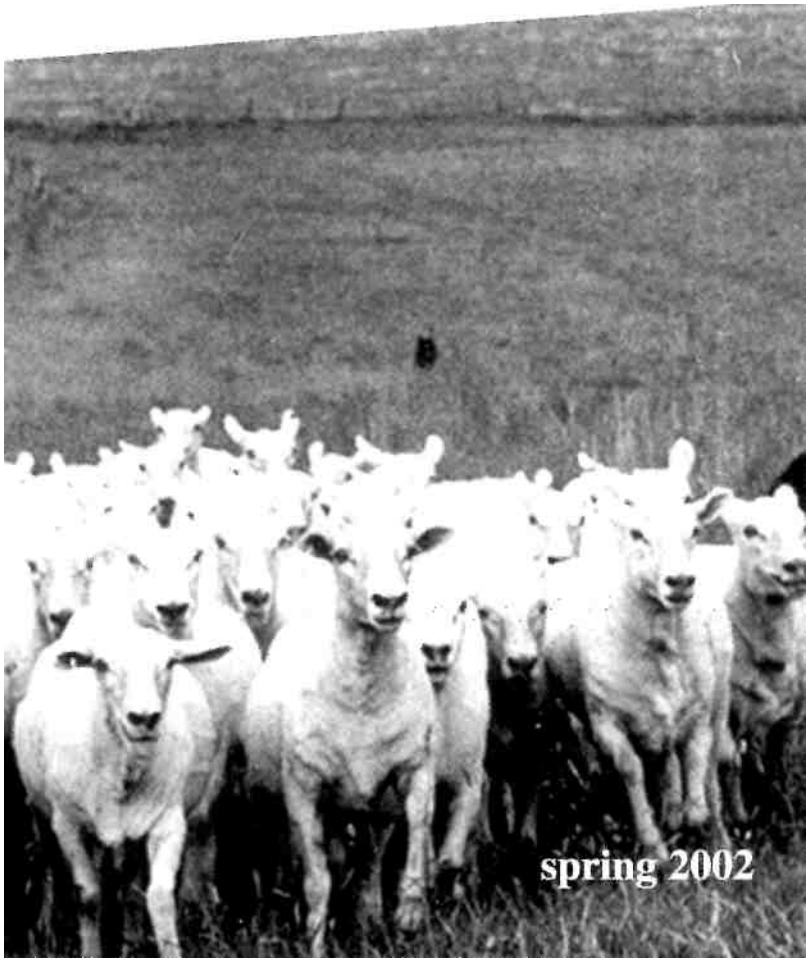
the garland



the garland

the art and literature magazine
of loyola college

the garland volume 15, spring 2002

 Undergraduate members of the college community are invited to submit original works of poetry, fiction, and photography. All works under review remain anonymous. Please direct corresondence to **the garland** c/o Dr. Daniel McGuiness, Loyola College Communication Department, 4501 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21210.

Published by Junior Press.

contents

poetry

photography

short fiction

editor's note

People stop me in the street, badger me
In the check-out queue
And ask, "What is this, this that is so small
And so very smooth
But whose mass is greater than the ringed planet?
It's just words
I assure them.

Simon Armitage - Zoom

Words. Milk in the check-out line, Doritos, electric bills, Tuesday's homework assignment and junkmail are all words. But there is a certain time when ordinary words fall into extraordinary places. I am not saying that writing is an easy task or something that just happens, but there are moments when you know you can make the words fit, when you know that they can say something - This edition of *The Garland*- is a collection of those instances.

I would like to thank all contributing writers for their work and their time. Thanks also to Professor Atticks for his patient understanding of my design and computer problems, and my greatest appreciation to Dr. McGuiness for introducing me to the world of contemporary poetry and thinking I could do this.

- Erin Jones

it is her birthday
although

from Chagall's Birthday

The driveway and mailbox are
empty so she stays
inside, gulps her tea for heat
and cuts her own cake,
dividing herself over and over
the way a cell multiplies,

gives birth and stretches
the limits of nature,
the girl growing and having
grown, tea and
cake forever she believes
until he surprises her

knocks her from behind
so that her eyes explode wide
and discover a green smear
where his eyes should be
and she is drunk on backward-
bending and feet-sweeping

the classic stages of falling
forward like we do
in dreams and like we will
on that day when
tea and cake are no longer enough.

Kelly McGuinness

six degrees

You sent a scent of a pony-
Tailored and tied with mysteries and maybes
Was that a mistake?
Subliminal, signals of braille
Dreams and talks of babies
Interrogation, with punctuation hail.

Steady stream was fire-
Walled with blame as blaze
Why do we do that?
Drunken decisions,
From a guiltless ale daze
Prioritize with bodily revisions.

I miss the misanth-
Rope of ants thereof
Is passion fake?
Broken trail existed
Umbilical cord of love
Barely, but still connected.

Magnetized by round, maglite eyes
Gently tied and knit, yet bound
Bite the bullet?
Apologies apt and all forgiven
Cupid's bow was buried in ground
Until Venus' noose, was cut and riven.

Once again, there was the face ...
Enhanced by mouth, as wine to taste
To resist flesh as cake?
Spit from licks have formed a lake
Nothing closer to heaven's sake

Enamored through glamour . . .then reality taps and wakes,
And occurs an epiphany from above
Sex and emotion feeds the dove
Finger tip or a chat?
Some take advantage of one, not the other,
And are prepared for a wife, but run away from a mother
But I swear, my adoration ... is complete.

Greg Parasmo

prairie
backstroke

For Matthew Shepard, murdered October 7, 1998

These last few days I've been
backstroking through jello
trying to push that picture out
out of my hair but it's
stuck to my eyelashes like
the framed three year old
me with yellow cake icing as
war wounds
Why couldn't he have won that
night of purple welts delivered under
a silent and secretive Wyoming sky
that watched the whole play performed
by three, two Budweisered villains and
the handsome protagonist denied
the Hans Christian Anderson ending he

should have been alive on the last page

I sit here two years after it happened
wondering if the fistfuls of
tears he caused have dried up like
the comers of this old newspaper image
Did the brown blades of the grass surrounding him
whisper the secrets of the hushed life
being rocked back and forth between
clear blue waves and the sinking earth?

They said the people driving by thought he
was a scarecrow staring out over the hollow plain
skinny body hung up and dangling the notes of ignorance
I can still see him

I can still see that strawed hair
wisps of it blowing
singing with the wind a song I hope
my parents never have to learn
holding me, framed and
streaked by the icing in my eyelashes

Susannah Wetzel

grinds

While spilled mugs of tar
Seep like autumn on our wedding plans-
Water tinted, then murky, then thick as a
Cauldron stew, scolded and raped,
Gritty flecks of memories are left for us to look on.

So I gulp coffee like a pelican does a fish,
Swallowing whole, needing the lift,
And also to be warm, not burned.

It's best not to revive our relations,
But to let them die in peace.
When I was a young girl, I once saw
A hermit crouched by the shoreline
Who noticed a handsome bird choking and gagging
A self-made fishing hook, he jammed
His hand, man's self-conscious bait, into the slimy
Tunnel, as tight as his skin was loose.
Pulling out fillets of half-chewed fish, strips of natural selection
Who was he to halt chance?
His help helps none.
Things end
As do our plans. But first they scorch,
As when coffee is poured over and over
In cups, and over and over our heads.

Gina Petrizzio

memories

I.

I remember a morning
When I woke to
Airplanes
Flying overhead
And the comforting
Smell
Of cigarette smoke.
I wandered down the steps
To find an old man
Reading
His newspaper.
He asked me if I
Would like a grapefruit.
I said yes
And so he fixed it for me.
Then he finished
His coffee
And left.

II.

I remember an evening
When I watched
Country singers
On TV
Until it was
Time
For ice cream.
An old man
Came up the stairs,
Smelling of bourbon.
He pulled out
A brown bowl
And scooped some Breyers
With chocolate syrup.
Then I brushed
My teeth
And we said
"Goodnight."

Jessica Gardner

untitled

I was there last night while you were sleeping.
My kiss dried on your cheek
  as you stirred and woke.
The curtains settled,
  and you turned and sighed.

Aidan Ryan

parking lots

February falls in a slant.
There is no ocean or coastline to
Make the moisture scenic, real -
Just rows of cars, a garbage can, and
A salt bucket too heavy to carry.

Cars lined symmetrically - tailights,
Headlights. Windows rolled up, door
Locks pushed down - tires stopped, sleeping
parallel to the electric cables and yellow

lines of the highway. In the High Renaissance,
a time unlike today, architecture turned to
antiquity and replicated ancient circles of
rains. Spheres were central, the Earth
the center of the universe, and a man by
the name of Bramante erected a little
cathedral - *The Tempietto at San Pietro* -
made of circles in the courtyard of a square.

The symbol for woman is the circle and men
are said to be linear - standing beneath a
shower head, where water falls in the motion
of arrows, or a bullet leaving the barrel of
a gun.

Erin Jones

winter morning

Snow on the driveway settles on the tar,
the fat, white snowflakes coating it
like goose feathers, fresh from a pillow fight,
onto a bedroom floor.

Shadows pour out of
a dark, old tree as if cut open at the base:
sap draining in winding pathways,
wandering aimlessly through the frozen yard: only shadows.

A lone crow, circling through the grey sky
caws, interrupting the still silence,
like his shiny, black body cutting through
the pallid, mournful dawn

Elizabeth Andrews

sound

Her voice, like delicate glasses of ice water
Clinking playfully
Song filling the air
The glass drops
A gentle whoosh
Causes a light gust of wind
Whispers to him
Hisses her desire
To extend the chimes
Fill the echoes
Caress the ears of all
Who will stop and listen.

Jessika Rao

river's morning

I wake to find the window gaping at me,
Mist curls slow like a snake-ghost
through a tear in the screen.
I stop and hang this way: arms above
The head, skin stretching. Eavesdropping.
Birds discuss the weather and
Gossip, flit and swoop.
The air is still—windless—instead

The river runs black. Starless night black,
Cigarette ash black.
The color is
A trade-off for its depth.
The river is older than America,
Birthed a thousand mornings.
Primitive oars sliced the dark water.
The birds flit and gossip,
swoop overhead.

Kelly McGuinness

"Mark Rothko's *Red Over White:* A Tribute to Virginia Woolf"

I.
A white window encased by pink frost with red resting on the bottom
Dark against white like morning against night

II.
The saxophone dangles from your fingertips lightly
(I think of Duke Ellington)
I am only sixteen and my hands are like white doves
You turn and I see your face, and mine,
In a mirror of gold against the sultry notes
My cheeks turn pink, but inside it is all red

III.
A woman is standing on a cliff in Switzerland
Her red shawl has been captured by the wind
It glides over and under the wind like the waves below.
(A mere idea drifting from her fingertips)
A man in a white sailboat below is entranced.
He dances on the white cresting waves as she dances in red above.

IV.
The mother is walking through a field of poppies with her child
(frozen) The poppies bum red, and she opens her parasol
to shield the color. They have lived to see Monet's death,
And they will live to see mine.
They will live to see the generations of faces shifting before their
view, millions of mouths open in awe at the bright red poppies against
the white-washed walls.

V.
Grandma watched my little red snowcap soar
I flew down her backyard, white hills of snow, not knowing that

things melt, change.
One day I patted my grandmother's hand,
White like ice, and she said,
"Maybe one day you will want to go sledding again"
But I knew I would never fly like that again.

VI.
My little legs are dangling from the top limb of this white birch tree.
I scratch my name into its surface,
And it bleeds orange.
A red cardinal lands near me,
I whisper into its ear that if I too was a bird,
Would it be my friend?
It flys away, a blur of red against white.
If I were a bird, I would plunge vertically into the air,
High up into the world of white clouds and mist,
A phoenix in a white veil.

VII.
I am sitting in a cathedral,
Little candles are bursting and beginning with light everlasting
I lean my head back against the wooden pew
Tiny swirls of reflected light in the high, high ceiling
Stars, I think
Somewhere in the back someone is weeping,
a voice like a baby's whisper
I look at Jesus and his white marble eyes.
The altar is a blood red carpet.

VIII.
Do you remember when we went fishing?

Do you remember the way the sky was like the sea?
Do you remember the way I laid down on your lap and fell asleep? Do you remember how my eyes were closed, and the sunlight burned pink inside?
Do you remember the way your lips were like upside-down crescent moons?
Do you remember the way you smelled of white chrysanthemums and peppermint?
I do,
And time comes back circular,
Just the way Virginia Woolf always knew it would.

IX.
Red paint.
White paint.
Red and White: Pink.
Two colors destined to converge?
One always greater than the other?
Am I a child, a grandmother, a mother or a father?
Am I a star, a rose, or a blue cresting wave?
Or am I everything?
Is the world swirling, swirling, swirling...
Is this all just one mass of thick, messy paint?

Dayna Hill

poem

self justification
is eating apple sauce
on the surrogate hood
of your neighbor's new car
shouting about how you
want to be like Kafka
except you think you can't
because you're too scared of
bugs; chiggers inside of
your head that are moving,
stealing your life away

and besides that, you think,
chigger sounds like some kind
of ethnic slur, which is
"really a shame," you say,
"but that's just how it goes
sometimes" and you are right.

(a poem inspired by classroom discussion)

Nick Prindle

mark baird

tiffany scofield west

kevin foley

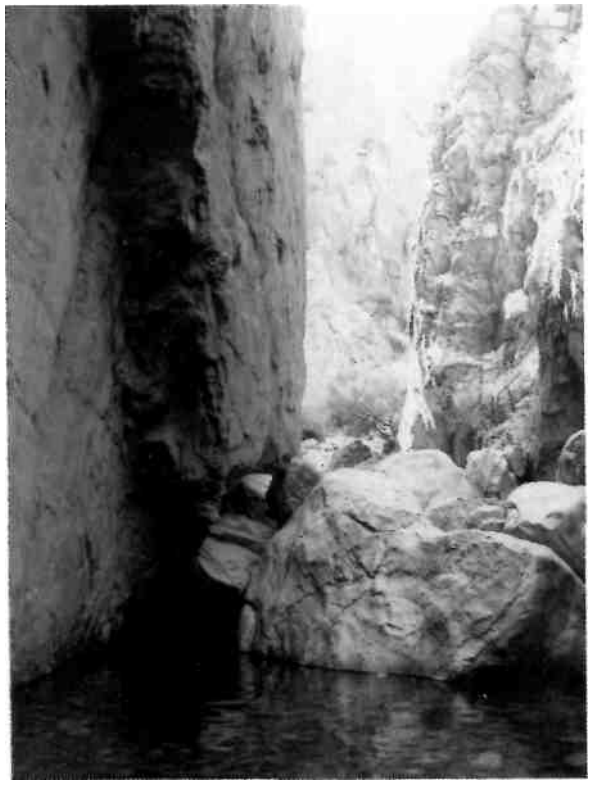
maryl roberts

erin jones

mark baird

annie cassidy

mark baird



erin jones

ryan creel

mark baird

maryl roberts

mark baird

lightning

The day that kindergarten orientation began at Chester Elementary School, my mother, the smiling principal who would greet each busload of children that arrived, received a call from the husband of her best kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Price would not be able to come to work for an indefinite amount of time. Her 19-year-old son had been struck by lightning the night before and had died on the spot, around the same time my family was eating hamburgers and corn on the cob, our last tribute to the fading summer served on red-checked picnic tablecloth.

They were playing tag football on the beach, the unorganized but never half-hearted type where he and his younger brother Jimmy took on their dad and older brother Tom, the younger set wiry and lithe in the adolescent way and much faster, but ultimately the losers when up against matured muscle and bulk. It was sunset, pink and orange everywhere, the kind of August evening glow that makes you want to sit on a deck for eternity, breathing in citronella and barbecue smoke and sauce. It must have been even more pleasant on the beach, the sand reaching that seven o'clock coolness with the tide rhythmically going out in gentle rushes. Off the Jersey shore, nestled in the woods of the rural hills, I didn't see any clouds on the horizon as we all sipped iced tea and passed platefuls of pasta salad. But there must have been one, there had to have been one gray, floating warning in the sky above the ocean, signaling a potential storm. Or at least there should have been.

My mother said it was out of nowhere. But perhaps as he passed the ball to the little brother who his parents called his "twin-" same height, facial expression, and tilt of the head-maybe he felt a shift in the wind, felt the sand spread in a sudden flying way, saw a purplish hue in the orange rays of the descending sun. Perhaps he felt his heart jump, not from the rowdy pace of football but from something deeper inside of him; the feeling in the center of the stomach, gripping and breathtaking, the knowledge of someone's eyes watching or sense the footsteps quickening, coming from behind.

Moments before death may be like that; a surge of determined adrenaline, the rush of the last crucial seconds in a beach football game. He threw harder and dove without hesitation; his sister, giving the eulogy in a solemn Catholic church, said that night was the first time it looked as though the younger boys would beat the "men" of the family.

I picture it like a photograph you could find in one of those apparel catalogs: four healthy men in all-American T-shirts and still-drying salty bathing suits, tanned and muscled, strong, white-toothed smiles. But as the sun goes down the photographs become stoic, black-and-white shots taken of him, alone, moving unaware of an outsider's eye, weaving through sand and arms with concentration, dancing in still-life. He sees the ocean, the sky, the beach, the mother who told him never to grow up and the brother he stole Halloween candy from; devoid of color, the pictures glitter at his eyes.

And in a space of time that refuses to be measured, white streams through the last shot in a thin and jarring, crooked but unified line. It is without declaration or explanation, we attempt to control it but it is not something for us to decide. In his last picture he is mid-air, preparing to tackle his taller and heavier father, and then his father is standing but he is not.

How strange it must have been to die while seeing yourself live in everyone around you; his twin, Jimmy, who constantly competed for distinction from him but never actually wanted it. In this boy just one year younger, he saw his own face before him: the same gray eyes and dark hair, one clump of it always parting to the left when the rest of it parted to the right; but this face was red, alive, eyes blinking and mouth moving without sound, Chaplin-like; while he himself rocked in between heat and buzzing, the sound of the ocean like fading background music through his colorless cheeks. For him, the sand became the water and the sky became the earth, shifting plates of grit and smoothness, moving up from his feet to his brain in massive waves that he used to wish for while on his boogie board, bare-chested and twelve years old.

And then the silence of evening becoming night, the space of time immeasurable to him rolling, racking his body in the slow-motion that only the dying can truly experience. And in this change from purple to black, the faces he sees become spots and then only light, and the photograph, the stilllife of a 19-year-old, will not develop but remains a formless splotch of white rimmed in overexposed yellow.

My mother said the funeral was silent and the church hot with swarms of mourners, breathing as one, a tunnel of air, of life circling death. I thought that those words, that any words, would never be able to capture what it must have felt like to be caught running without inhibition through cool sand on an August evening with the ocean behind you and sixty years ahead of you.

Susannah Wetzel

The part in my hair looked crooked in the mirror that morning, the white scalp too drastic against the brown locks. Grieving seemed to create a lack of proportion, some sense of contortion, like it unfastened your mind. I had turned the shower on as hot as I could physically bare—not hot enough to really burn. The water seemed more cleansing when it scalded. It's like taking tape to your skin, leaving it smooth, shorn.

I was standing, eyes to the sky, closed, in the midst of a shower of leaves. The whole scene reminded me of a refrigerator picture that had been passionately colored by some fierce second grader. Sliding into the white plastic lawn chair, I waited for dusk to bring light, or perhaps more literally--that obscured clarity--to a dimming day.

Looking at the white arm-rest, I wondered about the old man I saw in the store that day, hobbling around, appearing empty and lost. He smelled like cigars, wore all brown: a corduroy jacket, brown turtleneck, and what appeared to be brown polyester "slacks." His face was sweet—soft, but his smile was sad. I wondered why he was alone. I thought for a moment that perhaps he was somewhere thinking about how lonely it would be to be me, and here I am—a complete idiot—a complete loser, letting white plastic lawn chairs break my heart. Of course, I always do that, take a minuscule event and make it my own—always read too much into smile, I suppose. Even the other day when the lady behind the counter at the Uni-Mart smiled at me, I would have sworn she fell immediately in love with me, wanted to spend the rest of life with me, saw something special in me. But deep down I knew she gave that smile to everyone. That old man probably will never think about me again.

I actually made myself throw up that morning; right before I made myself go look for lawn furniture. It's funny how you take for granted being able to look at yourself. You never really understand until you do something as terrible as I did. It was not like I killed anyone, or burned down any houses, I was just selfish—and that may

be the worst way to live.

Usually as I lay in my bed, trying to fall asleep, I replayed different endings to that night. Sometimes I turned away from her and smiled, just walked away into the black night. Sometimes I hugged her, held onto her blond hair, smiled, opened the door to my battered green truck and drove her home—not talking necessarily, but knowing that everything was okay. Sometimes, and this was my favorite, I left before she got there, finished my beer, took one last drag, and with a wave of my hand left the rest to party in the parking lot. We simply passed in the darkness, never knowing what harm I could cause.

Of course Mary was okay, but I was not. I saw the way people looked at me as I drove through town, or as I was stopped at the one stop light on Main Street—some looked sorry, usually friends of my mother's, like they wished they could've helped me; some looked knowing, as if they predicted my down fall from the day I was born, "Oh that Matt, I knew he wasn't right the day he came home from the hospital, always crying." Or "Well, what would did you expect—his mother left when he was in elementary school—he was bound to screw up." As if there was some kind of statistic in last month's Good Housekeeping supporting their assertion. Most people shot a mixture of anger and disappointment at me through their eyes, making me wish I could duck my head and drive at the same time, and that hurt most of all.

She's been gone almost a year. After she left I walked around, head to the ground, apparently looking for something of substance to fill the void. I looked up the word redemption in the dictionary, thinking I had a better chance of finding it if I knew what it meant. It didn't come—or hasn't yet. Mary hasn't come back either. I see her parents every once in a while fishing in the lake right on the edge of town, sometimes I imagine that they don't know, and I'm just another guy driving by. Sometimes I think they'll ask me to join them. Or sometimes I think her father will pull out a shotgun and stare straight into my eyes—not doing anything, but making me almost want to die anyway.

Her father was one of those prominent men in the community who talked too loud, told dirty jokes when the wife wasn't around, and stood guard like a lion over his little girl. I think her mom was a hippie turned born-again-Christian. I hated the word hippie—didn't really understand it—but whatever it meant; most of them seemed to grow up to be fanatic Jesus followers. It was not a bad thing to be, I suppose—we all needed a little faith, or something to keep us together, but most of the time I think we need something more.

I went to church every morning when I was little, me, my mother, and my father—and she still left. It wasn't a bad divorce. She needed to be someone the country didn't make room for, no room between the pine trees and the flying squirrels—so she went to San Francisco—a long way from western Pennsylvania. One morning she packed her bags, made me eggs and bacon, tore apart her art studio—shoved yarn, canvas, oil paint into her jeep, and drove away. The country felt like hands around her neck, a pillow on her face, a space with no room to dance. She had wild ideas—she could turn regular glass into a sculpture of color and light so magical you had to touch it to make sure it was real. Dad raised me—taught me to hunt, fish, and be tough. He wrapped his feelings pretty tightly around himself—liked numbers and facts better than emotion. He was the ground—she was the sky.

Whenever something bad happened, like broken bones or wisdom teeth, or when my mother missed something big like the time I pitched the no-hitter at the little league all-star game, she always sent me a piece of her stained glass. It usually worked, since it wasn't money she was sending me, or trying to buy my love with, it was time she was sending—time and love and thoughts—from thousands of miles away. I think it made my father a little jealous that she could fix things like that, but that's one of the reasons he loved her so much anyway.

So when Mary had to leave my mother sent me a stained glass sailboat—purple and yellow against a red setting sun with the words Sailor's Delight written in white calligraphy letters in the blue ocean. I hung it against the bathroom window—every time I looked at it I wanted to throw up. My mind never quite grasped why she sent me something for that occasion—or incident—or accident—or whatever it should be called.

My father never talked about it really. He asked me if I was okay once in awhile, but he never dove too far into my heart after I told him. I knew he wanted me to grow up to be a good, honest man—and I already seemed to have ruined my chance.

* * * * * *

"Can you please come with me, Matt?" Ann begged. "I can't, actually, I refuse, to sit through another one of these meetings, 'sessions' whatever, by myself." The ringing phone had pulled me out of the past, pulled me out of the lawn chair and into my shit-hole house.

"Jesus, Ann, you're always telling me how weird all those people are—the pill poppers, the acid droppers, come on, I've had a hell of a week." I started tracing the infinity symbol on my dirty jeans

and rocking myself back and forth, tuning Ann out.

Ann was a recovering alcoholic, who had dabbled occasionally in other recreational drugs—a little pot, prescription drugs—nothing too hard or too often, except the booze. We graduated from college together last May, a local community college, and neither of us has gone too far since then. A lot of people get sucked into small towns, not that it's a bad thing, just a pretty bizarre phenomenon. I often find myself making lots of comparisons between the country and the city—especially after my mother left—and then even more when I stayed, basically in the woods, after graduation. I got my own place about two months ago, but Ann still lives with her father. Sometimes I feel like Eugene Toomer, I mean, I think he got it—I think he got it first. The purity lies in the country side—the city is simply one large box—imprisoning—hindering—and they don't even realize and they don't even care, because if the box is made of gold, the sunset against the cotton field—or reflection in the water--means nothing.

"Matt, hell-oooh...are you still there? Come in Matt, Come in Matt, Space Shuttle Matthew ready for landing." I was spinning around and around in the only bar chair I have along the pseudo bar my kitchen, changing direction every couple seconds so the phone cord didn't wrap around too far. Ann was giggling by the time her little space shuttle escapade was over—after much gurgling, blasting, and other non-identifiable noises through the phone. Ann had a cute laugh. I smiled to myself. "Are you coming Mr. Philosopher?" She always made jokes that I analyzed things too much—beat thoughts along the walls of my mind until they were just bloody incoherent words lying around.

"Fine, Ann, I'll go."

"Goody, Goody, Goody! Yeah!"

"Calm down dear, I'm not excited about it."

"Sure, Matt, it's like a weekly dose of entertainment if you look at it right—a bunch of freaks talking about their problems—it should make you feel better. I'll be there in five minutes." The phone went dead before I had the chance to respond.

What a feisty little thing. And little is an understatement. She's probably just barely five feet tall—almost 100 pounds, short jet-black hair—bright green eyes, porcelain skin. She's like a little doll. When Ann was in high school she could drink any football player under the table—bottles of tequila—cases of beer—just before she'd go snort a line of Ritalin. In college, it just got worse, and I found myself sticking my fingers down her throat, brushing her teeth, and sitting up beside her all night long—worried she wouldn't wake up.

One night when we were sophomores I found Ann in the bushes behind the dorms throwing up blood and singing old Bruce Springsteen songs. Her laughter covered it up the next day, making people think it was a big joke—nothing serious. Her shaking hands and unsteady eyes told a different story though.

Ann was actually the one who told me about Mary leaving. Mary got fired from the Dairy Queen the morning after it happened. Her parents didn't know for days. My stomach feels like it's eroding every time I think about that night. I knew it would be all over town by the weekend. That's what happens when you live in rural America—unless it's hunting season, no one has anything better to do than talk about what everyone else is doing. In the summer—it's even worse. In high school when Bobby stole a bottle of Jack Daniel's from his father's liquor cabinet and went cow tipping, my father told me about it before Bobby even had a hangover. And when Stacey gave Bill a blowjob for the first time, my grandmother called me asking what the hell a blowjob was.

It happened at After Dark, when the DQ closed and we would all sit around smoking cigarettes, drinking warm beer on hot car hoods ranting about the stupid hicks who would pop up at the window during the day. Mary's told me her mother always said nothing good could happen at a place with that name. Her mother also always said that nothing good happens after mid-night. But After Dark isn't even a place really—it's just a parking lot.

So Mary's boss saw us in the field. He said it looked bad for his business. Well so did underage kids drinking beer in his parking lot. I think he just wanted Mary to himself—a young girl to sit on his lap, bring him beer, and take advantage of. She was a special girl—long blond hair, brown eyes, perfect boobs, and a great laugh. Ann-and Mary were kind of friends too—even though Mary was two years behind us.

Arm's honk made me jump up—almost hurting myself--out of my old porch swing. As I walked to the car, she looked at me as if I was just having a conversation with her, not myself, as if she knew where my mind was on that porch swing. The handle was stuck on her '86 chartreuse Volvo, it always was. Reaching in through the window, my fingers found the handle and opened it from the inside. "Come on, Matt, I need to tell you something." She sounded nervous. Usually people told me to put the past in the past when they saw that look on my face—what was wrong with Ann? I took my place in the bucket seat—mended with duct tape where the leather had suffered, where time had taken its toll—I felt like it was my own bed. Leaning

back, I got in the perfect position to look up at the stars. The stars were always out in small towns—I've never even seen one in a city. Once I visited Baltimore and didn't see a single star for three days.

"Nice lawn furniture." Her smile was playful as the almost sarcastic compliment danced off her lips. She lit a cigarette. Now that Ann doesn't drink anymore, she smokes cigarettes all day long, drinks coffee till two, coke till ten, and tea until she falls asleep. While I'm lying in bed, I picture her bouncing around the confines of her room—laughing and smoking until the sun comes up.

"Thanks, big purchase of the today, I thought it would add a nice touch—-a little spice- to my very nice, and very large, porch."

"At least you don't live with your father anymore."

"Yeah, I only work for him." My eyes were on the sky as we talked. I know the landscape by heart anyway, no need to look anywhere but up. The houses haven't changed in twenty years. The air started whipping at my cheeks, I turned my head into the wind for more. Ann's cigarette smoke found its way over to my nose and then flew out the half-opened window.

"Um...Did you know Mary had her baby.. .your baby.. .the baby..." Ann's voice trailed off, and suddenly our usually mindless banter almost slit my throat, cut off all oxygen.

"Well, I knew that.. .I knew that.. .I knew that it was almost almost almost almost time for it—her—him—to come out.. .be born.. .it's been almost a year.. .well, I guess nine months, huh?" I laughed nervously as I made an attempt at a joke. My head was shaking back and forth, my eyes twitching in their sockets—a symphony of blinking and blank stares, both knees seemed to have a mind of their own, and tears were pushing their hardest to start flowing—I shoved them back. Rolling down the window, my hand moved through the cold air in waves, a few drops of rain began tickling my arm—or trying—it felt more like open safety pins being thrown by little children at my bare skin. The houses blurred into an oblivion of black, the street swept out from under me, the stars nothing special in the sky.

"Listen, Matt, she wrote me a letter, I just opened it today. She sounds good, she doesn't want to talk to you, but she wanted you to know." I knew Ann had more to say, but I cut her off.

"Jesus, I have a little..."

".. .girl.. Jessica." Ann filled in.

"Girl," I repeated slowly. "Jessica," I repeated even slower.

"Matt, it's going to be hard, but you need to move on—she doesn't want you to see her."

"Can I have her address?" I didn't even really feel like a dad—I felt like I was reading that story in Health class, the one they make you read in sex education, in an attempt to stop sex before marriage, where the adolescent father turns out to be an asshole, leaving the reader wondering why the story isn't turning out right. But I was dead to emotion. My tears stopped pushing at my eyelids, my body silenced. I was a freak. I was a goddamn unfeeling, asshole freak father. Can I have her address? I repeated the question over and over in my mind as Ann silently drove. What kind of question is that? Suddenly I felt my body begin shaking again, but out of anger—pure anger—like I felt when I heard the rednecks in town beat up a black man running down the street—like I remember trying to control when my mother left—an anger you can't understand—an anger that starts slowly and then takes over all you know—the houses, the street, the sky, you hands, your feet. How could Mary do this to me? She's making me a bad father without giving me a chance—she chose my fate for me. Who gave her that power? Who put her in charge of my life?

"We're here." Ann said it as though I'd been waiting for this destination all my life. My lips didn't move—neither did I. "Listen Matt, we need to put the past in the past—things happen. That's why I want you here tonight—these people were almost completely gone—lost to the world at some point in their lives—even at this point in life. Maybe they'll help, in some twisted searching way." She said the last part with her forehead all wrinkled, her head cocked to one side, not sure of what exactly she was hoping for. Her tiny hand was squeezing my shoulder. "You're not going to be a part of Jessica's life, Matt...you just can't be." Her hand found the handle of the door, it opened. Ann turned back to me, her feet on the concrete, "Mary is going to finish college—she's very happy—she is actually engaged." Ann said the last part fast—she knew she couldn't keep anything from me—perhaps she thought it would make me feel better, relieved even.

"Why isn't she marrying me?" I asked quietly. But Ann had already shut her door and started toward the big white doors of teh building. My hands were insistently tapping the glove compartment—in no rhythm—just in anger. After three attempts at opening the door, I finally got out. Following her, my mind was a jumble of string tied in knots, my stomach an erupting volcano of acid, my lips closed tightly. The train's whistle was blowing in the background, soothingly I suppose. I knew Ann well enough to know that she didn't mean to break me with her last words, I knew she felt as though she had to pay me back for all the nights I guarded her. Maybe some boys would be glad to not have to deal with a family right now—in a lot of ways I

was—but at the same time I felt robbed. The parking lot was almost completely empty—and for some reason it smelled funny, like wet cats or something. On a better night—I knew I would have associated it with winter or falling leaves—not tonight though.
"Do you really want to marry her, Matt? Jesus, come on!" She had stopped so suddenly I almost ran into her. Her words were angry, but soft somehow. Her green eyes were looking straight into mine—solidly. I had to look away. "You didn't even love her—remember? You're fucking this all up in your twisted little over analytical mind, sweetie." The sweetie was biting—patronizing. I couldn't say anything; I just stared at her, her little nose red in the cold night air, her cheeks flushed with earnestness. "Stop fucking with yourself, Matt." With that she turned on her heel, focused on the door, her black hair shining, her shoulders slumped to the ground, her step quick in spite of itself. I followed Ann silently into the gray building; the wet cat smell intensified as the air of the room attacked my nose. I don't know why I didn't start walking home, I guess I knew she was right—although it was too easy to admit—if I admitted she was right, I felt like I would immediately turn into a failure. The door slammed behind me, The fluorescent lights blinded me.

* * * * *

The circle of people inside the building was almost exactly what I had expected—the perfect stereotype of these kind of sessions. All different addicts represented, coffee and cookies—and a lot of cigarettes. Ann poured herself some black coffee, picked me up a few sugar cookies with smiley faces on them, and led me to a seat—she never met my eye. I looked at the pale, sunken-in faces, fidgety hands lost in oversized sweaters, tired eyes, and hopeful smiles. What did I come for? A story? A look? A feeling of understanding shot across the room? I didn't even know where these people were coming from. I had always pictured these "meetings" after Ann would get home—she never said much about them, just generalized the kinds of addicts, their stories, their dreams. It actually always amused me in some way—I never felt like it was real. But it was. I looked at Ann; her tiny hands rhythmically tucked her short hair behind her ear—maybe twenty times a minute. Her eyes were focused deeply on the ground, as if she expected something to come flying out of the fake marble squares: cake, violets, little birds, playground equipment, sanity, screams, the truth, the end. I didn't know. Maybe she just hated me.

The ex-heroin shooter, Chip, dressed in a long sleeved black shirt, stonewashed jeans, with legs that went on forever, was slowly explaining how he lost his feet. His limbs were so long they were all

tangled in each other—a web of flesh. He sat in a wheelchair—too much heroin between his toes. Every once in awhile I thought he was going to fall asleep—his eyes rolled back, his head bobbed, his words almost stopped—but somehow he kept going. Most people seemed to be pretending to listen. I think most of them were probably writing out their own monologues in their minds.

For some reason "Chip" didn't sound like a heroin addict to me. But I liked him regardless—he talked with sincerity—with remorse—and with hope. I wished I could take him home. Just to sit with him and talk to him—figure out where it went wrong—how it got better. We'd have coffee, sit on the porch, tell stories about high school, junior high, laugh, cry, hug. He'd tell me about the kids who used to beat him up, his father who did the same to his mother, his first dose. I'd listen, shake my head when the time was right. Then he'd listen while I'd tell him about my mom leaving, the child I'm never going to see, my first trip—which was my last. We'd never talk again after he set the coffee cup down on the porch and wheeled himself away, but it wouldn't matter.

Kelly the "cokehead" was pretty, slightly overweight, but had a sweet face. She was probably in her forties—she looked like an ex-cheerleader. She spoke quickly—listening to her was like riding a roller coaster—her words came out too fast to really process what she was saying. She almost committed suicide without even realizing it. Almost jumped off the thirty-first floor of a Holiday Inn without a second thought. The maid luckily walked in as Kelly climbed to the ledge. I felt like it was a made up story—as if I'd seen it in too many movies to actually believe it happened, but when I looked at her, I knew she was telling the truth. The lines around her eyes told the story within their deep and saddened crevices.

I wondered what the hell Ann was doing there, next to Kelly and that old lady, across from Chip, on a folding card table chair, her hands around a cup of black coffee—she never had problems like this—why didn't she go to simple AA meetings or something? I would imagine they would be a little easier to handle.

Every couple seconds the names Mary and Jessica would float through my mind—until the names seemed like tangible objects that I could reach out and grab at any moment. I didn't love Mary. But I had to love Jessica, right? Or maybe not. If I never get to know her can I really love her? I didn't know. I didn't get it. A few more people told their stories as the names took form in my head. I heard bits and pieces—breaking through my confusion and imaginary tangible walls. Jake dealt drugs—all kinds—always—spent what

should've been his college years in the "slammer" as he called it. He looked hardened—like he built a wall of stone right behind his pupil right before the back of his head—just stuck it in somehow—maybe through his ears.

Then there was Kathy—your regular run-of-the-mill alcoholic who lost her job and almost her mind. I kept my eyes on Ann mostly; she caught me a few times, her face blank when her eyes met mine. Ronnie still had flashbacks—his eyes danced in his head—he still saw giant butterflies, little green dogs, talking bottles. Most of the time he said he was fine—but he looked too paranoid to really believe that. He didn't look anyone in the eye—just at the white floor, men to the table with the coffee and cookies, to his skinny squirming hands, and then start the cycle again. What a way to exist. He said most of the time it was the shadows that got to him—came slithering up to him in broad daylight—in his sleepless dreamless nights—-from out of the roads, and under the water. His life was a nightmare—and he knew it, but he couldn't do anything about it. We were all living in some sort of surreal reality—a dangerous one, where we teetered on the edge of it each morning as we rose, each night as we laid to rest. But we didn't seem to control any of it.

"I wish—I need—the parts to simply add up differently," Ann's voice was almost startling, as she began talking with her little voice, turning the long sleeves of her gray sweater into knots as she spoke. "I wish they would multiply—in unanticipated ways. I want to wake up in the morning feeling good for the first time in years—I want to redo it all. Meshing and pulling apart all those moments of my existence to create something brand-new: redo day 12 of year 10, undo day 14. Have more days like 300 of year 22, erase day 1 through 50 of year 21." She looked up for the first time, no tears, but something sad behind her eyes, I looked hard at her tiny face, some sort of intensity—a power—a strength seemed to be flowing up from the floor to her cheeks. "I want the goddamn calculator that got me here—and I want the person in charge of pushing all the buttons." She was biting hard at her bottom Up as she finished, her gaze still strong. I could hear her inhaling—I could see her chest rising steadily up and down. The room was completely silent for at least two minutes. I felt like I could hear everyone's words scramble—racing one another through their minds—all mimicking mine. All hatched from Ann's desire to go back and start over.

"Amen, my dear." Kathy finally said, reaching over to grab Ann's hand. The entire circle seemed to be shaking their heads in unison. Smiles and tears creeping up on their faces.

"That's all for tonight," the "session leader" said. The session leader really didn't seem to do too much except find a time to stop the meeting. Maybe she brought the cookies too.

Of course, Ann was the first one to leave the room. She seemed almost embarrassed—or maybe shocked she found the words. I said good-bye to Chip and Kelly, gave a wave to the rest of the circle, not seeming so unified as people started standing up and breaking the curve.

I wandered out to the parking lot just in time to see the back lights of the Volvo pulling away. She left without me. She left me there. But she's the one who brought me here—how could she speed away? I started walking down Mahonning Street, past the same houses, in the back of my mind sure that she would turn around for me.

The air was cool, crisp, perfect, but my body was numb. The road was wet from the light rain, flat, and straight, but my eyes may as well have been closed. My body craved a cigarette, my hands wishing I had the comfort. I needed Ann, and I wouldn't mind having the calculator that got me here either. Delete. Delete it all. That's it. No redo—no repeats—just erase. My feet somehow found their way to Main Street even without my mind. Every time a car went past, which wasn't very often on that country road, my eyes would focus on the road at my feet, my eyes at my shoes, pretending for a second that I couldn't hear the engine approaching—almost didn't turn around, only to turn and stare hard into the window as the car passed. Every second car was familiar—John's parents, Jason Fredrickson's truck, Nancy Burger's Honda, some girl from elementary school's grandmother, each stopped to ask if I needed a ride, each time I said: "No, just out for a little walk, thanks." Reply: "Okay, Matt, see you tomorrow." When you live in a little town everyone just assumes they're going to see you tomorrow. Hopefully they're right. Someday they won't be. I always thought I would see my mom "tomorrow" and she hasn't been in this town for twelve years. I always thought I would see Mary "tomorrow;" it's been nine months.

When Main Street finally led me to my little shack of a house, I prayed she would be sitting there—like a final scene in a Hallmark commercial, with tea cups and a hug, the last shot of us embracing in the late fall night, street lights illuminating the porch, her black hair glowing, my arms overtaking her.

I heard the porch swing creaking before I heard her voice.

"Remember the night I threw all the furniture off that frat guy's porch in college—smashed it all: the green settee, the white wooden table, the two matching rocking chairs?" She was sitting

Indian Style in the swing, her shoulders pulled close to her chin.

My feet carried me right past her, like they couldn't stop; her eyes tried to come with me, straight to the bathroom. With one swoop the painted glass was in my hand. Down the steps, out the door, to the porch. Then without thinking, without analyzing why, without looking or caring, I let the sailboat smash into a hundred little yellow and purple parts. The streetlight shone through them like a Picasso sunrise, rain started to gently glisten the street, my closed eyes turned up to the stars letting the drops fall on my face.

Laughing I turned to look at Ann—she smiled.

Maryl Roberts

the sixth floor

The wheelchair was a gift from her son. He gave it to her on her seventy-seventh birthday, three months after she fell in the lobby of September's Place. The fall resulted in only minor injuries to her wrists and an ever so slight braise above her left eye - hardly noticeable. She had slipped on Dry Vermouth and Canadian Club, which slopped from someone's glass during a hearty laugh or violent sneeze. The son had mistaken it for old age, creaky bones, ineptitude. She refused to sit in the chair - not even when he presented it to her in front of all six people at her party. He wore that dull smile and felt naive excitement. She said, in that detached, blasé way, "That's the most ridiculous gift I've ever received. Take it away." She knew she had simply slipped on a misplaced Manhattan. So the wheel chair went in the garage.

Months later, as she lay in room 623 of Riddle Memorial Hospital, he was moving boxes and tools to the far corner of the garage. He wheeled the chair into the one story ranch house and into her room. The rocking chair in the left corner slid behind the TV in the living room. Then the rest of the bedroom furniture was arranged to accommodate the wheel chair.

The nurses gossiped on the sixth floor - the job wasn't very high-pressured. The home was filled with elderly people, not sick enough to die, but too sick to take care of themselves. They came to the sixth floor while their families decided who would get stuck with them or how they would split the bill for the nursing home. In room 623, Alice Kirkpatrick sat, propped with four pillows, ringing the nurses' bell. At the station, four grown women groaned.

"Oh hell no! I am not goin' in there again."

"Oh no, girl - do not look at me. I've been in there three times and I only came on an hour ago."

"Did I tell you that my mother-in-law is pregnant again? Joey is so upset. Can you imagine - you're mother having another baby when you're 24?"

"How old is she?"

"Almost fifty-five. She didn't think it was possible - you know, physically. It's a miracle - at least that's what they say."

"And Joey's upset about a miracle?"

"Well, it's a miracle it happened, that doesn't mean it's gonna work out. The woman's over fifty! There're so many complications and problems for her and the kid. Just because it's a miracle..."

The buzzer stopped ringing and the blond nurse lowered her voice.

"...doesn't make it a good thing."

She stood up, a look of obligation stubbornly pushing across her face.

"I'm gonna go check on the old broad."

The nurse walked down the hallway, adjusting her multi-colored uniform and running her hands through her blond hair. Three deep breaths, a smile.

"Where the hell have you been? And if I had been dying - which, God bless us, I'm not - what would you have done? Let me die, I don't doubt that. Purgatory for sure for that one. Hell even. And I wouldn't feel bad looking down on you, cause you brought it on yourself. I feel like I'm lost in this bed. I like to have control over the bed. I don't like to feel like the bed has control over me. And this place is freezing."

"You need another pillow? How about I readjust the four you have and we can make it a little more comfortable for you?"

"What? Are you on a budget? All I want is one more pillow. Doesn't my insurance cover it, or are you just cheap? Oh hell! This is the worst hospital I've ever been to. You don't answer the buzzer, leave me to die, freeze me, and then force me to lay in discomfort."

"Yes, yes - another pillow. Another blanket. I'll be right back with them."

"Oh it's too late now to get on my good side. Much too late. I know your type...constantly trying to get out of work. Getting paid to sit around and talk while patients suffer. Haven't even mentioned food! Do you think I don't eat? Think I prefer the IV?"

The nurse had walked out before Alice had finished her rant, and looked at the ground - what a bitch - rolled her eyes - what an attitude - and shook her head as she turned out of the room. Right outside the door to room 623, she collided with a man about her height, and about 5 times her weight. He had a white button down shirt and khaki pants. His neck slopped over the edges of the collar like a busted slinky, his eyes were nearly hidden by flesh. But the nurse was caught off guard by his smile. Bright white, teeth straight,

no yellowing in the hard to reach places. His smile seemed genuine, and though the nurse had no reason to do so, she immediately liked this stranger. He fumbled nervously and apologized. She accepted, even though it had been as much her fault as his, if not more. He grabbed at a nametag on his shirt with his right hand - Hello, Welcome to K-Mart. Underneath, in bold capital letters, a name - LESTER.

When he entered room 623, bis mother was muttering under her breath. She pretended that she didn't see him, and looked wistfully out the window, saying something about food and the IV.

"Are you hungry?" He hadn't thought to bring her anything from home, though he knew her favorite sandwich was salami on rye, no mayo. He made a note to try and remember to bring something the next day, if she had to stay another night. She looked over at him with what could be best described as indifference.

"No. I cannot eat now. I'm too upset."

"What happened?"

"What happened? Of course, only you wouldn't see this. It's the nurses. They're terrible, Lester. Do you know how long I rang the buzzer until one finally came? I could be dead. You could be making funeral arrangements - God forbid - because she was sitting talking about her former sexual encounters, in detail. That's what they do these days, you know, at nurses' stations."

Lester rarely took his mother seriously. Her knowledge of the late nineties was based roughly on the adventures of the younger generation of Days of Our Lives characters. She propped herself up in an attempt to gain dignity and appear to have control. The transparent hospital gown fell around her shoulders in cutting angles. The bonyness of her body surprised him. A large Band-Aid beneath her ear hid the thick crease of her neck. From the front, her white hair appeared full. In the back of her head, about three inches above her neck, a crescent shaped patch of skin interrupted the fullness of her hair. In the center, a staggering line of black stitches. Lester watched his mother from the front, with no clear view of the tear in her head. He smiled as he went to adjust her pillows. She was lost in the bed.

"Do not touch me, Lester. The nurse is bringing more." .

"I really think you're fine with four, it's just a matter of adjusting you."

"Lester, don't speak. I know what I need and that's another pillow and some respect. When I buzz I want a response."

"Mother, they have other..."

"Lester. You heard me. Do not speak."

And with that the blond nurse came back into room 623, carrying three pillows. She smiled politely at Lester and tried to keep that same expression when she faced his mother.

"I think this should tide you over, Ms. Kirkpatrick. How else can I help you?"

"No. That will be all. I thank you very much. My Lester is here now, he can help me. However, if I do, in fact, need your assistance again I will buzz an hour before my pain is unbearable."

The nurse finished stuffing the pillows behind Peggy while Lester fidgeted, slightly embarrassed.

"I'm sure you will...I'm sure you will."

The nurse walked out without another word. He blushed, wishing he had said something to her.

"Have nothing to do with hospital personnel, Lester. Bad seeds. Bad seeds. They work here cause they're expendable. You know that, don't you? If they catch something and die it's a loss to a minimum amount of people. They screen you - if you have too many family or friends you can't work in one of these places. Seedy people, Lester. Not many friends, not many family."

From the tone of his mother's voice, Lester knew she was just beginning her theory on the evils of hospital employees. He rested his head on his chest, propped up by the layers of skin and multiple chins, and sighed. Distracted, he began flicking his K-Mart nametag with his index finger. He dealt with elderly men and women everyday. They demanded price checks, asked for the manager, and could never quite grasp the return policy - especially regarding underwear. Most reminded him of his own mother, though they limped out of his life with their items in plastic bags and drove home to their own sons and daughters. Of course, there were regulars, but Lester never remembered a face.

His time at K-Mart was a forced break from the time demands of his last job. He had started at B&I AutoSupply directly out of high school, hoping to earn enough money for college. He began as an office boy in corporate, but before long Lester was in charge of sales in the Scranton area. It was a three-hour commute from his mother's home in Springfield. He lived for the road trips, the selling, the challenge.

After three years, the money was there but Lester had lost interest in college. He stayed with B&I, away from his mother for days - sometimes weeks - at a time. There were road trips to Atlanta, Boston, Cincinnati, and Detroit for conventions and special selling assignments. Most Friday nights Lester would meet the guys at

Duffer's Pub for a few beers before driving home, loaded but happy.

Lester resigned from B&I when Alice was sixty-five. A mammogram showed a lump in her left breast. It was small but malignant. Lester needed to be home to drive her to treatment, to keep her spirits up, to take care of her. There was no one else who could do it - according to Alice - and she despised the idea of an in-house nurse. Lester was forced to quit. He still met the guys Friday nights, until his mother's sixty-sixth birthday fell on a Friday. After that, Alice always had reasons for Lester to stay home instead of going to Duffer's - she needed a ride to a dear friend's viewing, she wanted desperately to go out to dinner, she needed the guest bedroom painted now. Once she finally set him free he had lost touch with anyone he might have socialized with.

He doesn't remember how he ended up working specifically at K-Mart. In Lester's memory, it was suddenly what he did. He has no recollection of thinking about it, applying for the job, or interviewing with a manager. One day, he worked there and couldn't remember what it felt like to work anywhere else. Last summer he was promoted to assistant manager of the Springfield store. Though it made his mother proud, the only change Lester saw was that his nametag now had a blue background. His salary hadn't even increased.

He squinted at his mother on the bed. The lights in room 623 were dimmed and the shades were drawn. A thought ran through his head - he could be in a hotel in Detroit, a small bar in Boston, Cincinnati, Atlanta. He closed his eyes, forcing another thought to follow the last - it's not her fault. In the darkness, it was hard for Lester to see his mother's mouth moving. But her voice was clear.

"...what it comes down to is that not too many people would miss them. These people are simply expendable. I'm telling you the truth, Lester."

It struck Lester that his mother would be eligible to work in hospitals across the nation. The thought saddened him, and he didn't mention it, even in jest. She never truly understood most of his jokes anyway. Sometimes she did laugh to be polite. Other times, she looked at him skeptically, as if her inability to understand his humor reflected badly on him as a person.

The blond nurse plopped into a chair at the station and buried her head in her palms. The three other nurses had disappeared to do rounds. She laughed out loud when she heard the buzzer ring again, the light beside room 623 blinked frantically.

"Something funny, Nurse Sampson?

"Oh, Dr. Youngman, I'm sorry. It's just that I've been in that

room so many times today, and every time I go in there she's more cranky. And I forgot to get her another blanket."

"What room?"

"623."

"Well perfect - that's where I'm headed. I'll grab a blanket and bring it in with me. I'll be the shining hero - you can be the bad guy."

"Oh thanks!"

Dr. Youngman was not Alice's doctor. Her doctor, Dr. Griff, was out of town, so Youngman was filling in. He walked towards room 623 just as the buzzer stung through the air at the nurses' station another time.

"Don't buzz that again, Mother. I'm going to the cafeteria, I'll get you some food. What do you want?" Lester was simply looking for an escape. The last thing he wanted was to be sitting next to the bed when the blond nurse walked in with a look of restrained contempt and threw the blanket at his hopelessly annoying mother.

"I just want some toast. If it's burnt - don't bother bringing it. I'm telling you -I won't eat it, Lester. Lightly toasted. Buttered moderately."

"Well hello, Ms. Kirkpatrick. How do you feel today?"

"Oh, Doctor, hello. I would feel much better if I wasn't freezing, or nearly freezing at least. That blond nurse never brought the blanket I asked for."

She didn't notice the blanket draped over his arm. She looked at him, expecting him to be outraged. He smiled lightly, and reached out his arm, extending the blanket.

"Here it is. A blanket for the lady. So, you had a rough day yesterday? No broken bones. Which is very good. Somewhat of a miracle, but we'll take it, won't we? We did have to stitch you up. You hit the back of your head - gashed that up pretty bad. There are about twenty-eight stitches in there now. And there's a slight laceration just below your left ear. Only three stitches. The doctor's downstairs took good care of you. Do you remember when I came in to see you?"

"Yes. And it was a slip, not a fall. Anyone can slip, Doctor. It's the environment, not the person. I tell my Lester, I say, 'Lester, anyone can slip on something slippery. That means nothing.' I merely slipped."

How dare he ask her if she remembered him coming in to check her yesterday? How dare he.

"Well, yes, Ms. Kirkpatrick, that's true." Dr. Youngman was

unaware of the swell of anger, denial, and embarrassment bubbling inside Alice. If he was aware, he might have been wise enough not to continue. But as the situation stood, he went on.

"Now.. .if I'm correct - oh yes, here we are -I am... Lester tells me you fell about seven months ago, in a restaurant. And that you had some minor injuries from that fall. Is that true?"

Alice's eyes had widened during Dr. Youngman's interrogation.

"Dr. Youngman, I believe that I have clarified the events that transpired during both slips in question. The first slip, a mere memory, happened seven months ago when I slipped on a spilled drink. The second, which occurred yesterday, resulted when I slipped on a newly polished hardwood floor in my home. I happened to slip at the crest of the stairs and was unfortunate enough to fall down the entire staircase. I was lucky enough to come out of the incident relatively unscathed. My cousin, Susanne - God rest her soul - was not as blessed when she slipped down her staircase. Newly carpeted, you'd think that would have helped. I trust that you respect my memory and that you understand the difference between a fall and a slip."

Alice exhaled and smiled, impressed with her own restraint and coherence. Dr. Youngman looked up from her chart.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Kirkpatrick. My apologies. A slip is very different than a fall, you are correct. It's something I have to be constantly reminded of from day to day when dealing with this sort of thing."

Alice eyed the doctor suspiciously. Her trust and respect was dropping with each word he said. He agreed too quickly, he wasn't taking her seriously.

"Now, tell me, Ms. Kirkpatrick...may I call you Alice?"

"Absolutely not."

"Alright. So, tell me, were you drinking when you had either one, or both, of these falls?"

Alice exploded - didn't exhale, didn't stifle the anger. It all came pouring out. "What kind of Doctor are you? I slipped, Doctor. Slipped. It's not that hard to understand."

"So, no alcohol was involved. Great. That's all I needed to know. I'll be back in a bit to check on you again. Take a few deep breaths, it looks as if your pressure's up."

"Of course my pressure's up!"

Dr. Youngman stepped into the hallway to find Lester's rotund body leaning against the wall. Lester had slipped into the room, unseen, mid way through his Mother's speech. He heard the tone of her voice, sensed trouble, and wandered out.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. I'm Lester Kirkpatrick. My mother has a tendency to be somewhat over... overzealous at times."

"Oh yes. Yes she can."

"And everything's alright?"

"We're still waiting on some tests, but I think everything should check out. The x-rays came back negative. I see no major damage, though she's very lucky. A fall down the stairs can be devastating to someone her age. We're monitoring her heart and vitals. As soon as the blood work comes in, I'll come by again."

Dr. Youngman walked toward the nurse's station, no doubt adding scribbles to the "Comment's" section as he walked. Lester didn't move from his stretch of wall, and watched Youngman lean casually over to the blond nurse. He extended the chart to her and both laughed.

Lester couldn't remember the last time he talked to a woman with any hoping of attracting her. At B&I he had fallen as close to "in love" as he imagined possible. Claire was a secretary in the corporate office. He always smiled at her when he passed, acting important and essential. First he brought her cookies. Then candy. Then flowers. Then he took her out to dinner.

He began dating Claire in those early years at B&I - he was well under the three hundred pound marker and his mother was healthy. But he was also traveling a lot. And time spent at home had to be balanced delicately between his mother and Claire. Looking back, it's always amusing to him that he expected his mother to like Claire. The two could not be left alone together, Claire would inevitably end up in the bathroom trying to hide her tear-swollen eyes. His mother, smiling in the dining room.

When Lester thought about Claire he got a tightness in his thick chest. It had been twelve years since he had broken off the three-year relationship. Three months after Alice was diagnosed with breast cancer, he told Claire that things wouldn't work out. They could never get married. He told her that she deserved more. He broke the news in the driveway of his mother's house, sitting in his mother's car.

Claire wanted him to travel over weekends at short notice, or to understand when she just popped in for a visit during what happened to be his mother's favorite program. Alice hated to watch TV alone. Claire wanted Lester to be ready - mobile. But he had work. His mother had treatment. She didn't like to watch TV alone. She insisted Lester be home for dinner Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and

Sunday nights. She needed the flowers watered in the summer and the driveway shoveled in the winter. His mother couldn't shovel, for God's sake, and there was no one else. Lester could not be mobile.

As he leaned against the hallway wall, Lester felt that familiar tightness in his chest. What was Claire doing with her life? Did she find that mobile man? Was she happy? Her voice was always so soft. It was that softness that made her last words to him still sting after twelve years, "Lester, every mother wants her sons to be happy. Why doesn't she?" Lester pushed himself off the wall, and turned to the doorway of his mother's room. He should have been mobile. He could have been someone else. Other people could have shoveled.

Once inside the room, Lester unwrapped the bread he had so carefully toasted and buttered. It had once been hot and crisp. Now, the lightly toasted bread was soggy and damp, cold against his palm. He extended it, dreading his mother's disgusted reaction.

"He accused me of being a drunk. A drunk, Lester, do you know what it means to simply slip? Old people can slip too, and it means nothing more than if a child or a thirty-something did the same thing."

"Mother, come on. You need to understand that as you get older, people are going to get concerned when you slip or fall or whatever. People are going to worry. I moved the wheelchair into your room. I want you to think about using it."

"The wheelchair? What wheelchair? Not that piece of garbage you brought to the party? You were to throw that out, Lester. I specifically said to do so."

"Mother, it's necessary."

"A cane - yes, I see that logic. But don't rush me right to a wheelchair. I refuse to pull that act where you wheel around half the time and walk half the time. That's lazy, Lester. Pure laziness. Fat people who are too heavy for themselves do that. Foreigners, too. And I won't - Lester, I mean this -I won't sit in a wheelchair until I have no intention or power to get up from it myself."

"There is no shame in using a wheelchair."

"I understand your intentions are noble. Thank you. And Lester, I know some things come harder to you. But dear, try to think. I don't need a wheelchair. I don't."

"Fine. I'll move it when we get home. The doctor said you could be out of here by tonight. Isn't that great?"

Lester hunched next to his mother's bed. She looked at him, a rounded ball of failed attempts and good intentions. What would he do without her? As a child, Lester was small - tiny, even. She made

it her personal mission to "meat him up." Stuffing him with three servings - "he's a growing boy" - and sending him with extra lunch money each day. He kept growing - up and out, then only out. When he sat, his stomach crashed upon his thighs, circled up and met the loose skin dangling from his chins. His arms fell at angles from his insulated body. He appeared to be retaining air.

Alice was comfortable, propped with seven pillows. They sat in room 623, waiting for Dr. Youngman to return with permission to leave.

"What if they make me stay another night, Lester? I can't bear to be in this terrible place another night. I can't..."

"Mother, I have a feeling they'll want to get you home as soon as they can."

She looked at him, stung. He added hastily, "So you can be comfortable." The afternoon slipped by, Alice and Lester sat in dimly lit room 623. There was nothing to say. Lester escaped to the cafeteria every time Alice dozed off. He got a small side of mac and cheese, a cookie, a coke, a salad, chicken fingers, M&M's. He didn't care that the cafeteria staff began to recognize him, or that he hadn't been able to lift his knees more than three inches for over two years, or that his arteries were certainly narrowing with each passing second.

On his last trip, Lester walked back towards his mother's room, popping M&M's in his mouth. He had tried to take a different route back this time, and as he stepped off a different elevator he found himself directly across from the nurses' station. Four nurses were sitting behind the counter, they turned to him as the elevator doors opened with a generic beep. They knew whose son he was. Something inside him pushed him towards the counter to offer an apology. Something stronger pulled him away, head bent, hands tight, crinkling the empty yellow M&M bag.

"That's her son?"

When Lester entered his mother's room, Dr. Youngman was standing at the foot of her bed. The two men exchanged a mutual sympathetic nod. Lester knew he was free to take his mother home. Alice had already swung her legs over the side of the bed and began directing Lester to fetch things.

"Just stop at the nurses' station on your way out and we'll have all the paper work there. I'll have a wheelchair brought right up - hospital policy."

"Certainly not. I can walk out of here on my own two feet. I do not need a wheelchair. Lester, pack the toiletries."

Youngman nodded, and showed himself out.

Alice was ready in ten minutes. Her overnight bag was packed on the bed, she had put on cotton pants and a diamond patterned sweater, leaving the hospital gown folded on the bed.

At the nurses' station, the papers for discharge waited. The blond nurse bustled around the desk and brought them a wheelchair.

"Why don't you sit down, Ms. Kirkpatrick?"

Alice said nothing. Lester blushed.

"Mother, do you want a wheelchair?"

"Lester, please. You know the answer. Don't be ridiculous."

Lester looked at the nurse, his eyes pleading for forgiveness. There was no point allying himself with the nurses at that point. Alice scratched her name on the discharge papers. A swooping, shaking signature. Lester imagined the possibility of getting out without being further embarrassed by his mother. A short, black nurse ventured politeness, a white flag.

"Well, Ms. Kirkpatrick, the doctor says it was a miracle that you're leaving today - no broken bones, no serious damage."

"It's a miracle I'm getting out of here alive. A miracle you're ineptitude didn't kill me. That's the miracle." Alice sighed.

The old woman turned to face the elevator, which opened before she hit the button. Lester shook his head and followed her. He turned to the nurses, shrugging as he murmured, "Thanks for everything." The four women heard only an inaudible grumble as the elevator closed. Lester and Alice went down.

Maggie Dougherty

staff

Editor In-Chief

Erin Jones

Associate Editor

Maryl Roberts

Art Director

Joseph Esposito

Selection Staff

Ryan Creel
Kelly Johnston
Kelly McGuinness
Shawn Parcels
Jessika Rao

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Daniel McGuiness

Techinical Advisor

Kevin Atticks

150 YEARS
1852-2002