



# The Fall Line

2011



Piedmont Virginia Community College

# The Fall Line

Volume III ♦ Spring 2011

The Fall Line: a fall line is a natural border between the coastal plains and the mountainous region that spans Virginia.

The Fall Line, Spring 2011, is the third volume selected, edited, and produced by the PVCC Creative Writing Club.

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This year, in addition to our submissions, The Fall Line is publishing three essays provided by the college's QEP [Quality Enhancement Plan] Essay Contest. Deborah Poulin's "The Toothpaste Incident" was the winner of the QEP Essay Contest. Kelly Shott's "The First Bite" was the runner-up in the contest. Doreen Robert's "Blending into the Background" was the second runner-up in the contest.

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# Permūtātiō

Definition: (Latin) Thorough-going change

Synonyms: alteration, anomaly, change, deviant, deviation, evolution, innovation, metamorphosis, modification, mutant, novelty, permutation, transfiguration, transformation, variation, vicissitude

# To Live Well

Patience L. Ray

We were born cracking,  
called from the womb  
egg brittle, bloody limbed,  
the place we knew gone,  
awaking to breaking,  
hard hands and light.

Nothing remains.

We only hear the gorgeous choke  
as the merry-go-round starts,  
musical engine serenading;  
we rise, fall, turn too fast  
to see the surrounding  
moment, a blurred rim.

To forget is good.

We move on,  
closing doors, windows,  
sweeping the path, any  
proof we passed that way  
or scraped our black heels  
across the tiled floor.

There is no shame in killing.

At times memory, home, knowing,  
are too strangled to live well  
inside the brittle shell of skull;  
we must pull them out with pliers,  
hold this or that instant between forefinger and  
thumb—the rest will bury themselves.

# A Sunny Afternoon

Stephen Canty

Today Tully and I were trying to build shade with a tarp to keep the afternoon sun from baking the small dirt room, formerly a shop, that we lived in. It was one of many abandoned shops in Marjah, Afghanistan in what used to be a small market. The buildings of the market clustered along two narrow, dirt roads separated by a canal and joined by a bridge. Across the street, two Afghan Police talked to a group of kids. Three shots, semi-automatic, well aimed, kicked up dust at their feet. A little boy in white, maybe six fell face first into the dust. The police ran, pushing the other three boys toward a corner of a building nearby. Three more shots, a policeman stumbled, hopped twice, and fell down. His friends dragged him to cover. Tully and I stood in front of our room watching all this. The violence was sudden; the whole thing lasted only a few seconds. Tully said, “Oh shit!” and we both dashed inside, grabbing our gear and readying our weapons. Roberts sprinted by shouting, “One of those fucking dudes got shot!” I grabbed my SAW (a light machine gun with a 200-round drum), and, for the first time, my first-aid bag.

I stepped out into the blaze of the Afghan sun and paired up with Roberts behind the corner of a building on our street as he peered out, poised to run. We’d go together across the two open streets with a bridge connecting them, a 30 meter distance. There was a lull in the firefight and Roberts seized the opportunity. He turned his head and said to me calmly over his shoulder, “I’m going” before putting everything he had into crossing that distance. I tried to stay close as it’s better to move in pairs in case one of us got shot. Once we crossed the bridge and reached cover behind a building, Roberts and I briefly caught our breath. He looked annoyed as he said, “This shit is getting old, dude.”

I walked towards the room where the policeman lay. Blood pooled outside in the dirt and inside on the floor. The remaining kids from earlier were there, young, no older than ten, sitting against the wall, their eyes wide with fear. It was easy to tell one was the brother of the boy in the street. He wept silently and repeated his brother’s name quietly. The other boy appeared to be in shock and stared at the wall with empty eyes. Nearby the policeman lay on a cot, moaning and bleeding. The smell of blood and sweat was overpowering. I’ve always hated blood.

I paused to take this all in before remembering the first aid kit in my hand. I was

the one with the tourniquets and bandages. Every Marine at our outpost was a combat life saver--they could all keep him alive until the helicopters came, but I had gone to a week long course for this. I had the bag; I had to do something. I dropped my weapon and bag and knelt down to unzip it. I briefly tried putting on latex gloves but the heat had melted them together. Fuck those gloves! I tore open a tourniquet and turned to the guy writhing on the cot. Blood covered his pants and foamed through a shemagh (Afghan scarf) that had been wrapped around the wound by another Afghan policeman. I leaned in slowly, the smell of his body odor and blood overpowering as I clasped the tourniquet to his upper thigh and cinched it tight. I cranked the bar, tightening it until he gasped out in pain and continued well past that. I remembered being told a properly tightened tourniquet should always hurt more than the gunshot wound itself. Until now that had only been a joke among Marines as they “practiced” a little too realistically with their friends in medical classes.

I couldn't see the blood flow because of the crude bandage covering the hole. The guy writhed and moaned and tried to roll over on the cot. I encouraged him to pray and began for him in broken Arabic. He nodded but even that seemed to hurt. The room darkened as a figure stood in the doorway, blocking the light. Smith stepped in and offered another tourniquet. A CASEVAC had been called in, he said. We needed to move the casualty to the landing zone in a nearby poppy field back on our side of the street. I tried to communicate to another policeman nearby that he needed to talk to him to keep him from going into shock. Sweat beaded on the wounded cop's face and he looked pale. He begged for water and someone produced it. Outside, the sounds of gunfire still from both Marines and Police.

With the casualty's bleeding stopped, I turned to the kids still huddled in the far end of the room. A third boy was now with them, no older than three or four. I guess he had been separated from the other boys during the fighting. I tried to calm them down and say a few words of encouragement. I asked a policeman to get water and handed one of the children a string of prayer beads I kept in my pocket. I smiled a tired smile.

I left the room and stepped into the din of the firefight outside. In the next five minutes, the wounded cop on the cot would be carried by other policemen across the open area of the two streets and bridge, while Marines and other Afghan police opened up to suppress whoever was shooting at us. I fired bursts into anything that seemed appropriate, like ominous doorways and bushes hopefully making the shooter

find cover.

When they crossed, I leaned my SAW against a police Ranger and fished for cigarettes. Only one in the pack and it was broken. I smoked it anyways. Khan, an Afghan policeman, reminded me of the kid still laying face down in the street. I had assumed he was dead but Khan said, "He's breathing." Peering out into the street from around a corner, I saw the boy in a pool of blood, his face caked in mud next to a string of dull grey barbed wire. Khan told me he saw him breathing, but I can't see it. The boy is so still. Khan insisted he was alive and agreed to run and grab him. More shots as we covered him. He lifted the limp child and carried him back to the safety of the building. The boy was shot through the back of the head, his eye blown out. His face was so dirty and bloody. I checked his radial pulse, the hole in his head not registering. His pulse was weak, and for some reason I thought he might have a chance. I pointed across the street and Khan picked up the child. I yelled over for Gilbert to cover us as I crossed the street with Khan carrying the boy behind me.

When we got to the Marine's side of the road, Gilbert looked down from his spot on the roof and pronounced, "That kid is dead, man." I still asked where the landing zone was because in my mind there was a chance we could save the child. Khan laid the boy down nearby, convinced he was dead. Near the Marines post a van was still stopped in the street, its driver and passengers seeking cover in a nearby building. Khan had laid the boy at the driver's feet. The driver, an old man dressed in white, began sobbing when he recognized the mangled face of his son. I knelt and found a weak pulse in the boy's neck. For some reason, I thought this kid with a hole where his eye should be would live. I insisted on taking him to the landing zone but by the time we got there he was dead. The helicopters came and went, taking the wounded policeman with them. The firefight was over as dusk settled in. The father left in the golden haze of the late afternoon, collecting both of his sons: one living, one dead.

I remember collapsing beside Roberts on an old wooden bed he had sitting outside his room that we used as a bench. I took off my helmet and ran a hand through my matted, sweaty hair. Someone gave me a cigarette. We were mostly quiet, the comedown from the adrenaline hitting us and exhaustion setting in. We had seen truly innocent people, even kids, get hurt before, but it is a hard callous to form. I still remember the smell of that stale tobacco and the coppery, almost metallic, tang of blood.

# Strait from the Vine

Brandy Vest

Looking back, 'hourglass' isn't exactly the word he would have used to describe her. Sure, she was curvy, but not enough to warrant a lingering gaze. She was more like a bunch of grapes, but because of her large shoulders, not her chest. That's not something he would say aloud either: "You're as curvy as a bunch of grapes - you have men's shoulders and small tits." Wide at the top and small at the bottom - she walked with her feet close together, which, if her hips had been wider, would have given her the sway of a model on the catwalk. Which would have countered out the wide shoulders. As it were, it looked like she'd grown up in the 50's. That was the reason he'd fallen for her quirks in the first place - she was far too intense and grab-life-by-the-ballsy for that spinster gait.

He'd seen her around the office a few times: the new girl, supposedly from the South but without a trace of accent, who had spilt her entire 32 ounces of Coke onto the boss within two hours of her first day. As if she weren't getting enough looks already for having fast food in the office when every other peon skipped breakfast and stared menacingly at his or her salad and protein shake when it came time for lunch. From his vantage point in his corner office, he'd chalked her clumsiness up to being an out-of-towner.

She had moved from Virginia with her family when she was 19, old enough to have gone off on her own, but young enough to still believe in the romance of starting over someplace new. Two years later, she still lived with her parents, but there was nobody to judge her for it - he certainly wasn't - and it kept life simple. That's what she'd told him, at least.

Going on his first impression, she was pretty damn cute. She wore her hair almost short enough that it could have been one of those no-nonsense pixie cuts if it were straighter. As it were, her curls made her look like she had a never-ending supply of optimism, the way they bounced with every step. And the constant smile - small, like an I've-just-done-a-good-deed smile - only made her prettier. There'd been research on that; guys were naturally attracted to women that smiled and looked happy, so he felt slightly less guilty about checking out the new girl. The last female to join the firm had been a 40-something year-old with proportions that, quite frankly, belonged in a 'before' picture. He'd already noted that the new girl wasn't exactly bodacious either,

but she was young and cute. And he was handsome and successful. A match made for a real estate commercial. 2.5 kids, white picket fence, labrador in the backyard.

Yeah. Right.

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When he'd first asked her on a date, she hadn't understood.

"Would you want to have dinner sometime?" he'd said.

"Oh, you mean the company dinner on Friday? Yeah, Mr. Cryer already said I was 'welcome to attend,'" she'd replied.

He'd made sure to keep a seat next to him open, which she'd taken, but between the four courses and Cryer's speech, he hadn't gotten a chance to turn their conversation from "I've been an ad exec for seven years" to "I'm good at what I do, if you know what I mean." She probably wouldn't have gotten the hint anyway.

After dinner, she had grabbed her purse and made to leave, apparently uncomfortable with making small talk with anyone other than him. It did wonders for his morale and his plan of getting an actual dinner with her, so he'd played dumb and kept her there, chatting idly with her and blatantly ignoring her glances toward the door and her attempts to cut their talk short. In retrospect, probably not the best way to get her to warm up to him, but at least he'd kept her laughing. So the night hadn't been a complete failure.

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"Your grapes taste funny up here."

She was standing next to the window overlooking the city with a bag on the sill, plucking grapes from it one at a time and showing no signs of awkwardness at being in his condo for the first time. No, she'd taken a few analytical glances around while he'd continued their conversation about the misogyny of beer advertisements (he agreed with her - they were - but seeing as beer was a male-dominated product, both in consumers and producers, it had to be done), then opened and scoured his fridge and made herself comfortable.

"How so?" he asked, handing her a beer and opening his own after returning her raised-eyebrow smirk.

"I guess it's just 'cause I'm not used to eating them from a bag. Or cold."

“I keep forgetting you’re a Southerner.”

“What is it with you and the fact that I’m from the South? You think everyone down there strolls through orchards plucking fruit and grinning gaily all day?”

“Hey, blame Lorraine Peterson.”

A pause. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

He chuckled, both at her and at his attempt at making an advertising joke. “The original Sun-Maid girl. She was real, you know.”

She scoffed. “Then yeah, I blame her.”

He set his beer down next to the bag of grapes and glanced over at her. She was wearing her pinstripe pants again, that hung a little loose around her thighs - a downside of being fit. On her top was a maroon shirt he hadn’t seen before. It fit her perfectly, the sleeves going just over her shoulders with a tie-string at the end, and the same string at the bottom of the V, which was the perfect length for a necklace without dropping low enough to show him anything if she leaned forward. With her white-rimmed sunglasses pushing up her curls, she looked adorable. Could have been on a poster for sunscreen, if she’d wear shorts and grow her hair out a little.

“It gets cold early up here,” she said, stealing a grape and leaning forward on the windowsill.

Somehow, her constant analysis of New England never got old. “Used to the sun and sand?”

She rolled her eyes. “Virginia, not Florida. And don’t start joking about never seeing snow before.”

He shrugged, turning around to lean his elbows on the sill. “It starts earlier than you’re used to.”

“Christmas?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ve never had snow on Christmas. And only in a few Decembers.”

He took a grape. He never really liked green grapes. He preferred the ones the same color as her shirt, with the seeds still inside. More natural. Grapes and beer was a strange combination anyway. “You think you’ll go back eventually?”

“Eventually, yeah.” She bit a grape in half, sucking the extra juice off her thumb,

and he smirked at himself for the way he was watching her. “But I like it here, too.”

“You have a good job,” he pointed out.

“Exactly. And I like the people there. Life’s pretty good right now.”

He gave her a sideways look, one he knew she could see, but she kept staring out the window, smiling softly.

“Why do you have your sunglasses on?”

“They’re not on.” She kept smiling and not turning to him.

She did that a lot. Like, “I know you’re watching me. I’m just playing with you. Keep on looking.” So he did.

Her face, reflected just slightly in the window, was so familiar now, but still as pretty, as attention-grabbing as he’d first thought it to be. She had a way of letting her small, knowing smile play into her eyes that made him not want to look away. It was the kind of spark necessary for cosmetics models; makeup commercials were rife with girls who knew how to catch your attention, so all the company had to do was make sure they had enough strategic placings of their name in those thirty seconds to get it through to the viewer. Mostly it was all up to the girl.

He nearly laughed to himself when he realized that she was probably watching him watch her because they were both reflected just slightly in the window. When it got colder, in another week or two, he’d be able to see her breath on the glass, and a mental video of her drawing faces on it came easily to mind. It was exactly the kind of thing she’d do.

He leaned over to kiss her and she finally turned to face him, as per usual.

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“So sell me,” she said, standing up. She had her hands gripping her hips, staring him down with that simple defiance, smile threatening him. She looked like she did that first week, when he knew her as the awkward girl, new to the office and eager to make an impression, but not necessarily to please.

What could she sell? What would make her sell? What was she selling?

She was wearing her pink camisole, which hung low with the yellow lacey bit at the top, and his underwear. An odd combination, but she was an odd girl.

There was that picture, still there in the back of his mind, of her with the grapes

and the red shirt. She knew grapes, or at least compared to everyone in Boston. Compared to them, she could have made \$300 wine. She had a nice enough face; she could sell that.

He studied her again.

She didn't move as he stared her down. She just watched him, her eyes still maintaining the smile that had faded. She was...innocent. Her posture said 'tough' and 'feisty,' but one look at her normal gait and the façade fell apart. She could try, and sometimes managed, to be a spitfire. She could definitely tell someone what she thought of them with just a flash of her eyes, even if her mouth spewed nothing but niceties. She was just too afraid to get on someone's bad side.

Even now, if he told her she could sell kitchen appliances because she'd make a lovely housewife, she would only be disappointed, not angry. Her face would loosen and her eyes, before she looked away, would lose their spark and go back to being brown. Yucky, plain brown. Not a mesmerizing shade of dark tan.

He sat up slowly, her glinting eyes still following him. He took her wrists and pulled her hands off her waist, letting her shoulders fall a little. He put her left arm on her right side, hugging herself, and he pulled her right arm toward him, palm outstretched, where he placed his own hand.

“Stability.”

That was it. Even as ditzzy and fiery and everything else that she was, she wasn't going to be the one to end anything. She was constant.

Could he really see himself with her? He'd had nothing but fun with her as of yet. She was so agreeable, and kind, and cute.

He'd never seen himself as the type to settle down. He'd never really wanted a stable life. Or, at least, he hadn't placed insurance very high on his list of importance. So what was it that made her so appealing? She exuded comfort and homeliness, even while she talked about abortion laws and living on the road for a year. It gave off the effect of what he'd imagine having a wife would be like. Somebody that you loved, who always wanted to try new things, and you were always right there with her because she offered enough stability for you to grab hold and never want to let go. And even if you did let go, she'd probably grab your wrist at the last moment and pull you back up to her. She was pretty strong. Put her in a breast cancer commercial, she'd do great.

So maybe...maybe he could afford to take a chance on her. He had a lot in the bank, but he'd never before spent it on love. If it was all Hallmark made it out to be, it was certainly worth a shot.

"Come back," he said softly. He placed a hand on her waist and pulled her into his lap, where she kissed him like he'd been talking out loud.

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Looking ahead, he has no idea what's waiting for him. Was this what motivational posters meant when they talked about a leap of faith?

"Hey, can we stop in D.C.?"

He turns to look at her. She has her arm hanging out of the window, maroon shirt blowing a little, looking like she makes the drive all the time.

"We already lost the moving van when we stopped in that ghost town."

"Just because it's smaller than Boston does not make it a ghost town. And it was Vitisburg. And they have a key."

He scoffs, but it's hiding a chuckle. "Fine. But you're paying for the hotel." He turns back to watch the cars she passes, smiling and waving to the people on their cell phones who glare at them like anybody going faster than they are must be a complete ass.

"Hotel? We can drive all night! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Adventure?" Where, exactly...maybe he'd left it in Boston with his Common Sense and Logic. And his Job.

Then again, maybe a Sense of Adventure is really the only thing he has left.

They pass a billboard proclaiming that Maryland is happy to welcome them.

He smiles to himself, rolling the window down and deciding he needs to let his hair grow out. Virginia has hippies, right? If not, oh well. The Boston boy is all grown up; he can wear his hair any damn way he pleases.

He looks over at her. The highway is packed, they'll need gas soon, and it's far too hot to have the windows down, but she turns the radio up and smiles. He smiles back and starts watching the scenery again, keeping an eye out for grapevines.

# This Train

Bonnie van der Linde

This train of thoughts  
travels faster than the  
flood of tears that turns  
my cheeks to rust.

How fast  
I go until

I run off the tracks and

I don't think  
I don't know

if I can be free  
like the heron

if I can be truth  
like the data

if I can feel  
his pain in my chest.

Meanwhile  
I carry his heart  
around in my purse.

# A Stroll Along the Beach

Lee Stone

Sometimes it is better  
to leap into the sea  
whose steady, frigid waves  
a fiery passion quickly quench,  
then to dwell here  
in your tepid bath,  
waiting for the water to warm.

# Une Eternité

Alexander Urpí

At last, after many a decade of long and painful work, the hour of elation had arrived. His novel was very nearly complete. Five hundred pages lay before him, each page composed of paragraphs, each paragraph of sentences, each sentence of words, each word of thoughts, and each thought of infinite contemplations. In terms of space and time as society knew them, it had taken Duchamp twenty-five years to reach this point. Twenty-five years of explaining that his plot was difficult to pin down in one sentence. Twenty-five years of enduring the stinging insinuations that there was no book, that he had simply fabricated tales of writing such a book. Twenty-five years of being told by professors that his aims were the fancy of an overeager student, and then, when he himself joined their ranks, of being told by his peers that he was not talented enough to write what they termed “a good book.”

Twenty-five years! Perhaps to them it had been only twenty-five years; to Duchamp it had been an eternity. Every waking moment—and some sleeping—of every day he had spent consumed in his myriad contemplations and imaginations. He could not even hope to remember the infinite glimpses and ideas that had contributed to his masterpiece. Perhaps it would not be a literary icon or the great French novel, but he had to admit that there was some greatness in it. That greatness had been written into it during that eternity spanning twenty-five years—or perhaps it was twenty-five years spanning an eternity.

Duchamp leaned forward and dipped his quill pen into the black ink of his well. He had written two words of the final line of his novel when, to his surprise, his arm stopped writing. He knew better than to continue with the task, for some part of his subconscious had urged him not to finish it. He leaned back in the plain wooden chair and searched his subconscious thoughts. He came upon it rather quickly.

Fresh air. He had cooped himself up in this circular study in his cottage for far too long, had made himself a prisoner of his determination and of his thoughts. He could not finish the book before taking a breath of fresh air. There were no windows in his study, so he would have to return by the dark hallway and leave his little cottage if he were to breathe calmly and freely again. Perhaps he might even find a better way to write the final sentence, as if it mattered what he said there.

He did not bring the solitary lantern with him, so he returned through his hallway

in complete darkness; he had gone to and fro in complete darkness for many years now. He did not know why. Perhaps it was because someone he met at a café in Paris once had said that thoughts surfaced better in total darkness. He could not remember the someone at the café—he might have been bearded—but then it hardly mattered now, now that he had finished his life's work.

Finished his life's work. The idea was somewhat disappointing, anticlimactic. What was he to do now that he had finished? He could not write anything else—this was the best work he had written in his lifetime, and he could not imagine surpassing it. He might go into teaching, but then, what could he possibly teach students that they could not learn simply by reading his novel? Besides, he found writing much more entertaining than teaching; oh, he had envisioned being a professor in his day—he had spent some years trying to be one—but now that seemed a different life, one that he ought not to enter into. He was a writer now, as much a writer as Dumas or Verne, perhaps even a better one. They had written of such petty subjects as adventure and chivalry—his novel, with its many themes, was much more interesting. In a way, he decided, he was even a better writer than his favorite author, Chekhov. The world would see that, soon enough, when they read his published work, the work it had taken him forever to write. He could compare himself to Chekhov, yes, for his book was quite impressive, literarily speaking. There were metaphors in it, and similes and personification and all those little gratuitous details and tendencies that made great authors great. He had told parables in the book, crafted chapters with such eloquence that he might have published them as short stories. Yet that, of course, would never do. Alone, they were short stories comparable to Chekhov; as part of his book, they were works of genius and far surpassed anything the Russian author could have imagined, let alone written down with such illustriousness as he.

He opened the door of his little French cottage and stepped outside. It was a beautiful day, marvelous. He should spend the whole day outside in this bright sunlight, with this blue sky and cobblestone pavement and green grass and rainbow-colored flowers. They had said it should be windy, but it wasn't; in fact, the breeze was more than welcome. The temperature was just right, he thought. Nothing could possibly go wrong on this fine day.

Indeed, nothing did go wrong. Duchamp spent the whole day walking the little streets of his tiny village, lying under trees in the park and sitting peacefully on benches. He did not return to his cottage, and in fact, the mossy walls of the abode, the

dark hallway, the circular room, his book on the desk—not one of them so much as crossed his mind. Here he was, spending the whole day in blissful—blissful what? He wasn't doing anything, absolutely nothing. Perhaps he should call it nothingness. Yes, nothingness. He was spending the day in blissful nothingness, while his fellow Frenchmen waddled about their daily business like mallard ducks crossing the road down by the river. He had spent twenty-five years, an eternity, with nothing but the book on his mind, and now he found he was able to forget it completely. It was an exhilarating feeling, and that night he went to bed in his beautiful cottage—he found it beautiful now—and slept a sound and dreamless sleep.

The next morning, he returned to his study, although he wasn't sure why he was doing it—perhaps out of habit—by passing through the dark hallway. He opened the door to the circular room, which he noticed for the first time was strangely curved, sat down at the desk, and dipped the quill pen into the black ink. Again, however, his own arm stopped him before he could finish that final line.

Why should he finish it now? There was no rush, after all. Finishing the book would seem so dull, so dreary. He didn't want to be finished with it, didn't want to be done with the work of twenty-five years, an eternity. Perhaps he could wait just another day, and then finish it tomorrow. He could spend today as he had spent yesterday, lounging about in the sunshine and the breeze, lying on the soft grass instead of sitting on this hard chair. Yes, yes, he would do that. He would enjoy himself.

Indeed, he did enjoy himself, not just that day but many days afterwards until he lost count. He would walk into his study every morning and decide not to finish the book that day; eventually, he stopped entering his study altogether and simply waltzed around his village. He visited the baker and chatted about how he managed to make his bread so wonderfully warm and soft on the inside, yet crispy on the outside. He talked with the gossipy old women who lived in cottages like his, on the same road, and asked them how they went about tending their gardens. He paid a visit to the church house and had lunch with the vicar because the bishop was away; they talked about God the entire afternoon, and when the vicar asked if he had finished his book, he said he was almost done with it. On the way home, he stopped and had words with some fine, respectable ladies, and they complimented the near-completion of his little book.

He was not a slave to his subconscious, and over time he realized why he had taken to leaving that final line unfinished and pondering on it instead of writing it. He

simply couldn't finish the book, not now, in any case. He had spent his whole life writing it, and if he stopped now, he would experience that terrible sinking sensation that he always used to feel when he finished writing stories. No, he was much happier this way, always with the knowledge that he could finish his book at any time. In fact, he reasoned with himself, he could start to improve the book without finishing it.

He began to cut his days in half, the morning spent reading over and revising his manuscript in his parlor, where there were windows, instead of in that dreary study. In the afternoon, he would enjoy himself, visiting his friends and acquaintances in the quaint little town. He even fancied that he might search for a wife, since all the gossipy old women claimed it was high time he found one. He very much enjoyed revising his unfinished book because it allowed him to feel as if he were re-writing it instead of changing something he had finished writing. Removing lines was no longer a pain for him. After all, he wasn't destroying his sentences; it was more as if he had never written them in the first place. Had the book been finished, he felt sure, it would have been much more difficult to improve.

Some afternoons, he gardened and found that he enjoyed it very much. The rainbow-colored flowers responded well to his touch, and he rather fancied that he had a bit of a green thumb. He took better care of the moss and vines that curled around his stone cottage, and, before a year had passed, his garden was the envy of the town. Whenever he finished working in his garden, he felt so elated that he visited the chapel and thanked his late father profusely for his inheritance, without which he could not have enjoyed so fruitful and happy a life. His gratitude, over time, extended to the entire town, and he began to fund book clubs and social gatherings and charitable events.

Through all this, he felt that his book improved exponentially. His experiences, these new feelings of gratitude and peace, had helped him elevate his novel to such heights that it now seemed to him the greatest work ever written. Certainly, Dumas and Verne, even Chekhov, no longer compared, but now he imagined that not one of the world's greatest authors could ever surpass him. He no longer questioned whether his might be the great French novel—he knew with a kind of visionary assurance that it would be. He talked with some professors and literary critics in the town about what they believed would constitute the finest novel ever written, and their answers only proved decisively that his was that novel. His life passed in this way for five years, years that passed so quickly, years in which he truly considered himself a writer in all

connotations of the word.

One fine spring day at the end of these five years, he was walking along the main street and whistling to himself. He meandered and stared up into the branches of every tree he passed, and sometimes he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk simply to take in the warm rays of the sweet, bright sun. What a change this was from that dark corridor which led to his study!

The corridor. The circular room. The desk. The book. The quill pen. The black ink.

He had not thought of these things in years; he had revised and re-revised his book for one-fifth the time it took him to write it, although this was not particularly egregious. Only recently had he begun to think of them again, but he had deliberately ignored those thoughts until today. There was, he knew, a reason he had thought of these things lately. The revisions were finished, and there was nothing more to be gained by waiting. His subconscious—no, his talks with the vicar had convinced him it was his soul—was now telling him to finish that book. He knew at once what the final line should be like, and then tomorrow he would ship the book off to the publisher and see what he said. Somehow, the idea of finishing the book was no longer anticlimactic, nor was it depressing. He knew, somehow, that it was time, that it had been time for a little while. He had waited too long, but now he would listen to his soul and finish the book. Then all his good friends—he did not care what the critics said—would see how fine a writer he was. He began to skip joyfully on his way home, a home that now seemed so far away, as if it might take him an eternity to get there.

Duchamp's novel was published a year later and achieved great renown in France. Critics and regular folk alike agreed that a novel like it had not been seen in many years. The words were so precise as to be perfect, the tone so smooth as to be eloquent. Similes, metaphors, and other figurative language abounded so that one might have considered it poetry instead of prose—some critics called it a work of “prosetry,” so melodic was its rhyme and meter, all within prose form. The novel sold well into the hundreds of thousands, which in that day and age was unheard-of. It was translated from French into English, and from there it traveled to America and to all corners of the British Empire. In India, it was read in Hindi by Brahmin priests; when it reached China, it became mandatory reading for the mandarins. It appealed to all ethnicities, philosophies, and religions; everyone from the Christian to the Muslim to the Buddhist to the Confucian saw value in its fine plot and skillful composition. Around the world,

it was generally considered a fine novel. Admittedly, the myriad of themes meant that critics rarely concurred on how to interpret it. There was, however, one point on which they all agreed.

The novel suffered in only one aspect, which, had it been remedied, would have elevated the masterpiece to such heights that it would indeed have been not only the great French novel, but the greatest world novel of all time. As it were, it could not compare, literarily speaking, to the work of Verne, Dumas, or, as was often cited, Chekhov.

All critics expressed their wish that the author had not been hit and killed in a carriage accident before being able to complete the book, which lacked the sense of resolution that the unfinished line might have added.

# He Sat With His Thoughts In His Hands

Ashlie Vandebrooke

Get deep into your thoughts and walk around;  
Get out and find a way to feel the ground.  
It's a funny human trick we try to play.  
We get tangled in the words we do not say.

# Bereft

Definition: Deprived

Synonyms: lovelorn, unbeloved, bereaved, grief-stricken, grieving

# Missing Rain

Aerial Perkins-Goode

he called me puddles  
when it rained on days  
where the sun decides to play  
hide and seek with the clouds  
when raindrops fall  
I would think about how  
fragile each single drops was  
dwindling from what seems to be an  
endless abyss  
why do you jump in the puddles  
he asked me with a slight grin  
because they want me to free them  
from their structure  
with the soles of my willingness  
and rain boots doesn't exist to me  
water stained pants legs  
remind me of my childhood  
the good times  
where doubts fly  
like the breathing wind  
I remember him saying  
well just roll your pants legs up  
before you jump  
advice well taken

# The Toothpaste Incident

Deborah Poulin *winner of the QEP Essay Contest*

On a nondescript autumn morning in my sixteenth year of life, I licked the soft pad of my thumb and through a haze of lingering sleepiness, reached up to the mouth of the new boy in drama class and wiped free toothpaste remnants that without his knowledge clung to the hinge of his smile. To this day, I can't muster any reasonable explanation for what caused me to commit this random act of intrusiveness. I do remember however, precisely how we drew apart from each other wearing identical expressions of alarm. The simultaneous startle wasn't because of the spit I smeared across his unexpecting mouth; instead it was the lightning bolt of familiarity we shared. I was destined to bathe his mouth in my saliva; we had been anticipating each other's arrival our whole lives.

When I close my eyes and succeed in quieting my interjecting mind, that blank canvas of a memory is sought out and I reconfigure him; paint him again, every finite detail of the seconds immediately following the toothpaste incident. If told I could retain only one memory of him for all of eternity, it would be just that one. The expression he wore, the light in his eyes, that split second of purity, the one right before we fell in love and replaced our youthful innocence with experience.

In our time, we frequented Harvard Square, together chatting up every invisible homeless person who littered the pristine streets of Cambridge. To him, these forgotten anonymous weren't eyesores, but rather grand story tellers eager to share their epic tales. As I witnessed this mere boy encompass the gravity of love with his enraptured attention to these folks, I learned the life lesson ultimately responsible for my carefully constructed conduct as a human being. He taught me that everyone deserves to feel like someone. The unfathomable warmth that emanated from him was palpable; he literally glowed with genuineness from his insides out, bathing everyone in his beautiful radiance. Until him and since him, I have never seen a light quite so luminous.

He was my first for everything; my first true best friend, first love, first lover, and with the end of his life, my first experience with death. As a grown woman, I now understand his pervasive impact on me to be like a stone skipped hard into a quiet still pond. He landed heavy in my heart creating enough of a splash to ripple endlessly, sustaining me through the span of a lifetime.

The love that we shared twenty-four years ago is a blink of an eye when put in

context to the years following. I have grown from girl to woman, a lost woman to one found. I have married and given birth to four children, and yet, that brief love affair has had a lasting impact on me far surpassing the other relationships I've had, even those of colossal caliber.

In the dusk of a beautiful May evening of my eighteenth spring, he was killed in a car accident, drowned by the waters of our beloved Charles River. The shock reverberated with hollowness leaving a life of substance to feel a then forever foreign concept. It took me a long time to see kindness in any form in a world lacking his presence, especially my own. Thankfully, the auto pilot gear I was stuck in finally shifted to neutrality; with a deep breath I paced myself through stages of grief. I wrote unrelentingly in journals numbers enough to fill the shelves of a library. Occasionally, when a butterfly would tease me with a flirtatious game of hide and seek, I imagined it was him, and laughed freely, hoping the breeze would carry my love for him wherever it was he flew away to.

I lived linked to him this way for years. Then, one day while brushing my teeth, I stopped; mouth full of minty foam; overcome with his disapproval of my anguished spirit. In my ears his voice, everyone deserves to feel like someone including you my love, so get to work. Every day since, while inspecting the corners of my mouth for lingering Aquafresh, I see his face that very first morning, morphed with my own present reflection, we are smiling reciprocally. In the glass, in our smiles, I discover he not only he lives on in every kind act I commit, but that we are eternally bonded by our mutual appreciation he passed no mirrors himself that day.

# H. I. M

Victoria Proffitt

I wonder, sometimes, if the moment we met he felt it too. That tinge of seeing something we ought not to have seen. It was the middle of a dry summer and my patience for men and love was running thin as ever. I was rapidly becoming enveloped in the idea of being asexual and isolated. I was standing outside the door of my friend's apartment when he came around the corner and my life changed instantly.

I was a depressant liberal who raged for pro-choice and liked to chain smoke while chatting about North Korea. He was the boy who was too worried with his future. He was the boy with a head on his shoulders, but a heart hidden under sheets and sheets of chemistry work. He would never see the way I watched him, the way his every movement contradicted my attention from one minute to the next. I salivated on every word he said, and I was the rebel he tamed most severely and unknowingly. If I had known from the first cigarette that he would consume me so, I would have given up smoking years ago. But from one end comes forth another. And at the end of that cigarette, I smashed the butt of it against the concrete, feeling more apart than I had in a while. How unfair it was the way his eyes cradled my heart from the first blink. How grotesque his smile left me, when I realized my cheeks flared red every time I saw his mouth move upward in that most familiar movement. It happened so fast that my mind had to sprint to keep up with my mouth when recalling those first few moments I met him. I never dreamed I would know his name or plans for the future, never knew he would engulf me with his rhetoric. I never thought he would know my name, but he proved me wrong, became a fixture of my life, like a lamp next to the bed or a coffee table. Most convenient, but nondescript as they come. I can't say I love him, but I wish I could. I could love him so much more than I could ever love myself. He makes me feel alive. The way he stands next to me, I'm surprised he can't feel it too. The way my chest feels like it might explode from the electricity of our near touches. The way I wish I could touch his skin, and feel the creases of his inner hand. How all of this makes me feel even lonelier, writing it out for the world to take in and turn it into savage lust and obsession. It's so much more than that.

I could leave him, forget his name and the way he smells, but it would do me no good. I could remember to forget him in conscious thought, but my dreams would be limitless. He would be the celebrity behind my eyelids almost immediately. The way he

makes my tongue twist and tie to try to put him to paper makes me feel for him even more. I want to have our mouths inches apart, but never kiss. Maybe then, he would understand how his very presence affects me. I build my world around him now. Please don't crucify me. I only ever wanted to be honest with him and my heart at the same time. He consumed me so effortlessly. I use to be the girl who walked around whole, believing I was complete within myself. He changed that, most dramatically. Now I walk around feeling slightly departed and a tad dingy. I walk around feeling ragged and smeared. I use to be better put together, but I suppose I fell in love, and nobody has come to fix the pieces his rejection left me in. I know it is said that it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all, but I believe that is utter rubbish. If I had never loved him, he would not still linger in every song on the radio and collect dust on the pages of notes I meant to send him but never did. I feel like I lost a piece of me that I never really owned to begin with. If this is love, I never want to be burdened with it again. That might sound childish, but I never wanted to grow up anyways.

We never dated. We never kissed. He slid through my grasp like dust in the rays of the evening sun and departed to bigger and better things. I became his friend, nothing more. That was the first time in my life I had experienced something so painful I pleaded with death to bargain with me, to surrender myself over, to end the torment. You may know him as a man, a student, a blurred detail, but to me, he is the reason I pop my little Zolof every day. He was the first thing to break me and now I walk around uncertain from one thing to the next.

# Something You Miss

Kyla Crowley

my heart hangs defeated on my bones

tomorrow sets me down on a plane bound for home

i'll speak now of things i never told you

the big, long thoughts i left alone

i will miss you more than any person should

i will wonder if my sex was really any good

i hope i was beautiful on the outside, for once

i hope that my insides weren't crazy, too much

i want to see you again someday

i want to mean something to you

more than just a big mouth

i don't know what to make of anything you've said or done

though i analyze it every hour on the hour

i wanted more than we had or could possibly devour

i wanted to be seen as someone other than i am

who do i tell when all my dreams come true?

when these bright and shiny new ones were laid in front of me by you?

i'm only twentysomething, oh what did you expect --

i've never had a lover i didn't have to regret

i've never had a secret that was able to stay

i've never had a desire and then walked away

i've never had a word i thought before i spoke

i've never been someone that's easy to love

they always drop their hands, when push comes to shove

i've never had a hurt quite like this

i don't know how to be something you miss

# Better Left Unsaid

Hillary Fox

I went out into the night expecting nothing spectacular to come my way. It was an ordinary gathering of friends which had been the routine in the past several months. It had taken on a sameness that I appreciated but became monotonous after a while. I did not expect the evening to hold any surprises for me, but that was about to change.

I pulled up to my usual parking spot, around the block from the yellow house, and right away I gazed upon the massive puke green Plymouth Satellite. My heart swelled. Moffitt was here. Instantly I was nervous and frantically examined my face in the car mirror. Hoping to see a new one in the old one's place, and disappointed with the lack of change, I pulled it together and exited the car. I couldn't wait to see him. It had been months. He had taken a semester off from college and moved from Winchester to Manassas to work. I had been lost without him around. He was one of my closest friends, and I was madly in love with him. It was a strange predicament, but we worked around that fact.

I entered the house and prayed that my face was not the same shade of red as the hydrant out front. Brian was the first one I saw, and he greeted me warmly. He asked if I needed a beer. I took one out of obligation and started to scan the room for Moffitt. At 6'6 with long, dark curly hair, and a deep hearty laugh, he was never hard to find.

"Hill!" I heard it and my heart sped up. I turned too earnestly towards the sound, but then he walked up to me and embraced me tightly. It was just the fix I needed after those months apart. We made small inquiries about each other's summer activities and then he asked if I wanted to join him on the porch for a cigarette. Two hours passed as we spoke to each other effortlessly. Our long talks were what really made me fall in love with him. We had so much in common, and our humor was wicked. I could never get enough.

Then he admitted to me privately that he was under the influence of some mushrooms. He wanted to go for a walk just to clear his head and wanted me to keep him company. Would I go? Of course I would. I would have followed him anywhere.

It turned out to be the best stroll I've ever taken. We chose to ignore the sidewalks and take full advantage of the empty city streets. No cars passed us, and it truly felt like we were the last two people on Earth. There was a delight in taking up that much

space. Our conversation flowed, and his intoxication didn't seem to dampen any of his musings. There was a strong summer wind blowing through the tops of the trees, and I will always remember that rustling noise.

We walked every street we could in downtown Winchester. Eventually he asked if we could make our way to the potential house he was going to rent for his return to college in the fall. He began to point out the elements he enjoyed, but I couldn't even concentrate on what he was saying because I was so elated. He was coming back. Maybe not back to me, but he was going to be near me and that was enough.

Soon, I realized it was incredibly late, and to my dismay, I needed to head back to my car. I had to work in the morning, and I was scared of oversleeping. He escorted me back to my vehicle and then we continued to talk. At first, we stood, but then he hopped upon the trunk of my car and beckoned me to do the same. We lay back against the cool glass and gazed up at the night sky. I cannot remember what we discussed, but I can see him clearly. He was wearing a dark blue rugby shirt which was unlike anything else he'd worn before. I made sure to compliment him because he looked very handsome, and I hoped he would wear it again. He was into flannel and t-shirts adorned with the school plays he'd crewed before, so it was a pleasant change. He smelled delicious to me as well. It was a combination of Old Spice and Tide, even though he had been incessantly smoking and walking all night. I still catch that smell sometimes when I least expect it.

Unfortunately, I am responsible, and I broke the spell. I stood up to leave, and he followed suit. We looked at each other, and then he embraced me. It was the longest, tightest hug I've ever experienced from another human being. Then I pulled away. I was feeling awkward. But then he looked into my eyes, and I knew he wanted to kiss me! So, naturally I turned away and bolted for the car door.

I often wonder how badly I wounded him that night. My blatant rejection of his quiet advances upsets me still. As I drove home that evening, I cursed myself for being so cowardly. How could I have been so stupid? The next morning at work, I recounted the evening for my friend, and as soon as I finished, Moffitt stepped through the door. The timing was eerie, and in accordance with the night before. He had come to tell me about how he had gone to see the house, and he was going to take it. I was excited for him, but deep down I knew I had been on his mind as much as he had been on mine. It was a simple conversation taking the place of what really should have been said. But for us things were better left unsaid. The truth was too much to bear.

# Before You Were Young

Ezra J. Miller

It seems like a thousand autumns have gone since that autumn. Your hair was black then. The autumn before, your hair was the color of Pinot Noir. The autumn before, you were young, vivid, a Renoir painting of freshly flowered maturity. You laughed at everything, at things that weren't funny. You told me once you laughed as a way to cope when you didn't know what else to do.

But this autumn your hair was black, and brilliantly so. You smothered your delicate baby blue eyes so that they matched. You wore jeans that didn't quite fit, and I strongly suspect you excused yourself from your first block to cry in the bathroom when Jack Evans told you so. That was the last day you rode the bus. After that, you became a specter in the front seat of my car. You didn't like my friends, and they in turn did not understand why you always got shotgun. You didn't like my music either. You used to like my music. You used to sing along to Sting in your stunning little soprano. "If you love someone, set them free." You quit the school choir that fall as well. It was stupid. Stupid. I chided you on the limited vocabulary, and you rolled your eyes and told me I was stupid. That was when you were kind.

When you were kind, you told me you were just experimenting, trying out new things, new forms, new ways of expressing who you were, as if you knew. You tried out new boys as well, boys with names like Sky or Vid, who played bass guitar in shitty metal core bands that soon dominated your walls with their visages. You smoked cigarettes with them, Marlboro Reds, and I told you I was proud of you. You smoked weed with them, and I told you I didn't care even though I did. When you were kind, you'd tell me about them in great detail, elaborating at length about why each one was different from the last, how each one was special, not just another boy who wore the same tiny jeans, t shirts, and high heeled boots you did. Another boy who didn't care about you.

When you were unkind, you didn't tell me anything. We went days without speaking, and in the winter, I swear the coldness made the frosted windshield twice as hard to clear. In the autumn before, you had called me crazy, stupid, your dumbass big brother. This autumn you didn't call me anything. You just didn't look at me in public, as if you were ashamed of me, and I never felt smaller or more pathetic.

# Blending into the Background

Doreen Roberts *a runner up in the QEP Essay Contest*

The aroma of burning Tupperware was our first clue that something was amiss. Last Christmas as my sisters and I crowded into Mom's kitchen for the holidays, bearing covered dishes and platters full of festive food, Mom warned us that the stovetop no longer worked. Within the hour, we discovered that it did indeed work and that she had turned it on with plastic laying on it. Up to that point, we had noticed little signs here and there but at that moment, the pit in my stomach deepened. I knew we were dealing with the first stages of Alzheimer's.

I have lived enough decades of life to realize that life is often inequitable. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the caregiver gets cancer, the poorest country gets the earthquake, the soldier loses a limb, the newborn is diagnosed with AIDS. I have come to almost expect unfairness. Dementia, however, seems the unfairest of them all. Robbing the victim of their very personality, it leaves the rest of us dealing with a mere shadow.

Mom was never a shadow, never a blender, never a wallflower! The creative juices were always flowing to help her five active daughters with everything from 4-H projects to Halloween costumes to graduation speeches. None of us could beat her in multi-tasking! She could get five kids on the school bus, buzz around the yard mowing, throw in seven loads of laundry, clean my aging grandparents' house, and get beef, mashed potatoes, peas, and homemade rolls on the table by 4:30 p.m. when Dad came home from the chemical plant.

She was the type that could be ever so sober about a topic like God, but then get into a pee-your-pants-giggling fit with me in church. Mom had respect for doctors and teachers and those that were doing something for the greater good, yet realized that her role as a mother was equally weighty. She didn't base her actions on what everyone else thought was important.

A person's parents make an indelible mark on their offspring, and unfortunately for many, it's not a positive thing. I feel blessed to have a mother that inspired me to always be thoughtful and put others first, not to muzzle creativity, and to do the right thing in life. I perceived through her character that motherhood is an aspiration to greatness, too. I was instilled to never be indifferent or uncaring or unsympathetic.

I'm not sure how a woman gives birth to five daughters, then deals with

stair-stepping toddlers, followed by a period of five teenagers, five weddings, and then be a mother-in-law to five new men, followed by being a grandma to ten grandchildren. It wears me out just thinking about it. But she handled it with aplomb and was greatly loved. What tears my heart out is that she should be able to enjoy the fruits of all her labor. Instead, the dementia has clawed at her brain. When I call her and she can no longer remember my name, I have to remind her, “I’m the third one. You know ... Doreen?”

Observing a person muddle through a debilitating disease can also have an immense impact. I cannot express how many times I count my blessings that I have all my faculties for the time being. What a reminder for all of us to latch onto the people in our lives that have a positive impact on us and to appreciate and love them. We simply cannot allow those people to blend into the background until it’s too late to tell them how important they were in our foreground. How many times did I take my mom for granted over the years? How many times could I have used loving words instead of whiney ones? How many times could I have lightened her load instead of giving her more baggage? How many times could I have just laughed something off instead of being so serious?

As I read over what I’ve penned, I came to the realization that I have written in the past tense. It’s as if she is already gone ... as if she has already blended into my past...

# Renascence

Definition: a revival or rebirth, esp of culture and learning

Synonyms: awakening, cheering, consolation, enkindling, freshening, invigoration, quickening, reanimation, recovery, recrudescence, regeneration, rejuvenation, renaissance, renascence , renewal, restoration, resurgence, resurrection, resuscitation, revitalization, revivification, risorgimento

# Black Canvas

Kyla Crowley

i'm a canvas of contradictions

i've got a bellyful of lies

there's lightning on the water

there's a fire in the skies

i wanted you to hold me

but you saw the red you saw the black

you breathed poisoned oxygen

slipped your fingers around all that i lack

so beat a hasty retreat now

do not make me tell you twice

i'm coming out odd

on an even-numbered die

paint by number my contradictions

i've got a bucketful of cries

there's a shining on the water

Jesus Christ is in disguise

# The Problem with Being Dead

Patience L. Ray

The problem with being Dead is, after a few days, you start to stink. Kristen took the perfume bottle from the top of her dresser and gave herself two good sprits of the sweet smelling fragrance. Not that she could smell anything either way, she just wore it as a precaution. The last time she had gone outside without wearing any perfume, an old woman had almost fainted from the stink. It had been quite embarrassing.

Kristen looked at herself appraisingly in the mirror hanging over the dressing table. Sure, besides smelling like road kill, the ghostly pallor and dark circles under her eyes were a little bothersome too, but there was nothing a little make-up couldn't fix and she kind of liked the way her skin seemed to glow when light hit it. There were definitely worse things in life than being Dead.

She finished applying a bright red shade of lipstick to her full, gray lips and then grabbed her purse. She walked into the kitchen where her mom was standing at the sink up to her elbows in soapsuds.

'Hey mom.' Kristen kissed her mom's pink cheek.

'Hey to you too,' her mom said, raising an eyebrow as she took in her daughter's appearance. 'Headed somewhere?'

'The Graveyard,' Kristen replied, checking her purse to make sure she had her I.D. 'There's this new band called the Headstones who just flew in from Denmark and I hear they're stone dead cool.'

'I guess a little music won't hurt,' her mom said, wiping her hands on a dish towel, 'but be careful. You know how I feel about you being newly Dead and hanging out at a place like the Graveyard.' She slung the towel over her shoulder, a slight frown around her mouth. 'I just hope I'm not letting you jump too quickly into the Dead scene.'

'Don't worry.' Kristen put one arm around her mom. 'Dr. Matthews says being around other people like me will help.' She gave her mom an affectionate squeeze. 'Sometimes it's hard when everyone else in the family is packing a pulse.'

'Of course,' her mom said, 'I know it's the right thing to do, but I don't want you to forget your old friends either.' She looked pointedly at her daughter. 'Like Liz. She called today and wanted to know if you were . . . feeling alright.'

Now she calls? Kristen thought bitterly. ‘Didn’t seem like I was alive enough for her two months ago,’ she said, gazing at the floor. If Liz wanted to talk to her, it would take a lot more than just a phone call. Kristen looked up again at her mom. ‘You told her I wasn’t here, right?’

‘Yes, just like you asked,’ her mom replied, shaking her head as she pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down. ‘But I still feel terrible. Liz sounded so sad on the phone, like she feels responsible for what happened to you.’

‘I don’t blame her.’ Kristen tried not to sound hurt, which was pretty easy since being Dead made the whole crying thing impossible. ‘It’s not her fault some drunk guy decided to go for a joyride into the side of her car—it could have been her in the passenger seat, she just happened to be driving.’

Her mom reached over and took her hand. ‘You two were so close, just give her another chance to make things right. It will be better for you both.’

Kristen nodded, waiting till she trusted her voice not to crack. ‘I’ll think about it.’

The chain link gate swung shut behind Kristen, and she turned left, walking briskly along the sidewalk toward the railway. The Graveyard was only fifteen minutes away on foot, right by the abandoned rail yard, so walking on the train tracks would be the shortest and least crowded route to take her where she wanted. Besides, it was nice to be outside. Being stuck in the house all day had been one of the hardest things to get used to, but her dermatologist had been very clear about the damage extended exposure to sunlight would have on her skin, and rotting, gaping holes did not sound pretty. Cost was an issue too. She had just gotten this skin suit a few weeks ago and she had to make it last as long as possible. Neuskin products were expensive, and her mom’s work didn’t provide insurance for deceased dependents.

Kristen picked her way over the tracks, careful not to get a heel stuck between the rails. Only a few more minutes and she would be at The Graveyard. She passed a tall, round oak tree, its broad, leafy limbs a black mass in the darkness. Our tree, Kristen thought sadly. She and Liz used to come to that tree at least once a week to smash pennies on the track and watch trains go by, counting the boxcars, but mostly it had been a place to talk. But not anymore, not since the accident. She moved on, trying to keep thoughts of Liz from creeping in, her attempts only making it worse. She should have asked her mom drive her instead of coming this way. With relief, Kristen heard

the steady beat of music just ahead. Maybe now she'd be able to forget what her life had been like before. She hurried up the slope toward an old warehouse, a sign with the words 'Graveyard' flashing in red neon above it. After opening a few years ago, the Graveyard had turned into the place for corpses to be and was one of the only joints in town that was strictly for the living dead. The parking lot was packed with cars, and there was a line of people at the door waiting to get in. The old glass panes above the door rattled in their frames as music blasted from the warehouse, and Kristen could almost feel the ground vibrate as she moved toward the end of the line.

There was someone already there, waiting anxiously off to the side.

Liz walked over to Kristen.

'Hey.'

If Kristen had been alive, her heart would have skipped a beat.

'Hey,' she said lamely. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to find you,' Liz said, 'your mom told me you'd be here.'

'Oh.'

They were both quiet for a few moments before Liz broke the silence.

'I'm sorry,' she said, her voice quavering as she scuffed the toe of her shoe into the gravel, 'I should have called you sooner, I just felt so. . .'

Kristen watched a tear roll down her friend's cheek. 'I know,' she said quietly, 'it's alright.'

Liz relaxed her scrunched shoulders. 'Really?'

'Really.'

Liz smiled, looking at Kristen's face for the first time since she'd walked over. 'You look good.'

'Thanks, but you look . . .'

 Kristen noticed the dark circles under Liz's eyes. Her friend's skin was an unhealthy shade of gray and her lips bloodless. 'Are you feeling alright?'

Liz leaned closer as two guys walked past them. 'Yeah, I'm fine,' she said in a whisper, pulling Kristen a little farther away from the line of people. 'I just wanted us to be able to hang out like we used to and I heard that the Graveyard only lets in, you know, Dead people.'

Kristen's mouth dropped. 'Are you seriously pretending to be Dead, just so we can be together?'

'Something like that,' Liz said.

Kristen stifled a laugh while looking her friend up and down, a foolish grin on her face. 'Well, you really look the part.'

Liz shrugged. 'The make-up was easy, I read up on it. You can find anything on the web.'

'What about the I.D.?' Kristen asked. 'You have to be registered as 'deceased' to get in.'

Liz held up a death certificate. 'I know a guy. Faked it.'

Kristen giggled. 'Gosh, I missed you.'

'Yeah, you too,' Liz said.

They walked together to the end of the line. The couple in front of them moved through the door and Liz and Kristen handed their I.D.s to the guy standing at the entrance. He had what looked like tire tread marks down the right side of his face.

He took one look and waved them in.

Kristen watched Liz's face for any kind of reaction as they entered the club. Nothing. How was Liz doing it?

Liz felt Kristen watching her and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Kristen nodded toward the dancing crowds. 'A whole room of stinking corpses—how are you not gagging right now?'

Liz smiled proudly. 'Nose plugs.'

# Journey to Vinestone

Sarah Catherine Washburn

*And there, looming before them, stood the Abbey, the safe hold, the destination: Vinestone. After all they had been through ... the hiding, the fighting, the suffering ... they had made it!*

We sat leaning intensely over the freshly revised script. Lost in a reverie, it took several seconds before any of us spoke.

“It’s perfect!” exclaimed my sister, Ariel, shaking her brown hair in admiration.

All of us agreed. It was a work of art. We had put so many long hours into making it perfect.

“Ooo!” Layne sighed, eyeing my pile of supplies. “What kind of stuff did you bring?” She stood peeping into one of my bags, her blonde, wavy hair pulled back in a long braid.

“Well,” I said, “I have the elegant, medieval costumes, the village props, and the fabric.”

“And I have the cameras!” Ariel added enthusiastically. She was deeply into all-things-camera, and it’s a good thing too, or else we wouldn’t have had the necessary equipment for movie-making.

“Great!” cried my cousin Morgan, her smiling face framed by her short, dark hair. “Now can we try on our costumes?”

Dressing up was not something average teenagers did, but we were going to have a blast! Thankfully, we would be alone and deep in the woods where no one could see us. Just as we had planned, we changed into our medieval costumes, arranged our hair, and put on our various medallions, knife sheaths, and footwear. Layne was a princess and wore a beautiful white dress made of bed sheets, done up in elegant twists and flowing folds and fastened with two safety pins tucked out of sight. For a crown, she wore a string of white beads around her head. Ariel was a villager. She wore a simple brown dress and an intricate belt made from colorful beads and leather and had two small braids in her hair, tied together in the back. Morgan was the princess’s maid and wore a maroon frock and a blue skirt. In her hair was a comb, adorned with beads and trinkets. I was a warrior and wore a long, cream-colored tunic, a straight, shin-length, brown, rawhide-looking skirt, and a medallion around my neck.

Feeling foolish in clothing of such oddities, we walked out of the front door and

into the lushly green yard, where the sweet smell of summer flowers and the cheerful chirping of North Carolinian birds greeted us. Tromping down the street to the public walkway, we looked like an anomalous revolution, all dressed up in medieval clothing. We gulped. Now, we—the lost heroes of old—were fully exposed to the world. The path was relatively quiet, but long and open. Anyone walking could see us on that narrow little lane.

We walked along the path until we came to a secret trail where we turned and cut into the woods. The splendor of the forest was overwhelming. It looked like a mystical woodland. Passing moss-covered trees, deep creeks, and fallen logs only added to the magic. Wildlife was everywhere. Birds sang, frogs croaked, and rabbits hopped gleefully around, celebrating the magnificent day. We crossed a wooden bridge, rounded a bend, and looked up. Our eyes met a glorious sight—the Meadow! Layne and I loved that place, and when the sun hit the field just right, the beauty was so vivid you could almost see fairies dancing in the tall grass. It always gave me a deep thrill inside saying, “This place is magical.” It was the perfect spot to film.

We then set everything up and got the camera ready. We did a quick run-through of the scenes, got into our places, and started shooting.

“Action!” I shouted, for I was the cameraman.

It was a forest scene, and the princess was running from an enemy camp. Layne was in the spotlight. She had to run through rough terrain, climb up a steep ledge in one giant leap, and duck under various boughs. Finding it to be nearly impossible, it took three takes before Layne got up the ledge. But then, on the fourth take, Ariel and Morgan could be seen in the film when they were supposed to be miles away at a village. So we did one more take, and it was perfect! Then we filmed some scenes of the sky and some of the beautiful meadow and surrounding scenery. After that, we headed back to the bridge to shoot a water scene in the stream.

When we arrived at the bridge, everyone got into position, and I was just about to press record when a girl rounded a bend in a pathway and was heading straight towards us!

We froze. I turned my head away, and Morgan and Ariel pretended to be talking. But Layne ... Layne had a different idea. Some people are shy, some outgoing, and others follow their spontaneous instincts. That is what Layne did.

“Excuse me ma’am,” my cousin, all dressed up in a princess gown, said, using a

heavy, exaggerated English accent.

My heart stopped. No, no! Don't bring any attention to us!

But Layne had no intention of letting a good joke pass by. "Could you please tell me where the nearest carriage is? I'm afraid I'm late for the ball," Layne finished, staring at the girl with a face of perfect innocence.

"Uhh ... okay?" the girl answered in a questioning tone. Her dumbfounded face showed the shock of seeing a rugged band of adventurers from the ancient castle era.

Realizing that this girl had no interest in playing our game, Layne quickly apologized. "Oh, sorry. I was just..." she trailed off, her innocent look melting away to uncover one of sheepish embarrassment.

I was trying so hard to keep myself from laughing that when the girl finally disappeared around the corner, an outlandish howl exploded from my mouth as it tried to escape.

"Did you see her face?" cried Morgan, gagging with hilarity.

"I know!" Ariel added. "And she was taking out her cell phone to make fun of us with her friends. We are going to be famous!"

After shooting our water scene, we headed through the woods back to Layne and Morgan's house. The forest life seemed even cheerier, as if it understood our laughter. As we strode back, we replayed the best scene of the day about Layne and the girl. It got us all worked up again, and I don't know how we ever stopped laughing, but we did, and that evening we had so much to share at the dinner table. It had been a fun day—one to remember for years to come.

Imagine walking down your favorite path—one you used often—and seeing a bunch of teenagers, about the same age as you, all dressed up like ferocious first graders in costumes of imaginary places. I think the girl was relieved to find out that we were just pretending. But that conclusion probably made her just as uneasy. After all, "ordinary" teenagers didn't let their imagination and love for adventure get the better of them. But we didn't care. It had been years since we had dressed up, and it was refreshing to feel foolishly young again.

Oh, that wonderful princess and her carriage ... the one who not only "stars" in "movies," but who also loves to laugh.

# Like A Good Piece of Land

Patience L. Ray

I wish the bed would eat us,  
tear me limb from limb,  
pick the flesh from your bones.  
Maybe then this place would be ours;  
our sweat, our blood in it  
like a good piece of land.  
We would sow all year round  
with our hands turning the sheets,  
cloth fields to bury death in, live in,  
forgetting as we soaked into the cotton,  
silk, whatever we made it with.

There are things only a pillow can carve up,  
make better, look at with your eyes closed.  
Like that time you ignored my bound foot  
pressing against your Sunday shoes  
under the table.  
I needed unwrapping  
from that mediocre dinner party,  
but you let me add superficial layers  
for another 92 minutes.

I thought it meant something  
until we returned to ground,  
shedding false pretenses,  
became snakes digesting gophers,  
filling in the musty tunnels  
and holes in our field.  
Forgiving is pulling back the coverlet,  
entering that place between tongue and palate,  
embracing the cud, this place of ours;  
our sweat, our blood in the fabric  
like a good piece of land.

# Love, Italian Style

Anthony S. Prato

## **Canto I. The Knowledge.**

They know. They all know. All of them.

How do they know? Did they learn the Knowledge in the womb? Did they absorb It by osmosis? Was the Knowledge handed down to them via a long chain of female relatives, deceased and living?

It doesn't matter. What matters is that they have the Knowledge and you do not. No, my benighted young friend, not only do you not have the Knowledge, but you don't even realize it exists!

Here they come now. They look pretty ordinary, don't they? They're just another group of Italian-America Roman Catholic teen-aged girls from some big-city working-class neighborhood. We could be anywhere: New York, Philly, Baltimore, Boston or Frisco. Let's pretend we're in New York. Queens, actually. Okay, Long Island City in Queens.

They're getting closer. They're chatting a mile a minute, giggling and grooving to the rock music blasting from somebody's radio.

In the middle of this covey of seemingly innocent little doves is a girl we'll call Vivian. She is dark-haired and attractive. Her name was well chosen: she is vivacious and outgoing. Look at her! Not a care in the world or a brain in her head, right? That's just what she wants you to believe, chump!

These girls seem so oblivious to the world around them. The operative word, of course, is "seem". They have long ago mastered the art of seeing without appearing to look, of hearing without appearing to listen. Above all, they have mastered the Black Arts of sensing, intuiting and envisioning, which enable them to look into your very soul.

Make no mistake about it. These young ladies are Ninjas, female Italian Ninjas. Assassins!

So what is the Knowledge these Italian girls have? When you try to describe or define the Knowledge, you inevitably trivialize it. It's essentially the feminine art and science of winning a mate. The highest manifestation of this art, the Black Belt level, is the ability of a Woman of Knowledge to induce the male to feel that he cannot live

without her and that he originated all of the courting and subsequent commitments.

## **Canto II. It All Began Here**

Here is how it begins. You (we'll call you "Salvatore") are hanging out in one of the rooms of the school attached to the local church, rooms that are used for Friday night socializing by the teen-aged parishioners. Let us call the church "St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church."

A girl named Vivian looks at you across the room, smiles and murmurs "Daddy who? Daddy cool. Daddy who? Daddy Cool." Those are the words of a popular Rock song of the day, but when Vivian gently voices them, they are soothing and hypnotic. Also, listen to the words. Vivian is calling you "Daddy," implying that she looks up to you, that she thinks you are wise and strong and knowledgeable in the ways of the world. And, as a bonus, she thinks you're cool! Vivian has taken complete charge of the situation. Salvatore, you are doomed.

You ask her out...clumsily. She accepts...graciously. So the next several weeks become a dating fiesta: movies, pizza, inexpensive neighborhood restaurants, walks in the park, and church functions. One soft summer night, graced with a lovely full moon, Vivian says, "Why waste your money on movies? Why don't we just go for a walk in the park?" She takes your hand, and the both of you disappear into the hidden, shadowy recesses of Rainey Park, hard by the East River.

## **Canto III. Sunday Mass.**

Sooner or later, Salvatore, either you or Vivian will suggest that you go to church together on Sunday. After all, both of you go to Mass every Sunday. Why not go together? It will probably be Vivian who broaches the subject. You are hopelessly obtuse.

So you and Vivian go to Mass together each Sunday. After a short time, you have become a couple. All of your friends have seen you together each Sunday, as have hers. Relatives that live nearby have seen you and Vivian in church.

This has been a triumph for Vivian but she is not growing complacent. Remember, Vivian has the Knowledge. She knows how crucial the next step is... and how dangerous.

#### **Canto IV. Sunday Dinner After Mass.**

Vivian needs advice from her co-conspirator girlfriends. She meets with them the following Monday at a table in the high school cafeteria. There are many urgent whispers at that table, laughter, and tears. The full gamut of human emotions is given free rein here, with even what sounds like the cackling of Macbeth's Witches gathered around the smoking cauldron.

What is the problem? The next step is for Vivian to invite Salvatore to her house right after Mass for Sunday dinner. But when? Timing is of crucial importance. If the invitation comes too soon Sal may realize that he is being set up.

The moon, the stars, the witches of Macbeth, the shades of wise, ancient, southern Italian crones and Vivian's friends all agree that the very next Sunday is auspicious.

You and Vivian have just attended Mass. The Mass has ended and you are melding with the crowd leaving the church. You walk Vivian to her home and start to say goodbye. Vivian says, "Why don't you come up to my house for dinner?" "I'd love to but my parents are expecting me," you say. Vivian replies, "Well, you could call them from my house."

You and Viv have now reached a critical juncture. Having everyone together for Sunday dinner after church is very important in most Italian-American families. This is your first step towards becoming part of Viv's family. Viv knows that she must become a part of your family too. That will soon come to pass.

Your mother will say that you should reciprocate and invite Viv to your house for Sunday dinner. Vivian will, of course, accept your invitation, cordially but without appearing too eager. Soon this becomes routine: dinner at Viv's one Sunday, dinner at your house the next.

#### **Canto V. She's Good for Him.**

Your mother has already fallen in love with Viv: "What a sweet girl, so warm and friendly. And she's attractive but a little plump, just like me! I think she will keep Salvatore going to Mass every Sunday...and keep him away from those no-good friends of his."

Your mom and dad know you're a bright kid who always did well at school. They've been praying for years that you will go to college, the first of the extended family to do so. They are scared to death that your friends will tempt you away from the ivy path to college and towards the primrose path to...God knows where. To jail?

To a roof top, where the police will find you slumped over with a needle dangling from your lifeless arm? To a hospital emergency ward, your life oozing out of a lung punctured by a razor-sharp knife wielded during some senseless gang fight?

I know your crowd, Sal. Your friends aren't that bad. It's just that parents worry. They worry most about those scenarios whose horrors far outweigh their likelihood. That's human nature. Nothing can change it.

The important thing is that your mother sees Vivian as a good influence: a lighthouse in a pitch-black night, an unwavering compass pointing the way to safety for callow and inexperienced sailors tossed in a stormy sea of adolescent angst, confusion and vulnerability.

## **Canto VI. Meet the Family.**

Vivian knows that the next step is crucial. Again, Viv must confer with her girlfriends. When you have a bunch of Italian girls sitting together in a high school cafeteria, talking in urgent, conspiratorial whispers, you know some unsuspecting guy is about to sink a little deeper into the courtship quicksand.

The next step for Viv is to invite Sal to a family function: a birthday, a christening, perhaps a major holiday. Again, timing is critical, as is the choice of function. Wakes and funerals are out (too gloomy). Weddings are out. No sense in scaring the unknowing little slaughterhouse piggy...until it is too late.

Christmas dinner at Grandma's is as good a time as any. There will be plenty of relatives there who haven't seen each other in a while and will be anxious to renew their friendships. Viv knows that Sal won't be the center of attention and will therefore be able to relax and enjoy the festivities.

Another advantage for Viv is that one side of her family gets to size Sal up, all in one sitting. This is important. Italian-American couples do not live in a vacuum. They are an integral part of both the husband's family and that of the wife. Actually, the two families will eventually become The Family. It is unthinkable that Sal and Viv could get married if either one did not fit into The Family.

After Christmas dinner, Viv's mother will be receiving reports from the field. They will all be favorable. After all, Sal has been in his family's school all his life, the school where one learns how to be an Italian male. He is nice, friendly and modest, and

respectful of the older family members. Viv's family will recognize him immediately as one of their own.

And so it goes. Viv attends all of Sal's family functions and Sal attends all of hers. Now you are officially a couple in the eyes of God and The Family. If Sal goes alone to a family wedding without Viv everyone will converge on him asking, "Where's Vivian? Is she ill? Tell her we said 'hello'."

### **Canto VII. Heart Speaks to Heart.**

Sal and Vivian have had many long, serious conversations about their future, many of them in the "...hidden, shadowy recesses of Rainey Park, hard by the East River." On one of these occasions, Sal is very quiet. "Honey, what's the matter? You're so quiet," Viv says. "It's nothing", Sal replies. "Tell me," she demands in a raspy whisper, her beautiful brown eyes wide with concern.

Sal asks, "Are you dating other guys?" "Well...NO! Why should I? Do you want to date other girls? Are you thinking that we should break up?" "Well..." Sal says, taken aback by the force of her reply...and cut to the bone by her palpable pain. "WELL, WHAT?!!" she snaps at him.

"Well, since we're not seeing other people, I thought, and I don't know how you feel about this, but I thought, well, maybe we should..." Vivian completes his sentence: "Go steady? We've been doing that for months, you silly!" And then she drops the bomb: "Why should we go steady?"

Sal's innocent question somehow turned the conversation into a chess match. The words "check mate" are softly, almost inaudibly, reverberating inside his skull. "Well," he stammers, "I think we should get married someday". "Why?" she says, archly. "Because you love me? "

"Well sure, Viv, because I, well, you know, love you...sort of...and because I don't want to be without you...ever." "That wasn't so hard, was it?" she asks, trying very hard to keep a note of triumph out of her voice. The moon and the stars look down on the young couple with approval. The Witches of Macbeth, the shades of wise, ancient, Southern Italian crones and the spirits of her girlfriends gather secretly behind a dense copse of nearby shrubbery, silently cheering.

### **Canto VIII. The Perils of Passion.**

Vivian presses her lips against Sal's, cutting off his reply. The kiss, one of the very

few that she doled out to him, is long and passionate. After several seconds, when she can feel her heart trying to burst out of her chest, she pushes him away, a little more roughly than was necessary, Sal thinks.

Vivian is totally, cold-bloodedly in control of the couple's amorous activity. She knows what would happen if she became pregnant and she is prepared to fight with her entire being - tooth and nail, body and soul, to the death if necessary - to avoid that fate.

If she became pregnant, she and her parents, and Sal and his parents, would be in Father Russo's office for an impromptu, private wedding ceremony. There would be no nuptial Mass, just a perfunctory, uncomfortable rite that everyone, even Father Russo, would want to be over as soon as possible.

Vivian wouldn't be able to bear the look of pain and disappointment in her father's eyes. Nor could Vivian stand seeing her mother struggling for control, trying to think of something reassuring to say, only to break down totally and blurt out: "Vivian, *bambina mia*, my heart, my soul, my blood, why did you do this to me?"

No, bad boys and girls, and their parents, don't get formal church weddings, in the presence of both families, with the bride dressed all in white, just like she has been dreaming of since she was a little girl. Mothers of bad girls get to cry their eyes out at every family wedding as the bride, all aglow, and stunning in a dazzling white wedding gown, walks slowly down the aisle at her father's side. Such is the compassion that the Church's administrators reserve for erring communicants.

## **Canto IX. Plans.**

Vivian is a very practical young woman. As for the engagement ring proffered with a formal proposal delivered on bended knee, well that's only so much American frippery. Life is serious and has nothing to do with rings. A diamond ring? That's a refrigerator equivalent!

And the bended knee should be reserved for church, where one genuflects to the Living Presence residing at the altar

The happy couple eventually decides to get married as soon as it is practically and reasonably possible, which really means in a few years. Yes, Sal, you have now not only resigned yourself to your fate but you are embracing it. Vivian cannot wait

for that happy day. You young people are crazy. For years you've been complaining about how old fashioned and irrelevant your parents were, how uncomprehending and clueless, how hopelessly out of date. And yet you are now in a big rush to become your parents! The gods, and parents everywhere, must be laughing

Sal is changing his plans to take a pre-law curriculum at Queens College. After all, it takes three years of study after college to get a law degree. It seems more practical to get a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting, which is all the education necessary to become a C.P.A. Sal will enroll in night courses at City College's Bernard Baruch School of Business Administration while working full time at a stock brokerage house.

Vivian will go to work as a secretary for a major insurance company. Sal and Viv will open a joint savings account.

### **Canto X. The End...and the Beginning.**

Four long years have passed since high school graduation. Sal will make his formal proposal to Vivian in the hidden, shadowy recesses of Rainey Park. Vivian will be a June Bride next year. And yes, Vivian will get her engagement ring. After all, she has to set a good example for the sake of her girlfriends.

No one knows if Sal will propose on bended knee...no one except the moon and the stars, which are benignly beaming down on the young couple, and those other benevolent well-wishers: the Witches of Macbeth, the shades of wise, ancient, Southern Italian crones and the spirits of Vivian's girlfriends, who hide behind a thick copse of nearby shrubbery. But they aren't talking.

# The First Bite

Kelly Shott *a runner up in the QEP Essay Contest*

“You know you can’t leave until you eat all of it.”

I took a deep breath and groaned. How had it come to this? I am a grown woman, and besides didn’t she know that I couldn’t eat this sandwich. The nurse looked at the clock and sighed.

I looked down at my plate. Why can’t I eat this sandwich? The bread was fresh, the turkey was unspoiled, the cheese was not moldy; there was nothing unusual or offensive about it sitting there in the compartment of the institutional tray. I did the calculations in my head automatically. I had eaten the broccoli first: 10 calories per stalk. Then I ate the apple: 100 calories. I had drunk my milk: 130 calories. I had eaten more in this meal than I had eaten all last week; I just couldn’t eat this sandwich.

It was my first day of inpatient treatment for Anorexia Nervosa. My struggle with this exhausting disease began at age 12. Eating disorders are primarily anxiety driven and anxiety is something I know well. A hair on my shirt, a dust bunny in the corner, the slightly less than ninety degree tilt of the paper I am writing on, all of these things can throw me into a deep spiral of panic. Some students strive for A’s and B’s, I demand 100 percent. Overachievement is so common in my family that even the family tree is afraid to fail. I graduated with a 4.0 and numerous acceptance letters.

That Fall I started college with the same grueling expectations of myself and the new found freedom to starve myself to death. The pressures of college soon took their toll. Chasing perfection is like trying to fill up a bucket with no bottom. In a world of deadlines and expectations, I thirsted for control. I was dying to control.

One of my therapists once said, “You have a bad case of the shoulds. You need to control a situation to feel safe and stave off the anxiety but your sense of control is an illusion and you know it. When you can’t control anything else, at least you can control what goes into your mouth.”

I became reclusive and alienated. I quit the rugby and equestrian team; I dropped out of German club. My friends whispered, theorized and finally gave up and stopped calling. My weight dwindled and I found reasons to not come home for holidays. That summer my facade finally fell to pieces. I could no longer pretend that I was not sick and at 98 lbs I was admitted to a voluntary inpatient treatment center located in the

Appalachian Mountains.

I thought about all the reasons why I couldn't eat this sandwich.

“If you eat this sandwich you will get fat, your grades will drop, no one will love you, and your whole world will fall apart...”

I looked at the nurse. Her hair was out of style, her name tag hung just slightly askew on the lanyard around her neck, her impossibly white shoes squeaked on the sterile tile floor. Then I met her eyes. I saw steel resolve, I saw concern, and I saw compassion. Her eyes seemed to say, I hope you succeed but if you fail, we will try again. Like a mother bird pushing her fledgling out of the nest, she knew I had to fly or hit the ground. She thought I was worth it and she was not going to give up without a fight.

I looked back at my plate. This woman had just met me; she didn't know that I had an almost perfect SAT score or that the tassels of my bedroom rug were all perpendicular to the floorboards and she still thought I was worth it. If she thought I deserved to eat this sandwich, deserved not to starve, deserved to be happy, then maybe I did. The prospect of eating that whole meal was the most terrifying thing I had ever done but, for the first time in years, I cleaned my plate.

That nurse saved my life. I finished my inpatient therapy under her experienced care. Ninety days later, I went home armed with the tools to defeat the mental illness that had ruled my life for my entire adolescence and had threatened to stalk me into adulthood. I don't remember her name, but I will never forget her. The way her voice sounded as she encouraged me. The way her hands always smelled like antiseptic when she held my head. I will never forget that she never gave up on me, that she insisted that I was worth it.

# A Long Time Coming

Kenneth N. Moore

This voyage at sea  
was more than I imagined it would be.  
Storms and unknowing frightened me.  
Only faith  
held off my growing belief  
That I might never set foot on land again.

But then one morning I awoke  
to the shouts of the lookout  
crying, “land, land, I see land.”

I felt the pounding of my heart,  
as I strained to see  
out across the sea.  
And then it appeared  
a ridge upon the horizon  
that brought my soul to rest.

As our ship sailed closer to this promised,  
but sometime disbelieved land,  
memories of stories past spoken  
merged into reality.

Now, sometime past  
I am aware  
and grateful—  
It was a long time coming.



