Spring 1999

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Valparaiso University

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the lighter
valparaiso university's literary magazine

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Volume XLI Issue II
All selections remain anonymous throughout the selection process. *The Lighter* welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation.

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*The Lighter* staff would like to thank our advisor, John Ruff, for his guidance, and the Committee on Media for their support. Also, special thanks to Mary and Otto for their wonderful proof reading skills. Most of all thanks to all the students who graciously submitted their work this semester.
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Winged Angel

Sarah Blum
Plastic and Blue (A Circled Diary)  Josh Honn

Ledger: Life

Our plastic lives
wrapped up, wrapped up
the eyes we use look backwards and through
they never look upwards at you.

Ledger: Dreams

Our golden dreams
trapped in, trapped in
we see things unexplained and blue
they never point us to you.

Experience:

"It's all lies," she said. "It's all pictures in your head."

Ledger: Church

My blessed day
plastered to, plastered to
my keys unlock world; alone and two
all this time looking for you.

Ledger: Life (after remembrance of)

My treasured life
bottled up, bottled up
I've spent too many days starting anew
forgetting I'm plastic and blue.

Experience:

"It's all lies," she said. "It's all pictures in your head."
Ledger becomes Experience (a retort through life):

“My pictures of holiness, dear. My pictures of holiness, indeed.”
Candles lit.
Illuminate,
Name Maria.
Cigarette heart.
My paragua.
Wash away,
Skeleton past.
Black magic in the heart of May.
Postmark.
I marked me for death.
Escape,
Maria’s heart.
Candle smoke,
ever present.
Postmark.
Candle’s out.
A grave return.
My skeleton heart.
I.

Candle sun background, wooden frame horizon
The curtains mesh with windowpane plainness
And she said ‘it’s painless, at first’
Eyes guiding bricked house hometown lies
Before there was anything we were nothing
Before there was anything we were nothing

II.

Blind book readings, air in whistled words
him and her reiterated history in tomes
Did this to that and that to time
And in the candled dead doll room stood the fight of a million soldiers
All marching in lines so long
All waiting for a chance to call
All waiting for an eye-gazed heart
The ones not old enough walk around the circled square
And the ones not big enough grasp for air.

III.

On the horizon men fight wars of wisdom
Where I stand now we fight for nothing
Before there was anything we were nothing

IV.

Walls cover the candlelight, hide the flames so soft
The flames we recover to scar our hands
Again, and again.
V.

The air grows thin as we rise higher above holiness
Teaching things we know nothing about
Guessing, crying, laughing, all in the name of understanding
Soldiers know reality
Soldiers know where we've all been

VI.

In the candle sun background, there stands nothing in the fore
The soldiers fight lays outside wooden frame
And we whisper amen, as our palms continue to burn
Forty-five long nights with sweat drenched sleep.
I hide my comfort under the bed, so when I wake up tomorrow I will wake up with a smile.
Permanent indentations, indent mattresses like stepping on grass.
Bendable and flexible I try to cope with the little breaks.

I can’t believe you want me to shout that out.
If it’s true then I’m gone,
If it’s true then I’m gone.

When everyone comes together it is so cold.
Our backs creak with the sound of an old man, early in the morning.
Gasping for air, gasping through his plastic exoskeleton.
Trying and melting, I try to forget that he is even real.

You really want me to repeat that line?
If it’s true then I’m gone,
If it’s true then I’m gone.

I can’t escape that noise in my head. My ear the door, but never even open. How do I shut my mind up?

The smell of a temple permeates the homeless.
Making a blanket out of bread, I’d rather freeze under the moon.
Clenching my fist, clenching it so tight I warm another.
Clenching and clenching until I forget what I am holding onto.

Say it to me and I will shout it into the night.
If it’s true you’re wrong.
If you’re wrong, I’m gone.
I.
"Why he sleep down there?"
the girl in the pink patent leather shoes murmurs
watching the box housing the stilled body
fill the furrow plowed into the ground.
The earth swallows the shiny maroon box
shovel-ful by shovel-ful,
with an appetite for endings.
"Because" the man hesitates,
"it is planting season..."

II.
Long ago, a man died
for the first time anyone could remember.
His rising chest consented to falling
as he paused
in the middle of a thought.
Villagers crept around the still man
afraid to touch his paling skin,
unsure when he would awake.
At night, a watchman stared
hard into the sinking eyes
of the body on the splintered platform
ready to howl at the shiver of an eyelash.
His screams raced across the grassy hillside
as twilight moved the shadow
but not the eye.
Dawn crawled up the horizon
and retreated in red-faced embarrassment
as each new morning found the body still
motionless.

III.
A call for a meeting pummeled the hillside
and fearful villagers gathered,
their eyes pacing across the still body.
Questions danced on the horizon:
"what will we do with the man who will not arise?"

A fisherman, the skin on his face darkened and divided into scales of browned flesh, spoke in a fluid breath that left him gasping.
"I have often seen the tide vomit a sleeping fish and toss it again and again in waving solitude."
But, the gathered ones imagined sublime waves twisting and crashing into fragile flesh ever adrift and farther away.

A hunter, his eyes fixed on sagging flesh spoke in halting sputters.
"Sleep is for the weak ones who cannot survive the night. Any flesh will fill your belly."
But, the gathered ones savored the day's kill seared fast in the flames of the evening cookfire.
They imagined roasting embers browning the pallid skin, never cool as the flesh burned their tongues.

A farmer with dirt buried in his weathered wrinkles, spoke in dark tones.
"Many a seed slumbers until I plant it in the ground and the summer sun conceives a sprout birthed from the tiny seed."
The gathered ones nodded in assent.
Surely, planting the body would wake the slumbering man to burst forth in resurrection.

IV.
They dug a furrow with spades plunging into the quaking earth.
Manure fertilized the rotting flesh
to encourage a healthy sprout.
All who gathered that afternoon
stood still and motionless
as the body crashed into the dirt
to sleep and germinate.

V.
Spring’s fierce rains provided the water,
and the sun of the afternoon
basted the ground in warmth.
A guard stared hard
into the plot of land,
ready to howl at any sign
of the human sprout stretching his legs
and breaking forth from the bedrock.
When spring’s grass sifted through the dirt,
the villagers prayed to the God-that-Causes-to-Be
for a similar shoot of life
from the earth that swallowed their dead.

They waited and waited,
imagining the body germinating
through the spring, and through the summer
and through the death of the forest leaves:
yet, nothing.
Baskets filled with the platinum fruits
and the sun burned its autumnal streak across the sky
but the grave never sprouted.

VI.
The watchman returned to his usual duties,
now neglected and brambled.
The grave was no longer visited in expectation.
But, the farmer planted his seeds each following spring,
still sure the human sprout would dance someday.
Someone else died not long after,
and the farmer told the gathered villagers
that often you plant three times as many seeds
as plants that you expect.
They tried to plant a still body again
and again. And again,
the ground was firm and hard packed
above more lifeless bodies.

VII.
"... and still we try" the man says
"wondering if our dead will sprout someday
in a plant of human flesh."

The girl peers into the filled hole,
watching her shadow move across the earthen mound,
and wonders if another life would
breathe in that dark box someday.
And she creeps up onto the mound
directly above the slumbering body.
Her feet dip into the earth as she kneels,
pink patent leather shoes
plant in the newly packed dirt.
She waits, breathing shallowly
through the evening hours.

VIII.
Morning, finding the girl with dreams
still floating behind her eyes,
prods her with shards of sunlight.
The girl rises from the earthen mound and leaves,
dirt still crusted on her pink patent leather shoes.
Epitaph for a loved one  
Rebecca Schmidt

Cry for me when I am dead—
Drop a scarlet rose upon my tomb,
so I am not forgotten too soon—
And if by chance I still dance on in your brain
then my blood shall not have run in vain.
Places of worship dangle as decomposing carcasses, freshly gutted of their faithful followers.

Hypnotic incense draws camera-clicking tourists, who pay a couple quid to pass through the immortal cross-wrought iron bars, to witness smashing stained glass shards—jigsawed in pictures of paradise, eluding prying photographic lenses.

(just as morning mist escapes the clutches of an algae infested pond)

The cumbersome air outside suffocates the limp specter of a man hung inside Salvation Army scraps. Naked feet stab from greasy trousers, blackened by hordes of polluted autos caught in twisting networks of pavement.

Herded under those avenues of mile-high piled dismal abodes, cud-
smacking cattle find solace for their souls within pitch chutes as their lucid vision plods toward auction.
The screeching horn of your dusty
blue rusted Chevy Blazer
rips through this sultry
Saturday, demanding my startled
look. 'Damn you,' I seethe
as I catch your perverted
gaze raping me-
But I must have asked for it.
After all, my breasts weren't covered
with a loose shirt—just a comfy cotton
purple-striped sport bra—
and little black nylon shorts
did just barely graze my thighs.

(ideal clothes for a run
on a sweltering Indiana afternoon,
but practicality couldn't possibly
make sense to you)

Instead you caught
my concealing hair pulled
into a careless cheerleader
ponytail. You tasted the hard-
saline sweat dripping down my naked
face. As every degrading desire
seeped from your cold
cobalt eyes, could I
do anything but cower,
like a cornered rat
receiving an electric shock?

The rev of an engine and screaming
sticky tires shot
loose gravel upon my exhausted
body. You were a meaningless
speck on the horizon, but your dust
stuck in my dry mouth and burned my scarlet-threaded eyes. I picked up the pace to exercise the demons...

I still have a long way to go and so do you.
Harmonious morning sunshine dwells
in hilly bales and lakeshore swells,

I cast my line into their midst
while praising days beginning mist.

Patient waiting, pleasures call
to vigilant fisherman before the fall.

Some would say the practice fails
to cause beguiling fish to flail

upon their filament, but this fine day
of trail in waves to praise the peaceful way

of tradition centuries old, one man must
defy the cold to fish, provide, return to dust

before his maker calls—for father too
embraced the art to fish amongst the morning dew.

From suns fair rising to early evening set
the ancient art is practiced well, whether line or net.

The fisher feeds his family nest
from natures bounty, his art knows best.

When sunset comes from tiresome day
across its long descent, the fishers toil has paid his way

and homeward bound his feet do tread
with string of silver fish, now grown heavy on his thread.
For Susannah and the Elders,  
The Romanian National Museum of Art.

Late afternoon, the yellow sun sinks,  
turning red the scene, like the redness  
rising in flushed cheeks. Warmed spring  
water flows through reed rocked rushes  
and cleanses pure flesh.

Pouring through white fingers,  
she washes worries away,  
carried down clear water streams.  
Gangly men gawk at her languid  
form bathing in cool water spring,

seeing her white wash  
in that cool water blue.  
Pulling the reeds back, they feel  
the strain growing deep within  
their elders' bony robe-flesh.

One leg extends from the water's  
mirrored finish, glowing hues divine,  
reflected in the elders' reddened eyes.  
They stare from their clandestine viewing  
perch. She knows only her happiness.  
Splashing in her nature's bath,

her skin exudes innocence.  
Leaving the cool fountain bath,  
she suspects she may be watched  
and hides her whiteness with a robe  
flowing to ankle length.

Captivated would-be captors  
reveal themselves to the girl  
and her suspicion culminates in a gasp.
Two elders and an innocent framed by endless sky. They proposition her with pock-marked flesh and a grasp that does not lessen.

To allow these two
to abash her purity, or refuse and tread upon her name;
  it penetrates her mind.

There is no decision, long fingers vanquish hope for escape. Ribs protrude, loosely hung beneath the elders' vulgar loosening cape.

Across the long green meadow the last sun-red rays turn to purple as its candle flame is quenched. Cool water turns cold as the fresh water runs red.

Sky's last image of speckled white disappears as swans beat overhead, while all that is heard is a single broken sob, and silence.
She frees the notes to fill her need
and shapes them fast to form a whole
They grow in me like writhing seeds
She harvests songs to fill my soul
The world has found an empty life
Because her muse won’t fit the mold
She is the black piano’s wife
And when she stands, the keys grow cold
She is poet and siren and faerie queen
And even the dead can hear her call
Through all the years, each day I’ve seen,
She’s found a way to sing them all
The color of fire with the cool of a pearl,
She’ll never become a cornflake girl

Myra Ellen  Jennifer Fett
This stream
of consciousness?
Has swelled into a deluge—
A flood filled with
swimming thoughts that swallow
all who dare to dive in. One by one,
they are brought to the bottom of the basin
sinking in the bogwater with the weight of my world.
But the current carries me swiftly still
splashing and fishing and
thrashing and wishing
I could somehow solidify
the rapids
or find
a branch
strong enough
to grasp.
Highway Reflections  Jennifer Fett

This day is intention—
not coincidence; creation.
Clouds, grey and fading, know
they cannot compete with the burning aura.
Still, they push to glow most intensely
just before the flicker
and fade
of winter’s sleep.
A spectrum from a celestial palate
fills me with delicious
burnt sienna blends and aubergine
that share the sky with prickly jade.
An ebony angel caws as it flees the scene—
trying to fly farther and faster than October.
I drink this Midwestern Eden like an aphrodisiac
taken to ensure peaceful sleep
until Spring frees me,
once again rising like the phoenix
to wake the world.
'have a coke and a smile, dammit. no. 3'

Wendy Barker
Fairy leaps across the wooden floor
One leg in front, bent slightly at the knee
One extended back,
Toes pointed,
Head up,
Eyes up
One by one
Me first!
Me first!

*Let the others have their chance*

You live in the spotlights
With all the attention
All the love
All the fame
All the roses thrown on the stage expressly for you

Leaping
You think you have wings until the floor jumps
And you fall
A slip up, the ultimate failure in front of a class full of eyes
The fame flies away like the bird you tried to be

Pink leg warmers, not for you,
Instead cream-colored with rainbowed words
The words on the one did not match the other
right-right-right-right-right
That one was supposed to go on your right leg
left-left-left-left-left

Struggling with directions
Turning circles around the barred room.
In a leotard and tights,
Confounded to a world of elastic
And pulled back hair
Discipline
I'll give you stickers if you be good now, you hear?

Threatened to behave
Still got the sticker though
You were was her favorite
Always was
Always have been
It's lonely at the top

When you're five.
as they were led between walls of water, 
so i am led.
following a man inspired, 
treaded and grumbled along the path, 
distrust in their creator, 
in their leader, 
in themselves. 
a wilderness, worn down world 
had overcome them.
has overcome me. 
between a pair of unleashed forces 
i wonder. 
i wander. 
knowing not which way to swim 
who to trust 
where to go.

grumbling, mumbling, stumbling each day 
filling the air with disgust. depression 
waves in my stomach twisting into knots, 
knots so tight that 
butterflies fluttering must 
cease their muttering 
when memory returns to tell me 
i am led.

by something. 
by someone. 
forty days turn into forty months into forty years 
and before the realization sets in, 
i have conquered 
the trial 
the tribulation.

wandering 
 Wondering 
through a sea of reeds
wishing, hoping, dreaming, praying.
in this place so present
almost past
praying to find
to inhabit a
promised land.
ripped

kelly k faustich

all alone in her corner
the rain from inside falls
she is
dancing in circles

a woman coughs, no hacks, in the next room
the man watches videos of john wayne in the living room
no yelling on the screen like in the background of our life
far away an old woman named "little bit" cries
without home or food
distant and so close
to the dancing heart

but she,
she dances to a meaningless tune
the deep golden tears stream down her cheeks
to the soft landing of a worn beige carpet

flopping down
the burgundy quilt her cushion,
a sigh escapes her exhausted body
a sigh softer than a thunder that has pushed her
into acting, a mask more beautiful than her own

if the walls were a vivid yellow,
maybe she'd understand,
but her madness is one of warmth
of deep green curtains
warm blue picture frames
a burnt orange pulse

dolls and animals,
framed memories
the closet and the dresser full of clothes,
the tears halt for a moment in disbelief
then continue as the thinking,
the ceaseless pondering rips holes
in her soul
all that stuff
so blessed
so ungrateful
so empty inside
surrounded by beauty
which does not belong to her.

the tattered stuffed dog is the only comfort for her sorrows
his deep brown eyes gaze into her green-
he has been sewn and resewn year after year
only *his* threadened stitches heal,

standing once again
dancing in circles
i watch her
through the looking glass that hangs on the wall.
Un Boisson D’anticipation  Guy W. Meikle

Four ice cubes thrown into the stainless steel shaker,  
it must not be tainted. Three shots  
of vodka, then let the vermouth  
get close, kiss-hugging  
the  
liquor  
but  
not  
penetrating it. Look  

above into the dark-cherry wood-lined rack, pick  
from a mirrored-sea image; glass waves.  
Sultry lemon peels  
the color of  
the  
sun-  
mist  
in  
morning’s haze.  

Squeeze that sun and let it shimmer down the glass. Bitter  
rains fall down to the yet lifeless stem.  
The mix has bonded with the  
ice, the drink  
cascades,  
floods  
into  
the  
glass. It seeps  

between pimento’s center and olive’s lime-green  
womb. Now the cocktail has been born,  
unimportant, yet created  
from earth and hand.  
As  
if  
it  
could  
quench anticipation.
My toes curl around the edge. I have just watched all of you dive. Drop your pudgy young bodies off the top and surface again through the muddy palate of the Mississippi. Strains of confidence have not yet stiffened my gait.

You all have found your way, gliding naturally. My ego and youthful pride say I should too. Gripping my houseboat-perch, I spread my wings to fly. I feel the exhilaration of flight. Hoping-willing my body will know what to do.

Slicing through the water, my untamed body is a spoon. I strike bottom. Headfirst, my mouth gulps air. The mud I get instead will not save me. Tendrils of red-hot embarrassment already creep in. I already know when I surface, my lungs will hold no wind.
Creepy crawly
those little monsters that you see
in the darkest corners
of your fears
flit around from person
to person—
madhouse to madhouse—
basket case to basket case—
moulding you
into their own playground
where they trapeze
through the air (your thoughts)
and laugh, or cackle incessantly
in your ears (where your
headaches come from)
and then slide down your spine
until they land
in the mud pit of your
ulcerous stomach and as they
run tag races
from shoulder to foot
is when you’re pacing to and fro
wriggling in convulsions
because it’s like a fever
and all you want is
the depression to stop
and a deep slumber
would be nice, it might just
ward off Anxiety,
the little demon that’s
playing the
“never-let-go” game
and then you
tire yourself out
and maybe, if you’re
one of the lucky ones
these damn funny little
gremlins will take a nap
in the microcosm of your body.
But maybe they won’t,
just maybe they’re high on caffeine.
I arose tonight,
remembering the Ya-Ya's.
I enveloped them with generosity into
my great, long arms.

They came to me, and are now
sleeping full and satisfied
in my belly. (How it gurgles happily.)
And they don't want to leave.

The stillness tonight is the kind that comes before a good snow.
A rare beauty rode in on the cold winds
of winter. She whispers and whistles
on silver-stringed vocal chords her song of

Great Wisdom Tonight.
The iceberg of thought melted
in my hands tonight,
which is a good thing because again

I can relish the scent of the Queen B's
in the air. Their words,
and their humor prickle me like
eight tiny finger-tips healing my body.

Touches from sweet angels.
True grace, for a Dahlin. I won't be a fool.
"Enough is never enough."
There cannot be too much love.

Tallulah, Moon Maiden,
Our Lady of Peace, Genevieve,
The High Priestess of a Sacred Tribe,
Necie, Teensy, Caro and Vivi,

Come together again in the smiles of my own friends.
Words that will forever ring in my ears:
“Meet you at Java at 9?”
“I’ll be there at 9:15!” (Better bring a book to wait with.)

Succulence: wild, old & crazy-
We are strong and awesome.
We have given to each other the gift of Resilience.
We are Old Cars with lots of Insurance,

Lots of insurance to live with.
We will be like this always...
though kingdom come & kingdom go.
“Life may be short, but it is so wide.”
Slender brown finger
studded with bitten
nail-points,

opaque window front-
vault that initiates children's
dreams

blurry blaze bares
down on kinky head
tightly tied in sections four

beige rubber band screamed
on its connection
to her heat holding head

red ribbon frazzled
on edges
held sections four

mother looks

puffy braids straightened
by untwisting
unrecognized
unraveled
unformed
reality

finger grows elegant
the translucent
window evolved

mother cries
Cornrows  michaela chatman

She would start a cornrow
from the nape of my neck
until she reached the con-
fused middle of my head

stopped on rusty knees
90° back bent
forward down
faced pressed into her thighs

my peach fuzzy face
brushed against the cotton gown
blue flowers with pink centers
shift stitched by work worn hands

woven threads sealed
the smell of fried
hair baked
in Bergamont blue

criscoed salmon croquettes
and peppered
buttered rice
from the mornings fare

and that special momma smell

face gingerly between
two oak thighs
my mouth breathed
agape

nostrils pressed
resisting
inhalation
tongue parched
sand paper dry
mouth would close
to swallow

my nose an accordion
wrinkled
tingled nose hairs
fighting

my head snapped up
dexterous fingers grapple
my jungle moss
of hair

firm fingers flexed
me back
90° back bent
forward down
First Impression  Doug Favero

At first sight of them

The Mexica warrior thought
He had seen a god,

At least a demi-god,
The hideous creature

With four beastly legs
And the upper body of a man.

Then, as the god neared,
He found

Merely a horse
And a man.

The Mexica warrior,
With precise aim and two sharp arrows,

Shot them both down.
Hernán and his horse–

Dead as mortals–
Tumbled to the ground

With blank faces and empty eyes
At the feet of the warrior:

I am not afraid of you.
Blue Drapes Which Hang  

Doug Favero

I sit up in bed and seep through the blue drapes which hang over the window. The pale sun a hot blotch—a scab green under gauze—soaks through the cold air of winter, through the knit of drapes, like a burn settling. The scar—

like stitches bubble the rough cloth and tear across. Behind the drapes the window—its bars like the bespattered sun only in the way they curve along the drape folds, stripes of a darker firmer blue, shadow to the glow.

And behind the bars the frozen distance between this bed and you. But the olive sun too will drop; the wan sun will grip it all, even this winter and drag, drag it down down down, leaving only the blank dark behind the drapes which hang a deeper, finer blue.

The pretty young girls float by
Behind the Ford pick-up:
Wave & smile, smile & wave.

The mayor's hand covers "Made-in-China"
As he readies the firesticks for blast-off,
And the beginning of this year's display.

The townsfolk, ancestors from all over
Europe, assemble around Mt. Morris High School--
"The Home of the Braves"

And host of the jubilee--
Shuffling for the right spot, the best
View, and look up, expectantly.

The stars and half-moon dim
Behind hand-picked cotton clouds
Spread across the sky's navy-deep blue-black.

In front of me, a telephone pole
Extends skyward, slices
My perception in halves.

The show begins. The stars mingle
With splashes of fire, and the moon
Suffers an ambush.

Sounds of howitzers, cannons, and pistols
Disturb the swaying summer fields
And riddle through the vacant village streets.

All eyes fix upon the heavens.
A woman behind me grimaces,
"Who likes those loud banging flashy ones?"
The show goes on.
Occasional clapping and whistling
Rolls through the crowd.

Some are drinking. Some
Are with family. Some are thinking
Of themselves as American.

The show is good.
Glorious rockets shoot for the moon,
Arousing the awestruck.

But the earth pulls harder, bends them
Back, as they squeal, explode, and
Fade.

The night glows soft, showery,
As if the sun had not quite set.
And after a splendiferous burst
Of color and sound sparkling,
And the vibrating earth
—The grand finale—

The flag, in lights, lifts
Through the goal posts
In the football field.

The show ends.
The moon blares boldly.
The stars restore their blaze.

My stiffening neck tells me sometimes
It's hard to look up.
Waking  
Gregory Denton Gallup

8am and you’re watching memories
on the TV screens of my eyes ~
open halfway to the world,
not quite ready for the whole thing.

8:05 and old baby blues
are lying to you
with their superficial broadcast images
you call perfection,
I call seduction.

“Baby blues,”
you say, “when they wink,
tell a story of their own.”

8:15 and this bed suddenly seems
too small
and all too real
for what is hard
and growing between us.

I could blink you away like tears
and you’d still be there
in the shadows of
8:25’s not quite light out yet.

This time of the year morning
is slow to come,
sleep is hibernation,
and you keep pulling me
out of my cave
into the light
before I have time to shield my eyes.
'have a coke and a smile, dammit. no. 1”

Wendy Barker
Painted Eve  Gregory Denton Gallup

Perfect Pink
Rose Petals

I'd forgotten
you also need white
to make pink,
and left the store with
only red.

Aggressive, this red,
but tonight is sure to be
a more subdued pink.

I'd forgotten
that some words remind me
of things past.

Much like
I walked out of the store
forgetting the white,
I walked out of the room
forgetting her name.
there she sits
in a pile of shoes
sorting
damp memories
trapped in
all she has
all her
pretty things...

kids gone
hungry cat
cold coffee
last cigarette
and no way
to get anywhere
sitting in a
pile of memories
sorting
damp shoes
because
the
roof
fell
in
and that’s not
the only
thing.
So laugh because
it takes me
five pages
to say
what I’m really thinking
and I
bounce
between
cool and confused
in one sentence
and pretend
it’s no big deal
and it’s really not
but for a moment
my heart
is on the
line
and you can break me
with one word
and you do
before I look back
and realize
I should have kept
my mouth
shut
and left the letter
tucked inside a
notebook
on my shelf
because
you know
I love you
whatever that means
and I never give up
because
that’s me
and because
you're you
"goodbye"
can't escape my lips
without
lying
on my bed
wishing
I could say
"come here"
and you'd say
"in a minute"
because
you finally realize
I'm not
laughing
back
sometimes gliding underneath
flesh as an athlete's, my aching muscles
liquefy, jelled beneath my skin, shapeless,
without direction, they cannot think,
but if they could,
I would hear screams:

*What is my purpose?*
*How do I function?*
*Why do I exist?*

In a stairwell, I begin to realize catastrophe, and I fall.
No muscles, balance gone, I fall.
The concrete stairs pose no threat to tread of my shoes but my clammy palms sense a slippery texture, and I concede defeat: I fall.
Flailing grasps at the metallic railing yield failure and further expose my weakness.
Fallen.
My perception from the floor distorts reality. The smooth cold surface on which I lay repels me with its deceitful ambivalence, yet I have no choice but to embrace this animosity.
Bricks layer themselves in a sickening pattern I can no longer tolerate. Nausea permeates my insides. How are the bricks growing in quantity? How can bricks pulsate, even in rhythm with my heart which has lodged itself in my throat, choking me?
I extend a shaking finger to the metaphysical wall, expecting and hoping to feel a grainy surface; instead, I feel flesh, just like my own. I jerk my hand away, unsure anymore of these parameters and how my eyes trick me, and I shut my lids to recede within a vacant, aching shell.
And I am alone. Not wanting you
R help because I know a vacan
See prevents you from sigh
T. "Feel my pain" deman

Dead a body. Requests can leave
Me more vacant—still like what
Er beneath fog which rises
From a lake on a cold, sun

Less morning. For you, a los
S pells and pelts and tells beliefs. Un
Chain me from this monster. Lie
Fe prevailing shatters you cyst

Em. Please, damn the fee
L ove hate. And fate and fear. Con
Tinuing abstracts distract and con
Strict our meanings. Do you not

See?
Sleep-hungry eyes open to dawn
At this light-filled dune.
She shakes and stirs, then swims to scare
Away her agony, away her scar.

Liquid glazes her taut flesh.
She proceeds in growing fury, for fresh
Reality is her necessity.
But, her strokes vacant, she knows only vacancy.

"I like agony for I know it is real."
Feigned Dickinson vibrates in her ears.
She can breathe knowing of her company.
Although water is what thrusts her free.

Her eyes roll back painfully, then close
In gratitude. In her mind she kneels,
Desperately praying to her God
For relief from misery, this suffocating fog,

Like the stinging water in which she floats,
Poses as death but remains her only hope.
She craves a new view to find herself
Less alert, less harmed, less self.

But knifing awareness forces
Tears to blend with fluid's cool embrace
And she is grateful for she can lie.
Only sickening mucus inside

Her throat reveals her hate, of giving
Too much. She yielded choicelessly.
Plunging her feet into the sand, she suddenly
Paces from the living pool toward the asphalt.
Clouds the shade
of antique lace swim
by and I remember
the tone of memory, gone
from sight now. Stars
permeate a poetic
experience, two languages
unite, and I remember
the flavor of desire, lilac
like lingerie you wanted
to touch in the store
but you refrained—scared
by others’ notions—wrong
and right. It’s not that simple.
Didn’t anyone ever tell
you that? Devotion comes
in many colors. Adoration
shines like when I smile
at moments when I think
I have touched you. See,
you don’t remember,
do you? Scared of me
still? Enter the gazebo, lean
your head out and look up.
A Promise  Carly Skvarce

The Moon
stares blindly at the dark ground
blinking away tears
that gleam as they fall
a million kisses
soothe Her sorrow
a million bright infinities
cleanse Her spirit.

The little boy stands
watching
crying
staring
he looks to the sky
feels the universe with his eyelashes
and pleads
  why must you hide from me?
  why must you always leave me?
as another cloud shadows his face
he steps into midnight.

Ubiquitous silvery smiles
light up the foaming tide
liquid blackness
swallows up the shoreless beach
as ghost ships sail past
ancient watchtowers
through the hazy mist
of another sullen evening
a sliver of pearl peeks though
the window
the sky exhales
sweet breath.

The boy gasps as the cold air
discovers his vulnerability
golden locks fall from their place
he retreats to the sand
lays shivering
loneliness and desolation come to him
as he feels the soft soil
on his feet
in the place of no visitors
gazing upward
a curious sight
a slight smile plays upon his lips
a crescent.

As the ocean opens its door
hope watches as a star crashes
cold passion triggers
sweet remorse
scintillant orange
she exposes one twinkling eye as
tiny worlds dance
collide in a translucent galaxy
the gravity of despair
melts into a nebular beam
of celestial celebration
a rebirth.

Blue eyes of
shimmering warmth
emit tears of exhilaration
the boy rises as he sees Her
returning to him
She smiles as he reaches
for Her embrace
the embrace of eternity
a questioning thought
beckons to his innocent ignorance
are you going to leave me again
will I be lonely once more?
a latent nod
sends shivers to his fingertips
why?
why must you always go?
as a resplendent voice sings
across mountains of solitude
and forest of amnesty
the crystalline stars flicker
courageously
I am always with you
She answers soundlessly
in your heart
you can always feel me,
when invisibility takes me from your sight
always remember
it's just another phase.
placid eyes
   spying water in the puddle waves
shifting like rain
   or the snow that never ceases in January and laughter
your hair
bow tied tightly in a blond mountain
over-shadowing your face
   with everything necessary to reveal all of you
into the night
your clicking black shoes disguising your feet
and the long sleeves of you
   the perfect mask, unsuspected and tracing your fingers
row over
   endless row of streetlights you glide below
ghost like with an attitude
   discretely being that thing that raises
   eyes and hands to
write
there you go
   into that good night like lightning
or the rain after the sun
   shuts down, or the way a kiss is lost and found
there you go
from my sight like a vision
   or the visionary's sight
   into that next cool shadow, my heart
   falling out,
running in watery lines after you.
I Passed by Honeysuckle Today  K.E. Root

Three crushed blossoms lie by my bed
I picked them in mourning for my dead,
and from their bold spirits my past was raised.
Maybe the languorous southern haze
pressed me to pick the bloom off the vine
of the two-toned honeysuckle white and cream,
and whispered my name time after time
‘til out flowed the passwords of my being...

My lost friend of childhood, she and I
drank the honeysuckle sitting high
in a vine covered tree, cloaked in green,
in the vines strong tendrils went unseen
for long hours on end—secluded—
we breathed humid breezes and grew deluded.
She laughed and fought with me through eight years
of false inspiration, ebbs and tears
of oblivious childhood. Our eyes closed
to all around us that, ghostly, posed
in Georgia’s expressions, veiled and numb:
we fumbled through hot days deaf and dumb.

Memorials will fade by and by
so I’d never bothered: let them die—
like fragile mimosa, or growing pains
like an epiphany, or hot shame—
in peace and be buried: I have learned
from the death of that life now long since spurned.
How these thoughts came to me as I passed
by the honeysuckle! I’ve trespassed
against the slow southern song. Rebelling,
I remember it all and now the telling,
innocent perfume of the crushed
sweet blossoms beside me flood and rush.
And I reach down to touch by my bed
the honeysuckle spray I picked for my dead.
I reread them—
her emotions are abundant here,
and I miss her mostly
because I know she'll fall.
She's on her mountain.
Her voices seem loud around me,
I can hear all of her inflections:
excited and confused.
But the writing is lyrical:
she's feeling idealistic
though she is abused.
The other voice here, you see
after years of reading these lines.
In the first her sight's restored,
in the second, she is blind.
The writing is disjointed,
she must be freezing cold...
In the first, she's found some love,
in the second, love is old.
Swallowed  Cheryl Lohrmann

Finished another painting
It’s done
On the wall, a swatted fly.
My palette is a colorful chaos
Enemy colors coerced to comraderie.
Conflicting feelings produce friction
Wear each other out until they turn gray.

I just drank my paintwater.
An accident, good thing it’s not turpentine.
My tongue urges a spit, the bad taste
Remains
In my bloodstream, in my veins
The point is, it’s in.
Red mad, orange fresh, yellow new
Blue, obviously.
Mixed and confused.

It takes seven years for swallowed gum
how long for this?

Here take this picture
See the wonderful contrast and unity of composition?
Just take it, hang it where it fits.
Meaning will come when you let it.
As I sit here with my empty rinsing cup,
Yes, it’s empty.
My thoughts on the wall,
My soul in my stomach.
There are bodies strewn throughout the room, on the floor, in chairs, clinging to each other. young, old, but no children under 16 allowed. sterile starched sheets gently cover each person—a morgue for the emotionally dead. And darkness shrouds the room, veiling the suffering, the pain under a blanket of sleep—the fish tank hums, covering the hushed sobs of the restless.

A woman reads yesterday's Times a man pages through a tattered Newsweek from '95 a boy, about 17, looks at me though the fish tank. To me he is trapped, to him it is me who needs escape.  

2:44  
I wait for him to emerge so the scream that is stifled can finally be heard and time isn’t like running through water.
delicate wings
encounter
the transparent barrier.
legs
caress
fresh air
that penetrates
the wire screen.
eyes
absorb
multiple visions of
dew kissed grass,
rotting
crab apples.
cries
of agony
float,
then
dissipate
into Eden's air.
metal
grinds
and
the
tomb
seals.
Marie Thérèse Walter: A Portrait  Jes Noon

(Interpretation of the painting by Picasso)

"Time's wingèd chariot" hurries near
as the artist captures his muse.
She illuminates the dark room.
Her countenance blinds the lover.
His brush strokes the canvas
as his desire strokes her cheek.
She raises a red polished nail
to break his wistful stare.
Returning to his palette,
he runs from the moving sun.
the milk spilled when you didn't show
and I cried, but not at that table for two.
no, I blinked back the tears
as I stared at your menu and silverware.
solitary dining humbles the hopeful.
it crushes the spirit like
the crackers in my soup;
an appetizer,
to give you time,
to come.
Self-Portrait #403

Wendy Barker
distant images of you still stain the faded canvas
the streaks remain in dull vibrance
the faded pigment still shows your eyes
which look down on me like blank masks
which see nothing yet I see them

memories like the dry, rotten frame of a long forgotten masterpiece
no longer holding steady the ingrained image of you
the burned likeness heals over and soft new flesh resides
in the back of my mind, there you once ruled.
I can no longer be satisfied with the dusty relic

stowed away in a back hall in a forgotten mansion
never to be searched for & seldom to be remembered
your memory stands, in darkness
my shutters have been opened and the new light of
day has entered my damp, dark, house

The cool crisp air of a new season, after the Autumn
leaves have fallen refreshes my spirit and I yearn
to travel out to explore the freshly fallen white pureness
preparation for the new awakening of spring
when I like the flowers of may blossom in new found beauty.
A Birth  Kelli Blahnik

A tiny fist, balled and pink,
lips still coated in mucous
grope for the heaving nipple of a young girl,
sighing audibly.

The smell of afterbirth still remains
in the thick air.
The child's head, oblong and prunish
from its tight passage through the birth canal,
rests against his mother's beating heart—
her sweat still moist between her breasts.

The nursing is painful at first
as she lays with her legs still spread a bit,
too tender to move much.

her husband pulls her wet hair from her olive skin
and she feels his warm breath on her ear
as he looks over her shoulder at the infant,
still smudged a bit with the blood of his wife's labor.

he looks for something miraculous, something amazing
and finds only the wonder of all fathers
in the squinted eyes and determined sucking lips.

During the birth he had heard only grunts, heavy breathing—
There was no fanfare or flourish,
no heavenly gasp,
but only his own quiet whimpering as he saw
the crowning head of his new son
and his wife's trickling blood.

This, indeed, was a meek incarnation—
hardly noticeable in the Bethlehem night.
And not even a glint of glory was left in his son's eyes,
no divine communication marked his gaze—
like other infants his eyes were somewhat glazed,
unfocused,
his muscles, without control,
allowed for random kicks of his small feet.

What his spirit knew was the Glory itself
had taken residence in space, in time, in flesh—
yet what his eyes saw,
what his heart felt as he nudged the small fist with his finger,
was an overwhelming sense of his fatherhood,
a poignant sense of his inadequacy...
and a small child that indeed was his
nursing at the bare breast
of his new young wife.
Claustrophobia  Otto Marxhausen

Because your hands and eyes agree
(like they are supposed to)
Most of the time.
And then the red light climbs the walls
And the there/not there comes swirling in.
And your hands say the world is out and around you,
Back where it has always been.
(Andshallbeforeevermoreamen)
But your eyes tell you that the world is
RIGHT HERE!

(pressingyourface and climbingyourlegs and claspingyour waist with
the urgency of a drowning swimmer)

The world is a plate;
Two dimensions;
A microscope slide you are pressed upon.
It is
RIGHT HERE!
(Or it is supposed to be—your eyes told you so)
And you can’t feel it.
And they ask you why
You push your gorge down
And clasp your shaking hands together
And begin to sing and titter
And they say nothing
But look at you with soft wide eyes
That make your soul screech with the question:
Why?
Standing
waiting
homeless and hungry
on a street corner in the city of churches
Cars passing
glances
stares
but nothing more
perhaps a guilty conscience or two
but only in retrospect
when it's too late.
a young mother lies still and quiet,
not realizing her double sin.
the future does not concern her,
only a temporary reprieve
from her unwanted
(expected)
burden.
a cool draft rustles
her thin gown
as a cold hand touches
her forehead.
with only slight prompting
she spreads her legs
(as she did once before)
and succumbs to the pain;
she loathes it and welcomes it
all at once.
then it is over
and she is alone,
but the pain remains with her.
the room is still;
she slips into slumber.
her troubled dreams are of
tiny footprints in the sand,
frail cries of impatience,
the wide eyes of an innocent.
she cries in her sleep,
but she will never awaken
from this eternal
nightmare.
death of an icon  Jessica Binns

she sits in the hallway and cries quietly
to her boyfriend on the other end of the line,
weeping over the trivialities of her 18 year-old existence.
her muffled sobs reach me, connect with the sadness in the
recesses of my soul,
but I retreat behind my facade of vellux® and Chopin
and fight back the inevitable tears
that stain the sheets a hue more like
the blood they found in the mass on his gall bladder
that obstructs what should have been an ordinary procedure.
and now we are reduced to shocked speechlessness:
for the death of an icon is at hand.
On late summer afternoons we constructed worlds from battalions of GI Joe soldiers. We would fashion intricate bases—your territory, the weed infested brick grill, while the ancient willow tree housed my ranks.

Whole afternoons unfolded as we planned strategy, setting up snipers to guard our strongholds. A jungle of willow vines provided cover for silent sentries. Through countless covert reconnaissance missions, few shots were fired, in this war without casualties.

The weaponry and experience of the soldiers matched evenly in good and evil; each of us unconcerned by what we represented. Though Shipwreck always the first captured, Dusty, Duke, and other veterans proudly wore battle scars of missing thumbs and knees loosened by dirt.

we marveled at the ancient ninja rivalry existing between Snake Eyes and Storm Shadow—built upon hatred and respect. Broken vehicles ran smoothly on the fuel of our imagination. But as the evening sky darkened, we ran out of gas—forced to end our battle, closing another chapter in that unending war.
Midnight Groove  christopher john brown

I'll sit back,
Drink my wine.
Pick up a pen,
Record my rhyme.
Lift my head,
Fake a smile,
All the while,
Damn, I'm in that midnight groove
Because all I can think about
Around this time
Is the sweet caress of you.

I like second hand smoke,
Retarded laughter from a played out joke.
Cheap perfume hanging from familiar faces,
But come on girl,
Sometimes we need our escape from those familiar places.
That's why when the young and the restless have had their fun
And the lights of halogen lamps go numb.
I write to John Coltrane and Duke Ellington.
Hell, I'm in a sentimental mood.
Damn, I'm in that midnight groove.
Because I want that sweet caress of you.

Swing to my scene tonight.
Right?
Feel that vibe that will drop us to your knees this night.
Right?
So if you want to play me,
Play me.
But listen to my song
As it takes us along
And tries to prolong
The sweet, sweet sound of
Ba Dee Dee Ding Dong.
It just happens to be that particular time of the
E-ven-ing
When the beat of the snare and the cry of the keys are
Bring-ing-me
To a sentimental mood.
Damn, I’m in that midnight groove
Because I need that sweet caress of you.
I speak.
My words unspoken to you.
I touch.
Your body numb.
You cannot grasp that which
I hold out to you
Same dwelling, different worlds
Revolving around each other..
Pity Party  Erica E. Kaufman

Woe is me,
the end is here-
the fat lady has sung
(Elvis has left the building).
It's me against the world
with my candle burning from both ends.
It seems I've jumped into the fire
when I was just trying to get out of the kitchen.
The world turns without me,
the sun'll come up (tomorrow) without me...
if opportunity knocks,
tell him to try the house next door
(their grass is greener).
Human  Erica Kaufman

Created in God's image...
what a joke.
Look how we have tarnished
and torn
and beaten
and destroyed
these bodies; these lives...
what a waste.
The old man sits,
rugged, old clothes torn and smelly.
His quivering hand holds a small cup
which whines for change.
   Even a penny.
His tired, world-worn eyes
seek out my face—I look away and bustle on.
   Somewhere I hear a rooster crow.

The young girl walks,
the child swims within.
Connected they are: snowball children.
   So young, searching,
wanting someone to offer a better solution.
I know the answer... but I’m running late.
   Again the rooster crows.

They sit... flying, dying.
Injecting death into their veins.
Blood-shot souls scream for help.
   White powder blows away,
out the window, circling my head.
I look up—I can see the befuddled addicts,
grasping to hear color and see sound—
   I see them.
But, if I’m not home by 5:30, dinner’s cold.
   Cock-a-doodle-doo.
Remember wine and roses?
The sweet commitment and flavor.

   Memories of...
   Wow. Now

afraid
to follow your senses.

   Smile Juliet,
it’s a woman thing.
The love and hate,
The trust, independence and beauty.
Still nobody and

   only you.

The dark gap
in your life will fade,
soon to sparkle.
And never lose your
declaration of meaning.
Look Back  David A. Sisk

About 2 years ago
Small time theatre club
2 a.m. show
I walk through a dark star filled passageway
With old friends that aren’t around anymore
I look over and I see this girl
Our eyes meet
She looks down
Writes something
Sticks it on my chest
Winks and says “you’ll understand”
I was fascinated
I went in and sat down
I looked at my chest and read “Look Back”
I searched for an instant meaning
A minute later I looked behind me
And she was there
Looking in my eyes again
I walked out that night
With this group of people laughing
Because they enjoyed the show
I was withdrawn
I said nothing
Smiled occasionally
Observed everything
And understood nothing
Now, 2 years later
I see meaning in her prophecy
So I look back and smile.
On the Streets of Chicago  Armando X. Fernandez

(Yippie-Yippie-Doo/Piggy-Piggy-Loo swing your partner round...)

Nineteen hundred sixty eight,
The bombs scarred the night while the liquid fire loomed in an Asian hell,
*Are Martin, Bob and John really gone?*
An aire of revolt stirred on the street of Chicago.

It was time to gather the tribes of the nation,
The ass and pachyderm were fucking,
While the nation mis-spent its youth,
As the coppers pushed down the streets of Chicago.

*Hizzzonner* was willing to let it all go in eight of sixty eight,
His black militia beckoned to his call on those hot murky nights,
The scene was set...lights...action...*now–let’s fuckn’ dance*,
Twist and Stroll onto the streets of Chicago.

The donkey’s ass was shining...a bluish red and white,
As the piggies and their wives feast upon their bacon,
A nation’s eyes were viewing,
The show on the streets of Chicago.

On commencement day they shuffled back and forth,
Giving and taking credentials, the blood spattered banner waved on high
Echoing the cries of a million tears,
Along the streets of Chicago.

America was losing its place at the table,
Marching, shuffling feet to the beat of sobbing mothers,
One star, two stars, three stars¹ we’ve got’em all,
Sanguine river and icy tears on the streets of Chicago.

His, ours, theirs all believed the end to be near,
LBJ walked, still calling the shots, while the Hump stepped onto
the stage,
And the clashes started as the country’s bloodshot eyes curdled,
A crimson wave descended boldly onto the streets of Chicago.

Covered badges, bags of shit all thrust headlong to posterity,
Paddy wagons—*drop, curl and protect!*
Shot back home to the TV dinners and RC Colas wishing it were over,
Our wasted youth ran through the streets of Chicago.

An aire of revolt stirred on the streets of Chicago,
As the coppers pushed down the streets of Chicago,
Twist and Stroll onto the streets of Chicago,
The show on the streets of Chicago,
Along the streets of Chicago,
Sanguine river and icy tears on the streets of Chicago,
A crimson wave descended boldly onto the streets of Chicago,
Our wasted youth ran through the streets of Chicago.

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1 Gold Star Moms: one star = one combat offspring, two stars = two combat offspring, etc.
The castle is burning
The veil is torn
The red carpet is in shreds
As every fairy tale dies in the night.

No light seeps around the fire
Its burning flames have no desire
Each stone less memory gone within the fortnight
A seemingly endless story shall have no ever after

The tapestries gone from the walls
The dresses curling in the inferno
The jewels forgotten in haste
Each left in a dream that will not be by morning

A life taken, a life starved
A life led on from the end of the beginning
A match to begin the end
And a horse to lead the way to hell.

No servants standing to help
No wings to show one how to fly
Just the spirits of what was never meant to be
To make the flames dance around the castle
That was once upon a time.
"But I want to make you my poem," he insisted; she believed he always insisted.

"I would not like that. I would not like being made into your poem," she resisted; he believed she always resisted.

"It is true, you may not like being made into my poem. But I must say that I believe you would like being my poem, I mean, once I had finished, once I had completed the poem."

"Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I may find pleasure in being a perfect and complete poem, your poem."

He liked her language, the language of her.

"I enjoy listening to you thoroughly."

"You enjoy thoroughly, love, or you listen thoroughly?"

"Yes, my poem, perfect and complete."

* * *

"Ah, I can see something, an idea, coming to form: I would begin you with a question, and end you with a question."

"And between these questions, what would you place for me?"

"Possibilities, my sweet. I would place possibilities."

"And a dream come true. May there be a dream come true?"

She was startled by her sudden request. Perhaps she seemed greedy to him now. Surely it made her vulnerable. She became excruciatingly eager for him to speak. His words of reply pleased her immensely, and she was at once set at ease and delighted.

Without any hint of hesitation, he looked into her eyes and assured,

"Yes, I trust the poem will be all that you are."

* * *

"And having finished, I may stand back a step, or two, and then discover with a pang that I cannot grasp my poem. I may find it escapes me. Entirely, it escapes me, having been loosed. I cannot say but that I have been vexed; and only that it moves me, stirs me alive. And that it is beautiful."

"Painfully beautiful," he added after a moment's thought.

* * *

Afterward—many years together in love having passed—he would stand over the small mound which was her grave. He would break to his knees, and tremble and weep. With his bare hands he would
tear at the earth and mutilate the flowers surrounding the grave, crumbling the petals like words in his furious hands, yearning in vain to grasp that which had escaped him.

* * *

"Painfully?" she questioned that day years ago, eyebrows raised. "Most painfully," he confirmed, "most" twisting his whole mouth and face.
Both of them were terrified by the way he said "most."
I know him only an hour, and here I am listening to his story. He tells me of a tornado that ripped through his house. He tells me it threw everything every which way. Refrigerator and bathtub, family albums and television set … the whole house—tossed all over the property. He tells me he did not see the tornado himself—lucky for him. He says his dad did, all too well—that dark whipping cloud be the last thing my daddy seen, alive anyways, he says. It left his mom, his brother, and him homeless while they tried to put the pieces back together.

I ask him how long of a time that was. He says the neighbors made it out the storm okay and took us in fer li’l while. Then maw moved us into a trailer on the outskirts.

Funny, I think, that tornado scattered the pieces around enough, he never did find them all. But really I am finding nothing funny about it. I ask him when did all of this happen? I heard of a tornado rambling through the area about six months ago.

And then I have to try not to act surprised so as not to make the both of us uncomfortable when he tells me, Oh, it was ‘fore that’n. Let’s see here, I’m forty-two now, that’d make it, what, thirty-five, thirty-seven years ago? I’s ‘bout five when that bugger come roarin’ through.

Funny, I think to myself again, How many pieces are left missing? That tornado threw him out of a home for good, I start thinking. He is homeless now; his life has been a mess since that day. I am putting him all together now, getting him all figured out. He has been speaking of this tornado like it just happened. It is the first thing he tells me about himself—we only know each other under an hour. And it is as fresh in his mind as home-made bread right out of the oven. But that bread became crusty and stale, the crows have long since devoured it; and the oven is a rusty skeleton wasting away in a junkyard somewhere.

And from his seat I’m looking at me in my seat and I’s seein’ we’s got two differ’nt worlds. All sudden-like his eyes’re like two charcoals—I can’t see a thing in ‘em anymore.

I cannot see a thing in his eyes anymore, just some sad story of a middle-aged homeless child. And he can’t see me either, talking to
me like I'm somebody important, smart. Some kind of promise. He keeps referring to me as "college boy" and insists I'm studying to be a lawyer or somebody else important that he's not. Here I am, visiting a homeless shelter because I have some free time to do a good deed and feel good about being there for some homeless folks, to be just someone to talk to. I'll visit for awhile, you know, a little break from the university, make their day, make them feel special, maybe try to help them along with a couple of their problems.

I don't know how he's feeling right now—as I'm staring at his tired old skin, his heavy empty eyes, the dirt under his nails and the stink on his breath. I suppose it's the same feeling he's been carrying around like some kind of disease—a slow cancer eating away from the insides, just letting him breathe and do enough of his own damage to himself—for thirty-seven years. That tornado—seems it gutted his flesh and bones and stole something else in there too and left him scattered across the ground—an empty sack of skin. I get a creeping impulse to poke him and see if he feels it, see if he's at all numb.

And here I am on this side of the conversation, and I'm looking at him so unfamiliar, like he's not made up of the same elements as I am. But somehow I'm suddenly not feeling like so much of a promise. Suddenly, I don't quite know what I'm feeling inside. At once, I have become terribly unfamiliar to myself. I'm staring at him: I can't see anything in his eyes, through my reflection; in fact I see a whole lot of nothing. And I'm thinking if only I had what he needs—that missing piece. I assure myself it is not a something one can simply receive from another, certainly not a stranger like me. And I see that tornado tearing up hell in his mind—I just want to tell him, in my college-cocky voice—make him understand: A tornado cannot keep a grip on anything too long, cannot keep for good anything it takes up into itself. It is just wind, dark and swirling wind, a shell of clashing air—there is nothing on the inside.
The Jester: A Self-Portrait

Karen Kloosterman
July 29th—10:00 A.M.

The airport lost power around 8:00 A.M. this morning. The temperature outside is already near ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Through the large windows that create three of the four walls of the terminal, I can see rivers of convection rising off the surface of the scorched concrete, blurring the planeless landscape before me. I wait for the cool dry air to be infiltrated by slowly creeping heat. In a few hours it will be too hot to move. The backs of my legs will stick to my red, plastic chair. Around mid-afternoon, the sweat will trickle so profusely from the backs of my thighs and knees that I will slide slowly down the chair, until my chin touches my chest. I will tap my feet impatiently and the man next to me will ask that I stop. I won't.

Despite the assurances to the contrary, no planes will land today and the power will not return. Five days ago, we were detained from our flight as news of an imminent nuclear war reached this tiny, insignificant, desert airport. By the end of the day, all planes and vehicles, and all but one staff member had departed toward the big cities, in hopes of rescuing loved ones before the first strikes were made. Those of us left stranded at the airport misunderstood our good fortune until news of the destruction of New York, L.A., and Chicago was broadcast from an independent television station in the neighboring state the next morning. Little reached us beyond that broadcast before the power went out this morning. It is certain only that we are alone.

July 30th—3:00 P.M.

Uncertain of safety beyond the airport, we have decided to remain here indefinitely. I have been watching my fellow travelers, beginning to wonder if nuclear fallout might be the least of our worries. Their eyes are changing. Once, their deep, glistening glow betrayed fear and grief. Now they bear the dull, dry stare of hopelessness and uncertainty. In time, their eyes will develop the wild, flashing, wide-eyed gape of madmen.
1:00 A.M.

It is late and the intense heat has all too quickly been replaced by the biting cold of night. The flat, black sky seems to absorb all warmth—first from the air, then from the body. A woman stands by the window looking up at the sky, her right temple pressed against the hard glass. She hugs herself tightly, swaying back and forth, and half mumbles, half hums, some unfamiliar tune. Beyond her, outside in the distance, the horizon has developed an eerie glow. Like the others who have surely noticed, I ignore it.

The man next to me has laid down on the floor. He is a tall, thin man. His bones jut out at angles, as though they might pierce his skin. His body is curled in a fetal position. His eyes, wide open, deceive. He is asleep.

In the corner, near the entrance to the women’s restroom, a mother sits on the floor, her back against the wall. Her arm is draped across her daughter who is curled amongst the clothes in their large, black suitcase. The mother’s vacant stare chills me more than the night air.

The airport employee has decided to approach the woman at the window. Gently touching her shoulder, he speaks, “Ma’am, perhaps you might sit down for awhile. You’ve been standing here since dinner ration.”

No answer.

“Ma’am?”

The woman reluctantly turns from the window and allows the man to lead her to a chair across from me. She sits down, puts her head in her hands, and cries.

July 31st—4:00 P.M.

The thin man has moved near the mother and child. They started conversing this morning at breakfast ration and seem comforted by the other’s words. While the little girl sleeps in the suitcase, the mother and the thin man speak softly to each other. The woman looks haggard and the man, broken. The child always sleeps.

“And do you have a fam. . . Ummm, I mean, do you have a job?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah, I do. It’s uh, kind of funny, uh, ironic, I guess. I’m a life insurance salesman.” The corner of his mouth turns up—part grin, part grimace. “Kind of pointless now, huh?”

The mother makes no reply. She directs her gaze outside. Her face
contorts— a furrowed brow, a twisted mouth, a mournful, fearful look in her eyes. He stares at his hands.

The thin man breaks their reveries. “And you, uh, what do you do?”

She smiles, looking down and stroking her daughter’s hair. “Oh, my job, I guess like yours, is insignificant now. What matters is here, my girl.”

She pauses, then continues, rather quickly, “Do you realize that if we expect the worst, we kind of expect the best? We could create an entirely new society based on the people in this airport.”

The thin man’s sunken eyes open wide. He stammers out, “I— I don’t want that kind of burden. I am no forefather!”

She makes no response. Her eyes close, and she leans her head against the wall.

August 1st—Noon
I am suddenly aware that no one here knows anyone else’s names. And, for some reason, I don’t care.

August 2nd—3:00 P.M.
The window woman is dead. The mother found her on the floor of the women’s restroom. I knew something was wrong when the mother emerged from the restroom, stooped down, picked up her daughter and walked out of the airport. She headed across the runway toward the distant mountains. The thin man followed. I decided I should check out the restroom.

As I opened the door, I was hit with a nauseating mixture of strawberry fragrance and decay. The ice blue stalls and olive green and white floor tile swirled in a dizzying array of patterns. I covered my mouth and nose with the bottom of my shirt and walked toward the last stall. I opened each door as I passed. Upon opening the last, I was confronted with the bloated corpse of the window woman. Her face was contorted in a silent scream of helpless terror. I ran to the door and called for the employee to help me. He brought a white tarp and we wrapped the body, as if in a hammock, and carried it outside. Not conscious of my actions, I led the employee to the center of the runway. We laid the body down and I looked into the distance and noticed the shapes of the mother, child, and thin man, blurred by the heat... Or perhaps it was only a mirage.
6:00 P.M.

The sun is hidden behind coal gray storm clouds, billowing ominously over the tops of the distant mountains. I am alone in the terminal. Only the chill of silence remains. I have not seen the employee since we laid the body on the runway. I believe he never reentered the building.

Flashes of lightning pierce the dark sky as a howling wind begins to rattle the windows of the airport. I watch the body on the airstrip. The white tarp is flapping violently in the wind. It is anchored somewhere under the window woman, reaching desperately toward the sky.

The first large drops of rain begin to fall, and I am lured outside. The wind tears at my clothes and hair. I am drenched by the relentless torrent of rain. My skin feels washed from my frame. An antiseptic calm stills the tremors of chill. I lift my face and hands toward the sky. I know that God has arrived.
The four hundred and thirty-third mile of the day offered little more respite from my thoughts than its predecessors. The interior of my vehicle was silent. The radio offered only empty, static stations. I seemed to chase the charcoal clouds billowing in rolling heaps on the distant horizon. Sun broke through the thick ceiling at irregular intervals and illuminated the young wheat in the fields. The moist shoots appeared as sharp green and distinct as emeralds. The incessant, monotonous hum of the wheels on the pavement provided me with the momentum to persist in my journey. Not a car had passed mine in either direction since I’d pulled from the side of the interstate in the icy blue glow of predawn.

The towns I passed swirled with the dry dust of their desertion. I stopped at a lone gas station around noon and helped myself to a full tank of fuel and the last non-expired sandwich in the softly humming refrigerated display case. The chair behind the attendant’s counter lay on its side on the worn, dull green linoleum floor. Ripped cellophane from a pack of cigarettes lay on the counter under a few pieces of scattered change.

In the toilet a sour dampness permeated the air. I washed my hands and drank in the numbing, antiseptic smell of the antibacterial soap. My reflection in the mirror was uneven—a flaw in the craftsmanship. My right eye looked swollen and bruised, while my lips appeared shriveled, dry, cracked. I felt submerged in a burning fluorescent bath of light. My wrists pricked with pain as I hit the bathroom door with my hands, running.

A few solitary drops of moisture fell from the sky as I left the lopsided shack of a station. One landed on my lower lip, near the right corner of my mouth. My tongue instinctively reached to absorb it but a sudden, tumbling wind fell from above and evaporated the cool moisture on my lip. Then it was still.

In my car I felt that I was going somewhere, drawn to a purpose, alive. Without it, I felt lost and non-existent. I drove on, into twilight.

The first buildings of the city loomed before me like scolding parents. I began to tremble with an inner chill. On familiar streets,
familiar homes passed with unfamiliar faces gleaming in the windows, watching. Under the impersonal buzz of a streetlamp I parked my car and opened the door. As my foot touched ground a bolt of consciousness shot through my body. I became totally aware of the placement of my mass in the atmosphere. I could feel the edges of my skin where they touched clothing and air. I smiled, closed the car door, and walked up to the door of number 18. I knocked.

He was at the door immediately and stood to the side as I entered. "Hello," I said, still smiling.

"You’re late," he countered, looking down at me.

"You noticed."

"Where were you?"

"I hardly know."

"What’s that supposed to mean?" He closed the door and stepped toward me.

"You figure it out. You’re the smart one, remember?"

"Is this some kind of game to you?" he snapped back, voice rising.

"Sure. It has been for you, all along, right?" I stepped toward him, defiant.

"Is this about my moving again?" He suddenly softened.

"Actually, it’s not, for the first time ever." I turned and walked into the living room. Boxes were stacked near the front windows. I had seen them so many times before I knew what was inside without opening them.

"I’m just not happy here. You can’t expect me to stay where I’m not happy." He followed me into the room.

"No, I can’t. And you can’t expect me to live unhappy. You can’t expect me to follow anymore. I mean, I’m already two states behind you. I’ll never catch up." I felt the room begin to spin and I looked to him to steady myself.

"But, I love you." He stepped towards me.

He blurred in my vision and I had to look away. My eyes rested on my car, outside on the curb. The room stopped spinning and my vision came into focus.

"Yeah, but I don’t."

I left him behind, as I walked out the door, trying to explain. It had begun raining. Not the fierce, driving rain the day’s earlier clouds had suggested, but a steady, soaking rain. I entered my car and turned the key in the ignition. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw beads of moisture dripping from my hair to my lips and rolling off.
No one ever said that it would end. No one ever told her that one day in bed she would roll over and see his legs longer, his feet spreading and his skin puckering. No one ever said to her, witches are strong, evil lasts so long. And you’re a girl, a simple thing, a mortal, a wide-eyed naïf who didn’t learn a thing till after. No one. Ever said. The fairy tale would end.

They both knew, for weeks. They knew together, and pretended together, that his face was the same shape, that his hair wasn’t falling out. It happened so slowly, so gradually, such a smooth degradation, that it was easy to pretend. Simple to smile with tightened lips and make believe it was something that could be pushed aside. Hidden. Ever after.

But it was coming, and she began to ache for him with him there beside her, curled on the other side of the bed in their tiny house. A tangible barrier between them of fear and contamination and a faint smell of swamp.

He would go fishing every day, fishing on the lake for sunfish and catfish and crawdads, enough to eat and a little to sell, and she would go out and pick fruit from their trees and weed the vegetables with sweat dripping into her eyes and they would come home, too tired to grieve. But not to tired to pretend.

Until. Until he reached over and felt her flinch at the clamminess, the webbing just starting between his fingers. Felt her try to pretend it hadn’t happened, blinked his lids over his widening eyes. And said. And said, we have to think about the future.

And listened to her silence. Felt her thoughts. She thought, what future? You are no longer you and I can’t go home, they disowned me, silly girl, running off with the first charming amphibian she meets. And she thought of green smoothness and wept. She thought, it’s death. To live here on the lake by myself, this enormous lake that stretches forever and runs into a stream that goes to God knows where that I can’t go because I will wait forever. I can’t live on fruit but I can’t fish and take those slimy bodies off the hook looking into those lidless eyes wondering. What future?

You don’t have to be alone, he whispered. And she clutchted him, hard, pressing against his slickening body as she felt his thoughts and said yes. Let’s. Please try. I want to have you. I can’t. Leave me
a part of you.
So they tried and tried and they couldn't ignore any more as his
legs grew over the end of the bed and his mouth widened and he
couldn't hold the fishhooks any more and even had to grip the nets
with both rubbery hands. And they tried.
And they succeeded.
And they wept together, dismayed, at the result.
It had been so many months now and his voice was rough and
slurred. And he said I must go.
She said no.
He said I must, I must because I'm not anything now. I'll come
back when I'm not a freak, when I'm one or the other, and maybe you
can kiss me.
I kiss you every day, she said.
Maybe it'll work when I'm all changed, he said.
I'll wait forever.
I know. I love and need you.
I know.
And so he left splashing through the shallows and trying not to
look back as she watched trying not to run after him screaming come
back here dammit you're my husband and my lover and my home and
my people. And they tried.
And they succeeded.
And they wept.
So she went back to wait, and sat by the bucket of promise and
terror. She kept another little bucket by it, with water and a ladle
inside, and she would dip the ladle into the water and.
And pour it over the thing in the other bucket that had issued
form her thighs.
Pour it over the enormous jellysac of an egg that had floated
there, so huge it touched both sides. Keep it wet. Dip and pour.
Pssssshhhhhhh.
And try not to stare too hard, that would be bad luck, at the thing
that moved inside that looked like a tadpole and wriggled fitfully but
who knows?
It didn't have to be a tadpole.
Pssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhh.
She would wait, she thought.
Forever.
Pssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh--
She is three and they tell her, no, Susan, don’t go in the basement alone, never go in the basement ALONE because you never know what might happen to you, that door is heavy Susan and it might swing shut and you wouldn’t be able to get out and we’d look all over for you Susan and we’d be so worried never go in the basement alone Susan. There are RATS in the basement Susan, big ones, and we don’t want you to get rabies you’re only a little girl Susan never go in the basement alone.

And so she only goes down with mom to get things, into the hard cold basement it’s really more of a cellar she thinks years later when she thinks of it, the floor is only packed dirt anyway. She goes down with mom in the late afternoon (when golden sun that creeps in through the one high boarded window lies in narrow strips on the boxes that the tools and sewing things are in to protect them from tiny sharp teeth because it is a hungry year and old dusty books) because mom doesn’t like going down there at night when it is so still you can hear the RATS.

And then one time mom does the forgetting that Susan always remembers, that the alien adults that rule her life are not perfect, mom forgets two important very important things. She forgets the eggs, the eggs are down in the cool hard basement and it is evening and so mom runs down quick quick to get the eggs and Susan runs behind her and quick quick mom runs back up with three eggs in her knobby hands and she FORGETSSusan and Susan is down there in the dark ALONE don’t ever go down there alone Susan who knows what might happen.

And she is three and scared of the dark dark and she only has a little white summer dress on with its grease-soaked skirt from the frying and it is too cold. She is goose pimply and she can feel the grit under her bare feet and the dress against her ankles and she thinks I am not here alone I can’t be because they said not to why am I here ALONE? And her hands grasp her fat three-year-old elbows.

Because she can hear them she can HEAR them she is three and she does not understand God but she screams in her head to him because she can hear them the RATS in the WALLS.

They’re getting closer, there are rats in the walls, she can hear
them running up and down and are they getting closer they are because they are HERE and she can FEEL them on her feet and the naked TAILS caress her ankles and tiny claws scratch and don’t ever go in the basement Susan there are rats and they are BIG.

And she doesn’t feel them any more because she is way deep inside her head and she can’t feel her goose pimples or the marks of her soft ragged nails in her arms because she is running in a circle standing still and she doesn’t see it when the door opens and the rectangle of light falls and hurried feet come running down and they say oh my god, my God, Susan look at her oh my God and they pick her up and run away and she starts screaming when they bathe her and doesn’t stop until she falls and drops, asleep.

And they tell the story of how they found her that hungry year standing alone with her favorite cotton dress eaten up to her knees for the grease and her bleeding all over the floor from millions of tiny nibble/claw marks on her feet and her ankles and calves and shins and when they tell the story later Susan goes inside her head because she can still hear THEM the rats in the walls.

She is nineteen and they tell her, no, Susan, don’t ever go into town ALONE, it’s a big city Susan and there are people there, MEN, Susan, and God knows what they might do.

So she lives on her girls’ campus with her not-quite-friends and only goes into the city when an entire straggling herd clumps its way down the narrow alleys of the city in the daylight a chattering mass keeps the wolves away. She lives on campus and wears because she’s an old-fashioned girl long skirts that cover her legs and socks so you can’t see the scars no don’t THINK about that Susan it was a long time ago shove it back under.

And then Susan does the thing, a STUPID thing, a PROUD thing, a FOOLISH thing aren’t you ashamed of yourself Susan how could you do such a thing and she goes into the city alone at night when everything is shadow but not quite because there are lights everywhere that hurt the eyes and never turn off.

She goes into the city ALONE at NIGHT because she needs a new light bulb hers is burned out and she is nineteen and still afraid of the dark and everyone else is asleep and maybe the 7-11 has them there has to be somewhere in the whole big city that has light bulbs. So she is in the city.

And she is lost in the streets they don’t end up where you expect them to and she’s walking and it’s the tail end of summer but it’s
getting a little cold and she shivers a little even in her long skirt that she sweltered in all day long and she can hear.

She is nineteen and still afraid of the dark and she thinks I'm not ALONE I can't be they told me never to come here alone why am I ALONE here.

She is nineteen and she doesn’t understand the world but she begins to scream in her head to it that it isn’t FAIR and somebody please come help me because she can hear HIM.

She can hear him, there’s a MAN in the alley and it’s so dark she can’t see she is afraid to but the gravel crunches crunches and is he getting closer he is because he is HERE and there is one hand on the small of her back and another one at her thin collarbone with its thin thin skin with something hard and sharp and cold. And sharper TEETH at her ear don’t scream bitch or they won’t be able to identify your body.

And his breathing is fast and hissed she can hear it it sounds like claws on dirt and she feels the concrete wall against her back and the MAN has her skirt hide the scars Susan hide them her skirt up around her waist and don’t ever go in the city ALONE Susan there are MEN there who knows what they might do.

And she doesn’t feel him any more because she is inside her head while he hisses RAPING her in the alley and tearing count them six seven eight excited little tears in her skin with his hard sharp cold hand.

There is no one to come find her and bathe her she wakes up alone and alive not that it matters ALONE in the alley and she dimly pulls her sensible cotton underwear up past her bruised thighs and lets her long skirt see there are no scars settle around her, her SHOES are gone and she goes back to campus barefoot.

And she goes in her one little single room with no light bulb and locks the door it is day and the sun comes through the slats of the window golden and she looks down and sees her bloody and broken feet and feels the scaly TAILS.

And she begins to scream and scream and bang her head against the walls and tear triangle teeth-jagged patches of skin on the raw concrete around her and she doesn’t stop even when the r.a. opens the door and grabs her and the room is painted red and her fingers are broken and her eyes are swollen shut because she can hear them and when she goes back inside her head she can still hear them, the RATS in the WALLS.
About the time my father began collecting Kaleidoscopes, he bought me a ring. I don't remember if it was for Christmas or my birthday. I just remember the ring. A simple gold band, gently cradled an opal in its center. The opal shimmered in the light, reflecting various colors in all directions. Lying there in my palm I studied it as if it were a virus, afraid to put it on my finger. I had never owned a ring that hadn't come with a Happy Meal or from one of those dime machines at the entrances of drug stores. It seemed too delicate, too extravagant, too expensive.

"So what d'ya think honey?"

"Wow. It's beautiful... but so expensive dad."

"Everyone should have something worthwhile to give to their kids, something that will survive the tests of time. Someday when you're a mom, you'll give it to your daughter, and she to her daughter. You can't put a price on history, kiddo."

The ring peered into my eyes with its pink, now blue, now purple flashes - mesmerizing, hypnotizing, like a muted miniature of dad's budding kaleidoscope collection.

As much as the sparkling colors and morphing shapes entertained me, my father's insatiable hunger for bigger and brighter kaleidoscopes dwarfed any previous kaleidoscope interest known to mankind. He would have gazed through the mystical tube of light for hours on end if his busy days and those rules about needing money to stay alive would have permitted.

The multi-colored filters constructed a gateway into an idyllic universe of dancing hues and watery shapes, light years away from the gray-toned divorce fees and bill collectors which tainted his reality. With just a slight turn of the wrist, the shapes melted one into another, again and again - each vivid color combining and separating in a perpetual tide controlled by some synthetic moon. In a moment the sun and stars would explode into bursts of light, their dynamic destruction enchanting his universe with their fragmented wisps of fire.

This enchantment snuck up on my father when he wasn't looking. Dad received an airplane kaleidoscope as a birthday gift from a friend while he was working in a liquor store. My father saw
the job as a means to an end, planning to work there only as long as it took to earn enough money for his pilot's license. Because he was a lowly part-timer he mostly worked late night shifts. Soon after the clock above the register would glow midnight, withered and tattered shapes would carelessly stumble into the store, exhausted and disheveled, their watery eyes intently searching for something. Aimlessly the broken figures would wander through aisle after aisle, each step absorbing the stale heat trapped in the store. Fingering the glass rainbow of bottles like clumsy French connoisseurs, wrinkled fingers would finally grasp one from among the rest. Foolishly the search would end. My father served as a witness to their triumph at the check-out.

"This oughta keep the fires burnin', wouldn't ya say feller? Damn lucky you was open. Didn't know where I was goin' if you wasn't."
The clock read 3:30am when my father would finally make his way back from that job. It killed me to think of him going straight to bed, the sawdust smell of the floor still clinging to his black dress shoes, the words of desperation still ringing in his ears. Because I lived with my mother I always had the luxury of fore-going the reality of his nightly routine, instead scripting those after work moments in my mind.

His thick brown hair silhouetted in the doorway, he inches the front door shut with a quiet knock. Casually he tosses his windbreaker onto the couch, his sparkling brown eyes intently heading for the darkness of the basement. His eyes, already adjusted to the shadowy blackness, immediately connect to the waiting airplane resting on the shelf above the rocking chair. Even in the solid darkness, the airplane's wings glimmer, somehow finding the only ounce of light left in this underground cave. Cradling the airplane in his hands, meditatively rocking back in the chair, he gently signals a ray of light from directly above. There he sits, his eyes intoxicated by this hand held universe.

Other people would come over to his house now and see the airplane. Immediately they would decide that my dad was a big kaleidoscope enthusiast (the average person does not have airplane kaleidoscopes simply lying around the house). He began receiving them as presents for Father's Day, Christmas, his birthday, and other gift-giving occasions. However much he liked them in the beginning,
fate insured that my father's fondness for kaleidoscopes would be compounded by force or otherwise. But dad didn't need to be forced. Colleges were overflowing in my mailbox, family cars were blowing gaskets, and just getting by became a little more expensive. My father was forced to give up on his pilot's license and find a better paying job with more consistent hours. I never heard him say one begrudging word. In fact he was still smiling. When he was seven years old, he fell out of his top bunk and cracked his two front teeth. You can tell that they are yellowed on the bottom fringe if you squint your eyes. This superficial imperfection has never stopped him from showing them off. Instead of telling me that he had to quit so I could go to college, or because his wife's car needed fixing, or so everyone could be allotted the standard number of Christmas presents, he simply pressed his teeth together and bared them to the world. I never asked him if he was disappointed that his dream to be a pilot wasn't coming true. I never asked if he resented all of the mouths to feed and responsibilities to fulfill. I just watched him.

I watched him, the man who's never met a 10k he didn't like, settle into a stained and lumpy bus driver's seat for 6 months. After each trip he would decorate conversation with stories of sequined, elderly women in search of Elvis, as well as visionary suggestions for the improvement of the commercial busing industry. I watched him wake up at 4am and come home at 2am the next morning, having spent the entire day organizing and facilitating blood drives for the Red Cross. My dad talked man-stuff with 18-year old football players to keep their minds off the needle and brought home the extra sugar cookies and kool-aid for my hogish consumption. I watched him tool around Indiana and Ohio in his powder blue Honda Accord, selling muted metallic computer parts to professional business men and women. Men and women who will never see the fiery explosions of a kaleidoscope like my father does.

So on this undetermined holiday, the ring no longer seemed so viral. I slid it over my knuckle. The excessive pale extravagance melted away from the stone. I stared deeply into its unblinking eye. The colors glimmered in a dauntless ballet of blazes, each one fading brighter into the next.
Four years is a long time. Four full years passed since that sweaty Sunday afternoon of the congregational meeting when the woman no one recognized proposed that a church isn’t a ‘real’ church unless it has a fine set of stained glass windows. She raised her head slightly at this announcement and met the squinting eyes of the insulted group. The large gold bird pin drooping on her beige jacket jiggled back and forth as she moved. Mark, a young boy who sat near her, watched this glittering bird and thought it looked like the bird was flying.

The congregation was in uproar at the attack of thisforeigner. The pastor of the congregation felt he should respond to this outburst, but instead reminded himself to “turn the other cheek,” and he did just that. This position, consequently, put his head leaning right up against the wall in the perfect position to nap...

The melee continued as the woman spoke again. She straightened her beige jacket and lifted her hand slightly as if appealing to God. Yanking the hand of the fearful Mark, she proclaimed with a deeply dramatic voice, “children, the unread, look to the windows for the story of God. This young boy will look at the windows in their full glory,” she gestured slowly across the plain windows of the sanctuary, “and will see God. You have a duty, an obligation, a MORAL MANDATE,” sweat beaded across her brow and she shook her fist and her whole body so violently that Mark feared her golden bird would fly away, “to do this. Look at this boy, he is your reason.” All eyes in the room focused on Mark and he smiled fearfully, unsure how to react.

She sat down, her energy full spent, and the congregation quieted. Mark felt the overwhelming need to clap and cheer at the most theatrical performance he had ever seen. As a hush baptized the crowd, only the sound of the pastor’s rhythmic breathing continued. A poke in the ribs from his wife alerted him to speak.

“The question is,” the pastor cleared his throat and hoped no new developments had occurred since he ‘turned the other cheek,’ “just how important is the stained glass window to the life of our church.” He was pleased as a few people’s heads bobbed in agreement. “Will we gain something in our worship of God,” he said
'God' with a long lingering "0" sound that bounced around the sanctuary, "that we did not have before?" The question stood as the pastor sat down again, proud of his assessment of the situation.

"Yes" the pin bird jiggled. Other affirmations were slowly lifted up from the padded mauve pews. The congregation who fifteen minutes ago had never considered building a stained glass window, now found it the most important component of their worship of God.

Committees blossomed within the congregation: the Fundraising Committee, the Building Committee, the Planning Committee, the Public Relations Committee, the Vision Committee, the Inter-Committee Relations Committee, all headed up by the prestigious 'Effort Committee.' "The Effort" was the code-name of this undertaking, and the stained glass dreams were no longer called mere windows. Everything was done for "The Effort." Cheers echoed through the walls of the church: 'how do we earn more for The Effort,' 'who is the best artist for The Effort?' and (favorite to all) 'The Effort needs more of your effort.' This in fact became the rally cry of the greatest commitment the church had ever undertaken. The poster promoting the new window had the slogan across the top in big bold letters, with "Do it for him" in italics underneath and Mark's preschool picture next to it. He had become the spokesperson for the campaign and a celebrity in the church.

A year passed as money was raised through carnivals, picnics, bake sales, garage sales, and every possible way to earn money save prostitution and selling drugs (though both were discussed by the Fundraising Committee). Committees gave proposals, proposals were rejected. Committees gave new proposals, and slowly they were accepted. Proposals became plans; plans became budgets; budgets became blueprints; and blueprints became reality as three years hence, colored squares of glass were carried in by the "artistic effort" of a nearby interior decorating company.

The discussion over what should be depicted on the stained glass was divisive. Some wanted to picture the life of Jesus, from birth to death to resurrection. Some wanted Old Testament stories of Noah or Moses or Elijah. Some wanted the Creation Story recounted. Some wanted rainbows and sunshine and happiness. Some wanted darkness and night. The argument raged until the woman with the bird pin rose to speak for the first time since that sweaty afternoon.

"The Promised Land" she pronounced proudly. "We need a picture that is as hopeful and beautiful and bountiful as our Effort has been
to create this. God’s greatest promises, Canaan and the stained glass window.” All were receptive to her proposal and brows unfurled and fists unclenched as the decisive move was made. A team from the congregation drew a picture of “Canaan” and disagreed over whether Canaan was in the mountains of the plains or the forest. But, eventually through compromise and a little bit of wine, an agreement was reached, and the interior decorating committee began their work.

That final year entailed the intricate work of piecing the red and blue and yellow squares of light into their places until Canaan arched across the window. It was impossible to hold services in the church with all the construction equipment, so the congregation would meet in backyards for Sunday Service. Every once in a while, the services would be cancelled if no one volunteered their house.

On the day of the unveiling, cars filled the parking lot and the tide spread to the grass as newcomers came to see what lay underneath the white sheets. The woman with the bird pin returned and had been asked to say a few words about the Effort.

Today, she wore a bright blue outfit spangled with the same bird pin that still beguiled Mark. He dressed in his best suit and stood next to the woman because he had a prominent role in the birth of the window. He received a script and specific instructions. He was to react “delightfully” and say “now I see God” and turn his head toward the window. Feeling very important and respected, Mark spent all week practicing his role.

“Canaan,” she began “was a promise to people who were alone, who were in captivity, who needed a way out. God,” she had developed the same peculiarity of the long “O” as the pastor, “was their stronghold and God is ours,” the old sweat beading and raised fist trick. “Today we celebrate this promise and worship God in a way that even our young friend can understand.” Mark smiled. The woman gestured and the sheets fell. The congregation gasped. Stories circulated that some began to cry, and some began to sing, and some began to dance. There is even a story that a man who had never spoken lifted a chorus of “Amazing Grace.”

Once the general excitement lulled, the woman nudged Mark to cue him for his line. Mark looked confused as he glanced from her to the window, and the window back to her. The excited eyes fixed on him revealed that they had missed the obvious. He said, dejectedly, “now I see God,” but the last words of his speech were swallowed up by the cheer of the crowd.
When he was able to escape from the celebration, he ran out of the church to the back of the building to see the outside of the stained glass. He looked at the stained glass and out to the horizon and the landscape, and looked back and forth again and again. The same. The same! The tree that arched outside the window arched in the picture. The thin row of cornfields and the elm trees interjecting green in a golden horizon were spangled across the window too. Blue sky and scattered clouds were etched across both. They had made a stained glass window of their own horizon. He looked again at the angled colored glass, and thought to himself that the real landscape was a whole lot prettier and redder and bluer and yellower and aliver than those shards of glass.

The pastor was near tears the next Sunday to report that some “inconsiderate pagan damned vandal” had thrown large rocks through the stained glass window, sending the colored glass spinning across the floor of the sanctuary.

The pastor was near tears the next Sunday to report that some “inconsiderate pagan damned vandal” had thrown large rocks through the stained glass window, sending the colored glass spinning across the floor of the sanctuary.
Renee set her book *A Little Time Left for Shelley*, down on the floor of the living room and stared at the ceiling. She put her hands behind her head and starting with the tender area, she slowly massaged each area to find the bump. She took her short wavy red hair out of its ponytail and worked her way around the back. Maybe it was just a small tumor yet.

“Mom, my head aches, and yesterday, when I was done watching television I stood up feeling light-headed,” Renee stood up from where she was laying, nothing happened, “I had to stand there for a while before I could take another step, then I was okay, but still, that is not a good sign. Is it Mom?”

“Renee.” The voice came out of the kitchen. Then she heard footsteps and clothes coming closer. Mother stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room holding a cookbook in her hand, dog-earring some of the recipes.

“And I think I feel a lump on my head...feel here,” As she spoke, Renee’s mother looked at her as if some part of her face was so out of focus she had to squint to see the missing detail. Mother rolled her eyes as she set the cookbook down on an armchair and walked toward her. It was that familiar roll of the eyes that told Renee that she was irrational, as if she had just gone outside in the snow barefoot. Here we go again, said her eyes.

“Where do you think this bump is?”

“There,” Renee pointed to her headache.

“Come here,” mother sighed.

Mother never took her seriously. Sometimes she thought it was because of her red hair. No one in the family had red hair, not even her parents. And since she was different from the rest of them, friends and family would kid around with her, saying that she was adopted. Dad started it: “You were found by a pile of sticks on your birthday," he teased, “and that was where we found Kitty-Cat, she was a baby, too. You were keeping each other warm, so cute on the cool July morning grass with your red hair...” No one ever did understand her, no one listened to what she had to say. She believed the story. Found, not born by her parents, and now she had a brain tumor. Great.
Renee did not like July. No one was around, not even her older brothers were there to bother her. At least if they were around she could play basketball with one of them, or she could talk to them about school next year, or they could drive her to get a hamburger to see who else was getting hamburger. Even Dad was gone on his fishing trip with some old friends. It was just too quiet around here lately.

“You really need to stop reading those stories about dying,” said mother after she was through examining her head. “How many of those books have you read?”

“Only three others, my friend gave me this to read while she was gone.” July was always the month when her two good friends left town and went on long vacations with their families.

Mother rolled her eyes again and turned toward the kitchen, “Go find something else to do Renee, it’s summertime.”

She wanted to be able to do something else, but her sickness would not let her. All of this felt so real to her. The symptoms were real and there. The reason why she was given these books was so she could discover her disease early. Shelley first noticed her symptoms as she rode on a bus home from school one day. She knew something was wrong right away. It started with a headache and foggy vision, then dizzy spells. It happened so fast. One day all was well: Shelley had been asked to the homecoming dance and was nominated for the court. Then the next she was in a doctor’s chair, dying. Renee began to rub her head. She breathed softly, slowly, concentrating hard upon the functions going on inside of her. The headache persisted, but stronger now, and the fears grew larger than she could handle. She felt dizzy again.

“Oh my gosh,” she ran to the kitchen, “mom,” tears were gathering inside from her ears and throat, her diseased brain and her stomach, and fogged her vision, “Mom, I really think I’m sick.”

“Renee,” mother said sympathetically as she took the dough out of the mixing bowl and onto the floured counter, “The more you read about dying the greater your chances of thinking that you will die soon. You are imagining things. Now, please go and find something to do.” Mother began to knead the bread dough that she had just mixed. She could make bread as easily as it was for her to breathe. Effortlessly the dough was kneaded and formed to fit into a bread pan. Waiting for the right moment, Renee pulled at a piece of dough and ate it. She knew her mom liked to be left alone when she made bread.

“That is something I don’t need you to do.”
"Mom, what if I am dying?"

"Renee, go. You are not dying. If you were you would have to accept it. People who are sick have to in order to recover."

She was right. Shelley was told to visualize that an army of stuffed animals were constantly fighting her tumor, cutting it to pieces. It was important, they told her, to keep a positive attitude. It was as just as effective as medicine.

Renee didn't even want to be sick, she did not want to have to accept it. Up the stairs inside her room she looked at herself in the mirror and began to cry. She watched herself. Every wrinkle which she could only see when she cried would appear and stay for good in thirty years or so. But what if she didn't live that long? Right now she felt as if her whole lifetime had already passed. She wanted to live, she looked at a photograph of her grandparents. How did they make it through?

She hated July. By the time it came around she had grown tired of the summer free time. It was no longer a freedom, but a burden. She looked at her calender and the sad wrinkles on her face disappeared. She had forgotten to mark off another day on her calendar. The blue and red markers she used for this month lay on her desk. She picked them up and made one blue slash, then took red and crossed over the first one. One more big colorful "X" to mark off these slow days. She took the calendar off the wall and numbered the days until she could return to school. Fifty-three days left. Fifty-three days until she felt better. There would be no more sickness when school started. When she was with her friends she no longer thought about dying all of the time. They put her into remission.

Her head persisted to ache. She looked around for her book and remembered that she left it downstairs on the floor. It could stay there. Shelley was in remission now, since there were about sixty more pages left in the book, it would probably not be too much longer before she was sick again, then got better again, pronounced cured, then died suddenly. Yeah, she would leave her where she was.

What would she do if she were sick? It would take so much to accept the sickness and to deal with all the pain and suffering. Maybe she would not be allowed the pain and suffering, she would just die right away without warning. There would be no diagnosis because no one believed she was having all the symptoms in the first place. It would sure surprise everyone. At her wake they would try to remember if they noticed anything unusual about her lately. Then the
doctor's report would come into the discussion. The doctor said that if it had been discovered earlier, it could have been stopped. They would shake their heads and say, that is just a sad thing, and they would move on with their lives.

_We should have listened, they'll say, and they will pray for my dead self because it would be too late to pray for recovery._

She looked out of her bedroom window. Mom had gone outside to water the plants. The sound of the water hitting the leaves gave Renee a small shiver. Mom took such good care of those plants. Early every morning she woke up and watered them and on extra dry days like this one, they were watered twice. Flowers for the sun, flowers for the shade, flowers for part-sun and part-shade, they were all so carefully tended. In return for her care they flowered like good pets. She was surprised that mom didn’t buy snacks for the plants to reward their good behavior.

_And after I died, mom would continue to water her plants everyday, sometimes twice._

Her attention was drawn to the painting her mom made for her last birthday. It was of the bleeding hearts that bloomed so beautifully last summer. Renee remembered how mom finished the painting after sunset one evening, all except for one detail. Renee remembered that before she could see her painting, she had to wait a whole day after her birthday so mom could capture the exact color the setting sun cast upon the leaves. Around sunset, she allowed Renee to watch as she quickly mixed the oil colors into a pale pinkish yellow. With so much care and confidence in her eyes, she dipped her brush in the paint, and after two small swipes of the brush the whole painting came to life. Those last details made the painting come to life.

Renee heard the sliding screen door open and shut. Mom had finished. Renee could smell the fresh bread baking. It was about ready to come out of the oven. Soon the buzzer would sound, the oven would open and the scent would become even stronger. Mom was very good at baking bread. She was good at a lot of things.

Renee’s head still ached. She pulled out a piece of paper from the notebook she kept beside her bed and read what she had written when she was worrying about death a few days before. It was a list of her belongings and where she wanted them to go when she died. Again she began to feel dizzy and again she lay down on her bed and put her hands where she hurt. Again she worried and cried, her face
It was time for bed but she did not want to sleep. What if she never woke up? This felt like the end. This felt like the time she was jumping on her bed with her brother Tim. Dad came in and told them not to jump on the bed, it was dangerous and bad for the springs. But together they jumped. For some reason or other Renee was holding a penny in her mouth and when her brother made a large leap into the air, she gasped and the penny was lost inside of her. She could still feel it going down her throat. She remembered being scared about what she was supposed to do. She couldn’t tell her dad because he would just say that she should have known better. For days she worried to her brother about it. He just said, “At least now you are worth something.” She was so scared about what the penny would do to her, but she could ask no one.

Mother was the only one there to talk to and she would dismiss her feelings as silly and say that she should not be reading those “dying” books. Mother was good at baking bread and painting pictures, that is why she loved her mother. It was over for her, the adopted red-head worth a penny. The only thing she could do was keep herself awake.

Then there was a knock at her bedroom door.

“Renee?”

“Yeah,” she answered quickly turning off her bedside lamp so her mother could not see her troubled, red face.

And then a soft voice, filled not only with sympathy, but concern, and sincerity came through the door along with the light from the hallway and the silhouette of her mother’s face. Like fresh baked bread, a gentle spray of water upon leaves, and the final brushstrokes on a masterpiece, these simple words calmed her.

“How are you, Renee?”

Everything was going to be okay.
For KeUiK. Blahnik, writing is her instinctive response to the amazing grace she has received from her Savior. His birth makes all the difference in the world. She is an English and Humanities double major and after graduation plans on living in Southern California with her soon-to-be husband.

Wendy still has nothing to say about herself.

Jessica Binns is a disillusioned freshman from the East Coast who is thinking about drastically changing her major. Her favorite authors are Edgar Allen Poe, John Irving and Patricia Cornwell. She enjoys words, literature, procrastination, philosophy, writing, lacrosse and music (except country!). "Look around and ask someone if you are alive / You're a sidewalk cipher speaking prionic jive." –BR

For Kelli K. Blahnik, writing is her instinctive response to the amazing grace she has received from her Savior. His birth makes all the difference in the world. She is an English and Humanities double major and after graduation plans on living in Southern California with her soon-to-be husband.

Sarah Blum is a senior Art major with Art History and Japanese minors from Rockville, Maryland. These pictures were taken during her semester abroad in Reutlingen, Germany. She recommends everyone to study abroad also. “It’s a wonderful, once in a lifetime experience.” Her passions include the Washington Redskins, chocolate, and, of course, Christian. No MSG rocks! Thanks Mom and Dad!

April Burford is from Crown Point, IN. She is majoring in Graphic Design and minoring in Communications.

Christopher John Brown is a senior from Washington, D.C., studying History, Ethnic Studies and African Development. Through his four years at Valparaiso he has served to help create a balanced sense of community and humanness amongst all members of our university. Yet Christopher’s story would be incomplete without the remarkable influence of “Mother Africa” and the lives of her Ubuntu children. Ngiyabonga mfwethu, sisi bhuti. Siyacula iculo, yebo, "Simunye - we are one." Sale Kahle.

Mia Dolce Cabibbo is majoring in English and International Service. She is from Stoughton, WI. Her inspiration is the quiet beauty of everyday life.
Photography is like a form of meditation for her – a chance to look deeply at the things around her that she might otherwise fail to notice. She has found that, despite all the ugliness that exists in the world today, there is still beauty if we only take the time to look.

**Michaela Chatman** is from Gary, IN.

When he's not on the field breaking tackles as the 364 lb. star runningback on the University of Michigan Wolverines Football team, **Stephen DeLassus** can be seen galavanting around campus. Though he usually looks like a combination of lost and confused, Stephen is actually a grounded Finance and Accounting double major, a junior at Valpo, and a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity. However, he was heard saying, "... but I've always thought of joining the circus."

**Dan Di Prisco** is a junior Psychology major from Valparaiso. He would just like to say that he is glad he finally got in.

**Kelly K Faulstich** is a junior English Education major whose true existence remains under a picnic table many miles west of her hometown of Wheaton, IL. Until her 12 year plan becomes a reality, she continues being perfectly content singing songs about jell-o, attempting to personify Switzerland, and showing off her buccinate.

**Armando X. Fernandez** will be a Senior at the end of the 1999 Spring semester. He is majoring in History, with a minor in English. He presently lives in Portage, IN. Armando is a VU@Night student and has been thoroughly enjoying his university experience. He would like to thank Prof. Byrne and Prof. Ruff for getting him interested in reading and writing poetry. Armando also enjoys reading, writing, sports and music.

**Gregory Denton Gallup** is a Senior English major. He enjoys hiking, camping, music, reading, and writing. Upon graduation, he plans to travel with Americorps, then attend graduate school on the West Coast.

**Joshua C. Honn** is a sophomore Graphic Design/Journalism major with a minor in Philosophy. Other projects he is involved in include Stereodream, Sent and Airport (all musical groups).

**Jessica Irvin** is a junior majoring in Meteorology. She is from South Bend, IN, and writes poetry to relieve stress and make some sense of this mind-boggling world.
Sarah Jacobsen is a sophomore from Richmond, IN, majoring in Communications and minoring in Art. She has been writing poetry since 8th grade, and believes that writing has been the primary source for her self-reflection, where each poem is sort of her own "therapy session" with herself where she is able to delve into her imagination, and come up with something entirely "her." She is a fan of all writers, but only a few are due her lingering obsession, with Sylvia Plath being devoted the most shelf space in her room. A favorite quote of hers is, "Remember, your character is your destiny," as she believes it furthers us to the realization of how important true self-reflection is, because of what can come of it.

Erica E. Kaufman is a Junior majoring in Chemistry, Biology and the Humanities. She is from Dyer, IN, and enjoys learning and athletics in her free time.

Kerri Klein wants to wave hello. She is going to go take a nap now.

Truly, Karen Joy Klostermann sees the world through the eyes of a child. No, this is not due to her physical stature, but rather a mind which naturally embraces all aspects of youth. She thanks God for this, among other blessings, such as her friends and family.

Justin Krishka, a senior from North Richland Hills, TX, is double majoring in Music Education and English Education. He wishes to dedicate his poem to Danielle for showing him an example of great strength and faith in a time of crisis and to Kristi who has never stopped believing in him. And, as always, he encourages everyone to read Virginia Woolf as often as possible (preferably while listening to anything composed by Robert Schumann).

Becky R. Kruse is a freshman majoring in Broadcast Communications and minoring in Film Studies. She is from LeMars, Iowa, and hopes to accomplish being a movie editor. Becky likes ice hockey, plays tennis, writes books in her spare time and collects Scooby Doo paraphernalia. She enjoys the Goo Goo Dolls and her favorite movies include Dead Poets Society and Tombstone. Her favorite poet is a three way tie between Jewel, Dylan Thomas, and the great Bob Dylan.

And Mary loves most to travel and to write. She sees the two as being inextricably related (travelling necessitates writing, writing is travelling), and for this, she is grateful.

Cheryl Lohrmann, a graduating senior from Battle Ground, Washington, majors in Art (with concentrations in graphic design and photography) and minors in Writing. So, she likes to do art and to write.
Sarah "Otto" Marxhausen, despite appearing to be a freshman from Colorado, is actually a forty-year old heating duct repairman named Harry, who is on the run from the feds. He would like to sincerely thank everyone he's ever met in his entire life, especially Bob the Wonder Ivy for many hours of entertaining photosynthesis, and Callard & Bowser-Suchard Inc., for creating Altoids, the Original Celebrated Curiously Strong Peppermints.

jes noon attempts poetry knowing full well that her efforts are like dust mites in the world of imagery and words... she pleads that the world read more Nikki Giovanni, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and T.S. Eliot.

K.E. Root is a sophomore at VU, who transferred from the University of Toronto (Toronto, Canada). She is completing a double major in English and Theatre Arts. She lives in Valparaiso and is interested in writing for theatre as well as poetry.

Carly Skvarce is from the northwest suburbs of Chicago and has no idea what she is doing in Indiana. At this point in time, she is majoring in Psychology and minoring in Biology, English and Classical Civ., anything that will get her a job studying the behavior of her favorite animals in the whole world, monkeys and apes (and don't you dare get them mixed up!!!). Some of her favorite poets and authors are E.E. Cummings, Jack Kerouac, Douglas Coupland and Edgar Allan Poe. She can't live without her music and her dream of owning a 1999 Firebird Trans Am.

Naomi Strom is a senior with both an Art major in photography and an individualized major in Communications and Art History. She considers herself a traveling nomad who once considered the West Coast home. She wishes to thank her family, friends, and professors for their support over the last four years. Pepe—you know I can never put my thoughts into words but you feel what I feel.

Dirk van der Duim enjoys writing, making photographs, and singing (among other things). What he likes most is when he can share the words and pictures and songs. He thinks that it's good for people to let others see how they see.

Jenn Zeile, is a transfer from Michigan State University and is a sophomore. She is an English major hoping to go into advertising. Jenn is from Clarkston, MI.
You could be part of the Lighter!

Don't forget about the Lighter over the summer! Take advantage of your time off to write, photograph and draw!

Deadline for written entries for the fall semester issue is Friday, October 8, 1999

• entries are due by 8 p.m.
• all entries must be neatly typed
• please include a cover page with your entries stating your name, titles of all pieces submitted, and address or phone number – your name must NOT appear on your entries!

Deadline for artwork for the fall semester is Monday, October 18, 1999

• entries are due by 8 p.m.
• please include a cover page with your entries stating your name, titles of all pieces submitted, and address or phone number – your name must NOT appear on your entries!
• all entries except those chosen for the front and back cover will be printed in black and white
• photography, drawings, graphic artwork, etc. are excepted.
• all artwork will be returned
• all artwork must be of scannable size