Spring 2005

# Spring 2005

Valparaiso University

# the Lighter

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## Acknowledgements

**The Lighter** staff thanks our advisor, Walter Wangerin, for his guidance, and the Committee on Media for its support. Thanks to Amy Sample for her couragous work as graphics designer and to Netha Cloeter for being a fabulous assistant editor. Most of all, thank you to the students who so graciously submitted their work this semester and to John Ruff for allowing us to feature his poems.

All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process. **The Lighter** welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation. The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this magazine. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

Cover Art taken from **I Want To Be Kate** by *Lauren Schreiber.*

## Literary Works

## Artwork

**Interview with Robert Siegel**

*with Benjamin Mueller*

Poet Robert Siegel, who read at Valparaiso this past November as part of Wordfest, is the author of nine books of poetry and fiction. His poetry includes *The Beasts & The Elders* and *In A Pig's Eye*, as well his forthcoming *The Waters Under the Earth* and *New and Selected Poems*. His poetry has received a number of prizes and honors, including awards from *Poetry*, *America*, *Prairie Schooner*, the Friends of Literature, Bread Loaf, the Society of Midland Authors, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Siegel has taught writing at Dartmouth, Princeton, and Goethe University in Frankfurt, and for twenty-three years at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he twice directed the graduate creative writing program and is currently Professor Emeritus of English. He has degrees from Wheaton College, The Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars and Harvard University, where he studied for four years with the late Robert Lowell. He is married to the teacher Ann Hill Siegel and lives and writes on the coast of Maine close to their daughters and four grandchildren.

Joseph Parisi, the former editor of Poetry, has written, "Of Robert Siegel's talents there can be no doubt. 'Brilliant' is a term too casually applied today, and it does not begin to define the remarkable range of subjects delineated and the technical mastery demonstrated in *The Beasts & the Elders*. . . . His poems are a power." And the ALA Booklist notes, "The poet's extraordinary gift for metaphor allows him to reveal a range of emotions and attitudes that is rare among contemporary poets."

**BCM:** What do you think the role of the poet is or should be in a society today?

**Robert Siegel:** I think very few poets have a significant role in society—a direct role, anyway. Shelley called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The emphasis here is on the word "unacknowledged." Words do have power, and later generations may be influenced by the poet's vision, as was the case with Shelley's own work, but during his life he was ignored. Occasionally, as during the Vietnam War, a protest-poet like Allen Ginsberg may draw in a large audience. But the interest is in the protest more than the poetry. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote abolitionist poetry before the Civil War and was so well regarded that the movers and shakers of the new Republican party asked his opinion before nominating Lincoln. This may be the last time a poet had direct influence on politics.

I suppose today the poet's role is counter-cultural in the sense that most of what we pursue in our culture—such as money, status, and power—has little to do with poetry. Poetry is there as a resource to which people turn but not in large numbers. There are exceptions: one is after 9/11 when people turned to poetry to help them express all they were feeling at that time. Several magazines, the New Yorker among them, published poems people claimed articulated their deepest feelings and helped them come to terms with the catastrophe. But normally the vast majority of Americans ignore poetry. In some societies it's quite different. People who may not know how to read can be heard reciting poetry. In the 1930's the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca overheard his poetry sung and recited by Gypsies in the countryside. Even today in Iran some of the Persian poets of the middle ages, such as Hafiz, are recited by ordinary people.

I think the media have led to the falling off of reading generally. The computer of course is a great villain here; I find too much time is absorbed by that device. People say we're in danger of becoming a non-verbal culture; therefore I think the

role for the poet today is to write and find an audience in defiance of our cultural drift. Still, the danger can be overstated. I've been reassured recently when reading about the difficulty of getting poetry published in the late nineteenth century. When we look back at that century we think of it as the golden age for both fiction writers and poets, because you suddenly had this vast middle class of educated readers you didn't have in earlier centuries. You also had few modern distractions. Reading was in. So miners in silver mining camps in Colorado, for instance, would hang on the next installment of a Dickens novel, and literally ran to the mail when it brought the next serial installment of *David Copperfield*. Meanwhile the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, back when our population was only fifteen million, sold 30, 000 copies of a book within the first week of publication. That happens only rarely now. Billy Collins, the last poet laureate, is the best-selling poet in our country at the moment. Partly because he's very accessible, at least on one level . Robert Frost was popular because his work had a deceptively simple setting and language from rural New England.

But we need to remember what Robert Lowell once said to me. He pointed out that Sir Philip Sydney's poems, in the Elizabethan Age, were read by very few people. The population of England was only a few million at that time and most people couldn't read. Sydney was read at most by several hundred of his peers. Lowell said if today you publish a book of poetry you will be read by more people than read Sydney's sonnets, which circulated only in manuscript. Also you may have quite a readership through the centuries if you are fortunate enough and your work survives. There's always been a relatively small number of people who read poetry and take it seriously.

I think the poet's role is pretty much what it's always been. Still, today it's more likely to be a voice crying in the wilderness than one heard in the marketplace. And in one sense that's odd, because, next to singing in the shower, poetry is probably the most universally practiced art. I've never found any-

one who hasn't tried to write a poem of some kind. Cynics say there are more poets writing poetry than there are people reading it. Well, I'm not so sure that's true but it's true that you're not going to have many mega-bestsellers among books of poetry.

**BCM:** Do you see poetry's audience becoming more widespread or is it becoming more and more limited to an audience of other poets and professors?

**RS:** When I was at John Hopkins in the creative writing seminars, there were only two other programs in the country, one at Iowa and the other at Stanford. Now those graduate programs must number over a hundred. Undergraduate programs are in the hundreds. People in them are learning to read poetry as well as write it. Few are going to persist beyond the program to write as a vocation but they will be capable of reading poetry. So there is, one hopes, a growing, informed, readership out there.

Film and television, even the best of it, rarely satisfy the imagination the way a good novel or book of poetry will. The problem is they rarely engage the mind to the same degree that the printed word does. When you read, the mind must co-create the world of the novel or poem. It's not there on a screen for you to watch passively, and therefore I think, reading is an activity of a higher order. It demands more of you and consequently gives you more. I find even the most wonderfully photographed documentary on television is less engaging than a book about the subject—and far less informative. I believe this is a fact of many people's experience. They get bored with watching a screen. So reading will survive.

**BCM:** I would like to go back to what you were saying about the recent burst of creative writing programs and since you were the chair of one, I wonder what you feel is the best thing about the creative writing programs?

**RS:** There are two advantages: one is that you have a circle of friends or classmates and it's important to develop relationships with other writers around your age. The second, is that workshops are invaluable, not because everybody is right as to what they say about your writing, but because they draw attention to problems that you at some level recognize are there. They help you get necessary distance and perspective on your work.

A good writing program can save you years of going down dead-end alleys. Rather than writing in a vacuum, sending your work out to editors, having it rejected, and not knowing why, you can learn much of value in a short time. Obviously there's the old saw that you can't teach anyone how to write, but you can provide an environment in which people teach themselves more readily. I definitely think that every writer who can, should go through a writing program. Writing is a lonely enough profession—and it's good to know and work with other writers at the beginning of your career, some of whom you may share your work with over a lifetime.

**BCM:** What should one look for when choosing a creative writing program?

**RS:** I usually advise people to invest in the *Associated Writing Programs* catalog, and to go through and see what programs offer on paper. When you find a program that appeals to you, first look up the writing of some of the faculty to see if you like it—if you feel you're on the same wave length. Trust your intuitions here. Be careful to determine which of the faculty are permanent and which are visiting, or short term—who may not be there when you arrive. ( It's not always clear in the catalog.) I encourage students to try and visit the campus first, when the program is in session. Talk with the director, plus your favorite writer among them, and then get the names of graduate students and talk with them. They'll give you the more realistic,

inside story. I think this research is well worth any time and money spent.

**BCM:** Reading through your manuscript I noticed that form is important to your writing. How do you choose a form for your work and how does it affect your work as opposed to the way writing in free verse might?

**RS:** I write in free verse as frequently as I do in form, perhaps more frequently. Sometimes I use a fairly loose iambic pentameter, or mixed meter, where you have metrical lines of various lengths, but not in any pre-established pattern.
There are three or four different kinds of free verse, but in the basic kind you decide where to break each line, following no pre-established pattern. It's often easier to write in a form, after you get used to it. Good free verse demands just as much—if not more—attention. When I start a poem I usually don't know which form, or which free verse, it will be written in. The first few lines usually determine that. I'll begin to feel a rhythm and an approximate line length. My longer poems tend to be in a loose blank verse or syntactical (long-lined) free verse. The latter kind was used by Whitman, Ginsberg, Blake and the psalmists.

Most recently I've written sonnets about some biblical characters. Some of these portraits are true sonnets while others are not: they have an extra line or two, or I'll use an extra-long line. I'm really playing with the form. I think it's important for a poet to learn how to write both free verse and formal, and playing with both is one way to do it. Set yourself exercises, such as "Write a sonnet about a cauliflower" or "Write five lines of free verse about fingernails." There are books full of very interesting games and exercises, such as Robin Behn's and Chase Twitchell's *The Practice of Poetry* good for any of us to try.
**BCM:** How do you write? Do have routines?

**RS:** For me the ideal time and place is about nine in the morning in my study after a good night's sleep. After I've had breakfast I sit down and let my mind wander. Or I read a little poetry. Longfellow said he read fifty pages of poetry every day before writing. I'll often start by re-reading unfinished poems of my own. Usually something will catch my eye that needs to be changed or suggests a way to go forward with the poem. Something will strike me—a word or a phrase, or image. It is usually a sensuous experience, almost tactile, as if the thing itself is trying to rise up as words. Word and thing come together. In that moment I'll put a phrase down and see where it goes; for me the division between the mind and world momentarily disappears, and word and thing are one. That is one reason I compose on my old portable typewriter. The tactile sense, the weight of the keys, the sound they make striking the paper, all help.

That feeling lasts only so long. Later the draft has to be looked at coldly in the light of reason. Ben Jonson said that the really difficult thing in revising is to rekindle the same heat you felt writing the first draft. Revision is a tricky process for that reason. You have to retain a certain sympathy for the draft. You have to put yourself back into that original mood while exercising your critical faculties and being willing to make changes.

**BCM:** Finally what advice would you give to aspiring writers?

**RS:** First, read. Second, read. Third, read. Fourth, write, however little, every day.

Fifth: Keep in mind that the greatest reward from writing is writing itself, when the writing is going well. Of course, it doesn't always go well, and there is labor, pain, and frustration. But when it is going well you may suddenly feel, "This is wonderful. I am discovering something," or "I am making something good. I feel I am doing what I was always meant to do." This, I believe, is the greatest reward. Poetry is a means to

knowledge that you can't get through any other kind of language. When you're discovering something as you write, you feel, "I was made to do this," you feel virtue in the old Greek sense of the power or capacity to do a thing well. I don't believe there is any higher reward than this. It 's satisfying to publish. It's satisfying to win prizes. It's satisfying to have people read your work. But none of these measures up to the first. Perhaps the second-best reward is to have someone read and like your work, who truly understands it and can articulate that. But these other things fluctuate and you really can't control them, while the experience of writing is, God willing, always there for you. It is what drove Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson, who published not at all or very little in their lives. Or—to go to another art—what drove Van Gogh, who sold only one painting in his lifetime, but left us over 400. If the writing is what you value, then I think you'll keep writing through thick and thin.

*Lights of Chicago*
Kathleen North

## Ticking

*Stephanie Horn*

Sitting here in this apartment
I think it actually likes me
Or I like it
One of the two
I could see myself here
As long as I never left the house
I rock & shake on the L
On the bus system
Like a little dying leaf
Back and forth
With the momentum
Waiting for my colors to start blurring with the inertia of it all
I asked her yesterday
My best friend
The harlot in red
Why she wrote so much about the transportation
I know now
It's like a magnet
Half of existing is getting around
You can't escape the pull of a bus
A sidewalk
A train
Except here
She's done the entire thing up in
Cheap art and plants
I would imagine to make up for the white
Insane asylum white to me
Maybe comforting like snow to her
Since she's asleep in her closet right now
And I am not
No, I would rather take pictures of this silly city
And listen to the cat ticking on the kitchen wall
The hum of my computer
Making me a bit sleepy again
But an indefinable taste in my mouth
Urging me to stay awake
I spit it out: Chicago

## To You Who Walk With Me, To Those Dark Depths

*Niki Kranich*

I.

Poised upon the eglantine's morning dew,
this self is reflected: a prism of thought
dancing from synapse to synapse while watching you,
this tiny Monarch butterfly I once caught.

II.

While we were walking, you paused a moment
amidst the wild, overgrown roses,
to speak soft of how you spent your hours,
the tone of your words like echoing bells –
declaring those times when my shade entertained
your fancy and images –

I turned to the side,
to hide that humble blush – considering
all the warnings I had wrapped in my words,
how could I turn my heart to hate once more?
For no matter those sad discouragements,
there were always a few wet petals
from the early morning strewn at my rising feet –
your feeble attempts to find sweet order
in my motions, as if they could explain
this, our cacophony of poisoned words

III.

Some nights you spoke with a veiled calmness
these whispers of my eternal self-brooding –
that eternal thorn's tear scarring my soft side
and how my bones wish to crumble under God's time,
but you hold me like manna in your arms
so long, so tight – until I am near faint
and cry out for you, my own beautiful sweetbriar,
begging you to envelop me in your eternal embrace.

IV.

Nestled deep in the eglantine, I knew
that self to be in change: as this self
witnessed: grass-bed rose to cover
the limbs, flowers fluttered out
of the eyes, and thorns became its softest
pillow as the body rooted itself under soil
and roses covered the natural grave.

V.

The Monarch returns each morning
to kiss the dew collected on the cusp
of each petal, its wings caressing
each virgin flower to rise once more.

## To Paul and Other Men Who Were Once Red-Headed Children

*Lauren Schreiber*

While playing checkers,
(I am five, you a mere two),
You move your
chips
like warriors.

RED : clink!
over black.

Concentration.
Time elapses.

From my lips,
"I am tired of this"
hits you
like
bloody murder!

(RAGE!)

Indentions,
little chippers of teeth,
YOURS,
in my arm.

A furrow of the brow,
A thorough inspection,
I am alive.

You are grinning.

It is said somewhere,
I believe,
that the fire beneath
is what keeps feet dancing.

## Chuck

*Stephanie Horn*

One touch and I smell like smoke
Black coat
You don't walk but
Drift and shuffle
Away

## Lullaby

*Benjamin Mueller*

Before you lost your soft singing voice
Mother, before I got too old,
you sat at my bedside sweeping
my hair across my forehead
as white curtains swept in
the dim room on the hint of a breeze.
You sang about a ship loaded deep
because it held you and me
and sleep would drop down
on my eyelids. I'm grown and the piano
I've learned and you've loved sits.
You dust it though, and leave Brahms
open, letting the wind sift through
from ballade to intermezzo, then back.

But the gentle folds, the rose, in your throat
ha swollen and closed.
The doctor thinks smoke,
stress, caffeine, lack of water.
Steroids would open them
again, but not the same.
You only sing in church now,
the hymns you love most.
As I stand next to you
holding the hymnal
open between us,
I hear your voice, thin now, like wrists
laboring to hold something up,
to keep something together.

*The Shadow of the Tear*
Tsutomu Shiraki

## Occupation

*Jonathan Boggs*

I'd read stories of war, of Vietnam mostly—men who squeezed their heads, plump with expectations, into cold metal helmets—before I stuffed my life into an olive-drab bag and came to this desert land. I thought the wind was stale when it got inside my mouth and swept up all the moisture from the surface of my tongue.

I had read, even on the plane, of men as young as myself practically wilting, having seen friends opened or maimed by some trap under layers of jungle brush invisible until too late, men who'd seen female guerillas caught—eyes blank, primitive, afraid—and watched them being raped by American brothers.

I remember first seeing an Iraqi girl. Her head was draped carefully, tightly framing her face, which was round and chubby like a squirrel's, cheeks stuffed with nuts. The fabric around her head was not black, as I'd been led to believe. It was dirty-pink with faded purple and yellow swirls circling her ears and crown like tarnished jewelry.

She had not seen our caravan come from behind the copse of olive trees on the western brim of the village. She was skipping in and out of the tracks from the last tank that went through. So determined to plant her little feet in the deepest divots, she didn't hear the hungry, gurgling rumble of the next row of tanks.

It was as though she grew a bit older when she caught sight of us. Her shoulders, which moments before were rolling wave-like, almost dancing, shrunk together and stiffened like a warped board. Her step became plodding as though her feet had grown heavy. She began looking down at them, wondering, as if they'd suddenly become hooves.

She was trying not to look up at us. But when she was just beside, her eyes caught mine. I tried hard to read them, thinking they'd be warm, a deep auburn or a chestnut brown. But the girl's pupils were a dull black as if this ancient air with its coarse old hand had wiped away all their gloss and color.

*Graduation Day, United States Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, Quantico, VA, 9 July 2004*
Ralph Asher

*Untitled*
Melanie Schaap

*Lady In Green*
Lauren Schreiber

## Alternate Ending

*Sarah Werner*

*For Ophelia*

Woven wildflowers flow;
a fading, dying circlet crowns her
pale queen of sacrifice.
Icy tears twist together in a veil
lacing her pale, translucent face
beneath a boiling cauldron sky.

Starving, she strains an emaciated arm
toward the thick cathedral door,
bitter winter wind singing hymns
through holes in her brittle bones.

The sanctuary embraces, encloses her
in a soft intimate cocoon, archaic stone
solid, consoling—the warm eternity
his brief embrace could never feign.
Ethereal stars adorn the sagging beams
above, brighter here in this universe's heart
than those obscured by swirling clouds.

Righteous heavenly starflame,
gleaming ichor, oozes from the spire
under which she stands; starlight
swells, flows mellifluous onto the candle
clutched tight to her shivering body.

Molten wax mirrors the liquid starlight
and she knows not if she is the reflection.
It runs down her hand and arms
in scalding, skeletal white latticework,
trickling rivulets where tears once tread.

Streamlets quench her porous, ravenous bones;
two spindly fingers touch her garland,
desperate to destroy all interwoven sorrow—
then, sudden surprise that, like oil and water,
wax and blood do not mix.

Her finger, pierced by her thorny crown,
pools and spills a black pearl—
liquid wisdom travels a path
she does not dictate. Candle and starlight dim
in its thirsty wake. Mind and body surrender

wholly to despondent sorrow as torrential,
numbing wax pours thick over her body,
dulling the thorns, drowning… cloistered forever
in her shining white chrysalis as the winter winds
sing beyond the enduring cathedral door.

## Astronomy

*Ralph Asher*

If you would only ask,
I would wash my face
in the cool, wet lake
by which we sit alone,
facing the stirrings,
itinerant and halting,
of that strange score
known as love-or lust
with instrumental emotion.

If you would only ask,
I would row us out
onto the dead-still lake,
dog star heat shimmering
on shards of a jasper mirror,
slowly kissing your neck,
whispering Italian sonnets,
hands caressing your waist
as your eyes drown Antares.

If you would only ask,
I would cup your breasts
in my hands and kiss them,
soft, white, untouched.
Surely Dante Alighieri gazed
upon distant Luna, longing
for his Beatrice, aching to empty
himself for the total pleasure
of his wayward love.

But you do not ask.
Stony silent, I touch
your china-smooth face
and feel the fabric
of your dress, soft as skin,
impenetrable as your will.
I sit and watch you fade
with the season. Above, Sirius
swims in a black sea.

## December Musings

*Ralph Asher*

*After Campbell McGrath's "Capitalist Poems"*

Green and red lights fade
into a panoply of red, white and blue.
The Wal-Mart lot is jammed
(again)
with cars streaming through the artificial
roads in this Discount City where savings
are awarded on the platform backs
of the downtrodden workers, who make a fuck-you
grimace as they bear the cross of nail
polish, two for two, cheap cologne on sale –
(limited supply per store.)

Santa sits despondent
in an eggnog-and-gin coma, wondering
why he has sunk to the depths
of having redneck kids piss on him.
I question my own motives
("a man's heart is evil from his youth")

for coming to this place. Maybe
because I want to mock the lives
lived inside a big box, the surreal
land of scanner beeps and company TV
(like Pravda, only cheerier.)

Or perhaps I want to cry
out with joy and exultation at the prices
of incense and of myrrh
(cash, check, or charge?)

## "She never thought of it as dying"

*Jonathan Boggs*

She never thought of it as dying
for all the moments she lie there.
She gasped, then gulped and spat,
painting the cold sand warm blacks
and reds, pools of blood filling up
in her throat. Her eyes blurred with a film
of tears and mud. She thought of her grandmother.
How hard that perfectly gaunt and wrinkled woman
squinted, yet never once grasped for a hand
in walking, never so much as muttered a complaint.

The dark cloth that hid the dying
girl's face was suffocating her now. Her shoulder
tendons severed, she could not swing her fingers
to her mouth to peel one layer from another,
to feel the cold morning air sting slivers of separated
skin in her lips, the burn of her chest and lungs filling
the way her mother's soup, made with steaming
river water, always burned her stomach. As a young girl
she thought this same black sash—then wrapped taut
around her grandmother's thin cheeks— was a mean
long-fingered hand wiping away Grandma's happiness.

Grandma had tucked away her smile,
the girl recalled, all those years before.
There was an accident in Grandpa's field.
A boy just old enough to wield a blade
and growing tired from a full afternoon
of hacking, swung his sickle
into a tangled patch of stiff wheat
which clung to the knife like a thousand tiny,
desperate fingers. He stuck out his elbow
and jerked back, losing his hold
on the smooth wooden handle, propelling the flat
pale blade, silver and throwing light, to his right side.

Grandpa was behind the boy.
The sickle had stuck, cutting into Grandpa's shallow
muscled stomach. She imagined him dying,
sucking and whining like an infant helpless
for its mother's milk.

It was then, she thought, that Grandma masked
her soft lips and wrinkled chin with this ancient black wrap—
death's wretched hand stretched over her mouth
until the morning she breathed her last.

## *Hajj*

*Jonathan Boggs*

Although it is custom for Iraqi women to rush,
Iman travels slowly, wanting to feel
the night sand, pale below the moon
and as cool to her feet as dirt along a bank,
moist with the brush of the river.

She is searching the stars, as she did as a child,
for the angels who poked their heads
through holes in a cerulean sky.
Only tonight the sky is pale and by the standard
of her land she is no longer a child.

Although she is masked and wrapped in black,
Iman could believe her body draped in white linen
like the Muslim pilgrims bound for Mecca,
their families home praying for the journey.

Iman remembers stories after sunset prayer,
her ancestors traversing deserts in tattered smocks,
how she'd imagine her people all in a row,
thousands, each clothed in the whitest robes
and moving in waves—a great river of such light
God would have to shield his eyes.

She tries to picture her mother's smile,
so spread her lips would grow white at the center
as she told of Iman's grandmother, the first woman
in the family to see the sacred land—
how she dunked her clothes in Zamzam,
the well dug by the angel of God
for Hagar and Ishmael, ostracized and dying
in the desert.

Under her mask, Iman sets her jaw
and tries to find her grandmother,
but the only vision that comes
is lying stiff and cold in white burial clothes
caked at the ankles with the mud and dust
of a trek back from Saudi Arabia.

And suddenly the darkness deepens,
as if the angels had grown tired of looking.
She fumbles her stride, aware now
of the drooping weight beneath her robes
and a chill in her thighs.

She stops, refastens the belt
across her naked waist so it pinches
a small section of skin, and she begins to run,
spraying clots of damp sand onto the lower hem
of her cloak.

*I Want To Be Kate*
Lauren Schreiber

## A Key to Your Heart

*Andrew McSorley*

It is a strange item to keep, to say the least,
It can hardly be used as a bookmark,
And you wouldn't dare wind it through the end of your key
chain
Its crooked teeth dangling from the ignition

It's not as if you simply step into someone's heart
Like you would their front door
Catching them by surprise on a Saturday afternoon
Their bath robe gently scraping the floor

As they dart into the kitchen to put on some tea
While you stand silently in the living room
Admiring their taste in ancient pottery
And impressionist paintings

It's not as though I would look after your heart
While you're on vacation for a week,
There is no small white dog to walk
Or fish to feed

No shelves stacked with Puritan literature
For my eyes to linger on before I start to vacuum
There isn't even a chair or an ottoman
To rest my feet on after I've gone jogging through your
neighborhood

I am alone
On the naked doorstep of your heart
Ringing the doorbell impatiently
While the rain plays a slow jazz number at my feet

## When Cicadas Sing

*Benjamin Mueller*

*"a heart that laughter has made sweet"*
W.B. Yeats

My father sings in German when he does the dishes;
his wedding ring clicking on glass cups and plates,
a metronome keeping a beat for some quiet counterpoint,
muted by the suds, the soapy water, and the singing.

My mother sits back in her chair there in the dim kitchen,
after the weight of the meal has been lifted,
drinking decaf and laughing at his uncertain baritone belting:
*Wird wohl mein Feinsliebchen sein; hollahihaho!*

Twenty years ago, the song would have been the same
though the dishes have all broken and cracked since then
but always the after-dinner-music in a language she'll never
know;
*Geht vorbei und kommt nicht 'rein; hollahi, hollaho!*

Outside, the cicadas' song crescendos—decrescendos,
passes from tree to tree while the crescent moon
traces its curled finger across the crest of the sky.
Inside, the stairs groan as my parents trudge off to bed.

*Asper Boophis*
Melanie Schaap

*Untitled*
Melanie Schaap

*Budapest Parliment*
*from Castle*
Shile Dayton

*Glass Apple Pears*
Melanie Schaap

## Dona Nobis

*Chad McKenna*

The casserole wakes
the neighborhood,
losing its
cool on the kitchen tile;
those who were to eat
follow in suit
while nurseries
fire cannons from their doors.

A concrete river
sets them apart,
but the dogs
howl in their yard and mine
disturbing dreams of
households serene
full of new
unbroken plates and peace.

Father knows what's best
to hush them up,
but sirens
ensure a sleepless night,
and silence enters
in tupperware
filling mouths
with Mother's fresh muffins.

## An Elegy for Emily

*Sarah Werner*

Every day of your life, those around you witnessed your love
for alcohol, cigarettes, and that smarmy, revolting china
figurine collection
more than anything with a drop of life in it. You hated
us, didn't you—young, chipper foundlings of the decaying
society
you helped create, faces stretched in painful smiles as we
posed like carolers
on your icy porch after church, patiently waiting, wincing
in still, bitter air as you shuffled slowly toward us under a
mountain
of afghans, cursing us *auf Deutsch* in a hoarse voice *verboten*
in even the poorest church choir, rusted from years' worth
of wash in tobacco-brown saliva from allegedly sworn-off
cigarettes.

I don't remember warm spice cookies or anything like other
Grandmas'
world-famous turkey gravy—for me, just white bread and the
flat
generic root beer I'd snitched from the dank, unfinished
basement—I refused to eat the heavy German food you set
before me.
My last memory of you seats me once again at your table,
the one with the lacy tablecloth we dared not touch,
hands folded in my lap, tasting root beer a thousand basements
away,
stoically forced to listen to you drone about something—
what was it? But it seemed in those last days you recovered
what you were missing: I remember the treasured tablecloth,
partly covered by a hefty leatherback German Bible. Or maybe
it just obscured
an accidental cigarette burn, the black-edged hole in your web
of truth.

It rained on the day we buried you—tiny mirror-gray
mistdrops
clinging to fat petals on my yellow rose. I remember carelessly
sacrificing its peaceful beauty to your grave's open mouth,
upset
only because mud washed over it immediately, dulling
the only signs of life for miles. I remember the rain turning to
caustic,
lashing linedrives, wind whipping our hair until we were
haggard old women
without hairbrushes, not caring to look presentable. Why you
gave up
like that I'll never know. Fall apart, fall to seed that can't be
replanted
(though I admit now my young heart held *keine guten Boden*).
I laughed when you died
because I couldn't cry, raw, empty laughter that tore my throat
more than lung cancer's gnawing, desperate hunger
ever could, hacking up lungs and heart and, finally, tears of
blood—
the only life in this flat generic root beer.

## Indiana Sky

*Rachel Liptak*

Cold comes down
from the Indiana sky,
and nothing
but the sound of flying.

A year of winters not ended
and wreaking forgetfulness
and vertigo.
The sky is a color
that someone forgot,
and it flickers
and it swirls,
shedding thick, heavy bolls,
handfuls of palpable air.
Sometimes I forget to breathe.

There have been more
pickup trucks
than I had ever known.
We sat in the back,
wind whipping
through cotton layers,
but warmer all the more
with the company.

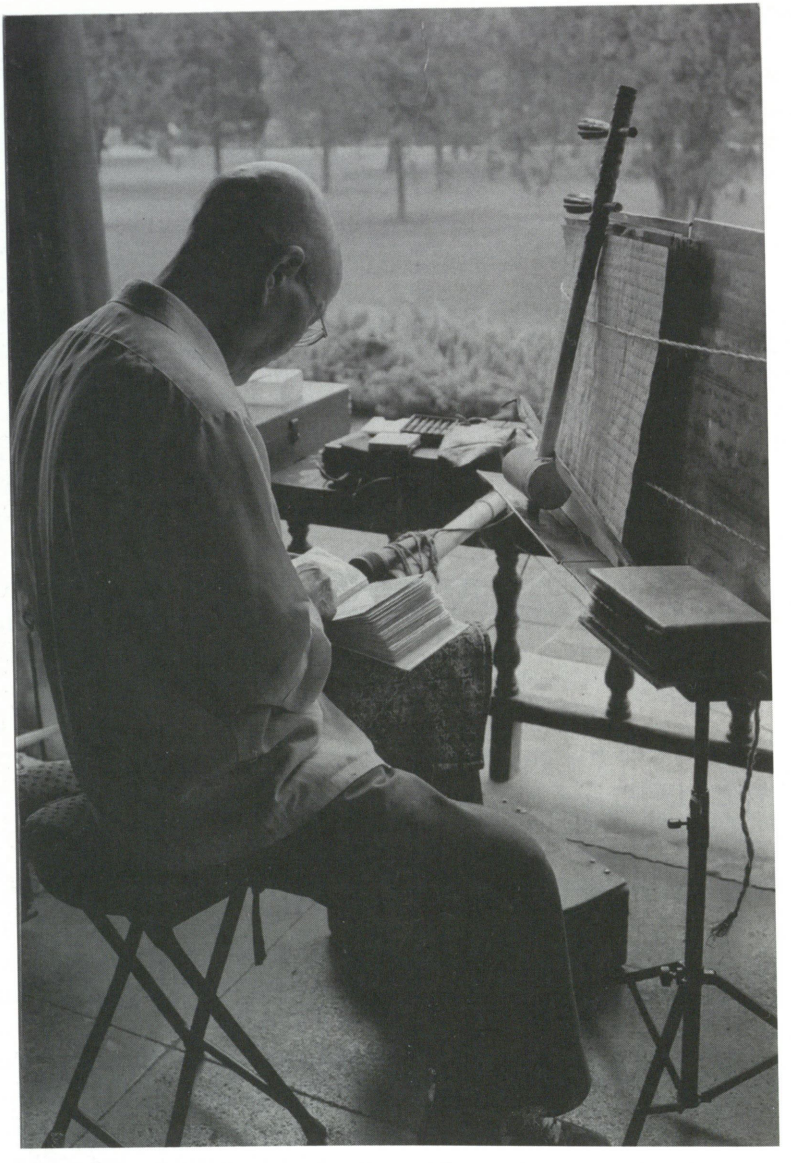
Sometimes I forget to breathe.
The sun pools
stained glass colors
on the ground,
or picks points
of radiance out in the snow.
I have seen
sights more sublime,
sinking cities and dwarfing euphoria,
but I have lain
in this grass
and felt the consequence
of the sun's reality,

the sharp-edged prick
of existence.

Now I will not take for granted
orange trees in the groves,
the haze of mountains
against the horizon,
the detail
of every scrub bush and
rock ready to fall,
or the creeping seamist
recoiling from the valley.

But neither will I forget
days like Mary's robe,
the warm suffusion
of spring rain,
or clouds blued and polished,
ringing with thunder shots.
Sometimes I forget to breathe.

So much of cold,
cold,
howling around the courtyard,
driven by some
deviling wind.
Now I do not miss
the fevered fervent cling
of earlier days
though the wind tears at my eyes,
creating sadness that never was.



*Untitled*
Stacy Gherardi

*Sewanee*
Tsutomu Shiraki

## Three Nocturnes: Soul

*Benjamin Mueller*

*"But even today, I can't conceive of a soul*
*Without seeing a woman's body."*
Larry Levis

i.
In the formless black of the bedroom the soul floats
over two figures wrapped in one white sheet.

A muted light from the moon spills in through the window
outlining the quiet tremor of hips. And the soul,

it waits for her arching back, her erratic breath
and then a kiss. She falls back to the mattress;

blood rushing to her cheeks, and her breath
gentle in, gentle out. Goodnight, she whispers.

ii.
After hours of labor, my father held the flesh
of a stillborn infant. He scrubbed his hands red,

and walked home, the car still in its place.
Over him the moonlight glowed behind wisps

of white clouds trailing some high, cold current.
He stopped before his house—his breath, so tangible

it hung about his chin before fading into nothing—
upstairs my mother slept, cradling her sweet swollen belly.

iii.
And so we spend evenings staring into the sunset
waiting for something to stir within, despite the night

creeping from behind in darkening purples and blues.
When we crawl into our beds and fade into the covers,

we close our eyes to the dark corners of our rooms
and whisper prayers for souls, but if there is a soul

it comes in the morning as the dew drops down leaving
its wet kiss upon the grass when no one is looking.

## Daffodil Building

*Philip Nadasdy*

### Apartment 203: Amanda
### I'll See You Tomorrow

*Let's contend no more, Love,*
*Strive nor weep:*
*All be as before, Love,*
*—Only sleep!*
Robert Browning, "A Woman's Last Word"

After eating the meal they both had prepared, she'd take his hand and they'd dance. Their feet would touch the ground in perfect unison, sometimes to music and sometimes not. She'd float, under his lead, across the apartment's wooden floor in her socks. There had been that time, though, when they danced so smoothly. When she'd take his eyes into her and then kiss him, tasting the wine they'd drunk on his lips.

There had been that time.

Then the meals grew quicker and the dancing shorter. She felt the pull of the floor on her feet and the floating stopped.

Amanda flipped the bolt of the lock to the apartment and placed her umbrella on the coat rack inside the hallway. The umbrella was dripping wet, and left a puddle just large enough to soak the welcome mat. The hallway was short, opening after just a few feet to a large living/dining room. When she entered the room, a trail of smells led to the entrance of the kitchen.

She dropped her bag and walked as quietly as possible over the creaking floor to the doorframe of the kitchen, just peeking to see him flipping pasta in a pan over the stove. Amanda watched for a while: he folded the pasta over itself letting steam rise and the smell of spices with it. The motion was soothing, constant and repetitive, but interrupted when he stopped to taste the pasta, sucking in air to cool the heat.

"I know you're there," he said, still holding the small bite in his mouth.

"I didn't think you'd heard me come in."

"If it wasn't for the creaking floorboards, I probably wouldn't have."

He finished the bite, nodded and smiled, "It's done."

Amanda grabbed two plates and some silverware from the shelves above the counter and walked back towards the dining room. While setting table, her ears caught the noises of two squirrels chattering outside the window. Through the drips of rain trailing down the glass, she saw them chasing each other in the thick ivy on the adjacent building. They jumped at each other, and then sat calmly on the on the windowsill before clashing again.

He carried a large bowl of pasta into the dining room and took a seat at the table. Amanda rounded the table towards him, folded her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

"It's good to see you, Rob," she said.

The pasta was good—sweet, with just the right amount of spice— and the wine went quickly between the two of them. They never talked when they ate with each other, not out of discomfort, but waiting when they could give each other their full attention.

Having finished, Amanda was relaxed, full from the meal and soft eyed from the wine.

"You haven't been home this early in a long time," she said.

She hadn't seen him except for in the early morning or late at night for many weeks. Longer office hours seemed to grow with their still young age. Even her days were getting longer. She hadn't come home tonight until 7:00; he, usually, not until 11:00, after she was in bed. Nonetheless, she was happy to see him: happy to eat a meal cooked by him, happy to sit at the table with him, and happy to be home with him.

"It's horrible. The hours are starting to get to me. I left

early today. I couldn't take it. I'm sure I'll get it tomorrow." He was looking out the window, apparently thinking of a scolding from his boss.

"You're home now, though. Try not to think about it."

Rob nodded with his head still turned towards the window. She wondered what his boss was saying to him, or yelling at him for, in his mind. He quickly turned to her, having apparently ended the imaginary reprimand, and grabbed a cigarette from inside his pocket and passed one to her. They rarely smoked inside the house, rarely at all in fact, not wanting the apartment to stink, except after meals when the tobacco added nicely to the ending smells of the finished dinner and tasted smoother under the dryness of wine.

Their conversation was simple, as if growing accustomed to each other again. It bothered Amanda only a little—they hadn't talked awhile, and the dull conversation was understandable. When not talking, she looked at him and him at her, both sitting contently. She felt his foot underneath the table, resting outstretched against the inside of her calf, placed there as if they were in a restaurant, as an inconspicuous sign of affection. Amanda grew warmer.

Still smoking, the conversation continued— plans for a vacation and a phone call from Rob's mother. Contentment filled her. During the last weeks, their interactions, if any, were brief but tinged with frustration. She wanted to see more of him, but would take out her frustrations by finding something to complain about. She started small arguments in the hopes of seeing him longer. He'd rush out the door in the morning, after she complained about the dishes in the sink, the bills on the counter, and the clothes in the hamper. Trivial things, she thought, and while sitting there at the table, she buried them and hoped for a dance.

Rob, though, looked uneasy like something was creeping up in his head that made Amanda curious. Bad day at work, she thought, obviously. He sat with his eyes looking just past her,

outside to the window again. He was involved in the conversation when needed, but always returned to the window. Amanda noticed this, and bit her tongue, looking up to the ceiling where the smoke traveled, creating a haze around the already dimly lit ceiling light.

The squirrels screeched once more, loudly. Amanda felt his foot pull away from her leg as he got up to clear the table. She tried to hold him there.

"Should we have dessert?"

"No, thank you," he said as he walked to the kitchen.

She stood up, "How about a dance, Rob?"

The smoke from her dying cigarette singed her nostrils when she heard him laugh. It was short, with a noticeable sarcasm. The sound of it could have been taken as playfulness or insulting. She chose the latter, a scoff.

Rob took the dishes and began to wash them. She followed, unnerved by the laugh, but not yet angry. She hurried past him in silence towards another bottle of wine sitting on the counter. She fumbled through drawers looking for a corkscrew, growing annoyed by her thoughts, him and the damn cork in the bottle.

"Where's the corkscrew?"

"I think we lost it. The last bottle was a twist top."

"Damn it, Rob," she said. She didn't know why she cursed, but she did, and at him. He stopped washing for only a few seconds, a pause that said he was contemplating an argument, but returned to washing. Amanda carried the corked bottle through the dining room and to the door of the apartment.

Why would he scoff, she thought. That was a part of their ritual, a routine up until the last weeks. They were close when they danced and closer afterwards. Was it laughable? Was it childish? She knocked on the door of the apartment across the hallway.

"Excuse me, do you have a corkscrew I could borrow?"

The man inside the door quickly turned, leaving the door

open. It was childish to him, wasn't it, she thought. Something they did when time wasn't an issue, with less problems, less responsibilities. He didn't care that it meant something to her. Anger came quickly, and she grew impatient while waiting for the corkscrew.

Her mind jumped around quickly. He didn't know that she ate by her self after work, that her nights were boring, that she missed him even when he was there.

"Here," the man said.

"Thank you," she said and turned as the man began to say something.

When she returned to her apartment, Rob was sitting on the couch drinking a glass of wine.

"Where'd you go? I found the corkscrew," he said.

She looked at the corkscrew in her hand, "Screw you, Rob."

He set the wine glass on the table and looked to her. A slight smirk stretched across his lips, something that always annoyed her.

"So, what's wrong with you?" he asked.

"Why'd you laugh, Rob?

"Laugh?"

"Yeah. I asked you if you wanted to dance, and you laughed. That was it, you laughed."

Her eyes never stayed directly to him, they jumped back and forth between him and the wooden floor.

"I laughed. I don't know, is it a big deal?"

He was still smirking.

"What is it that you do at work until eleven or twelve? What do you do there? The one night I see you home before then, you laugh at me."

The smirk dropped, having the lost the playful edge.

"I work. I work all the time. What would you want me to do?"

"Take time off. Talk to your boss. Quit for Christ's sake, I

don't know, do something."

The late evening light was falling fast, letting night creep up against the window, clouding the view of the tree and the now quiet blackbirds.

"Yes, Amanda, it's a wonderful idea," Rob said, "I like it. I'll quit. I'll quit because you want to dance after dinner. On my two weeks notice, that's what I'll write: Amanda likes dancing."

Rob could quickly change his sarcasm from playfulness, to ambiguity, to insulting. It was hard arguing with him for that reason, and Amanda, although she hated herself for it, let her emotions go, exaggerated them even, in the hopes she could cut through his sarcastic swings.

"You're fool. Yes, of course this about dancing, it's all about my love of dancing. Screw you. You're never here," she said as her eyes grew damp, ready to burst.

"I'm not. Still, what am I going to do? Seriously, Amanda, I'm sorry, but I might as well have been at work if I knew this is what I was coming home to."

With smoke still lingering and smells of the meal gone, the air had grown stale and it left a bad taste in her mouth as her breathing quickened, holding back tears. Trivial, she thought. Maybe it was trivial or maybe he just didn't care.

At one final breath, her tears started— no sobbing, no crying, just tears. She placed the wine bottle and corkscrew on the coffee table and walked past him as he brought a hand to his temple.

9:00pm. Even when Rob wasn't home, she never went to bed that early. She was tired with nothing more to say. His comment had hit her hard, and she regretted having yelled and cried in front of him. Things were wrong.

After an hour so, when she was nearly asleep, Rob walked into the bedroom and sat to her turned back. She was awake, and could feel him sit down. He sat there, not moving for a couple of minutes. Amanda ignored him, and tried to fall asleep. Her eyes, dry from tears, became heavy and just before

sleep took her, she felt his arm fold underneath and around her waist. His face pushed against the bottom of her neck, and she could feel his wet eyelashes open and close against her skin.

Sleep grabbed her, and then the time came when she floated— hearing a whisper from somewhere near, "I'll see you tomorrow."

**Apartment 201: Vacant**
**No One's Home**

*"I will not shut me from my kind,*
*And, lest I stiffen into stone,*
*I will not eat my heart alone,*
*Nor feed with sighs a passing wind."*
Alfred Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H." CVIII

Henry crossed out the address on his list in the back of the cab. It had been a shabby place, like the others, with the landlord less than welcoming. It was looking bleak. He had told his mother the same earlier that week: not a single apartment worth his money, not a single address worth his time. She hadn't taken it well and he could hear she was worried.

The cab driver sped down a side street away from the traffic and Henry thanked him from behind the glass for being speedy.

Rush hour, said the cabbie. This rain doesn't help either.

Henry wasn't accustomed to the trains yet, so he kept above ground, opting for taxis instead. They came down a side road onto a thin street lined with apartment buildings with no storefronts and no moving cars.

This way's better. Nobody uses it, the cabbie said, eyes on the road.

Looks like it.

The street was by itself, caught in between alleyways and two main roads, and only three blocks long. It was lined with small trees every ten feet or so, rising out of the sidewalks in little square patches of dirt. Henry asked the cabbie to roll down his window in the backseat, letting in a brisk air that made him squint, but he sucked it in while looking at the buildings. Drips of rain fell off the open corners of the window, and left the shoulder of his shirt splotched with small circles of wet. He heard the

cars and trains just a few blocks away, but it was muffled, low and quiet. The street seemed alone and outside of the city. A good street, he thought.

The buildings were old and tall with carved stone moldings below each window. They were all the same, drab of course, like every color in the city, but Henry enjoyed the pale differences of yellows and reds and browns covering their plaster and brick fronts. As they neared the second block, the cabbie slowed down as a kid ran across the street, and Henry caught a glimpse of a "FOR RENT" sign in the window of a yellow-bricked building.

Hey, stop here, could ya? Henry asked.

The cabbie pulled the car to the curb and poked the meter with his finger, $12.70. Henry gave him a twenty and jumped out. A wind came down the street and the wet spots on his shoulder went cold against his skin. The rain wasn't bad, but the rush of cold from the wind left his face feeling stretched and brittle. He ran up the steps to the building and stood underneath the doorframe.

Numbers and names were on the intercom system with "landlord" scribbled on a taped piece of paper next to apartment 300. He buzzed it.

The woman's voice came broken and loud, Yeah. Landlord here.

Hi. It's a little late, I know. I was wondering if I could take a look at your apartments.

There was a pause that left him uneasy. There were no cabs on the street and he'd be stuck there if she said no.

Yeah, yeah. Sure. I'll be down in a second.

The wind jumped up the steps and swirled right in front of the door. Henry shivered and wrapped his arms around his waist, bobbing up and down on his toes.

She was younger than he expected, but he could see thin wisps of gray hair leading back to a snuggly tied ponytail. She wore a long black cardigan that fit loosely across her waist.

Hi. I'm Susan, she coughed, I got a place open on the second floor. Been vacant for about a month.

Susan's voice still sounded like it was coming from the intercom—broken from the cigarette smoke Henry could smell on her. She was matter-of-fact in her speech, leaving little room for Henry to reply as she walked through the lobby and up the stairs to the second floor.

Good space. One bedroom in this unit. Full kitchen, small dining space, bath, living area. Hardwood floors. Nice view of the street.

They entered the apartment. Plaster archways, below the crown moldings of the ceiling, separated the dining, kitchen and living rooms. She walked him through the space, which was empty, still going through her routine, Electric and water of course. Laundry on top and basement levels. Rent isn't bad, but you know, a little up there for a place this big. I had all the walls painted, so I might be able to knock some down if you want to do some work on 'em. The place was pretty ugly before. He was an old guy. Old taste, ya know.

Henry nodded his head.

She kept on talking while he walked through the empty rooms. The walls were all white, and even the molding had been freshly painted. Henry wondered what was underneath— what old taste would eventually come through cracks of broken paint. Browns and oranges, maybe. The man's furniture would have been darkly stained wood with olive upholstery that was rough to the touch. Lamps, with fluted shades, would have cast a warm yellow light in the rooms. He would have slept soundly in a twin bed, woke up early and stood over the stove as the teakettle whistled.

Henry brushed his hand against the smooth latex paint of the dining room. The man's life was familiar, despite the newly clean feel of the wall against his fingers, bleached white and thick—at least two coats to cover up the old taste.

Henry could hear Susan still talking from somewhere in

the bedroom. Her voice echoed against the empty, white walls. It was softer with the echo, with the hoarseness all but gone from her throat. As he peeked into the kitchen, he heard her walk into the dining room.

So, that's about that. What do you think?

Henry kept his head turned towards the ceiling, I love it. It must have been good place for him.

Him?

Oh, sorry. The previous tenant.

Sure. Sure. Arthur I think his name was. Passed away at the hospital.

Arthur, Henry whispered.

Henry smiled at her, and her hands went uncomfortably to pockets of her cardigan.

So, Mister. Lookin' for a new place then?

Yeah. Just moved here actually. Well not yet, exactly. I haven't found a place yet.

Well this one's free and clear. Ready to go.

It's great. I am really thinking about going ahead with it.

She looked at her watch . Listen, you caught me here in the middle of dinner. I got some stuff in the oven.

I'm sorry, Miss. I didn't mean to—

No worries. I'm gonna run upstairs and get it out before it burns. Just wander around a little. Feel it out. I'll be back in a few.

Sounds good. I'll be here.

Henry appreciated her trust as she walked out of the apartment. He walked next to the dining room window and leaned against the wall, scanning the rest of the apartment. The living room would have been Arthur's reading room. There would have been no television, only a radio with a turntable on top. A large record collection would have gone on shelves next to a desk where he'd read. He would have had candles on a small table in the middle of the room and a small couch against the wall.

Arthur would have been retired and either widowed or divorced— no, widowed— with one child (a boy perhaps) that called only a couple times a year. He would answer the phone in the kitchen, and smile when he heard, Hi, Dad.

They'd talk for nearly an hour, as his son's children shouted and laughed in the background.

The wind blew against the window and the sound echoed through the apartment. Henry was happy to be inside, but the sound of the wind made the empty apartment seem cold. With it, the white walls became like ice, and the plaster on his back sent a chill through his neck.

Arthur would have placed rugs in every room to fight the cold of the plaster and the wood floors. He would've worn socks to bed and sandals in the morning. He would've cooked all his meals and ate them alone.

The wind outside died down. Henry began tapping his foot, letting a repetitive beat bounce around the room. He did not like the emptiness of the place. It came off the wall and caught him, stopping his foot and keeping him tightly against the wall. Every other apartment he had looked at had been shabby, but each still had old paint on the walls, chipping away, revealing layers upon layers of color. He wanted Arthur's old taste. He wanted the cracks and dents and to imagine their pasts. He shook his head and moved off the wall when another wind rattled the window. The sky outside had dimmed, and the rain was nearly gone. The rooms were shadows, monochromatic— the floors dark grey in the fading light and the whitewashed walls pale and cold. Henry felt uneasy and walked out of the apartment.

He took a breath and went to the stairs. Stopping at each level, he walked up and down the hallways, staying close to the doors of the apartments. He heard televisions and music, conversations and babies crying. He smelled dinners being cooked. He smiled when someone came or left their apartment.

He reached the top level, which was a small room with a

washer and dryer. Someone had their bed sheets hanging on a line. He felt like an intruder. What right did he have to see their dirty laundry? What right did he have to live there? He needed a place. Yes, he needed a place. But the street was secluded and home to others. It had been home for Arthur. Henry's home had been somewhere else.

Arthur's son would have come to the building once a year, when business led him to the city. Only him, his wife and children busy with work and school downstate. They would have drank whiskey, Arthur's favorite and his son's least. When family updates subsided, Arthur would've reminisced with his son about his mother, Arthur's wife. They would've laughed when Arthur remembered his son spitting red cough medicine on her dress when he was sick and still a little boy. When his son had to leave, Arthur would've walked him to the door, hugged him tightly, then given his boy a twenty dollar bill, which his son accepted every time, despite being grown and a father himself.

Arthur's home had been there, and Henry wanted to strip the white paint off the walls and make it his again. His home was somewhere else. His mother would reminisce just the same, and Henry would be too far away to listen, to console—too busy, not enough time, too caught up while living in someone else's home. He needed to leave. He needed a taxi, a plane, something to get him back. He needed air.

A door at the top of a narrow staircase read "Roof" at the other side of the laundry room. He walked quickly up and breathed in the as the cold came from outside. The wind was gone, the rain too, and the clouds had broken apart, hanging low across the city. Empty laundry lines hung between poles rising out of the pebbled roof. He ducked underneath and walked to the edge. The street was as calm as before, and the lights of the windows reflected in the puddles dotting the pavement. He drew in a breath and felt cold again go through him. The cold made the lights of the street seem sharper— their bluish whites scattered out across the city. Taller buildings, though, rose up

behind him, and in the windows, he caught the yellows of their lamps and ceiling lights, silhouetting people as they walked past. Warm, they talked on phones and watched TV and ate dinner. Henry folded his arms around his waist and rubbed his sides. One small and solitary gust went by. It went through his hair softly, while he breathed in the coldness of it, and then went down street, bouncing against buildings and the dotted warm lights of the windows. He felt calm.

Henry went back inside and walked downstairs to the second level and into Arthur's apartment. He flicked on the light and heard a yelp in the dining room.

Susan jumped peeked around the arched opening, Good God. You about me scared me to death there.

Sorry about that. I want to check out the rest of the building, Henry said.

Sure. Sure. Next time just tell me. Speakin' of which. You interested in this place then?

I think I'm set to go.

Good. Good. Just come by tomorrow and I'll have the papers ready. She reached out her hand, Ok then. But, hey, where'd the hell you go anyway? I about thought you disappeared.

No, No. Still here.

**Apartment 202: Simon**
**Invasion**

*It weighs upon the heart, that he must think*
*What uproar and what strife may now be*
*stirring*
*This way or that way o'er these silent hills—*
*Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,*
*And all the crash of onset;"*
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude"

Simon did not want to speak to Jack. He had answered the first phone call, hung up the second, and tried to ignore the third. Three phone calls in the last hour, each with an invitation to Jack's apartment, but Simon found his bed sheets to be more inviting. The bedroom was cold, but the blankets had kept him reasonably warm for the last twelve hours.

The alarm clock flicked to 5:07 pm.

The phone rang.

He pulled the pillow over his head, and struggled through four loud rings before answering.

"Jack. Stop calling," he said.

There was a slight pause; he heard a muffled whisper followed by a woman's voice, "Is this Simon?"

Simon cleared his throat, "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

He was relieved it wasn't Jack.

"Hi, Jack told me to call. He said you called in sick to work today. He really wants you to come over to his place tonight. He says it will cheer you up."

"Thanks," he said and hung up the phone.

He could hear the rain against the window to the bedroom. The blinds were fully drawn, but even for late afternoon, the room was dark. The rain clouds had apparently covered the

low afternoon sun that left annoyingly uneven spots of dark shadow and bright sunlight across his pillows. The clouds, though, kept the light even, diffused and pale, making his bed especially comfortable.

A few months earlier, Simon had gone to Jack's apartment, talked only to Jack and a few other people from work and quickly left—too much small talk, too many people, too much to handle. On most Friday nights Jack threw parties—"gatherings," as he called them—consisting mainly of female guests. He called women from work, women he had previously dated, and old friends that were, of course, women. There were men there, but their numbers were kept low and always disproportionate. Tonight's gathering would be no different.

The phone rang.

"Damn it, Jack. Stop."

"You're coming."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"No. I'm—

"Okay, then. We're coming to you. Eight o'clock. Clean the place up. I'll bring everything else."

"Wait a second, Jack—

"Expect twenty people, including the fine young woman you just rudely hung up on. See you then."

Simon heard a click, and then the dial tone.

He threw his face into the pillow: Jack couldn't be serious. But, Jack could be serious and people were coming. He wouldn't let Jack, or anyone else, into the building. Jack, though, would find a way into the building.

Jack was serious, and twenty some people would be arriving at eight o'clock

With a sigh, Simon rose out of bed. He didn't stretch his arms or yawn, but walked with hunched shoulders to the bathroom. He left the lights off and stepped into the shower. Still feeling groggy, he lowered himself onto to the warm porcelain of

the tub and let the water hit his stomach. The steam relaxed his shoulders and he felt more comfortable than in his bed. He couldn't hear anything underneath the heavy pour of the showerhead: most importantly, he couldn't hear the phone. He lay there, for an hour or so, nearly dozing off towards the end—relaxed and calm in the cradle of the tub.

Soon, though, people Simon didn't know or didn't care for would be gathering in his apartment. He pulled himself off the bottom of the tub and walked through his apartment in his bathrobe, assessing the mess. The apartment wasn't exactly dirty—a few dishes here and there that were easily disposed of. He went to his room and dressed. Besides a few pairs of jeans and old t-shirts, all Simon had to wear were two suits he wore to work: one blue, one black. They weren't exactly "party" attire, but would have to do, and he chose the black. It was a nice wool suit, but a rip in the lining, near the cuff, scratched uncomfortably against his right wrist.

The cleaning and dressing had taken longer than he had expected, leaving him with only twenty minutes before Jack's guests arrived. Simon sat on the couch and waited. Twenty minutes was too short to do much of anything else in preparation, and seemed far too long just to sit and wait. The room was quiet, except for his quickening breath. He felt his chest rise and fall—up down up down— faster and faster, while he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. The sound of his own breathing echoed in his ears, nothing but large rushes of air: in and out. A tremble traveled with the fast tempo of his breathing up from his fingertips and through his spine. His eyelids shut tight. In less than twenty minutes, Jack would take over the apartment with an army of twenty or more.

"Wake up, little boy," Jack said.

"Oh God," Simon flinched. He hadn't heard a buzz, a knock, or even an entrance. Jack had a found a way in, along with five others.

For the next few minutes, Simon shook hands and smiled and tried to remember names. There was a Jamie, a Stacy, a Melissa, an Erin, a Jason, with a Jennifer and a Kelly just entering the apartment. More followed. Jack pulled at Simon's elbow, leading him from person to person, stopping to hand out plastic wine glasses into which he would pour from a cheap bottle. After nearly ten people had entered the apartment, the door stayed closed for a while. Simon stared at it, wishing it would stay closed for the rest of the evening.

After telling an Amy to "make yourself at home," Jack turned to Simon and said, "There's more coming. Don't worry."

Simon brought his fingers to the bridge of his nose, "This is ridiculous, Jack."

"This is wonderful, Simon," with a smile on his face, "God knows you've never had this many people at your place."

"Exactly."

Jack walked backwards from Simon and raised his glass, "This will be good for you."

Before Simon could follow, there was a knock at the door. He looked at Jack who was across the room, already involved in a whispered conversation with a Kelly. Another knock. A Stacy and a Jason looked at him, apparently wondering if he was going to answer the door. Simon itched his right wrist, smiled nervously back at them, and moved to the door.

He didn't listen to their names, but recognized them from work. He greeted them and took their coats that were wet from the rain still falling outside. The woman and man nodded a, "Thank you," to Simon and brushed past him when they saw Jack, still standing with a Kelly.

Simon shimmied and dodged his way through shoulders, plastic cups and conversations with the heavy coats in hand. He laid them down on his bed and then groaned, itching his wrist when he realized his sheets were now wet from Jack's guest's coats.

He could hear the people's voices from the other room of

the apartment—all of it muffled and broken, but constant, like static on a television. The noise rose and fell in volume annoyingly—low-level, mumbling hums, rudely interjected by loud laughs and gasps. He felt a shiver through his shoulders at every laugh and his fingers began to shake. Again, his breathing quickened and he wanted desperately to fall into his bed, but the coats had taken the space. He turned and walked quickly to the bathroom just outside the bedroom.

The shaking continued in front of the bathroom mirror. Simon splashed cold water onto his face then watched it drip erratically off his nose and chin. Just as he closed his eyes for another splash, the door opened, letting in a loud wave of sound, and Jack.

"That Kelly. She's something, Simon," Jack said.

Simon sighed, "She's nice."

"Nice? She's beautiful. God blessed us with women, Simon. Finest creatures on the earth."

Jack raised his glass, and toasted towards the ceiling of the bathroom and took a sip of wine. His eyelids looked heavy, ready to close. He wasn't drunk, but the wine was showing; Simon didn't mind Jack when he was drinking—he was usually less of a smart-ass, more foolish.

"I don't get it with you. I mean, all those women."

"Simon, I don't know either. They like me. They see me as dangerous, I guess."

"You're an accountant, Jack."

"A damn good one too. Better than you, I'd say."

Simon groaned. Jack was still a smart-ass.

Jack stood for a moment, staring at his glass, and then continued, "Scratch that. I don't get it with you. Here—in your place— we have, what? Fifteen? Sixteen women? I haven't seen you say anything more than a mousy, 'Hello,' to any of them, even the guys. They're all nice people out there."

"I don't like big groups."

"Of course. Then, tell me: when was the last time you

talked to—no, even thought about talking to someone outside of work? The last time you saw someone interesting, attractive, whatever, and wanted to talk to them."

Simon bit his lip, braced his hands on either side of the sink, and shook his head. He wanted Jack to leave the bathroom immediately. The party outside would continue, inevitably, but he wanted the bathroom empty. He wanted to be alone.

Jack took a step closer, "When, Simon?"

Simon reached for anything he could, any memory he could find to appease Jack, "A woman, Jack. How about that? There's a woman that lives across from me. Attractive. You'd like her. You should go and to talk to her. Go do something."

"A girl, Simon? A girl in this building? And just across the hallway, no less! No, Simon. You should go and talk to her."

Jack continued his rant, but Simon turned the faucet on again and splashed his face. Jack was not going to leave. As the last drips fell off his face, he felt a pull on his right arm, leading him into the living room.

"Simon, this is Kelly. Kelly, this is Simon."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Kelly. Again," Simon said. His head was turned towards a man thumbing the glass of the picture frames on a shelf across the room,

"Are you feeling any better?" Kelly asked. "You sounded pretty bad on the phone."

He looked at Kelly. Jack was right: she was beautiful. He itched his wrist and mumbled, "I'm wonderful."

"Simon here is three sheets to the wind, Kelly," Jack said, "You were never sick, were you Simon? Just playing hooky."

Simon looked at Jack who was smiling broadly at Kelly, both laughing at the lame joke. He took the comment as an insult—hooky was for children. He needed an escape. He needed take a jab and flee, "I just live dangerously, I guess."

He turned quickly and walked through the thin hallway leading to the door of the apartment. As he reached the door, he felt a pull on his arm again.

"Trying to escape?" Jack asked. He was opening a new bottle of wine.

"I'm done, Jack. This is ridiculous. I don't even know how you got in the building. I don't even know how they got in the building."

"Your landlady's great. Told her I needed to cheer up a sick friend. You should really lock this door more often, though."

Simon shook his head. He was hot. A drip of sweat fell from his temple to under his chin. Jack uncorked the bottle, took a heavy gulp and smiled. Simon growled. He wanted to tear away at Jack, throw the bottle and clean the smile off his face.

"I did this for you, Simon. You weren't at work, and God knows you did jack for the whole day. So I thought, 'I'm Simon's friend—which are few and far between, mind you. I should cheer him up with some wine," he took another gulp, "and some good company.' So here I am. Whether you like it or not, I'd say we're friends. As your friend, Simon, I think you need a change of—

A knock.

Simon looked through the peephole on the door and took a jump back, itching his wrist.

"What?" Jack pushed Simon out of the way and looked. He turned his head and smiled at Simon, "It's her. Isn't it Simon? She's gorgeous. Invite her in."

Simon's fingers shook.

"Oh, this wonderful, Simon. This is great!" Simon jumped at Jack, placing his hands over his mouth. Jack's eyebrows went up, and Simon could feel a loud laugh from underneath his fingers.

Another knock.

Still silenced, Jack tilted his head towards the door and winked.

Simon couldn't leave her out there. He took his hands off Jack's mouth and looked again. She seemed annoyed.

"Go, Simon. Now!" Jack whispered.

Simon pushed Jack into the hinges of the door, and opened it quickly, leaving Jack pinned behind it.

"Excuse me, do you have a corkscrew I could borrow?"

Simon heard a laugh from behind the door and quickly turned around. Jack's arms were outstretched from behind the door, dangling a bottle of wine and a corkscrew. Simon grabbed the corkscrew and slapped Jack's hands.

Her head was tilted down.

"Here," Simon said— the only word his mouth would let him speak.

She looked up, grabbed the corkscrew from his hand, said, "Thank you," and quickly turned around.

"I'm having a party at my place," he said as the door across the hallway slammed shut, "if you'd like to come over."

Simon stared at the door for a moment, and then shut his own, releasing Jack.

"Well, that didn't go as expected," Jack said, "No matter! Plenty of other fish, Simon— all swimming in your apartment, no less."

Simon gave a Jack a small smile, which seemed to surprise the both of them. Jack took another gulp and raised the bottle to Simon.

Simon walked through the living room, gave a nod to Kelly and entered the bathroom. He draped his suit coat over the toilet and locked the door. He started the shower, letting the steam fog the mirror. He flipped off the light and lay down in the tub. The party would continue, and Jack would have his fun, but the trickles of water pouring onto his face drowned out the laughs and gasps and the low-level hum. He shut his eyes and waited.

**Apartment 200: Julie**
**Something Familiar**

*Will no one tell me what she sings?—*
*Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow*
*For old, unhappy, far-off things,*
*And battles long ago:*
*Or is it some more humble lay,*
*Familiar matter of today?*
*Some natural sorrow, loss or pain,*
*That has been and may be again?*
William Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper"

His hair felt smooth in between Julie's fingers. It was brown and straight, like hers, only darker. She kept her fingers outstretched like a comb, grabbing a tuft and then letting fall through her fingers back down to his head. Julie hummed a song, nothing in particular, while she combed his head her with fingers. She kept the tune quiet and low, so as not to disturb him. It would have sounded softer if she hadn't been so sick. When the hum went low, to the bottom of her throat, her lungs threw fluid into the sound and she coughed. She yanked back her hand to cover her mouth.

"Ow," he said.

"Sorry about that kid," Julie said, holding a tissue to her mouth.

She was sitting on the couch inside the living room of the apartment. Will sat cross-legged on the floor below her, in front of the TV. The blue fabric of the couch was dotted with crumpled tissues that had accumulated during the course of the cartoon show on TV: a man in a striped red jumpsuit was climbing and searching his way through a cave.

"He's fast. Really strong, too. He's got special powers. Like he can see things before they happen. Bad things. He could

be...a hundred miles away, and still know something bad was gonna happen," Will said, eyes glued to the television.

The superhero had a flashlight, which also red. He was deciding between two tunnels.

"Like he knows Bobby and Mary are somewhere down there. He saw the monster take them."

"Who are Bobby and Mary?" Julie asked. Her voice was low, but squeaked and scratched at the through each word.

"His friends. But they don't have special powers or anything.

The hero put a hand to his head and a cloudy vision of the monster carrying two children into the left tunnel appeared. He smiled and took quickly into the tunnel. He stopped just before a large open cavern, lit by torches, where Bobby and Mary were chained to the walls. The monster, a mix between a werewolf and bear, stood over them, drenching Bobby and Mary in dark, evil drool.

The hero jumped into the room, to the beat of fast music and the cheering of Bobby and Mary. He threw a large boulder at the monster, which missed. Then with a swift kick and then a final uppercut, the monster put up little of a fight and was knocked out. The hero handcuffed him, red handcuffs, and led Bobby and Mary out of the cave.

"Is he a policeman?" Julie asked.

"No. He has special powers."

"Why does he carry handcuffs?"

"So the police can put the monster in jail."

"I didn't know you could put a monster like that in jail."

"They have special jails."

Julie laughed. Then she coughed. Her throat was growing a little sore—not a sharp pain, but more annoying as fluid dumped from her sinuses down the back of her throat. She had called off work early that morning. After how bad she had looked yesterday, her boss told it was better for her to stay home. Will also had the day off: parent-teacher conference day. Julie

had canceled the appointment with Will's teacher as well.

She coughed again, this time more loudly. Grabbing the last tissue out of the box, she shook her head while coughing, annoyed at herself. She patted Will's head, got up from the couch, and walked to the bathroom.

Julie tried taking a drink of water from the sink, but coughed it up. As if her lungs were not enough, each time she coughed, something knocked loose inside a her sinuses. Like a wall, slime came pouring through her nose. Sometimes a cough and then a blow into a tissue. Sometimes a violent sneeze that took more than one. Always a sighed "guh," though," after each cough or sneeze.

After the coughing fit, she looked into the mirror. Bags, big pillows, of fatigue rested under her eyes. She wasn't feverish, but her head felt swollen from the pressure inside her sinuses. Yet, no matter how much she coughed or how much poured out from her nose, the pressure stayed. The slime inside her head rested there, heavy and sick, weighing down her eyes, swelling her skin and making her neck sore from the weight. The morning had been worse, though, like fingers pushing behind her eyes, and a hand pressing her head hard against her pillow. It had taken a hot shower, more than the recommended dosage of sinus medication (the last few caplets she had left), and a yelling kid ready for breakfast to relieve the pain— if not, at least, to take her mind off it. The fingers were gone now, though, and so was the hand. Now, all she had was a swollen, slime filled head.

Julie turned on the red knob of the sink left it running while she grabbed a roll of toilet paper. The steam rose from the sink, fogging the mirror quickly. She sniffled and put her head into the steam. It traveled into her lungs and broke the fluid inside her head. In through her nose and out through her mouth, she breathed. The warm of the steam eased her tight shoulders and took the chill out of her back.

Outside the bathroom and down the hallway, she could hear a ball bouncing on the floor, followed by Will's thumping

feet. The TV show was still going, the ending theme song, and she could hear singing along. She ran the water over a washcloth and pressed it her brow with pressure. As the song ended, she heard a shatter and then a crash, followed by, "Uh oh."

Guh.

Toilet paper in hand, she walked out of the bathroom towards the living room. Will was standing over shards of glass, water, flowers, and a tennis ball. He had his hands shoved into his pant pockets

"You got to be kidding me, Will."

"I'm sorry," he said, head towards the floor.

Julie bent down and cleared the bigger pieces of glass. She unraveled the toilet paper from around her hand and patted up the water. Smaller shards stuck to the bottom of the toilet paper and pricked her hands. It wasn't an old vase (not an heirloom or anything). Something cheap she had bought some time ago when she needed it more— when Will hadn't been born yet. Will stood there waiting. She looked at the small bits of glass that glittered on her skin.

"How'd this happen?"

"I threw the ball, and it bounced too high."

"Why'd you throw the ball?"

"I don't know?"

"You don't know." Julie stood with a sniffle, her arms at her sides.

"It was an accident."

Julie looked back down to the mess. An ache started again and she put her hand to her brow. It traveled, from her brow, throughout her face, making it feel heavy with sick. She squinted.

"You can't throw a ball around in here, Will."

Will stayed silent.

"You know? Answer me."

He looked at the mess on the floor.

The fingers from earlier that morning came backand

pushed behind her eyes. She pushed back, trying to fend off the ache.

"Alright. I don't want to deal with this. No more TV for a while. Go to your room."

Will's head came up. He stared at her. "Why?"

"Because you can't go running around like this."

"No."

"Will—

"This is stupid."

She coughed and pointed her finger towards his room.

"Go, Will."

He trudged off down the hallway and shut his door.

Julie grabbed a broom from the kitchen and sweeped up the remaining mess. Julie walked to the kitchen garbage. It had been nearly six hours since she had taken the sinus medication. As she leaned over the garbage, all the sick and pain in her body swooshed towards her head. It came over her quickly, and when she raised back up, the pressure stayed there— more intense this time, more sharp. The slime had turned into coarse sand, scraping and weighing against the insides of her face.

She heard Will singing from down the hallway. He had the door open, and was yelling,

"O say can you SEE!" It wasn't really singing—a monotone with a loud yell at the end of each phrase. "By the dawn's early LIGHT!"

Guh.

She could feel the yells echo inside her heavy head, and then bounce against her skull. Julie dropped the broom and headed down the hallway. She saw Will's shadow leave the cracked door. She pulled it shut quickly and went across to her room. She lay down, felt her head melt into the pillow and wrapped herself up in a cocoon of blankets. She was cold.

Letting her arm wander down the side of the bed, she grabbed a wet towel she had left on the floor from her morning shower, sneezing loudly into it. The pain went from sharp to

throbbing to dull—a deep ache just behind her eyes. Her eyelids shut and sealed tight under their own weight.

Will was running around inside his room. His feet sent a vibration across the wood floor of the hallway. She turned to her nightstand and looked for medicine. She grabbed the orange box and opened it. She sniffled and then sighed. Julie threw the box onto the floor and let the pain push her head back to the pillow.

She dozed for a while, but would come to when the fingers pushed against her eyes. She hoped for a fever, a more constant pain, not something that came and went when it pleased.

"Will? Come in here a sec."

His door opened and he came quietly into the doorway.

"I need you to do me a favor, kid. I need some medicine. This is big now. I can't get up. My head hurts real bad. Shut off the TV, put on your coat and run down to the market on the corner. You know where it's at. Right by the bus stop."

"You said I had to stay my room."

"No you're OK now. I really really need this."

The sound of her own voice shook the dull pain and rattled it against her closed eyelids.

"There's some money on the kitchen counter. Take that box of medicine down there with you. Ask for that. Anything like it. Then come right back. Right back. Take the keys on the coffee table. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Before she said, "Thanks, kiddo," Will was already out the doorway. She heard his footsteps into the kitchen, a fumbling in the closet, and a close of the apartment door.

He was nine, almost ten. He walked to the bus stop everyday by himself.

He'd be fine, she thought, but he might not know where the store was.

The street could be filled with cars. He wasn't supposed to go into the street when cars were around.

He'd grab the wrong medicine. Or get lost in the store.

No, he'd be fine. He was nine.Ten next month-.

But only nine.

Cough.

Guh.

Behind the ballooning pressure, the storm of thoughts stopped, defeated by the sick and fatigue throughout her body. The soft cotton of the pillow cradled her head. The pressure dulled back to an aching pain. When the rain started, the wind threw it against her window in waves. The repetitive sound pulled her thoughts away from Will and her head. She fell asleep.

And then woke up violently to a loud buzzing sound. She stared at the alarm clock, disoriented, her eyes dry from sleep and sickness. Thirty minutes, she thought. Half an hour since Will had left her room. She coughed wildly. The pressure in her head was still there, but it had moved farther back. An adrenaline rush of worry set through her, pushing the pain and pressure and sickness to places deep where it would not stop her from getting out of bed.

The wind blew a sheet of rain against her window: Will was outside in the rain. The drugstore was no more than a five-minute walk out the door. She broke out of bed and searched the apartment, yelling his name.

Just a boy and only nine.

The keys were still on the coffee table.

She grabbed a coat, wrapped it around her pajamas and ran out of the apartment. The hallway was quiet. She ran down the stairs to the lobby of the building. It was dim and a cold came up from the tiled floor, biting her toes and the balls of her feet through her flimsy flip-flops. Julie rushed out the door and looked all over the street: no cars and no accidents, but no Will locked outside building.

In pajama pants, flip-flops, and a large overcoat, Julie ran as fast she could, coughing and sniffling, towards to the corner

of the block. She had to stop often to a full halt, as her lungs grew sharp and her side ached. Her hair went stringy and wet quickly as the rain beat against her face. When she reached the corner of the block, she flew into the store wheezing, her flannel pants dripping at the ends.

A small man behind the counter cringed his eyebrows, "Can I help you, Miss?"

"My son," she said, mottled by short coughs from behind her fist. "My son came in here. Did he come in here?"

"Well—"

"He's young. Real young. He was supposed to buy some sinus medication."

"Yeah, he was here just a short while ago. I had a little talk with him."

Julie stared at him. This man was to blame somehow. Will was lost.

"He said he needed some medicine for his Mom."

"I'm his mother. Where is he?"

"Well, he showed me a box of medicine and we don't carry anything like that kind."

She stared at him. This man was to blame somehow"Where'd he go?" Her heavy eyes were fuming with impatience.

"I tried giving him some aspirin—

"WHERE?"

"He told me it wasn't in an orange box and then bolted out the door."

Julie turned before the man finished. She wrapped the overcoat around her mouth and ran back to the apartment. The rain felt harder during the second sprint. It slapped against her forehead and seeped inside her skull. She slowed to a walk in front of the apartment building, wheezing again, as a man in a dark overcoat closed the front door of the apartment building behind him.

It was getting darker out and almost an hour had passed

since Will left her bedroom.

She stood just underneath the doorframe of the apartment building. The rain stayed out of her face, but came down off the edge of the frame and hit her exposed toes, sending chills through her calves. She looked over the whole of the block. She imagined Will lost, somewhere, having made a wrong turn. Horrible images of him hunkered under an awning of a strange building entered her mind and she began to cry— a quiet sobbing both soft and crackled by her tired lungs. Her tears burned her cold skin and itched against her dry nose. The adrenaline faded and her heavy head sunk low into the overcoat. She curled her toes and turned to open the door of the building.

Why had she scolded him before? She looked at her hand, and there were still small red splotches where the glass had pricked her hands. Now he was gone. She had yelled at him. She had fallen asleep and now he was lost, or worse. With her guilt, her head began to throb, a deep pain that made her tears come quicker.

The man who had just entered was standing next to the door, brushing his drenched coat with his hands. He continued drying out, as Julie turned back to the glass door, rubbing her eyes, hoping to see him. She began to hum in a low sobbing tone that was both tired and sad.

"Can I help you with something, Miss?" asked the old man, still wringing his hands and brushing his coat.

She rubbed her eyes and cheeks, sniffled, and shook her head.

Just as the man began to walk away, she heard a yell— muffled by distance, but a yell:

"FREE!"

She coughed.

Julie bolted past the man and up the stairs. As she reached her level, she saw Will knocking on the door to their apartment, singing.

"And the home of the BRAVE!"

She grabbed him by his rain slick coat and pulled him into hers. She touched the back of his head and stroked his wet hair.

She felt him wiggle an arm loose. He pulled an orange box of sinus medication out of his pocket and held it in the air, his face still buried in her coat.

"The corner store didn't have any," he said, his voice muffled by the wet overcoat. "I found some at a different store."

She closed her eyes and felt the weight of her body against his small frame. Whether from sickness, joy, or both, she sniffled. Her head bowed to the top of his and kissed it forcibly. Her voice came out scratchy and tired, but quiet, "You forgot your keys, kid."

"I rang the buzzer before I went to the other store, but you didn't answer."

Next month, Will would be ten.

**Apartment 204: Mr. Sanders**
**St. John's Willow**

*Dew drops are the gems of morning,*
*But the tears of mournful eve!*
*Where no hope is, life's a warning*
*That only serves to make us grieve,*
*When we are old—*
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Youth and Age"

Mr. Sanders' joints were stiff. While rising out of bed all sorts of little sounds, little but painful, came from his body. His limbs opened up from his bed like a creaking door, tearing and pulling at the hinges. They shook horribly, and it wasn't until after a morning shower that he felt looser, with less snaps and cracks coming from somewhere inside. The white hairs covering his brow went easy in the steam of the shower, no longer cringing towards his nose in pain.

The bookshelf next to the bay window of the living room was filled with thirty-four pictures from St. John's Elementary, each in a standard frame: "We Love You," written at the top next to an apple, with "Mr. Sanders" filled in with crayon. Drinking a cup of coffee (the heat of it cutting the rasp out of his morning voice), he bent to the third shelf— the 1970s. His eyes always traveled first to the boy or girl holding a chalkboard with the year printed on it. He found 1977, and Peter Fransen, a chubby kid with grey cheeks that would be pink in a color photograph.

Mr. Sanders couldn't remember the slightest thing about Peter. For the other children, he could remember exact instances of good grades and scoldings. He glanced around the same shelf: Lucy Williams, 1972, had impeccable cursive for her age; Sam Jones, 1973, sat in the corner for two weeks after punching Jennifer Fitz's left eye, which looked as swollen as a black egg in the same photo; Ramon Gullon, whose assigned seat left him

between two girls, yelled in disgust when they kissed him during spelling class. Peter, though, with a chubby face and grey cheeks, was there in 1977, and that was all. Mr. Sanders tilted back from the shelf, disappointed in himself for not knowing Peter anymore. He grabbed his coat and hurried towards the door.

The other apartments were quiet and locked up for the workday. The stairs at the end of the hallway weren't necessarily steep, but always left him tired to the last step. He stopped in the lobby to pick up a newspaper and check the weather. Cool air was coming from the front door of the building, and he shrugged when the afternoon forecast called for rain. He had forgotten his umbrella and decided to risk it, rather than tackling the stairs again.

The air was brisk and traveled quickly into Mr. Sanders' chest as he opened the door to the building. The sidewalk trees looked thinner in the cold air, shivering in the wind and barely holding onto the last of their brown and yellow leaves. The streets were usually bare on late-morning weekdays, and with the rush of the commute over, the neighborhood went quiet. Mr. Sanders walked for six blocks from the door. His walk was slow and drooping, and each step sent his torso from side to side. Passing under the train tracks and down the hill, he stayed just close enough to the buildings' walls, letting his right shoulder brush against the brick and concrete. From the bottom of the hill, he could hear the children from the school's playground.

The school was plain. It backed up to St. John's Church, which wasn't anything extravagant— nothing more than a triangular roof with a steeple, and a normal brick façade that rose up from the sidewalk. The playground, though, was St. John's pride and joy. In the mid-seventies, Mr. Sanders gathered up a few of the faculty and took to turning the asphalt slab behind the school into a recess utopia. Juniper bushes and small spruces lined the fence that circled a set of swing sets and climbing structures. At the very center, Mr. Sanders had planted a willow tree,

which now stood as tall as the school's third story. Basketball hoops were at the far end, but other than the older kids, children stayed near the swing sets and trees, some playing hopscotch and jumping rope underneath the willow.

During his tenure at St. John's, Mr. Sanders had looked to the willow, saw how it had grown, and watched the children play amongst the developing tree. When he had purchased the young willow, it had already grown out of its sapling years, creating a climbable ladder for the children. A brave few attempted to climb the rungs of the trunk's boughs. Their flexible and wicker arms let them ascend to the highest places, where the branches turned to tendrils falling back down towards the playground. He had whispered, "Well done," when they jumped from the lowest branch, letting their feet hit the safety of the ground.

Some boys, though, climbed too high, where a green branch snapped, leaving an arm broken, a neck sore, and an even sorer parent. A chicken wire fence was constructed to keep children from climbing on the low-level boughs. Slowly, but noticeably, towards the end of his career, the branches had grown with the trunk of the tree. They raised the long ropes of leaves high above the swing sets, and let them drop under their own weight, leaving them at the mercy of the wind. The fence was removed, only until recently— the willow's lowest branch had grown taller than even the middle-schoolers and their basketball hoops.

Across the street from the playground, Mr. Sanders sat at a bus stop bench and ate the pastrami sandwich he had bought on the previous block. The kids were especially loud that day, their shouts and screams cutting through the cold air. The noises that came from the playground shifted in volume with the wind that was beginning to pick up. The willow silenced the shouts when the wind blew through its leaves, shifting and swaying at the top. A young boy wearing a bright orange hat yelled at a girl for, apparently, taking his ball. The girl's retort went muffled under the rush of the willow's branches as a gust

went across the playground. She turned with her tongue pointed from her mouth, and strutted nose-up to the swings.

Only a few children ever noticed Mr. Sanders. He waved to a group of girls that stared and whispered to each other. He glanced at their teacher, Mrs. Gardener, who was standing away from the children by the door of the school, who had also taken a dislike, as of lately, to his bus stop stoop during their recess.

Traci Gardener had held the chalkboard in the class photo of 1983. He had written on her report card, "Strong reading skills with lengthy book reports. Although, much of her writing relies on compliments (focused exclusively towards myself) rather than actual report. Her voluntarily sparse interaction with other children may hamper her otherwise amiable demeanor." Mr. Sanders regretted such a vague— yet harsh— critique of the child's developing personality. She had been a good student, remarkably good, but her propensity for "brown-nosing" the teacher left her alone on the playground, away from the willow, on the farthest swing of the farthest swing set. Traci Gardener, though, had become a teacher, taking over the second grade in his absence.

He wrapped the remains of his sandwich and placed it into his pocket. The clouds were coming fast, and the willow's branches blew wildly as the sky went overcast. When he looked back to the children, he noticed Mrs. Gardener leaving the gate of the fence. She called to him with a motion of her hand, as if motioning a child to her desk, her other hand carrying a small umbrella. Mr. Sanders slowly made his way across the street. She was biting her bottom lip, as if holding something inside her mouth. Her eyes, grey, squinted and focused at him, "David, you can't keep doing this."

"I remember when I was Mr. Sanders, Traci."

"David, some mothers here at school. They've seen you. I mean, they don't know you, but they get scared with you out here all the time," she said, her face still cringed with a finger pointing at his chest, scolding him.

"That swing over there, I believe, Traci," he said, pointing, "You remember, I'm sure. That was your swing."

"Please, David. Just go home for now."

"Mrs. Gardener, you're a wonderful teacher. But this bus bench suits me just fine. You and I both know that a very old man on a bench, enjoying a sandwich," he said while patting the lump in his pocket, "isn't a threat to your kids."

Her face went loose for a moment, and when a small raindrop hit her outstretched finger, she pulled it back to raise her umbrella. A gust of wind brought the rain with it, along with a sudden cool air that blew across the sidewalk.

Mrs. Gardener gathered herself and resumed her reprimand. Underneath the umbrella, her finger came up again, pointing rhythmically to every word. Mr. Sanders brought the lapels of the wool coat around his neck. Large drops came down from the grey skies, each one feeling colder than the last, leaving his hair wet in just a few seconds. He pulled his eyes away from her finger, and looked to the willow. Her words, "unwelcome, old, creepy," were drowned out beneath the willow's long branches and the children's yells. Without their teacher most ran underneath the tree, where the pebble-covered ground was still dry. A brave few, including the boy with the orange hat, danced about the playground letting the cool drops smack their faces and open mouths. The girls who had whispered at the fence stood by the door, waiting for their teacher in the rain.

She ended her rant with a heavy breath and a bold poke of the finger to his chest. Mr. Sanders smiled, and looked down at the chest that sunk under the slouch of his shoulders, beaten down by the rain. She pulled back her finger cautiously, as Mr. Sanders looked up from his chest, directly to her face, and then to her umbrella.

"Your kids, Traci, do not have umbrellas," Mr. Sanders said, still smiling.

She glanced quickly to the playground, and saw the children huddled underneath the willow, staring at her. Her finger

dropped, and she looked up to him at a loss for words. He smiled at her and pointed his finger towards the door of the school.

"Thank you," with a roll of her eyes, "Mr. Sanders."

A six-block walk home in a cold rain was not what he had thought of as "risking it." The wool coat went damp to the lining, and the sandwich inside his pocket melted leaving wet paper full of mashed bread pulp and slimy pastrami.

By the time he arrived at his block, the wet cold had traveled deep into his joints. His knees cracked up the stairs of the building. His face, with drops falling off the tip of his nose, was tilted downwards and concerned with each step. Next to the steps, a boy, about nine years old, was breaking the streams of water running down the sides of the street with his foot. The water parted at the toe of his shoe, staying below the leather of the sneaker. Mr. Sanders stopped in the middle of the steps and gave the boy a smile, who continued with his game.

"It's cold out here. You should run inside."

"I'm fine," the boy said, with no acknowledgement.

"I'm sure you are," Mr. Sanders said.
"My mom'll be down soon."

The boys coat was shiny in the rain, with water beading off at the bottom. Mr. Sanders brushed the sides of his coat with his hands that looked like raisins from the water. Deep inside the waterlogged wool was a set of keys. He continued to watch the boy as his hands went searching amidst loose change and deli meat.

The boy looked up, "Your coat's all wet."

"Yes. Thank you, I know. No matter, it's an old coat."

"My coat's waterproof," he said, raising his arms in the air, the rain still pouring down on them.

"I see that. It's a wonderful coat, but your foot is going to get all wet."

"It already is. Oh well."

Mr. Sanders still couldn't find his keys.

"What are you looking for?"

"I seem to have lost my keys. It's quite cold, and I'm all wet," Mr. Sanders said while looking down to his pockets, now annoyed by not finding them.

The boy turned and faced Mr. Sanders. He took back his sneaker and kicked the stream of water, sending a splash towards Mr. Sanders' shoes. The action took Mr. Sanders by surprise and as he took a step backward, his heels slipped on the concrete. His legs went out from under him and his arms into the air. When he landed, he didn't move. Something was broken, he thought. Something had to be broken. He had heard no cracks and felt no pain, but his bones were too brittle to take such a fall.

"Are you OK?" the boy asked, standing over Mr. Sanders on the stairs. Beads of water dropped of the boy's coat onto Mr. Sanders' head.

Mr. Sanders started to wiggle his toes and then his fingers. Nothing yet. His arms felt OK— the shoulders and elbows moved well. The legs, though, he thought, surely the legs. Ankles and knees creaked a little, but that was normal. He braced himself when he moved to sit up, thinking his hip was the only obvious spot left. His hands palmed the concrete and lifted his torso against the step behind him. He felt nothing but a sharp poke on his left thigh. He put his hand to his pant pocket and pulled out the set of keys

He raised his head back to the boy and gave him the keys, "Open that door, could you?"

The boy nodded and after unlocking the door, led Mr. Sanders by the hand into the building.

"Thank you," Mr. Sanders said, before the boy took off up the stairs of the apartment building.

After brushing out his coat, he slowly took the stairs to his floor and shivered as he entered his apartment. He threw the coat on the radiator along the bay window, passing the picture shelf, and headed to the shower.

Mr. Sanders let the warmth of the steam ease the pain in his back. The fall had left no breaks, but many bruises. The cold was rushed from his bones by the hot water, and through the mask of steam, Mr. Sanders remembered taking Peter Fransen, class of 1977, to the nurse's office after having slipped off the willow.

*Reflection 2*
Holly Andersen

## Professor's Corner: John Ruff

*The Stories We Tell*

Through his poetry, John Ruff is a storyteller. His stories are composed of ordinary things—those things that are often overlooked or brushed past without much notice—but with his gentle and intelligent voice, Ruff recreates the ordinary, finding within it the importance and truth present in all things. For Ruff, stories never claim to be the truth, but they are those things that point at the truth and dramatize what it means to be human. The greatest stories animate cultures and convey the morals and ethics by which we live. To tell stories then is to participate in a tradition of shaping and creating.

If you ask him about the importance of poetry, he'll tell you a story about when his wife was in grade school. A nun who taught her literature class explained that the boys ought to memorize poetry so that when they're in a foxhole they have something to recite and keep their minds busy. Ruff likes to think that we read poetry well in order that we might keep us all from the foxholes.

Part of reading poetry well requires good poetry to read. John Ruff gives us three poems of simple, ordinary things, rich in narrative and in music and painted with a frankness for the truth of his subjects.

-Benjamin Mueller
Editor

## The Man Who Writes Stories For Children

Begins with the woods and a path
into the woods. That's how it begins,
with a sky beyond the fringed treetops

full of clouds, full of faces, darkening.
Then the rasp of crickets and moonlight
filters down upon the path.

The man takes a child by the hand
and says, "Let's go." "It's dark,"
says the child and the man squeezes

the child's hand and says, "Let's go."
Now there is a brook the path
follows into the woods, darkness

and rumor rustling in the leaves.
"I'm over here," says the brook
to the wandering path; "I'm over here,"

says the path, a twig snapping. Then
a footbridge, and the hollow wooden
echo of their footsteps. "Back this way,"

says the echo, "let's go home." "No,
this way," says the brook, "it's this way,"
and the moon throws down its loose change

on the water, and stars flare and die
in the eyes in the bushes. "Where are we
going?" asks the child, whose hand

begins to sweat in the hand of the man
who tells stories to children.
"Into the woods," says the man

whose voice becomes their breathing,
their heartbeat, their footsteps down
the path. Deep in the man's throat

a wolf begins to howl and the child asks
"What's that?" "The beginning of a story
about love," the man answers, "or maybe

the end. Maybe it's about hunger, maybe
loneliness. We can follow the path, watch
for where it forks, listen for voices

that call and that answer." Then silence
brings them to a clearing, and the child
asks, "which way?" "That way is home,"

says the man who tells stories to children.
"And that way?" asks the child. "Who knows,"
says he man. "Let's go that way" says the child,

"you can take me by the hand."

## "Now My Next Poem Is About Lake Effect Snow"

*For Mark Conway*

Every winter they have the storm of the century
in Buffalo.

Buffalo is like a pilgrim site for snow. Buffalo is
like Capistrano

for blizzards. Think of the word "snowbank." Now
think of Buffalo

as the Federal Reserve. Think of Lake Erie as
your mother-in-law

and know how Buffalo feels every winter during
the holidays.

Meteorologists call it "lake effect snow." Imagine
having as little

imagination as that, watching as that swirling forms
into a fist

out over the lake. Why not just say Buffalo has been
asking for it,

why not just say Buffalo has it coming? Why not
think of it

as arriving like God's love, super-abundant, borne
by angels,

and way beyond deserving.

## On a January Morning in Indiana

As a boy you feared you would never live
Long enough to get to ride your bicycle
To school. So the next thing you know

Spelling class is over and you're married,
You've got kids in college and a 401 K,
You wake up one morning and you're fifty.

It's the middle of winter, it's a quarter of eight
And you're pedaling down Beech St. for all
You're worth, you're late for a meeting

With the Curriculum Committee, you can
Hardly see the road through your tears
From the cold as you rehearse in your head

That new proposal. You'll take no prisoners
You tell yourself as you run another stop sign
On Garfield—one of these days they're going to

Stop you, you just know it.

## Contributor's Notes

**Holly Andersen**, a Sophomore Theology and YFEM student from California. "Reflection 2" is a black and white photograph taken of the roof outside her dorm room window. It is the collected water from the fall rains on the roof which is reflecting the cloudy sky.

**Ralph Asher** is a junior physics major who hopes to graduate next year. His work is occasionally posted on his Valpo student website.

**Jonathan Boggs**
These three poems, *Hajj*, "She never thought of it as dying," and Occupation, are part of a collection of poems that is still in progress. The collection is currently titled *A Story, Iraq*. The "story" that I am telling is a fictionalized account of a real event in which a young Iraqi girl named Iman Mutlak strapped explosives to her chest, committing suicide in an attempt to terminate some occupying American troops. As with any newspaper article, Iman's story lacked any significant depth or background material. These poems are my attempt not only to fill in the gaps of the narrative for myself, but also to present a portrait of war in all its ambiguity. I tried to present a world in which there is no clear bad guy—no one to demonize, no one to glorify. Insofar as these poems are supposed to reflect reality, they were created to frustrate. Enjoy!

**Stephanie Horn**
I am a freshman at VU who is majoring in German and hoping to be admitted to the secondary education program sometime in the near future. I hail from Sheboygan, Wisconsin. My pastimes include reading, writing, singing Stevie Nicks songs very loudly in my dorm room, and naming my plants.

**Rachel Liptak** once drove a friend's truck while wearing a John Deere hat and singing along to her favorite Joe Diffie song. She is grateful for her time at Valparaiso and for getting these four more years of brown and gold.

**Chad McKenna**
Apparently I enjoy writing poetry, though usually I do it for the sake of song-writing. I feel art should be used to make a positive impact on the world. Oh, and I'm a Theater Major and an expert in swashbuckling in case you were wondering.

**Kathleen North** is a sophomore art major from Vermont with a minor in communications and an interest in photography.

**Lauren Schreiber** thinks that America's machinery has gone too far. She was spawned from the sonambulist landscape of the heartland to liberate the hearts and minds of her fellow people. If you would like to give Lauren a job in the future so she can afford health care, contact her.

# the Lighter

**Spring 2005**