shared with Rick and sat down on the edge of the pastel plaid bedspread, faded from her weekly washings, to remove her black patent leather torture devices.

Heather worked the leather ankle straps out of their clasps and eased the shoes off her feet: first the left, then the right. Next time she'd have to reverse order: first the right, then the left.

A few seconds after the shoes hit the floor, sensation crept back into her feet, and Heather winced. When she stood up to put the shoes back in their plastic box (labeled with a Sharpie) in the closet, the bones in the balls of her feet started shifting back to their proper places, and that hurt worse than anything.

"Why is it," she muttered to herself — wasn't talking to oneself the first sign of a mental illness? — "that putting things back to right is always more painful and difficult than putting them wrong?" Kinda like life. Wrecking things between her and Rick had been easy — a sore word here, and angry suspicion there — and now fixing them was going to be a big mess.

It would be all right, of course.

She got up and commenced straightening the bedroom. The covers weren't quite right, and she adjusted them carefully — two inches to the right, three back to the left, four down to the brass Victorian footboard — before pronouncing them satisfactory. Then she opened up the closet and began rearranging Rick's shoes left-to-right and alphabetically by color: black in the far left, then brown, then burgundy. All these were loafers, followed with a single pair of dingy white tennis-shoes in the dead center. There. Now he'd be able to find his clothes double-quick in the mornings and spend a few extra minutes talking to Heather.

It occurred to her that her plan might work even better if Rick's clothes were organized in the same way, so she set about methodically reordering Rick's underwear, newest at the front, oldest at the back. By the time Rick got home at 11:30, she had reorganized his socks, shirts, and dress pants, and had a good start on his sweats, organizing by the weight of the material.
Heather suppressed a yawn, staring across the living room at Rick. Last night he’d said, “We’ll talk about it later,” before she even had a chance to ask about his day, or why he was late. He’d thrown his clothes in the floor and crawled into the bed in his underwear, disturbing the symmetry of the covers in the process. “Later” was the sort of indefinite measurement that gave a man license to be incommunicative for hours, maybe days. Who knew? Could be weeks. After two rebuffed attempts to start a conversation this morning (and it was only 9:25), Heather wasn’t ready to broach the subject of “good morning” again. Rick would talk when he was good and ready, maybe after he finished reading the paper. But one section after another fell to the floor from Rick’s elegantly listless fingers, and he said nothing. Heather cleaned up the breakfast mess (he hadn’t said a word during breakfast, either) and put a few things on to heat for lunch. At 10:21, she reentered the living room to discover that Rick had moved past the morning paper to peruse last week’s Sporting News, which he hadn’t had time to read.

At 12:00 the hot buttered onions were on the table, the biscuits were warm in the stove, and last night’s chicken breasts were finishing a whirl in the microwave. Heather got two stoneware plates out of the cabinet and began fishing around for a pair of forks. “Rick?” Her voice felt a little hoarse from not being used in so long. “Rick, honey? Dinner’s ready, if you want to come and eat.” She put the dishes down where they always sat (they never changed places, seeing as how their table was just barely big enough to hold service for two and the food) and went back to fetch the biscuits and chicken breasts. “I made chicken and biscuits, just like you like.”

Rick walked into the kitchen and took his place, offering her a spare nod. Heather opened her mouth to explain that she had had this planned for supper last night, only he’d been too late to eat it, but he propped a copy of Men’s Health on the table in front of his face, shutting her out again.

At 2:30 Rick was sitting, silent as a doorpost, in a lawn chair on the patio they’d built together two summers ago, and Heather had had enough. “Rick, it’s time to talk.” She was too unsteady, with the bricks burning her bare feet; she sounded higher than she meant, like her voice wasn’t hers.

“What’s to say?” Rick settled his mirrored shades more snugly against his face and shifted away from her to get better sunlight.

“Look,” Heather tried again, more gently this time, “it’s just that I’m really sorry about the night before last. I was going to try to make it up to you last night, but then you were late again — I mean, you were too tired to talk when you got home. I just want you to know that I love you and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Rick mumbled. His right foot was twitching.

“But I really think we could make things better,” Heather said, encouraged by his nonjudgmental tone. “Really. I know you’re trying to make things better for us — easier — but I think I could help out more. Burger King is hiring for that new one out on the highway. I bet they’d hire me. I could work part time, and then you wouldn’t have to work so many hours — we could be together a couple of nights a week, anyway. What do you say?”

“Whatever you want to do,” Rick said.

“Well, I think it’d be great. I might not always be off on weekends — part time people have to take what they can get, beggars can’t be choosers — and I’d miss church some, but I think God would understand doing it for my marriage, don’t you? And of course I wouldn’t always be here to have supper hot, but I could make you up something before I left for the day, and you’d be all right. Maybe sometimes you could even stop by and get a burger. I think that’d be great, huh?” Rick grunted. “So anyway, if it’s all right with you, I thought I could go by Monday and pick up an application and we can just see how it goes. If I get on, that’s what, five dollars an hour? And I could probably get ten, fifteen hours every week. I think that would help us out a lot. You could come home at least an hour or so earlier every night — don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” Rick said.

“Well, why don’t you? It’s not that hard, is it? It’s just simple math.”

“Maybe we could both work and we’d get ahead faster.”

“Well, I’m not talking about you quitting work altogether! I’m just saying maybe you could scale back a few hours a week. I
never see you, Rick. I miss my sweet onion breath, you know?"

Rick shrugged. "You should really stop calling me that."

***

The rest of the Saturday passed in a brooding silence that added weight to everything in the house. The sunflower clock was too heavy, the chairs and the table and the dishes on it were too heavy, the bed and the bedclothes were too heavy, and at 4:42, when Heather picked up the butcher knife to quarter cabbage, she found she could barely lift it or saw it through the cabbage, and her quarters came out raggedly uneven. She told herself that it was all right because she was just going to grate them for coleslaw anyway. Rick liked his slaw with mayonnaise, not dressing, and no celery seeds.

Rick came to the table of his own accord, just as Heather was about to call him for supper. He stared moodily at his plate while Heather said grace, respectful but not really joining her, and then the massive quiet settled again, like a giant vulture standing on the very carcass it ate. The whole evening was like that, and by the time Heather went to bed her nerves were tense and raw. In her dreams she was sure a catastrophe was about to occur, but could never tell what it was until too late.

***

Sunday morning saw a little relief. At 6:05 Heather got up to make coffee, being sure to rinse the pot well three times before securing it under the drip. Rick got up at twelve 'til eight and had some of the coffee (Heather had kept it warm for him) with a bowl of off-brand cereal. His face didn't look quite as tight as it had the day before, but of course there was no time to talk; Heather had to leave for morning choir practice at 8:07. Probably it was for the best anyway. Least said, soonest mended.

Choir practice and Sunday School provide a nice little break. Heather always came out of herself a little bit at church. Here outward order and inner peace prevailed. But when Rick showed up (seven minutes late) for the morning worship service, Heather felt her jaw tighten. She'd had all his clothes ready before he even got out of bed this morning. She'd seen him eat breakfast, and she'd had his towel and washcloth and shaving kit laid out for him in the bathroom. How could he possibly be late?

"Hey, hon," she said, standing on one foot as she put her purse on the counter by the door. "You doing okay?"

"Fine," Rick said, although he sounded a little off — muffled, almost — to Heather's ears.

"Well, all right," she said over her shoulder as she hurried to put her Bible in the bookcase in the living room. "I'm glad you're feeling better. You looked a little peaked yesterday. I was worried about you." Rick didn't say anything, or even look at her, so Heather let it go and picked a new topic. "How about scrambled egg sandwiches for lunch, huh? With cheese? Would you like that?"
“Whatever. Fine.”

As Heather washed each egg and broke it carefully into a clear glass bowl, she kept sending Rick glances to see whether he was really all right. After a while and no change, she spoke up. “So did you hear the preacher’s sermon this morning?”

“I was there, wasn’t I?”

All right, it hadn’t been the most intelligent question. “I think so. What did you think?”

“Actually, I thought a lot.” Pause. “You know how he said that it would be God’s plan for a marriage to work if He led a couple together in the first place?”

Kinda. “Yeah ...” One of the eggs had gone bad; the yolk ran all over the place as Heather broke it. She threw out the contents of the bowl and started fresh.

“Well, I was thinking, what if it wasn’t his plan?”

This egg broke all right but somehow looked wrong. Heather stared at it for a long moment. What was the matter with the egg? “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if there was this couple, all right? And they were attracted to each other. I mean, they really fell head over heels in the beginning. And they thought it was God’s plan, that they were just meant to be together ... but really it was just a feeling. Hormones. Pheromones. Whatever.” Rick was playing his thumbnails along the edge of the table, watching his hands.

“Okay, so ... what?” Heather started whisking the eggs — six eggs, three a piece — with a fork.

Rick was silent for a long minute, while Heather poured the eggs into the skillet and turned it on medium. When she picked up the bread knife and turned to get the bread, he was staring at her. “What if that was us, babe? I mean, you know I’ll always love you, but what if we’re just ... wrong, you know? Like maybe we just thought we belonged to each other because we were such good friends and ... Heather? Baby?”

Heather realized she was standing much too still and grabbed the bread in her left hand, with the knife still point-up in her right. “You’re just all upset because of what happened Thursday,” she said. “But, look, Ricky, I said I was sorry. I’ve tried to make things up. You just have to let go so we can move on.”

“We can’t move on. How can we move on? I can’t.”

“Sure we can, sweetness. We’ve had fights before. It’ll be all right.”

“No. It won’t be all right. It’s not about Thursday. It’s ... you want to know what time I get to work, what time I leave work, what time I wipe my butt. You organize my underwear, for God’s sake.” Rick was quivering, his fingertips on the tabletop and his wrists hopping erratically up and down.

“I’m just trying to help you get organized, baby. You know you’re too disorganized; you need me for that. You’ve always needed me for that.”

“I know my colors, Heather. I do not need my shoes listed alphabetically.”

“It will help save you time. Rick,” she said. You had to be patient with Rick; he was so spontaneous himself — a lot of fun, really — that he would lose hours every day in unplanned activities. “Time we can spend together.”

“Doing what? Making out our menus for the next fifty years? I can’t stand this, Heather. I can’t stand what we are. My God, I can’t stand you. I don’t want your help, I don’t want it, can’t take it. I need my life, my life, mine, let me go. I can’t do this, I have to go ...”

Heather wiped the blood carefully from the bread knife and put it in the kitchen sink. The police would be here soon; already they would be on their way. She’d had to wipe the blood off the phone, too. There was no sense in leaving a mess.

She checked on Rick again, just to see if he was still breathing, after all. They could make up ... But no, he wasn’t breathing. Maybe it was better this way. She’d done all she could. The police could tie up the loose ends.

— Sarah Carpenter
Untitled
Leslie Brown
Best of Show

Death Study
Lavonia Martin
Campus Bookstore Award
Beautiful Monk
Christy Sherrill
2nd Place B&W Photo

French Blue Dream Existence
Emily Godwin
1st Place 2D B&W Photo
Proof of Existence
Joshua Mattox
1st Place 2D Color Photo

Looking Back
Brannon Burcham
2nd Place Polaroid Transfer
I Don't Remember falling
Brannon Burcham
Digital Multimedia

Meditations on Nature
It was our first night in the new house. My daughter had gone to bed early, and I was standing at the back door, looking out of the glass at the small shrubs in the back yard. They were barely twigs, dry and crooked. The dogs were outside rummaging through the ivy atop two knee-high brick walls that lined the western easement. The shrubs collapsed under the weight of their massive paws. Each of the three boxers weighed around sixty pounds, enough to frighten most people visiting our home. Lily kept staring at the tin overhang on the screened in porch, which was creaking softly. Although the dogs were large, their namesake belied them. They were not ferocious or even brave. Any noise could spark fear in them. This time it was the tin roof of the screened in porch.

The wind was picking up enough to stir the bits of shrub lining the yard. I couldn’t hear the tin moaning or even see it move, but the dogs were attuned to its every whisper. The mere breath of the wind upon their backs made their hair stand on end. Mia and Ramses, the only male of the clan, took the friction in the air as a call to play. They began running wildly around the yard, up and down the easement and around the pear tree. They only stopped twice, when the wind caught a piece of loose tin, bending it back. The cracking of the tin sent them running for the door. I stepped out onto the cement walkway and extended a gentle hand, sending them back to their games. Lily ran inside the house as the door closed. She had had enough and was lying under the bed, shaking.

I walked into the bedroom and sat on the bed. I had always paid attention to the wind. Not writing down speeds and directions vigorously, but listening to it. On most weekends, my family would pack the Trans Am and head to Many, Texas. Our camp was in Toledo Bend, among red clay hills and pine lined coves. We had a mobile home settled forty yards from a sandy bank, and docked nearby was my dad’s 1986 Bass Cat Protera. The 18 ft. aluminum boat that I was allowed to drive was stacked upside down over piles of firewood. Dad was serious about fishing and spent each
morning at the picnic table, drinking coffee and listening to the wind. He claimed the wind would tell us where the fish were hiding if we listened just right.

Most of the time, I sat on the dock and set traps for minnows or trolled the aluminum boat about twenty feet from the bank to fish for small crappie. I was more preoccupied with floating logs than I was with the wind. I kept watch for eyeballs and teeth, since the crappie attracted alligators and gars. My father made me throw back what we could not eat, and used the minnows as baitfish in deeper waters. When the wind was just right, we trolled past the small cove our camp was nestled in and past Mr. Clancy’s camp, so we didn’t disturb his traps. Milk jugs bouncing on the water served as markers for any trot lines. Once out of the bend, Dad killed the trolling motor and hit the outboard. The more wind there was, the faster he seemed to drive, lashing me all over the boat. We soared over waves and currents from other boats, which were brutal. Egrets and ibis dodged our Bass Cat, then flew directly back down to the water to catch whatever fish had been stirred to the surface.

By listening to the wind and knowing its patterns during the summer months, my father knew to search for bass and trout in mud lines and various sandy bends. He looked near rotted logs and in sunny patches that otherwise went fishless. The currents, moderate but consistent, caused sediment to rise from the sand floor. Bass were not spooked by the reflection of the sun and often swam through the murk, feeding on smaller fish. We took the opportunity to throw in line after line, catching five and six pound largemouth and smallmouth bass. When the breeze reached into the bends, we sought out rotting logs and reed patches, catching Perch and Flathead Catfish. We always had more to eat on windy days, it seemed.

I eventually joined my father in the morning at the picnic table, drinking coffee-milk and listening to the wind. I would tune the radio to 99.5 FM, where Rob Robin gave the daily weather report. How many knots, what direction? I gave Dad the wind report, proud to be so helpful. He would nod, smile, and say that I was missing the point. I was supposed to listen. The pines were either moving or not, the sand was either cool or warm, the water could be rippled or calm. He told me to run down to the dock and check the trot lines. What were the milk jugs doing? It was important. Like with the ears of the dogs, somehow he could hear the breathing of the wind and know what secret life was happening under the surface of the bends.

— Elysia Morasco
Hunting Story

"It’s starting to look as if the most shameful tradition of Western civilization is our need to deny we are animals."

- Barbara Kingsolver

Radical deer hunters make me sick. I have been around them my entire life; four brothers that live for the chance to kill anything that lurks beyond the green fields of the farm. Each holiday, I hear the same old stories “Ya’ll remember the time I shot that eight point that had that spread that was about this big?” And each Christmas, the spread gets six inches wider and we are entertained by camping stories where they all nearly starved to death or damn near died of hypothermia. It is all a bunch of baloney if you ask me, and sadly, they can’t relate to me unless they are bragging about the newest species they have mounted on their living room walls. I am not impressed.

Last December, I was persuaded by my youngest brother, Jarrod, to take a hunting trip.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “they don’t suffer much. It will be fun.”

I was appalled at that moment, but I still, against my better judgment, went on the hunting expedition. We sped along in his red pickup truck that had been through hell and back from a similar hunting trip. The tailgate was wired on with zip ties and the antenna was replaced with a coon tail covered rusty coat hanger. I was covered with mud from just stepping up into the cab.

“You like my new stickers” he asked grinning. “I got that one at the coon hunting club with a bag of dog food.”

Big orange letters plastered across the back glass read “Coon Killer” and “I Fear No Deer.” I couldn’t help but laugh a little. All he lacked was a coon skin cap. He had the truck loaded down with all the things that we needed for the much dreaded hunting trip: doe-in-heat pee in a spray bottle, grunts, orange vests, gloves, Levi Garret, and his lucky petrified turkey leg. “I never leave home without it; you know it makes a good backscratcher, too.” I just wanted to get to the farm in one piece, let him kill something, and go home all in this order swiftly.

As we approached the farm, I began to feel sick, the deep kind of sick that you get in the pit of your stomach when you’re nervous. I knew something was going to die there. He loaded my arms down with a gun, ammo, and three of the latest editions of Field and Stream magazine. I was sprayed from head to boot with doe piss, and at that moment, I had no way to defend myself from the overwhelming stench of ammonia. I smelled like a walking outhouse and I gagged with disgust.

“Well the deer ain’t particularly fond of Calvin Klein sweetheart,” he mumbled sarcastically.

I could have kicked his ass right then, arms loaded down and all. We trudged up and down the hills through red mud and feces until we found the shooting house. It was located about twenty-five feet up in the tree. My heart stopped.

“I can’t climb that. I am afraid of heights, and I am clustrophobic.”

I didn’t have much choice in the matter. He was already up the tree before I finished the last sentence, and there was no way in hell he was shooting a gun up over my head. I carefully approached the rickety wooden steps with my hands sweating and my body shaking. I grabbed the sides of the ladder and began to emerge.

I finally made it to the top of deer hunter’s castle when I began to worry about how I was going to get back down. My panic eventually ceased a bit when I glanced out at the landscape. The cedar trees swayed in the distance, the birds gathered around the corn plot, and the owl in the tree next door alarmed me with his solemn hoot. For a moment, I was glad that I came along.

We sat in the tree quietly flipping through the magazines. I, like most normal people, began to get restless. My nose was cold, my lips were chapped, I had to pee, and I was scared to crawl down the ladder to squat. I was stuck there with deer slayer until dark. A few moments later, I saw them in the corner of the field emerging from the green. They began graze. My brother began to take aim. I pleaded with him not to shoot. He waited a moment.

“Why? There are thousands that roam here on the farm, and that looks like it may be a good buck.”

I put my hands over my ears. They were numb from the cold, and it was over within a minute. I forgot about my fear of climbing down the ladder. I ran with him at first to gaze triumphantly upon our latest slaughter. She lay there still, blood frothing from her lungs, and in that moment I realized what we had done. We
were murderers. I cried. I was startled by my own emotions. This was something that I wanted to do. I wanted to experience the excitement and joy that all men talked about. I should have been prepared, but how could I be? The doe was like me, innocent, unaware of her surroundings and unaware of what was to happen. For her it was death. For me, it was an insight to the value of life.

I stayed in the field by her side while Jarrod ran to get the truck. Since I took part in the hunting trip, I had to take part in the cleaning process as well. I grabbed one leg and he the other as we dragged her up to the truck bed. Her eyes were still open and staring blankly. We drove home in silence. I think he was ashamed it was a doe, and I was ashamed that I had taken part in the ritual. I held her legs while he stuck the silver blade into her abdomen. With one swift pop it opened exposing the meat like cutting a watermelon. I watched as he dipped his hands in, slowly removing each organ and examining them. I watched as the steam rose from his scraped knuckles as he pulled the ropey intestines away. He tried to be funny.

"Have you ever seen a deer turd before?" he asked squeezing the last intestine he ripped away. I didn't laugh. She still had milk. I knew a baby would starve but the dogs would be fed, and we would have a hunting story to share at the dinner table next Christmas.

— Paula Jacobs

Pompeii

They were so beautiful they also made you afraid.

— Barry Lopez

I was thirteen years old when I first saw Pompeii. Like all of the other tourists, I shuffled past the glass enclosures where stony portraits of agony and confusion lay among ash and broken pumice. I remember crying as I stared at a woman hovering over a child. A charred bed stood next to them. The woman's right arm was crooked over the child's back and their feet were stuffed under the bed. I wondered if they were scooting under the bed like a wolf into a cave or if they were fleeing their hiding place. An older man in the group paused alongside me and put his hand on my shoulder. He whispered into my ear, "Don't worry, they didn't suffer."

The entire eruption of Mount Vesuvius lasted nineteen hours. Those who did not leave the village were plummeted with gaseous fumes and smoldering rock. Pumice rained down for over nine hours, like a landslide from the sky. The earth was exploding, creating a never ending night for the small village. Pliny the Younger wrote about the event twenty years after it happened: "You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death."

I can imagine the people running past images of their gods carved into the walls, wondering if they had been forsaken or foolish. The horror displayed by the land on which they relied was an amazing example of nature's betrayal of human trust. It has been said that some of the people of the village did not believe that the volcano was erupting. That there was any danger. I believe that they suffered more than anyone.

Denial must have served some purpose for both the man standing next to me and for the dead of Pompeii. Until lava paved the streets, they prayed and talked of life, ate and drank, ignored the beautiful mountain next door. Those that sat at the table, suffocating and being cooked alive, could not fathom the possibility of their gods betraying them or the bountiful earth erupting. Like the man who reassured me, denial was greater than truth, beauty greater than destruction. They could not realize that both are entwined to create a world where beauty causes fear.
Beach Explorations

A beach landscape by night contains a power unseen by day. The average sunbather misses that beauty of dark sound. No seagulls to beg for picnic scraps, no sunburned vacationers lathered in coconut-scented cooking oil. There is only the sound of breaking waves and the smell of ocean. A salty and crisp wetness, synonymous with marine, fills the nose triggering the neurons responsible for nostalgia and memory.

My first ocean experience remains vague. A trip to Walt Disney World, at the age of six, required a side trip to the shores of Pensacola before our family could return home. I was thoroughly upset. Why must I leave the comfort and safety of Mickey's fantasy land? Even more upsetting was the forced desertion of the hotel swimming pool. Its clear waters reminded me of a gigantic bathtub, a world away from the muddy banks of the Warrior River where I had learned to swim. So, I sulked for the entire drive. It is probably the repressed anger that makes me forget most of the experience. Yet, my mother takes great enjoyment telling the rest of this family vacation story. According to her retelling of the tale, I was only a visitor upon the beach for a total of one hour. In that time, my three foot frame had been dunked numerous times under the waves, and I also had managed to become sunburned and stung by jellyfish. My first trip to the beach should have been an unforgettable episode. There should be photographic evidence of me exploring my new-found environment with childish awe. Yet, the only thing that remains are a series of photographs in which I emerge from the surf like the "Thing from the Black Lagoon". My face scrunched with crying and, in the last one, a strand of snot extends from my chin to the top ruffle of my Strawberry Shortcake bathing suit.

It took me thirteen years to return. Pressured into a last minute spring break trip, I found myself driving to Gulf Shores, AL in March of my freshman year of college. My Honda Civic was overloaded with borrowed camping equipment -- covertly obtained from my parents' garage -- as well as three suitcases, three warm bodies, and one very important cooler. Our little travel party decided to cast off at 10:00 pm on a Friday in order to beat every other college kid on their way to the beach. Before an hour had passed, everyone was sleepy, irritable, and had a cramp somewhere in their body. Thankfully, by the time Montgomery's city limits popped into view, my companions were asleep. Well fueled with No-Doz and limitless cans of Coca-Cola, I began to enjoy the trip at this point. For the first time, I began to anticipate our coming destination.

The night beach is not an isolated place. Along with fellow beachcombers armed with flashlights, you can see a variety of creatures and natural objects that the waves have brought to the shoreline. All one needs is a small light source, a sturdy pair of beach shoes, and a discerning eye to witness nature. Small, transparent sand crabs will immediately scuttle from your light, and the larger ones -- about the size of a tennis ball -- will freeze in place. This is a survival technique. If still enough, the crab's transparency helps it blend seamlessly into the surrounding sand. Another nocturnal inhabitant of the beach is the Alabama beach mouse. Although endangered and very hard to spot, it is well worth a night of scoping out every available sand dune and bunch of sea oats if you can sight one of these little rodents. There are also numerous seashells to collect and identify with a field guide. The state seashell of Alabama is the Johnstone's Junonia. Small, oblong, and leopard-printed, it is relatively easy to recognize. It is usually found offshore but can occasionally be found washed onto the shore. If you stay on the night beach until 6:30, you can witness the tide come in, and also beat out the early-bird shell hunters.

Erin awoke soon after we passed the Orange Beach sign. She immediately rolled down a window and lit a cigarette. The scent of the ocean hit us both and we smiled in the dark. "We are almost there," she said.

"Where are we going to sleep?" I asked. Planning is usually my forte, but this time we were vacationing by Erin's rules. That meant no reservations.

"Let's get to the ocean first," she replied. Twenty minutes later, I was parking the car in a deserted lot sprinkled with sand. The darkness was broken only by scattered street lamps. Stepping out the car, the wind grabbed our clothes and tugged at the bandanna around my frizzy hair.
"Should we wake Kristy?" I asked.

"Fuck her she shouldn't have been such a bitch on the way here," Erin answered. Slowly we plodded our way to the surf, taking time to roll up the legs of our pajamas and remove our shoes. We picked up fists full of sand and slowly let the breeze catch the grainy stuff until our palms were empty.

"So where are we going to spend the rest of the night?" I said.

"Shut up."

"What?"

"Just shut the hell up and listen." Seconds passed.

"You have to close your eyes too."

"Fine."

Then it came, that realization that no other sound existed outside the waves in front of us. It was the closest thing to a sensory deprivation chamber that I had ever experienced. We didn't move or speak for at least ten minutes. Just the wind pushing against our bodies was enough. There was power here. Invisible but not silent.

— Candace Herron

Breathing

L

inda Hasslestrom's reference to "the breathing of the wind" stirs too many associations, from too many years of reading and teaching Wordsworth and Coleridge and Shelley and the "correspondent breeze." All those linguistic roots connecting the wind to the soul, to inspiration, to the breath, to God breathing life into Adam—these roots twine through my head, almost suffocating any fresh listening. For many years I have held close a statement from Thoreau's essay, "Walking":

In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is.—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?

I would fain return to my senses. There's the crux upon which depends any "acute observation of nature." My senses—my own listening, touching, and seeing, even my own breathing—are not always as accessible as I'd like. Technology continually disconnects us from our senses. To pierce through the encrusted layers of the familiar and see again the solid ground pulsing with its own being, is the task of not only the writer but of the person aiming for authenticity, for living deliberately (there I go again; Sartre and Thoreau creep in, despite my best efforts). Even more insistently, and underneath the yammering voices of the writers, never too far from the surface, I hear Jimi Hendrix singing "The Wind Cries Mary"—"Will the wind ever remember/The names it has blown in the past?" And back there somewhere, Bob Dylan sings that "the answer is blowing in the wind," a song I played some thirty-five years ago, the first time I performed music before a large group of strangers. I guess part of the point is that, although the answer is blowing in the wind, other people must have trouble hearing it too.

In other words, the head works too much some times. Other times I find more success in shutting down the noise and "returning to my senses." All week long I have listened to the killdeer cheep, the red-bellied woodpecker drum, the gull squawk. I have
recorded the train’s roaring engine and wheels, its blaring horn. I have listened with cold ears in strong winds to the river splitting on the upstream side of bridge supports and riffling its way past and on to Tennessee. At night I have attended to barking dogs, chatting neighbors, and wailing sirens, sounds carried down the streets or over the water and to my back yard. Early Sunday morning I step outside. The weather station I installed on my front porch reads twenty-two degrees. A northeast wind blows lightly, nothing like the wild, fierce banging of Saturday afternoon and evening. My neighbor’s long, cylindrical metal wind chimes swing together, sending music rippling through the early stillness. A single mourning dove cries, whowoo—hoo—hoo—hoo. As a boy, I could mimic that call by blowing into my hands. An old primer gray Chevy pickup rumbles down the street. The driver and I—and Sage, the big brown dog lying watchful and silent in the grass across the street—we are awake. Except for the ubiquitous blackbirds, quiet this morning, we are the only signs of life. The wind tells me I am in my senses. I will go inside and warm up with a cup of good, hot coffee.

— Tim Kelley
Untitled
Leslie Brown
1st Place 3D Ceramic Sculpture

After Adrian Arleo
Leslie Brown
2nd Place 3D Ceramic Sculpture
Without Vase
Beth Bachuss
Merit Award Ceramic

Existence
Daniel Nelson
Merit Award B&W Photo
Clumsy Girl

I am the clumsiest girl
I've ever met,
My mind always dancing
Without my feet.

So confident with books,
I find I am
Uncertain with road maps-
They confuse me.

Always saving money,
I am forever
Losing dimes.

And I apply lipstick too carefully,
Like a little girl keeping house
With toys.

— Sarah Carpenter
Antonia

I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister -- anything that a woman can be to a man.

-Jim in My Antonia

Because you were my first friend in a new place and close to my age,

Open to what I could teach you, but quick to show me everything I didn't know.

Because you were the strongest woman in the field and the prettiest girl in town

Every man and boy wanted your last dance, you were always kind but never feigned interest.

Because when you made your big mistakes, you never bowed your head with shame.

You knew work and hope would bring a better life. Because you showed your baby with pride.

Because you care about everyone which makes me glad I'm in this world

Because no one could ever stop you, not even fate itself.

— Jennifer Butler

What (Superstition) Could Save

I've always tried not to let myself adhere to [superstitions], but now I'm starting to feel that maybe they hold some validity. Riding in the back seat of my mother's Lincoln as a kid, a black cat ran across the road, narrowly being missed by our car. Immediately my mother began the ritual, and immediately my eyes began to roll to the back of my head. For black cats, my mother must cross thirteen Xs on the windshield with her fingers only to be encored by spitting a small mist over her left shoulder. Luckily, only family members could witness this specific display, but more public situations never restrained her. We could never "split a pole;" that is to say if we were approaching a column or a parking meter, everyone in the group had to follow the leader and walk either to the left or to the right of the approaching potential minor disaster. I can't count the number of times that I have been forced to walk back around a "pole," like a mediocre slalomer forced to turn around and negotiate a missed gate. Despite my logical resistance to mom's superstitions, traces of them have always remained with me. Alone, I think twice before walking under a ladder, then duck below its supports for spite as if testing superstition's fury. This way I always have something to fall back on when logic lets me down.

***

There was the issue of retrieving the ring that allowed me the opportunity to see Amber again. This sort of thing is usually done at the moment of breakup. It's the scene of the girl realizing that her fiancé is not the man for her, for whatever reason, and while crying she takes off the ring, struggling due to the swelling of her hands in this emotional moment, she forces it into her now ex's hand, only to turn and walk away, leaving that part of her life in the past. The End.

Long distance relationships, on the other hand, often lend themselves to the unconventional. Romance via phone and email eventually leads to lonely hearts a thousand miles away falling apart at two a.m., without a tear ever to be seen by each other. For all I knew, the college minister had brainwashed Amber into
leaving me. At least I had hoped so, as I sat in my concrete walled dorm thinking of her on the other end of the line. In my mind, I pictured her ending it with me, speaking matter-of-factly, staring ahead blankly. I saw the youth group that she was supervising, along with her fellow supervisors and her evil masterminding college minister, all sitting behind her in a semicircle, with hands held and praying while swaying from side to side, seeing their mission through. Maybe the Southern Baptists were the cult that I imagined them to be at times. I had to see her face. I had to see her as she told me it was over, and the retrieval of the ring gave me the perfect opportunity.

***

On my seventh Christmas, I awoke to find the tree decorated with all of the Transformers that I had been wishing for. The action figures, distinguished by me by their colors, were perfect additions to our glowing plastic Christmas tree. I had asked a Santa at the mall for them, and once again he had come through. After all of the hustle and bustle of opening the other presents, thanking mom and dad for each one, except those left by the guy from the North Pole, my parents told me something that I'll never forget; Santa doesn't exist! I had a sneaking suspicion that something wasn't quite right with the idea, so this wasn't overly shocking. It was what my mother told me next that has come to be a source of many doubts.

"We're telling you this, because we want you to know the truth. We waited to tell you about Santa so that you could have fun with the other kids, but we didn't want you to ever stop trusting us. And this is very important son: God is not like Santa, God is real. We didn't want you to confuse that, ever. Never doubt God."

Later on I heard others mention what the terrible consequences were for those who did doubt God. The general consensus was an eternity spent in hell. After hearing this, I made certain, for quite some time, to never let the thought of second-guessing my parents wedge into my mind. Alabama summers were hot enough, so an eternity in hell was no laughing matter.

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There's a fine line between those who are overly [superstitious] and those who are obsessive-compulsive. A visible difference is that the latter often receive medication, while the former are allowed to freely prolong myths which, for whatever reason, help those who invent and use them cope with the unknown. The common denominator to me is fear, generally, and fear of the unknown, specifically. Whether it is checking your locks six times before bed or a broken mirror's consequences, fear motivates.

I met a man who told me he was determined to cut off his finger. His left pinky had decided to grab a joint, which was eventually smoked by this young [religious] man. I'm still unsure whether the thumb had any role in this or not. Two weeks after I first met this young man, I noticed a bandage around his left hand. I asked him what had happened, and he told me that he had to wrap his hand to keep the bleeding down after he cut off his finger with a pair of wire clippers. When I asked him why he cut off his finger he pointed me to Matthew 5:30, which quotes Jesus as follows: "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."

Fortunately, for the young man, he had felt that it was only his pinky finger that caused him to sin, rather than his thumb or his entire left hand. Fortunately, there is one less object capable of casting him into hell.

***

When I sat down in Amber's Jeep, she greeted me with a smile as I put my suitcase in the backseat. "She's not wearing the ring," I thought. "Of course she's not. That's why you're here! Where is it? She left it at home, maybe. If she wants to give it back, why hasn't she? Is it possible that she doesn't want to? Oh shut up Nathan, don't be stupid, you've only just now said hello. Is she supposed to just shove it in your face as soon as you..."

We began with the typical greeting chit chat that comes
along with picking someone up from the airport. We were driving down the interstate with no physical destination in mind.

The stereo was always a point of argument between us. In the past we would take turns with the selections, my "sad bastard" music, as she put it, for her "fake contemporary Christian" music, which I only thought to myself, leaving those specific words unspoken. Eventually, a mass of similar unspoken thoughts had gathered, and I'm sure, being the poor actor I am, were reflected in my posture.

"It feels great to listen to what I want to," Amber began.

"I bet it does."

She was radiant, singing sporadically, loud and wild, while swerving and speeding away from the airport through the downtown traffic. She was purposely not glancing over at me. The last time she had picked me up from the airport, she rear-ended a car, because we couldn't keep our eyes or other body parts off of each other then. I hoped that she was now only watching the traffic for safety purposes, but the general recklessness of her driving quickly erased that hope.

"Do you know how much I absolutely hated the music you would make me listen to," Amber asked.

"I have a pretty good idea," I said glancing down to the speaker in the door.

"Aren't they awesome," she said referring to the Christian music playing over the stereo.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you say something? I was completely lost in the music," I said.

She finally looked over at me, again, and with an intense passion she told me, "I can drop you off on the side of the fucking road!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I will if you keep that shit up!"

This wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but at least she was cursing. This seemed to show some change in her general attitude. Maybe, there was hope left for us after all.

***

"Has there been any work done on the ring?"

"Not that I know of," I said to the jeweler who was appraising the diamond. I had bought the ring from a coworker, for a great price. He had posted the ring for sale, stating only that he "no longer needed it." I came to find out, after buying it, that he had bought it for a woman, who had literally thrown it in his face a few weeks after he had given it to her. I saw it as complete steal.

"I can't appraise it for the amount listed on the receipt. Did you know that there is fairly large fissure in the diamond?"

"What?"

"My guess is," the jeweler told me, "is that whoever set it into this setting put too much pressure on it."

She appraised it for more than what I had paid for it, but it wasn't quite the "steal" that it had been before I found out about the crack running through the interior. It wasn't something that could be noticed with a naked eye on a casual observation, but with a more detailed examination a black vertical plane could be seen absorbing the light passing through the area.

Driving home from the jeweler's store, the thought began to fully form in my mind. The thought that from a small imperfection in the stone a fairly large fissure grew as the pressure was applied. Looking back now, it seems almost too obvious.

"What will Amber think about it," I wondered. "Will she see it as sign?" I could only imagine what my mother would think about it, and I didn't want to know how she thought it could affect my future. If a broken mirror is seven years bad luck, how many years is a broken diamond?

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Golden illuminated crosses shine through stained glass windows, adding to the light from the electric candle chandeliers hanging high above my body as a child during my first memory of church. A preacher at the pulpit has the attention of the congregation as his voice reaches a scream. I see my mother and father's faces as they hear the words that I can't truly understand, except for that God is not happy with them. Everyone prays for forgiveness and leaves only to return next week.

Years later I found a golden light falling in from another set of stained glasses, while I prayed with a minister. I had decided that
it was time to live a life for God. For weeks afterwards I was completely euphoric, counting my age as the number of days since I had been "saved".

"Hey Dad," I would say, "Do you know how old I am?"
"Well, of course I do, Buddy."
"How old, then?"
"Twelve."
"Nope. I'm fourteen days old, now that I've been saved."

Eventually, the light faded and so did my need to count the days of my new age. Skateboards and tapes replaced bibles and study guides, but I am truly thankful for the experience, if only for the insight to how others may feel.

In Amber's eyes I have seen versions of my euphoria countless numbers of times. I saw it as she sang to the Christian radio while jumping on my bed to wake me every morning that I woke up in her house.

"RISE AND SHINE AND GIVE GOD THE GLORY, GLORY! RISE...." she would sing/scream.

I saw a version of my day-counting self in her as she talked about the missionary work she was planning to do. It was a feeling and a belief that she never completely let go, and it only grew with time. It was blind love, and it gave this young woman a look of joy that you usually only see in a child. And, of course, I see why she held onto it. It's logical to me.

***

At a deli adjacent to a mall, Amber and I began to warm up to each other, relieving the pressure on both of us. We sat in a corner, her with her back to the wall, so she could read the lips of the others dining around us.

"You know, I bet everyone here assumes we're a couple," she said. I appreciated the truth and sad humor of it. I touched her foot with mine.

"We should convince them," I partially joked.
"You would like that, wouldn't you," she said.

I pulled my foot away from hers and stared at the half eaten club sandwich. We still had four hours to kill before she had to be at work, and after wasting as much time as we possibly could in the mall, I convinced her that we should go to the botanical gardens, where we had taken our engagement pictures three months before.

It began to rain on our way to the gardens, and by the time we drove into the parking lot, it was pouring. We sat in the Jeep, facing the gardens, and waded out our time with sparse conversation. We watched the rain fall in sheets around the car as the windows fogged, mocking me, and leaving only a blurred view of the garden's edge. Shades of purple flowers swelled across the windshield as the rain flowed.

"You know, you never did tell me exactly why you ended it," I said, knowing why she had, but wanting to hear and see her say it.
"You don't want what I want, Nathan."
"What, just because I don't think I could be a deacon?"
"It's not just that, specifically. I want, I need a spiritual leader as a husband."
"I'm spiritual."
"You're not very [religious] though."

She reclined her seat and closed her eyes. Once again, I had fooled myself. Hearing her say this wasn't satisfaction. This wasn't what I had come for. This was actually the opposite of what I had come for.

"I have something for you to hear." I opened my suitcase, and pulled out a cd that I had recorded the night before my flight. This was my last effort, a crescendo to the actions of the day. This technique had worked on her before. We had broken up once before, and again I couldn't accept it. For her birthday, I wrote a song for her, and sent it by mail to her. She is a huge Wizard of Oz fan, so I thought of the idea to write a song in the perspective of Dorothy's lover, left out of the movie and forgotten. Somehow, it had completely won her over. She told me that she and her mother both cried when they heard it. Five months later we were engaged. It was too good to be true.

"Oh, yeah, go ahead, I don't really mind your music as much as I let on, you know." The music began.

"Who is this? Is this you?"
"Yeah."
"It doesn't sound like you."
She sat up to listen, having difficulties understanding some of
the words, so I began to speak the lyrics as the song continued to play. She reached into her purse lying in the floor of the pas­<ref>enger seat, where I was sitting. As her arm moved towards me I saw her trying to control its shaking. “At least it’s affecting her,” I thought. The song ended, and once again she was gathered.

“You should send it to a record label or something,” she told me.

“Sure.”

We left and drove back to the mall. In the parking lot she changed in the car, and I watched her as she crawled past me into the back seat.

“Okay, no peeking. You’re no longer allowed,” she joked.

“Right.”

She changed. I watched her, glancing from time to time up at the rear-view mirror, and she knew, but said nothing. She crawled back into the front seat to put on makeup. When she finished, she opened the glove compartment and pulled out a book of musings that I had written for her, along with the broken ring.

“I don’t want this,” I said referring to the book.

“Well, I’ll never read it again.”

“But I wrote it for you. I want you to keep it.”

“Okay. Whatever.”

***

The first ritual that I learned from my mother is the one that has remained with me the longest. We would kneel before my tiny bed, fold our hands, and begin by saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray to the Lord, my soul to keep.” Whenever I found that I couldn’t fall asleep, I was always able to fall back on this first ritual, and within minutes I usually fell deeply asleep. Eventually, even this ritual fell to the side along with the others that I learned from my mother.

In the sleepless nights that followed my final day with Amber, I thought about what I could have done to save it. “If only I could have convinced myself that those old stories were true,” I began to think. Memories of my resistance to religion, along with the cracked diamond floated through my mind. When I closed my eyes, I saw myself walking under ladders while smiling. Black cats crossed my path, and I saw myself laughing at my mother.

Lying in bed, I decided to fold my hands again, if only to find sleep. “Now I lay me...” I began, and somehow it worked like an old faithful charm.

— Nathan Pitts

Speculation

I expected there to be a spark or a bolt of lightning and clap of thunder as God reached down to touch creation. I imagined the cliché – light cascading from Heaven to a soundtrack of angelic voices, the culmination of past and present colliding with eternity.

Not simply one worn hand to another against a weathered background.

So insignificant.

not enough to draw the eye twice.

Needing a frame to make it seen.

Silent and still – no life

and no answer to life’s mystery.

Or maybe it isn’t God at all.

Could be a painter’s hand fetish.

An incomplete masterpiece.

Maybe a day without inspiration and an assignment due.

Or maybe it exists to conjure questions and inspire the color of my bedroom walls.

— Nikki Dee Corum
The Wolf at the Door

The wolf stands outside our beveled glass door. Her glowing eyes pierce my heart with her envy. Her claws are stained with her victims' blood. Her heart beats, but she feels no compassion. She is a thief, fueled by filthy lusty desires. With no conscience to guide toward the right.

She refuses the friendly scraps from our table. She wants to live in the warmth of our home. She wants to steal all that matters to me. She wants to replace me to those I love. She wants to devour the very heart in my chest. She wants to feed on our little ones' innocence.

The wolf lurks just outside the door to our home. Her powdered nose is pressed against the glass. Her knifelike fangs hide behind bloodred lips. Her long red claws scratch the welcome mat. She sniffs the air, smelling both love and fear. Her hackles rise and hunger burns inside her.

I tremble, waking you from your happy dreams. I scream that a filthy wolf waits, teeth barred. Hiding fangs stained by blood, she smiles at you. You go back to sleep, thinking it's only a puppy. You dream of the sweet little puppy, begging For your attention with a fluffy, wagging tail.

Only I see the wolf waiting at our front door. Only I see the envy inside her heart and soul. Only I see the fangs behind the flirty smile. My heart aches. My anger rises inside me. I pray for my babies. I tremble again in fear. That only I see the wolf, waiting at our door.

— Gwen Bentley

The Priestess of River Road

On top of a hill in Cordova sits a two-story white house with only a weatherworn wooden fence to protect it from the whims of Mother Nature. The shutters are freshly painted and the scent of recently baked chocolate chip cookies seeps from every crevice to mingle with the cold winter air. The front door stands open in invitation. Everyone is welcome. Even the small wooden statue of the Celtic Goddess Cerridwen smiles in greeting from her perch above the door. An old fashioned wood burning stove melts away the frost of winter and lavender candles dance rebelliously against the warm air of the room.

My grandmother, Jewel Dill, lives in this quaint two-story white house. For as long as I can remember her home has been a safe haven for me, a place where I can go and be one with nature and all things divine. Her warmth, like the aroma of the chocolate chip cookies, seeps through the house and ensconces it protectively. She grew up in the small town of Ullapool, Scotland. My grandmother wasn't raised in what most would call a "traditional" household. My grandmother was raised in a home filled with magic. Her mother, Delphina Kilgour, was a Wiccan High Priestess of a coven. So, while other children were dashing off to church on Sundays, my grandmother would sit and diligently learn the phases of the moon and the gods and goddesses of numerous and long forgotten pantheons, "I didn't think that I was any different from any other child. I wasn't the only one who did such things. There were about fourteen of us in all. We would gather at a different [coven] member's house and learn mythology. I thought it was a great adventure."

In an effort to keep her heritage alive she takes one week every year to teach her grandchildren some of the great mysteries she has learned over the years. When we were younger all six of my cousins and I would listen to her for hours completely enraptured by stories and incantations. Sadly, as time has passed the herd has thinned, but I always manage to clear a week off for my grandmother. This year that week fell on the first week of January.
January First

As always my grandmother chose to wake me up by luring me into the kitchen with the smell of blueberry muffins. We ate in silence and enjoyed the sound of a new year emerging. There has always been a bond between us. We have never felt the need to chat about mundane or nonsensical things. When she speaks it is always because she has something to say. Like so many times before once breakfast is completed we go to the living room for meditation. As a child I didn’t understand the concept of inner reflection. I would often lull myself to sleep to the sound of her deep and even breaths. Now it’s different.

My senses become more focused and primal as I sit with my legs crossed and eyes closed. I can hear my heartbeat and an unknown bird twittering outside. I listen to my grandmother during this time as well. I can hear her focused breathing. Call me a sentimental fool, but during these times I want to capture each of her breaths and put them in a jar. She won’t be around forever.

In the past when meditation would conclude, she would tell stories. As the years tick by, her stories don’t come as often. Complaining of fatigue, she goes to take a nap. I choose to linger and thumb through her notebooks. My grandmother’s notebooks are a veritable treasure trove of history and secrets. In them she has hidden her deepest thoughts and little tidbits of lore. “Heather works best when it is given on a Friday. It gives the person you give it to love and luck.” Reading the words she had written nearly twenty years ago brings a smile to my face. I read on even though I know every word by heart. A buttercup is given on a Monday to someone who is sick while an iris is given on Wednesdays in order to promote wisdom.

My favorite notebook is one that sits on the far back shelf. It is beaten and aged. It is her first book of lessons. She once told me that her mother would diligently give her things to write. “They were lessons that she wanted me to know and understand. I didn’t want to. I wanted to be outside, but I couldn’t refuse my mother.” She told that once when we were playing gin rummy. That’s the way it is in my family. We respect our elders and their wisdom.

Inside this book, with its yellow pages and fading ink, are the lessons that my great-grandmother handed down to her daughter. My mother handed them down to me as well. My favorite entry is one dated October 23, 1949. My grandmother was thirteen years old:

Samhain (pronounced SOW-in) means “summer’s end” in Gaelic. Traditionally, it is the time when the veil between the worlds is thinnest. It also means that divination is very effective on this night.

In the corner, she had scrawled: “It’s a time when everyone else in the world gets to eat bloody candy, but not me. I have to dance around and sing. Why in the hell can’t our family be normal?”

I always smile when I see her comments, because I once thought the same thing. She doesn’t get out of bed for the rest of the day. As badly as I hate to admit it, it disappoints me. I make Lunasduinn (Lammas in English) herbal bread for dinner, because I know that’s her favorite. This bread is traditionally made in the fall to celebrate the holiday that the bread is named for, but Lunasduinn has always been my grandmother’s favorite holiday. Traditionally, the bread is served to celebrate the first harvest. It celebrates the god of harvest and light, Lugh, king of Tuatha de Danann. He was the male counterpart of Brigid. His death comes from the belief that a god must eventually bow down to his goddess through whose benevolence he is reborn. I once asked my grandmother why she honored this sabbat above the others. She always laughs before saying: “All men should be like Lugh. Your grandfather has been bowing down to me for forty-five years. That’s why he’s still alive. Even when I’m wrong, he knows I’m right.”

***

January Second

The house was eerily quiet when I opened my eyes the next day. I looked at the clock suspiciously. It was nine o’clock. This immediately heightened my paranoia. It is an unspoken commandment in my grandmother’s house: Thou shalt get up at the butt-crack of dawn.

I found her in the kitchen cramming things into the open mouth of a mason jar. I stopped as acute fear crawled up my
spine. The jar was stuffed with vanilla, jasmine, and tiny plastic hearts. These are all ingredients used to promote love and romance. I know this, because on my sixteenth birthday I bathed in the stuff hoping to attract someone of the opposite gender. Next to the Mason jar was an apple, a garnet, and a small bottle of patchouli oil, other wise known as ingredients for fertility.

I tried not to run.

As if she sensed my presence, my grandmother turned to give me and innocent smile, “Crystal, will you hand me the braided ribbon on the counter?”

With shaking hands, I handed her the ribbon, “What are you doing with the jar?”

“We are going to a wedding.” Her face bloomed like a spring flower as she relayed the news.

I shriveled like a leaf in winter. Crap. It was Just as I feared.

I got dressed and wrapped the wedding bottle in newspaper.

My grandmother sang happily as she finished her morning ritual, “Ye’ll take the hide road and I’ll take the low road, and I’ll be in Scotland before ye, where me an’ my true love will ne’er meet again on the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond.”

If it meant me not going to this wedding, 1 would have gladly taken the road to hell. I was just about to call my mother and beg her to come and get me, but she had Just pulled up into the yard.

My eyes narrowed at her approach, and a single sentence reverberated in my brain: Et tu Mother?

We were going to Birmingham. The trees outside were bare and a cold, crisp wind pounded on our car windows. As a little girl, I hated winter. I hated the bleakness of the season. I didn’t understand why it couldn’t be spring all year round. I asked my mother this very question. She smiled; “I asked my mother the same thing when I was your age. She explained it like this; Mother Earth is just like you and me. In the spring, She is a young maiden, giving flowers and sunshine. During summer, She showers Her children with sunshine and warmth. Fall is the time when She loses Her youth and beauty, so she can die in the winter and be reborn during spring.”

I think this is why the wind batters the car as we drive. Even though it is a natural cycle, maybe Mother Earth refuses to die without a fight.

“Who is getting married?” My mother asked the question.

I shook easily out of my reverie and looked at my grandmother.

“Some old friends.”

I thought the conversation was over until we stopped at a red light. My grandmother turned to look at me for a long, searching moment. I knew this moment would occur. I knew it.

“When are you going to get married?” She asked.

The car rolled forward, and I sank into my seat. This is why I hate weddings. When you are married and invited to a wedding, you get to relive the memory of your own happy day. When you are single, you have to defend yourself. You are met with sympathetic smiles and people who know just the right guy for you.

I would rather stand in front of a firing squad.

“I’ll get married when the time is right.”

There. I hoped she would leave me alone.

“I would like to see you get married before I die.” Leave it to my grandmother to pour on the guilt in an effort to make me off.

The wind shook the car again, and I grinned. Perhaps Mother Nature wanted my grandmother to shut her mouth too. It’s good to know that I have at least one ally on this adventure.

We pulled into the driveway of an old brick house. Cars lined the street in front of us like tiny ants running across a picnic blanket. My grandmother smiled at everyone as we entered. It was a small home on the inside. The dining room was being used as the chapel or at least something like that. I kept my head down. I didn’t want anyone to smell the “single” permeating from me. Thankfully we chose a seat far in the back. I pulled a romance novel out of my purse and settled in for some recreational reading.

I only got to read the first paragraph before music began to play. A Lorena McKennit song began to vibrate from the speakers. I kept my head down and didn’t look up for a good three chapters. When I did look up, laughter bubbled in my throat. Ever vigilant, my grandmother gave me a poke in the ribs, and my mother gave a warning look. I bit my bottom lip and looked ahead.

The wedding was almost over. The rope was being bound around the bride and groom’s wrists. The proper words were
being said. The ceremony wasn't what most people would say was "traditional." My grandmother calls it a handfasting. Either way, I call it torture.

Everyone clapped as the bride and groom were pronounced man and wife. I stood up and smiled as Mother and Father Time walked down the aisle slowly. They were both about seventy, but the glow of their recent union made them look much younger. Now I understood what my grandmother meant when she said they were "old friends."

"Don't wait until you are that old to get married." My grandmother whispered.

"Does it really matter? They seem just as happy as any other couple. I guess love doesn't care how old you are huh?"

My reply drew a smile from my mother and grandmother.

***

January Third

I woke up smiling. Today is a very special day. It is my grandmother's sixty-ninth birthday. My mother's birthday is the tenth and mine is the seventh. For as long as I can remember we have celebrated our birthdays together. Today is no different.

Actually, it is not my grandmother's actual birthday. It is her Wiccan birthday, as well as my mother's. A Wiccan birthday is the date when someone was inducted into the craft. My grandmother was inducted when she was nine months old, so she has sixty-nine years in what she refers to as: service to the goddess.

The kitchen was full of activity and smells. It would seem that my mother and grandmother had been at it for a while, and judging from the exasperated sighs, they had been at each other's throats for just as long. I chose to ignore their bickering and concentrated on the food. Candied violets rose water and angelica wafers, chocolate bread and butter pudding, Lunasduinn bread, and to top it all off a big bowl of witch's brew sat on the table beckoning to me, luring me in with their fatty goodness.

"Are you sure this is going to be enough?" My grandmother asked.

My mother released a weary sigh, "We're not feeding a damn army mom. Can we please finish this before your next birthday?"

"You are not too old that I can't put my foot up your..."

I walked away.

Leaving the bickering to the professionals, I went to the living room and grabbed another of my grandmother's treasured notebooks. I opened it to an entry dated March 25, 1952. She was sixteen years old:

It feels nice to get away from the South. Mother convinced us that we would adjust. I think she was saying that more for herself than us. Anyway, we are in Scotland now. Home. I wish I could run away into the hills and never come back. I want to hide in the Heather and live in a little thatch house. I could do it too. I don't understand Southern women. They are so...so...irritatingly demure. I can't do that. I can't keep my mouth shut. When I have something to say, I want to grab people up and yell in their face. "Listen to me damn it! I have something to say!"

Home. I stared at the word for a long time. I have been to Scotland several times, and I have lived in the South my entire life. I am constantly straddling the fence of two cultures.

There is something wild about Scotland. The emerald grass and rolling hills leave a person feeling insignificant. Every plot of land tells a story. I feel attached to the land. It is where my heritage began.

When I was fifteen, my mother took me to the sight of the Culloden battle. From the car, it looked like nothing more than an ordinary patch of land, but when you put your feet on the soil, quietness steals over you. People died on that plot of land fighting for what they believed in. No matter what country you happen to be from it would be callous not to be moved by that.

I also feel connected to the South. My mother was raised here, so she has memories and roots here as well. I like Alabama. Slow southern drawls and lazy summer days are just as much a part of me as people who can trace their lineage to the Civil War.

Sometimes I don't know where my home is. I feel like a strange hybrid. Something that should be poked and prodded at in a Ripley's Believe It or Not museum.

"I told you that was too much." Ah, it would seem that another fight was brewing in the kitchen.
"Well, you're the one who said to add more sugar." I grinned when I heard my mother's indignant reply.
Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

Two hours later, I was still reading when I came across an interesting passage dated June 14, 1953:

*It is so quiet here. The land breathes deeply and constantly. Mother and Dad are making preparations for our return to Alabama. It's been four years since we moved. I hate to admit it, but I wish that Dad would lose his job so things could go back to the way they once were. The day before we left for our trip to Scotland, I ran into a few girls from school. I smiled and waved. I may not like being in Alabama, but it is my home until I can do otherwise. The girls ignored me and went into the store they were standing in front of. I never knew what hit me. I was walking home and they threw eggs at me. "You're going to hell." "Witch!" "Trash!" They shouted so many horrible things at me. I never told my parents. They weren't at home. I just went to the bathroom, locked the door, and took a shower. I threw the clothes I had on in the garbage. It was the first time I had ever felt ashamed of who I was.*

The passage made me think of all the times I denied things about my heritage. Growing up in a town like Jasper, I was afraid to tell people about my family. I didn't want to be ridiculed. I just wanted to be like everyone else. Now that I am older, I realize that I was ashamed.

I have nothing to be ashamed of. My grandmother and mother are practicing witches. I am still straddling the fence with my decision. It may not be acceptable. It may not be right, but it is the way things are.

I can't change that.

"What are you doing?" I smiled when I heard my grandmother's voice. She always seems to know when I am thinking too much.

"Reading."

"Well, come into the kitchen and help me before I kill your mother."
Outcast

Night falls on the people of the street
They are outcasts, wandering the streets alone
Loneliness the dime of admission.

Outcasts wander, lost in their minds
Never truly seeing who is among them
Never realizing the needs they all share.

Alone together in the dark
Stumbling blindly they do not see
That there is a new lost soul among them.

She tries to stand out in a sea of grey
The steadiest and the clumsiest among them
Black hair and lipstick, she is hidden from the light.

Cast about she left behind her toys
A childhood ended early to enter the dark
Mourning past, the sun sets and she dies a little more.

— John Givens

Floundering

The flounder is wonderfully adapted for its way of life. Both eyes in adults are on the “up” side of the head and the pigmentation of the upper side of the body can be varied to match the surrounding environment. A small body cavity and the absence of an air bladder aid the flounder in its position on the bottom. The flounder is superior in its ability to blend into its environment.

Throughout elementary school, I was the invisible child. Each day, I sat in the back of the classroom hoping to disappear. I was the kid with the black eye, who was constantly tripping over things, who was bullied into doing other kid’s homework. I was the geek in the yellow sweatsuit with a large, green caterpillar sewn on it.

Every year my classmates grew in height and stature. I did not. I found this to my advantage. I discovered that if I shrunk into my desk just far enough, my teacher wouldn’t know that I was there and I would never be called on. I also found that if I could squeeze myself into the small crevices of the jungle gym, the places in which the bigger kids could no longer fit, I could hide from bullies. I wanted to run away. Maybe then the humiliation would stop. Maybe the ocean of my life would swallow me up and I would cease to exist, but I remained standing.

I drew my inspiration from home. To me, my father was larger than life. Extremely attractive and flamboyant, he had possibly the whitest teeth I had ever seen. He was, by all accounts, a brilliant doctor. I was certain that he saved the lives of all his patients. He was a hero. My Super Man. I wanted to be like him more than anything. He seemed so strong and brave and wise. I often wondered how I could possibly be his daughter.

Some of my favorite memories are those of my father and I watching storms come in. We would sit in his blue leather recliner late at night and watch fluorescent dancers illuminate the night sky through a large bay window in our living room. It was on those nights when you could feel the electricity in the atmos-
phere charge your skin, you could smell the ozone in the air and
you could feel the presence of something much greater than you
stretch its hand across the horizon. It was on these nights that I
would climb onto my father's lap and together we would count the
seconds between lightning and thunder. Flash. One Mississippi.
Two Mississippi. Thunder would vibrate the very walls of the
house, the storm so close.

Father would tell me stories of his youth. He would tell me
about boxing and wrestling, of racing and winning. I remember
asking him once, "Do you think I could do that, Daddy?" He
always answered with comments on the inadequacies of my build.
I was too small, my wrists too thin. This was usually followed with
some statement about how I would make some man very happy.
Through past conversations I had learned that I was supposed to
have been Robert Brian, not Lisa Marie. My father had so hoped
to have a child to carry on the family name. It was simple. He had
wanted a boy. I was a girl, and a tiny one at that. I felt like I was
disappointment.

Lightning dances across the glass surface of the ocean and
the wind whispers my thoughts for the world to hear. No one lis­
tens. I remain standing.

Adult southern flounder leave the bays during the fall for
spawning in the Gulf of Mexico.

My world shattered with my parents' divorce. I cannot pretend
that I was the only one, that my pain was unique. My pain was
my own, however, and in the egocentric mind of a child I felt that
no one could possibly understand.

My father had found someone better. She was pregnant with
his child, his new chance to have the son I could never be.

I hated myself for failing him, for not being the boy he want­
ed. I hated God for making me a girl. I hated my grandmother, my
mother and my sister, every woman for being female. I hated
myself for hating.

My father became seriously ill soon after. I fantasized about
discovering some miracle cure, and proving I was better than any
old son. Surely then he would overlook the fact that I had a bet­
ter chance of becoming a circus clown than a star quarterback.

Voices echo to me from the past.
"Lisa, your mother and I want a divorce."
The tide rolls in.
"Lisa, Beth and I are getting married."
The tide rolls out.
"Lisa, Beth is pregnant."
The tide rolls in.
"Lisa, I have something I need to talk to you about. This may
be difficult for you to understand, but your father is really
sick. The doctors don't know what is wrong with him yet, and
they don't know how long he has to live."
The tide rushes out and this time carries me with it. It knocks
my feet out from under me, it steals all breath from my body. It is
too much. My strength is gone. I can no longer stand.

Although many are taken by rod and reel, "floundering" or gig­
ging offers the best challenge for this species. The flounder is vul­
nerable to this technique because it often enters the shallows at
right to feed. Both the skills of the angler and the hunter are called
for here.

I barely remember the drive to Mobile Bay. Over the past few
months, I had become a zombie. Life no longer registered to me. I
felt nothing. I was going through the motions of existing.

The few recollections I have of the trip are of making our way
up the twisting yellow road in our big white car. The colors out­
side were a mottle of deep greens, of browns and taupes and, in
the distance, the solemn blue of the bay.

At the end of the driveway stood one of the most bizarre hous­
es I had ever seen. It was tall, very tall. "While it appeared to be a
two story house, there was no bottom floor. The house itself was
small, sandy in color with a screened-in porch and windows on
every side. What made it so tall was that it was actually standing
on wooden legs. I later learned that the house stood on legs so it
would not flood during a hurricane.

The next image that comes to mind is of a woman, stout in
build with short wispy hair the color of cirrus clouds on a cold
winter day and thick glasses framing her face. At her heels was a
blonde cocker spaniel. They stood together on the steps leading
down from the house watching our approach.

I remember leaping from the car before it had completely come to a stop and running into the arms of this woman, my oldest friend in many ways. Ren had been present on the day of my birth and she was ancient then. She was fascinating. I loved to hear stories of her life in Africa, of elephants charging through camp and swarms of killer bees. She had taught me how to paint, how to read and fish. I had not realized that it was she that we had been coming to visit. Mom must have thought it would cheer me up. I was determined to prove her wrong. The excitement of running to Ren had been the first real emotion that I had felt in a long time. If only it would have lasted.

Gradually I drifted back into my depression. I sat out on the wharf and stared out into the water, always looking but never seeing. I slept for hours at a time. My mother, my sister and Ren tried to pull me out of it. No success. Even Ren, who had braved the wilds of foreign lands to nurse sick children could not save me now. My wounds were too deep.

Since water clarity is very important to the success of any floundering trip, floundering should be done on calm nights. The best catches are made during an incoming tide and on dark nights as opposed to moonlit nights.

I had gone to bed early that night, not that it mattered. I had slept most of the day anyway. I hadn't been asleep for more than two hours when the bouncing of my bed jolted me upright. Nightmares again. I looked up and found my little sister jumping up and down at the foot of my bed. "Come on", she said, "Ren has a surprise!"

I did not want to get out of bed. I loved Ren, really I did, but I didn't care what she had. I wanted to sleep. Unfortunately, my sister won out. After a few more tugs on my ankles, I was out of bed. I slid on my sandals and followed my sister out the door, down the stair and beneath the bay house.

I had never noticed before the small room at the base of the house. In the dim light, I could see Ren, my mother and my sister standing amidst a mass of fishing supplies. There were rusty crab traps, an assortment of rods and reels as well as many contraptions that I did not recognize. Ren never said a word. She just smiled as she pulled two lanterns and four spears from the other fishing gear and handed them to my mother. My sister jumped around excitedly. I probably just looked confused.

After Ren had gathered all the supplies, we stepped out into the night. The air was cool and moist, the wind had died off completely. The moon was screened from view by thick, dark clouds. The only lights came from the porches of surrounding bay houses. Ren looked around. "Perfect night for floundering, girls," she whispered. We glanced briefly at each other. What on earth was floundering?

Ren explained that we were going to wade into the water. Mom and Ren would shine their lamps into the shallows. We were to look on the floor of the bay for the outline of a fish called the flounder. Ren told us that flounder were completely flat, with both eyes on one side of their heads and they blended perfectly into the ocean floor. "How are we supposed to see it, then?", I remember thinking. Ren shushed us. It was important to be silent so we didn't frighten the fish away. Mom thought this was a big joke.

Carefully, we stepped into the water. It felt strangely warm in contrast to the night air and the slimy sand under my feet. We started making our way quietly through the water. For a short while, I actually looked for the fish, but my thoughts soon crept back to me. In the silence, I thought about my life. If my own father couldn't accept me, how could anyone else? How could I ever accept myself?

That's when I saw it, a faint outline on the ocean floor. It reminded me of pancakes that I tried to cook once and went terribly wrong. I made no sound. I raised my spear and thrust it into the center of the misshapen pancake outline. It connected and I pulled my illusive fish out of the water. I remember standing and staring in disbelief, and in that moment I understood everything. I had been wrong.

Looking back, we must have appeared pretty silly, two grown women and two little girls high-stepping through the bay by lamp-light and trying hard not to laugh out loud. I didn't care.

Others passed by, hunting the same prey and some stopped to admire my prize, grown men, young boys and women alike. It made no difference if they were men or women, if they were body-
builders or grandmothers. It didn’t matter to the fish. Success depended entirely on the skill of the hunter.

Ren hugged me, put her finger to her lips and moved on. Thinking back all these years later, I think she knew what she had done for me. She rescued me from becoming bitter, saved me from using my height or gender as an excuse to quit trying. She taught me that sometimes strength has to come from the inside. When the outside isn’t quite big enough to hold it, the heart never fails. I hope to do the same for another someday. I will be forever grateful.

Later that night, after everyone else had gone to bed, I sat alone on the screened-in front porch and watched a storm move in over the bay. Lightning reflected on the water like a camera flash on a mirror. I counted the seconds for the first time on my own and the ocean which had threatened to sweep me away forever grew still at last. It still is.

— Lisa Roper