Collision

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Letter from the Editor

Carey Smith, Editor in Chief

Peering over a stack of white and blue papers, we kneel on my living room carpet. The stapled chunks of text, blue sheets from the campus computer labs, and photographs have been gingerly placed in a line that stretches from my front door to the holey couch in the corner. Our makeshift layout.

During the process of putting the sheets in order and matching them with envelopes of negatives, we grow quiet. Each piece placed on the carpet has a boldness to it. The pieces we've chosen to include in Collision show no fear. From a writer dis-owned by her Jehovah's Witness family to a boy whose discussion of a severed finger would get him the silent treatment from his loved ones to a student confronting unimaginably horrific images of her ancestors hung on gallery walls, these writers aren't afraid to make their readers uncomfortable. They aren't afraid to set us on edge. They are essayists, in the truest sense.

The essay and other nonfiction forms, at their best, uncover a truth about the world. Either by subtly nudging us or snapping our heads to attention, the nonfiction form forces us to turn our eyes toward a truth that we might not otherwise know exists—or, even, a truth about ourselves that we don't readily acknowledge. Literary nonfiction shakes us up and makes us examine a little piece of the world beyond the ivory tower we sometimes, as students, are content to dwell in. The essay, and artwork that's done in the same spirit, changes our perspective by chipping away, slowly, at our own egocentrism. We read, sentence by sentence, or gaze at a photograph of an unknown place, and suddenly, unnervingly, our awareness has been expanded.
Mission Statement

COLLISION strives to creatively inspire, converse with, and provoke, the thoughts and emotions of our readers. We value the discovery process and the innate truths creative nonfiction seeks to explore. In the introduction to The Best American Essays 2000, COLLISION finds a like mind, and a way to gracefully articulate our mission. In this introduction, Alan Lightman writes, "...to see a mind at work, imagining, spinning, struggling to understand. If the essayist has all the answers, then he isn't struggling to grasp. When you care about something, you continually grapple with it, because it is alive in you." And this is what we at COLLISION strive for, to publish the kind of writing that becomes alive in us all.

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Without Sanctuary

Tavonne S. Carson

Jesse Washington is no more. There are no more legs, no more arms, just defiant stumps ravaged by the flames, remnants of fists balled up in protest, facial features scalded into nonexistence as he hangs for all to see. His charred core hangs as his murderers pause, awaiting the shutter of a lens. One man slithers his way into the frame, settling himself against the pole from which Jesse hangs. Nonchalantly, he crosses his arms, cocks his head, an accomplished look on his face. Spectators flood the photo’s background and click—here is America’s history. The crowd will eventually wander, continuing with the day’s other festivities; conversing with friends and neighbors, enjoying a picnic lunch in their Sunday best.

It’s hard to believe that lynching was such an accepted activity, that images like this and others floated through the mail from house to house and were collected as souvenirs, or traded as one might trade baseball cards. But one hundred of these images—a collection of photographs and postcards put together by James Allen, an antique dealer from Atlanta—is more than enough to convince me. And Jesse Washington is just the beginning.

I fought with myself for days about whether or not to make the trip to The Warhol Museum. I had never experienced being attracted to and repulsed by anything in such a way. I wanted to see the faces of those who lynched black people, my people. I needed to see the faces of those who watched and said nothing, did nothing. At the same time I was experiencing this extreme attraction, my fear, too, was making its presence
known—seeking the coward in me. (I had to make concrete an idea that, to me, had previously been words on a page or scenes from a movie.) The thought of seeing raw hatred and ignorance exercised for sheer entertainment was scary; knowing that it’s real life—history uncensored—was even more frightening.

*Without Sanctuary* hangs in heavy black lettering on the wall, announcing itself as the elevator doors part. The space is dotted with people here and there. An elderly white man with a gray beard and glasses scribbles in his note pad, a young couple, probably college students, hold hands as they point at items in a glass case. A small and round black woman, who reminds me of my 7th grade English teacher, Mrs. Harris, wanders from the right side of the gallery. A white lettered sign reads: *This exhibit contains graphic material. Visitor discretion advised.* Beyond that, creamy beige walls, a series of black boxes hanging intrusively on them. I walk left.

A large black and white portrait of Billie Holiday is set beside an enlargement of the words to “Strange Fruit,” a song Holiday was known for. A song about lynching, about black bodies *swinging in the southern breeze.* Mrs. Harris walks up beside me mouthing the words as Holiday’s haunting voice faintly occupies the background. *Southern trees bear a strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, /Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, /Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.* Right across the hall what Holiday sings is real.

Stalling is no longer an option with time working against me. The museum will be closing in one hour. I’ve visited the time line of important African-American historical dates twice, read headline after headline of the Pittsburgh Courier’s contribution to coverage of the antilynching movement. *Wrong Man Lynched in Princeton, W. V.* Sometimes the anticipation is the worst part, knowing that needle is hovering above your flesh is more torturous than the actual shot. So I go.

The series of black boxes I glimpsed from afar have become individual still frames of real life, each with a story to tell, a horrible truth to behold. To the right of one frame hangs a card that reads: *Stereograph of the burnt and partially skinned corpses of Ami ‘Whit’ Ketchum and Luther H. Mitchell.* My eyes need coax-
ing and I swallow the knot that has formed in my throat. Skinned, burned human beings. A brief history of this photo is attached. Ami and Luther were handcuffed together, stripped of their clothing, partially skinned and then burned alive. They were hung and left up for several days. My stomach feels hollow.

An older black man and his young daughter provide a welcome distraction at that moment. The girl is small, petite, maybe 7 or 8 years old. Her father’s voice echoes against the silence in the room. I’m not offended by the noise they create, but in awe of their interaction. She stands at attention with her hands behind her back, asking questions, waiting for answers. Why’d they put a mask on the man? The card reads that this man has been brutally beaten, hanged, and removed from the tree. He sits on what might be crates or a stool, a mask-like piece of white cloth covers his face; a stick comes from outside the frame to position his head. I am almost embarrassed at their ability to engage themselves with these photos when I can barely stand to look.

It is work for me to move from image to image. I hesitate before I take that next sidestep to a new piece of history. My eyes linger over the words, preparing myself for the illustration. A swollen face, elongated neck and a busted mouth. Unbelievably, his hat is placed just right back on his head for this photo of an unidentified male.

Just as hurtful and upsetting as these violent and hideous images are the participants and onlookers who pose in their suits and ties, prop up corpses with sticks and discarded items for photos, and make postcards depicting towns gathered for burnings. Coon cooking, they called it. These images overwhelm me emotionally and physically. My body has been plagued with tension and anxiety since I stepped off the elevator. My heart hurts like the moment someone jumps from around the corner, my stomach like the split second before the plummet of a roller coaster. I want to leave at times, but more than that I need to see every image, read every card.

I am alone in the gallery except for one of the museum’s employees. He’s a frail bodied man, dressed in black—black
button down shirt, black slacks, dusty black casual shoes—his hair fashionably “undone,” with calculated, tousled strands here and there. Most likely he has been sent to round up the strays, it’s almost closing time. He doesn’t say anything, just sits and waits.

Coming full circle, Jesse Washington is the last image I see. It’s the most memorable, the most painful to look at. It startles me as each image has. It angers me, drains me, and grabs me—holding me still. I am frozen, examining what used to be a living, loving being; looking at the triumphant eyes of the men who believed their actions to be just, until I can look no more. Still I stand there. Looking past the image I can see my reflection in the glass, my head tilted, my hand covering my mouth. Looking to the past, I can see a reflection of myself in that image, and that is why it hurts so badly, why fear almost kept me away. My eyes shut and I am there. My brother is there. My father is there. My mother is there, hanging. For all to see.
Distractions

Heather Bowman

I swear it snowed
12 feet last night in
Pittsburgh, but today the sun sets
red hot, or really flamingo
pink, a Floridian ending
to a day that began at
9:30 AM, waking up early
to do work, now night
will be here in half
an hour and what have
I accomplished, really: today
is a day when you eat
leftovers, when you read
yesterday’s paper, when the TV
stays on like a lighthouse, showing you
home, when you don’t answer
the phone because other people only
make you lonely, when you
don’t take a shower;

and here I have tried
to read Shakespeare, possibly ruined
a John Cusack movie by watching
it and crying, because all I felt
was stillness,
listened in vain for birds or
some sign of spring, let my hair dry
flat, put on my ugliest
clothes, and God this tropical sunset casts
a ridiculous glow over
the white-crusted city out
the window, almost making me forget
that it’s Sunday, and I miss you.
Astrocytomas
Anonymous

Kathryn Dunfee

My eyelids are so heavy that lifting them exhausts me. The room flickers whiteness with each blink, and I have to concentrate, hard, to feel whether I’m breathing on my own. This is not easy. Wires connect me to machines that transfer my existence into numbers. I recognize my mom’s voice, but I don’t hear what she is saying.

Hallelujah, I just took a breath! I am sure of it, and inside I smile.

“Take my arm,” I try to say, but communication is more difficult than I remember.

My mom looks puzzled, and I realize I’m going to have to elaborate.

“My arm,” I whisper, “out from the covers.” This simple sentence drains my energy.

She pats the blanket, frantic to do whatever I want. “It is, honey.”

She must not understand. “Take my arm,” I try again, desperately, “out from under the covers.” I am more awake now, but feel foggy.

Looking alarmed, she pats the covers again. “Sweetie, your arm is not under the covers.”

“Yes . . . is.”

“No, it’s not.”

She picks up my limp arm and shows it to me.

I must be severely drugged. “Oh,” I murmur as I allow my eyelids to drop again, finding temporary solace in a drug-induced slumber.
My family doctor gave me a referral for my first MRI as a precaution. She was concerned about my difficulties maintaining balance and had also found a slight curvature in my neck. I was so undaunted that I wouldn’t let my mom include my habitual stiff neck—the cause of which had been a mystery up to this point—on my medical history sheet.

This scan, which was supposed to last only forty-five minutes, lasted two hours. For some reason, I wasn’t alarmed when they kept telling me, “Just a few more pictures.” And I was only irritated, not worried, when they gave me an injection of fluid that would make my veins glow on the film, and took all the pictures again. Even when they asked me to return the following day to finish the imaging, I was not frightened. The slightest movement during an MRI can ruin a whole set of pictures. I thought that I must not have been lying still enough. That was Monday.

Tuesday my mom and I played hooky from work and school for my second MRI. This one was in another building, somewhere in the abyss that connected Presbyterian hospital to Montefiore and Children’s. The scans produced by these machines were crispier, the images clearer. The tube was consider-
ably smaller than the previous one—my face rested less than six inches from the surface staring down at me, and my arms would quickly bump the walls if I did not hold them securely over my stomach. I closed my eyes and pretended to be somewhere—anywhere—else.

Again, the technicians loaded my blood with dye. Again, the scan took longer than we had anticipated. Again, I was sure nothing was wrong. I clenched my jaw to stifle a yawn and the inevitable tears that resulted rolled tauntingly down my cheeks, soaking my earplugs. Finally, I was free.

I sat relieved while I waited for the pictures to be developed, a pleasure that would soon disintegrate. The radiologist handed my mom the slides and shuffled us off to meet Dr. Albright. There, in the hallway outside the neurosurgeon's office, he secured the film on a light-board and introduced me, for the first time, to my brain tumor. Its name was Astrocytoma. That was Tuesday.

Friday morning he performed my surgery.

Last year, in a desperate attempt to fulfill my science requirement, I enrolled in a class called Brain and Behavior. Intimidated by its official name, Neuroscience, I was encouraged only by its casual reference, Brain for Dummies. Two weeks into the course, I was obsessed. Why, considering my history, had I not taken this class before?

I focused intently on the "Control of Movement" lecture, learning more about myself as my professor taught us the significance of the cerebellum, brain stem, and spinal cord. I understood why, during a preliminary neurological exam more than eight years ago, I could not touch my finger to my nose if my eyes were closed. This was one in a series of menial tests, such as walking in a straight line, that comprised the before of the famous before-and-after. I failed all of them. My brother and sister laughed with me that night in the hospital, just hours before my surgery, when my finger confidently met my chin.

Brain and Behavior consumed my life. I began wondering if neuroscience was what I was supposed to be studying, and if I was finally on the road to answering why this happened
to me.

I can tell as I lay in this hospital bed that my body is busy healing, because all I can do is sleep. But I’m sick of sleeping. The only interesting thing to look at in my hospital room is an enormous banner made by a group of kids at my church. Each letter in “Get Well Soon” is unique, with lots of colors and imaginative, unidentifiable drawings; one letter is littered with huge red polka dots, another with miscellaneous animals. I scrutinize each of these letters for hours, memorizing them until I am tired enough to sleep again.

My dad is the minister of my church, and the whole congregation seems to have trickled in at one time or another. Talking to these people is tedious. When I was little and didn’t want to talk to someone in the congregation, I would stare at them and grab my mom’s skirt. Unfortunately, I am too old to be so obvious now. My fourteenth birthday is a week and a half away.

After hours of waiting, there is suddenly a team of doctors at my door gazing at me. I feel like a prodigy, and I smile at them, almost flirting, as they enter.

“How are you feeling today, Kati?” Dr. Albright asks gently, his crew in position to take notes at a moment’s notice.

He is tall, well over six feet, with sandy brown hair. He wears smart glasses, and has a remarkable smile for a brain surgeon. An aura of peace surrounds him. His words and his hands act deliberately, patiently. My world stops when he is in the room.

Dr. Albright is the chief of neurosurgery at Children’s Hospital in Pittsburgh, and he is my God.

“Okay,” I respond quietly. Really, though, I’ve had the wind knocked out of me. I would be dead if it weren’t for Him.

As the months after my surgery gradually wore on, my daily obstacles—at first walking and using the bathroom, then making my own toast and doing my hair—went from overwhelming to doable. I had missed more than three months of my freshman year in high school by the time I returned in January.
Once my life regained some sense of normalcy, a glitch in my memory emerged. My dad accepts blame for this, claiming that his own memory is just as bad as mine. He says jovially that I must have gotten all my good traits from my mother. I, however, am not so confident that only genetics are involved. I went to the dentist this week, for example, to have a root canal. Though it was not my first, I was still surprised by the procedure. I smelled smoke when the assistant heated an instrument and I almost closed my mouth when my dentist put the steaming wand directly in my hollowed-out tooth. I thought this must be a new part of the process until, several minutes later, a slight feeling of déjà vu crawled into my consciousness. This happens to me all the time. Even some of the scenes from my favorite movies get lost in my head, and continue to impress me when I watch them again, like new.

No one really knows where memory is stored in the brain. There is some evidence that it is gathered in the hippocampus, which is located deep in the center. But my tumor started at the top of my brain stem and crept down my spinal cord, nowhere near the hypothesized memory area. The spinal cord and brain stem are correlated with vital life functions like breathing and maintaining a heartbeat—nothing serious like memory. The brain stem is sometimes described as the pilot light of the whole nervous system; an unfortunate place to grow an astrocytoma, indeed.

It was luck that my tumor and the cyst that accompanied it brushed my cerebellum, a mini-brain at the top of the brain stem that is the control center for movement. Problems rooted in the cerebellum emerge as poor coordination and balance. Before my surgery I could camouflage these deficiencies as long as I could see what I was doing. I had no difficulty walking down the street or picking up a pen, as long as it wasn’t dark outside, and the pen wasn’t deep inside my backpack. When my eyes were closed, I couldn’t even touch my finger to my nose.

I only have to take the elevator down a few floors from my hospital room to get to my occupational therapy appoint-
ment this morning, but I would much rather be staring at the banner on the wall across from my cozy adjustable bed. There is a thin, square piece of cardboard in front of me, and on it is a pattern I am supposed to duplicate with tiny colored blocks. I am even clumsier than before; when I finally get one block to face the right way, I knock another one down. They fall through the cracks between my fingers, and jump right out of my hands with every chance they get. My left hand and arm are numb.

My occupational therapist smiles at me. Bitch.

I let my attention wander from this humiliation and I turn my focus on the doorway. The children passing through the hallway look young and damaged. Do I look that way? I feel like a queen being wheeled around by these ladies-in-waiting.

Even though I’ve only been in the hospital for a few days, Dr. Albright says I should be able to go home at the end of the week.

There are pain receptors inundating the surface of our skin. When threatened, these receptors shoot a signal up the spinal cord into the brain where, instantaneously, the brain sends a message of danger both back to the spinal cord (resulting in the retraction of your hand, arm, etc., from further harm) and also to the frontal cortex, which simply brings the pain to a conscious level. Pain, simply an annoyance to most, is really a safeguard against further injury. Somewhere, the pain pathway leading from my left hand is grossly interrupted.

Ever since that argument in intensive care over the precise location of my left arm, my nail-biting habit has evolved from being a mere nervous practice to a serious threat. Flaming infections quickly developed in each of the fingers of my left hand in the days following surgery. Yet I could not control the biting. I would look at my fingers and wince, only to mindlessly shove them back into my mouth just moments later.

Eventually, my doctor gave me a prescription for the infections. The cream was so remarkable that, eight years later, I continue to use it sparingly. The small tube, slightly larger (though similar in shape) than a trial size of toothpaste, lives on
its own shelf in my medicine cabinet. The silver label has been creased to white in parts, and the screw top is stripped. Though the initial infections subsided within days of using this beloved cream, I continued inflicting them upon myself for months.

Last week I had a standoff with my radiologist. "Try not to move your head or neck at all," she said halfway through my MRI. She had taken me out to give me an injection of contrasting fluid.

I started to nod, and said, "OK." My voice sounded stuffy through the earplugs.

"You said on your sheet you don't have anything in your body."

"I told the lady I have clamps holding the bones—"

"You have posts in your neck and spine. The MRI does not like posts."

No one had ever mentioned posts before this, and I had had at least a dozen MRIs. "I'm sorry," I said defensively. "Is it dangerous?"

"I just can't get my pictures to come out right. Don't you set off metal detectors? Have you ever been through security at the airport?"

"I flew to Texas last week."

"Well, that makes me feel real good about security!"

Keeping perfectly still, I crunched my eyebrows and glared at her through the plastic cage encompassing my head.

"You should really know what's in your body," she said snootily.

The irony of what she said didn't strike me until that evening. I was in her lab precisely because I didn't know what was in my body. We rely on MRIs and X-rays and doctors and surgeons and know-it-all radiologists to tell us what goes on behind the scenes. Our conception of the true self is only what goes on center-stage. Consciousness occupies only the front quarter of the brain.

My astrocytoma had grown anonymously in my body for years before I knew it was there. Now that it's gone, I am finally aware of its presence. When I lose my balance or when I
can't get my fingers to work the right way, I know it must be back.

Time will not let me forget. It moves us all forward at a pace that seems different for everyone. A day finally arrived when I didn't have to wear my neck brace anymore. Then it was my last day of physical therapy. Eventually, I could meet someone for the first time and they wouldn't know by looking at me. And though it has been years, that day feels fresh. It still defeats me when a stranger asks if I have a stiff neck. "No," I say sharply, because I had temporarily forgotten. Time reluctantly gives us moments of freedom, yet constantly makes us remember the past.

Last week I told a close friend that I was working on an essay about my surgery. "What are you talking about?" he asked me warily. In the year we had known each other, he had never suspected, and I had never divulged.

"You know, my brain surgery?" I said smiling as we rode up the escalator at Barnes & Noble.

"No," he said, laughing.

He stared at me while I told him the scary parts—that I was in the operating room for fourteen and a half hours; that I almost died because I still had a thriving vein most 13-year-olds don't; that I have a yearly MRI because all of the tumor could not be removed; and that I still have a cyst (a pocket full of fluid) sitting threateningly at the top of my brain stem. I always save the most benign part for last. "Did you know I don't have any feeling in my left hand?"

Predictably, his eyes glanced from my hand to my face and back again.

"So, you can't feel this?" he asked, pinching my hand.

I smiled genuinely and shook my head. This is my favorite part.
Severed Digressions

Mike Scalise

PART ONE

I lived in a home at the foot of a paved hill in White Oak, Pennsylvania until I was fourteen; then I moved to a home atop a paved hill, but not the same paved hill, of course. And this essay isn’t about the second home, where my parents now live, but the first, where strangers now live and have lived for some time. It was a blue house. That was (and probably still is) the only distinguishing characteristic that it had from the others around it. It was part of a housing plan, a setup of units that bore roughly the same schematics, clumped together to throb like an eye gash to those apt to a creative imagination.

My house was 104. Next to me, were 102 and 106. 106 was brown, and had a gravel stone driveway, owned by a former Mississippi family that moved in at the same time we did. The husband strummed and twanged his guitar and yodeled lightly on the deck (oh yes, there were also decks; wooden, self-built, cookie cutter decks, mere yards from one another), and his wife cut the grass. 102 was a lighter brown than 106, but brown nonetheless. Driveway: gravel for a while, then paved black, like ours. 102 housed a nameless family, and although I lived next door to them for 14 years, I have only vague recollections of their existence. They never cut their grass. They transformed from a silent couple into a family at one point in time, but I can’t actually remember the gender of their child. I used to associate them with Doonesberry characters when I was smaller, and since Sunday cartoons appeared more frequently than the people in
102, in time, to me, they became only those Doonesberry char-
acters.

When we moved, my father made me go back each month and mow our lawn until people bought the house. On the third month after we moved, he gave me ten dollars to cut 102's grass. I remember the day, for the most part, in terms of how many times I had to unclog my lawnmower blade—only once while mowing our own lawn, 104, but six times for 102. It took me three hours, and while I was cutting 102's back lawn, intent on my job, they came home. I knew because I saw their empty, beige car sitting in the driveway by the time I finished. It wasn't there when I started. They may have come home while I lugged the anchored bags of grass into the nearby woods, or while I ducked beneath the blades of our old, dangerous lawnmower. (It seemed, and still does, that the Scalise home has a poltergeist for power tools and appliances. More on this later.) But this fact remains: whether they were home that whole time or not, they never said anything to me about it. They just went on being invisible.

Digressions within the last three paragraphs, though. I meant to tell you about how I accidentally showed a very pretty girl her own severed finger. There will be no more about house 102.

PART TWO

My Uncle Joe had just proposed to Kary. She showed my then six-year-old brother the ring early on, while I was playing kickball up the street. (This is how I picture it happening: Kary waving her tan hand in front of my wide-eyed brother, him watching the bright diamond glow like a bold firefly, then her saying in a cutesy voice, "Just say it. Say, 'Aunt Kary.' Say, 'Aunt Kary!'") I remember I was playing kickball, because one of the Copeland boys refused to go home so that we could have fair teams. My team reluctantly acquired the extra Copeland brother, who, when he ran or even walked fast, moved his legs like telephone poles—not once do I remember him bending them. It was like he walked on stilts that made him four-and-a-half
feet tall. The competition soon fizzled, and with my team so clearly losing, I did the only respectable thing to do in that position. The only thing a skipper of a kickball team can possibly do to end the woes of his teammates.

Take your ball.
Go home.

More digressions: Kary dated my Uncle Joe sporadically around the time I developed the ability to notice females. She was seventeen. She was (yes) going to be a model, even had the sample photos to prove it. I remember when she got them developed, and brought them to a family function. I sat at the coffee table where they lay, curiously eyeballing the proofs, looking at a woman who looked like women looked on television. That was important to me then, girls looking like television girls, with teased hair and purple bikinis. She looked amazing. I looked at her green eyes without awe for years, but those glossy black-and-whites solidified her in my conscience—the most beautiful girl I knew. Lucky me. But yes, she was a model, whose parents moved to Virginia that summer, leaving her with no place to stay.

My parents offered Kary her own room in our house (my brother lost his room; we slept in the same bed for three months), and paid her money in return for her live-in babysitting services. This was the summer. She was our own Scott Baio. *Kary in Charge.* Mom and Dad worked, Kary sunbathed on our deck while my brother and I carried on our daily activities. (His: playing on our backyard swing set, playing with real friends, make believe friends. Mine: football. Or kickball.)

PART THREE

Walking down the paved hill, sore from the Copeland-infested kickball disaster, I was huffed. Those who still wanted to play yelled down at me, cursing my being. I ignored them. Walked. Would play basketball. In my own driveway (yes, they let you have a basketball hoop after five years living in color-coated clone-land). So that’s what I did. By myself. Hmm-ha. As I snaked around to my back yard, down the slight
hill of my paved driveway, I saw Kary and my brother Rob playing on our swing set. Kary was attempting to flip on the rusted, hanging rings that made up one-fourth of the tattered play set. I hadn’t seen anyone that size ever flip on the rings like that. She did a back flip, and her long, bony legs turned in like skewed hinges when she flipped, like logs in a dryer. It was the first ugly thing I ever noticed about Kary. Then she landed in a furrowed out patch of ground beneath the rings.

“OW!” she yelled.

I searched, huffing and puffing with defeat, in our garage for a basketball with air. There were three, but none of them had air, I remember. The Scalise poltergeist extended to recreational toys as well. Maybe there was one in the back yard, I thought.

I walked outside, saw Kary hunched over, holding her left hand.

“Ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-...,” she ran, grabbed, pulled me back into the garage. Rob hung from the monkey bars with his feet, something he seemingly did since birth.

“Michael,” she whispered, “My finger’s off. I didn’t want to scare Robbie, but my finger’s off.”

“Oh.”

Then shock set in for her, and the record skipped.

“Ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod-ohmigod...”

PART FOUR

More digressions: I was a smart child. Such may not be the case in my adulthood, but at the time this happened, with the finger, I was in the gifted, or special education (“SPED”) classes in grade school. Neighborhood parents were amazed that I knew how to read at two years old. And I did. They showed me books, they later told me, and I read to the older kids, who already knew how. My IQ is 136. Yet, this is not bragging, it is only a precursor. It is only a drawing out of myself for a desired point.

Example one of what I mean:
Midway through my Kindergarten year, I somehow got involved in a heated bus ride discussion about the logistics of 1+1 with some non-SPEDS. At the time—and then, I believed as strongly in this as I believe now, with air and breathing—I boldly declared this:

1+1=1

Not 1+1=2. 1+1=1. Yes. Despite adults and teachers alike telling me—No Michael, if you have one apple then add one apple—this was my stance for the better part of a year. On paper, it made sense: 1+1=1. And although at the time I had the comprehension skills of a twelve-year-old—and would soon read To Kill a Mockingbird, my first novel—I professed: 1+1=1. No exceptions. It turned out to be what I later discovered as a learning disability, a numerical dyslexia, but at that time in my life, being hailed a rare mind by people who were so much taller than me, it was another turn towards intellectual revolution. It was an abstraction, a blind one that I defended in the same manner, because at that point in my life, I learned the system so well. So well.

1+1=1.

Example two of what I mean:
When Kary told me of the finger, I didn’t call an ambulance. I don’t recall her asking, but nonetheless. I remembered hearing about friends of mine who had their fingers jammed in doorways, then patched up, which was what I figured happened to Kary. She just cut her finger pretty badly. She was on our couch, in our living room, watching television, clutching her hand. She begged me to call my Uncle, then not to, because the new ring he gave her was ruined. Then she begged again, then not to, again, then I called my mom.

“Hi, Mike.”

“Hey Ma. Kary’s cut really bad. She’s bleeding.”

“Put some ice on it. I’ll be home soon.”

We didn’t have any ice. All we had were Freeze Pops, the popsicles you buy warm then freeze and eat. The kind that, if you eat too many, scrape up the roof of your mouth. I gave her three, and a towel. Then I gave one to Rob, who was now in-
"Michael?" asked Kary.
"Yeah?"
"Can you please go out back and get my finger?"
"I'll try."

I grabbed a towel and walked out to the swing set. I didn't know what I was looking for; a broken nail, maybe. But no. The finger was in the flattened dirt below the rings. Around hovered neighborhood kids, most notably one of the Copeland boys, the one with the bendless legs (and he was doing this), poking it with a stick. It was nearly a whole finger, cut just below the second knuckle, in my back yard.

I rushed back inside, yelled: OH SHIT, YOU CUT YOUR FINGER OFF! Or: YOUR FINGER'S IN THE BACK YARD AND MATT COPELAND IS POEKING IT WITH A FUCKING STICK! Or some such thing that probably shouldn't have been muttered in front of Rob, who was now abuzz and alert. I didn't call my uncle, and I didn't call an ambulance. I called Roberta Hudak up the street, a nurse, I think, but she wasn't home. Kary, at this time, was somewhat calmed, yet still inching out cries and sobs. Rob ran outside.

I called my dad.
1+1.

"Dad-Kary's-finger-is-in-the-back-yard-she-cut-it-off-on-the-swingset-she's-on-the-couch-now-with-Freeze-Pops-because-we-don't-have-any-ice-,

"Ice is in the basement—listen. Listen."
"Okay."

"Ice is in the basement freezer. Break some up. Put it in a cup. Go grab the finger and put it on ice. I'll be home." My dad was in the Civil Air Patrol. He used to tell me stories about the two times he hiked for crashed planes in the mountains. Once, he bagged bodies. The other time, he ate grubs, which he said were good, if not bland.

Cup, yes. Pick up the finger with my hands? Of course not. So I grabbed barbecue tongs. Matt Copeland—who by this time, examined my entire back yard—found the ring, which proved to be the culprit. It was hidden below the long, lush
blades of grass that were sorely in need of a trim. Kary, in her
awkward and ugly flip on the rings, entangled her new engage-
ment ring in between the chain links that dangled from the swing
set. Copeland held it up. The ring was oblong—some flesh,
some blood. And yes—it was surreal to pick up an unattached
finger with barbecue tongs, but not as surreal as soon looking
into that Styrofoam cup, and not only seeing a severed finger,
but *my babysitter’s* severed finger, with an ant crawling in the
exposed bone cavity.

And I, who read at a college level at the time, shook the
cup, and the finger popped out, shot towards my brother. There
were a few screams, but most of my memory fails me. Rob was
silent. That I do remember. I picked it back up, the finger,
checked it: no ant. I then ran inside, and yes—I showed it to
Kary. I said, “got it!” and thrust the cup in her face, then—yes—
told her about how the ring ripped it off and—certainly—the
ant in the cavity.

1+1=1.
Imagine the sound.

PART FIVE

Digressions (in taste of detail, not in truth): My mother
walked into our house, calm, smiling. Rob was out back, field-
ing questions.

“Hey, Mikey.”
I, of course, shoved my babysitter’s finger in her face,
and she ran and threw up.

My Dad then blasted through our front doors, threw Kary
over his shoulder, nabbed the finger, cup and all, and hup-
hopped to the car. I watched as he sat Kary in back, the finger in
front (presumably, in the center console between the front seats,
because why else would Kary have yelled while backing out:
“Ohmigod-it’s-on-the-floor! On-my-foot! On-my-foot!”).

Doctors were unable to reattach Kary’s finger. She stayed
with us for the rest of the summer, until August, when her and
my uncle broke up. A year later, we received a summons to
appear in court, accused of providing Kary with an “unsafe work-
place.” Rob was the lone witness to the whole thing; his testimony the most reliable. Then, just before the court date, she got back together with my Uncle Joe and everything was dropped.

PART SIX

She’s now my Aunt. Aunt Kary. She has two children with Joe. Rob is now seventeen. I am twenty-three. The situation, ever since Kary and Joe’s re-engagement, has never been discussed in the open. Maybe Kary has had to explain to her growing, inquisitive children (one boy, one girl) why “Mommy only has nine fing-fings.” (And she talks like that now, suddenly, with a new mother jargon from some book. Like she took a course on how to be a Stepford wife. Gone is the photo beauty of seventeen. Here is the portrait of smoking chides and constant talk of nothing—nothing—but her children.) But other than private whispers when it first happened, it is not discussed. During my teen years, that angered me, as did most things.

One day, after a prosthetics expert came to my biology class in high school, we made casts of our own fingers in the same material that prosthetics were made of. You placed your fingers into a Styrofoam cup filled with a mold, then once the mold was caved out, you filled it with a type of plastic, and when it hardened, you pulled it out with a metal hook that came out of the base of the fake finger, right below the second knuckle. I collected several of these, and in a quiet protest to Kary’s new last name—Scalise—I hung them fruitfully around the Christmas tree that year. They were visible, those prosthetic fingers—I must have hung twenty of them—amongst the bulbs and tinsel of our tree, where the entire family gathered in our new house atop the paved hill. That Christmas, and every one since, my family has become our old neighbors, 102. We are now silent, blind to the incident. And I am not defending my actions or declaring pride in them, but take from this what you will: nobody said anything about the finger ornaments. Ever. We skate seamless around her grizzled jaws, and the jilted, ugly, and abusive mothering and wiving that has become Kary Scalise. While she was pregnant, both times, she wore skin tight jeans and
smoked cigarettes. Now, when her children fall and pepper their bodies with small bruises and scratches (as small children do), she demands reconstructive surgery. My uncle, at least three times in the last year, has spent a weekend on my parents’ couch, in their living room, in the house atop the paved hill, and two of those times his eye was blackened. And as a family, all we have to respond to it is boggled silence. 1+1. The tightened silence floats like smog in our family and we act as such; doing nothing, saying nothing, not inhaling, becoming family characters, points of reference in the Sunday cartoons. Doonesberry relatives, ghosts of ourselves, people without words, adding up to something calculated.

To me, the logic is sometimes hopelessly lost.
Honest Chocolate

Zachariah Blott

I drink you in
like honest chocolate
and purse my lips
waiting
for more
A Not-So-Christian Soldier

ZeAnne M. Hesterman

Mail call. Usually I just received bills, flicked at me along with a snide comment from Drill Sergeant Starch* about being the owingest soldier he’d ever known. On that particular day I received an actual letter. The envelope was thick. The address and return were written in my mother’s precise curly handwriting. I watched as everyone around me ripped open their letters and packages from home and devoured them. I would wait to open mine.

Just before lights out, I sat and stared numbly at the letter. I couldn’t put it off any longer. I was dying to open it, but somehow I knew it would kill me.

The handmade card had a beautiful photograph of a Montana mountain on it. I stared at it for awhile then finally turned the flap back. Four folded pieces of paper fell out from inside. I recognized each member of my family’s handwriting, and read mom’s first. She had written on the card.

She talked about the weather and the summer’s goings-on for most of the letter. Then with a this hurts me more than it hurts you tone, she said it. Well I guess I’d better let you know why I’m writing. I swallowed hard and read on. Each letter said basically the same thing, but my ten-year-old little brother said it best, I decided to write you a letter. I hope you are doing well. Because you have left Jehovah’s organization and joined the Army, I can’t associate with you, so I will not be writing to you again.

I wondered if Seth had thought of that himself.

My little sister’s letter read much the same way. It was short, only three lines, to the point and forced. We went over a lot

* All names have been changed.
of stuff as a family and have found out that what you’ve done should not be favorable to us. Why? Because some dumb religion told them so. The last line came from the tenderhearted little girl I remembered, but I will always love you in the sense that you’re my sis.

I imagined them at the kitchen table on family bible study night. Jody’s porcelain skin looked even whiter against her black curly mass of hair. Seth’s anxious little lips pulled tight and his usually freckled bronze face clouded as my pious father dictated what they were to write. Both their eyes, so dark brown they’re black, look first at him then back at the blank sheets of paper in front of them, pencils held awkwardly in hand. Their brows furrowed in concentration, not really grasping the reality that they were disowning their sister or the reason why.

_For I came to cause division with a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... Matthew chapter 10 verse 35

* * * * *

My parents found religion when I was six. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas, so that year was my last. I got a cowgirl coloring book in my stocking, a pink electric blanket, and a handmade kitchenette that also functioned as a toy box. It had an oven door that opened, stovetop knobs that turned, and little shelves for dishes above the sink. I also got my dog, Benji, that last Christmas. He was a roly-poly little Golden Retriever/Collie mix and my new best friend.

Uncle Dan came to visit and spent Christmas with us. I bugged him for piggyback rides until his back was sore. Daddy said six-year-olds were too big for piggyback rides. My parents tried to convince Uncle Dan that the Jehovah’s Witnesses religion was the one true faith. He never came to stay again.

I never really missed Christmas. Sure, it was hard to go back to school after winter break and hear about all the presents everyone had received, but I could live without that. I was an outgoing, athletic, competitive tomboy, living in a basketball town. It was the sports, dances, and boys that I missed out on.

“Extracurricular activities bring about unnecessary association with those who are not of your religion.” That was my father’s canned answer, courtesy of the church. Bad association
was seriously frowned upon, and anyone not a Jehovah's Witness was considered bad association. On Saturday mornings while my friends were at home watching cartoons, I was out knocking on doors and handing out pamphlets.

We lived in the middle of the wheat field on rural route 1, smack in the center of an east-west running section of square mile. Our doublewide was set up on a rented acre of land. There were some random outbuildings including the old farmstead house. It was a storage room for dad and a life-sized playhouse
for me. Another favorite playhouse was the sparse but appreciated windbreak of cottonwoods and caragana bushes that lined the south and west sides of the property. I could crawl through my own private forest for hours. All the trees leaned east from the wind that constantly seemed to blow. When you fly over American farm country and it looks like a patch work quilt from above, that was my world down below. We were three miles from town, but it may as well have been 300.

There was an old weathered gray chicken coup out back
of the property. The woodpile that stacked against it made a nice stairway to the roof. Benji and I would climb up onto the roof on high school game night. I could see the stadium lights of the football field three miles away. We would sit in silence, his chin resting on my knees, staring at the lights. I imagined that I could hear the band playing and the crowd cheering. I'm sure Benji could. Back then, I could run a mile in eight minutes. It would have taken me just under a half an hour to run there. I always had my tennis shoes on.

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"Why the long face punkin'? What's wrong?"
"It's nothing dad." I didn't want to get into it right now.
"You can tell me. You know you can tell me anything."
"I know dad. You just wouldn't understand. You never do."

"What do you mean I never do. Believe me, whatever you're going through, I've been there. I've been through it all before."

"That's the trouble, Dad. You got to go to your homecoming. I won't."

"It's better for you this way, hon. You don't really want to go hang out with those pagans do you, and die right along with them in the time of the end?"

Well when you put it that way, "You're right."

I was nominated for homecoming queen every year. Every year I had to turn down the nomination. There was no way I would have been allowed to attend homecoming much less participate.

The older I got, the more I questioned and tested my beliefs. Vigilant teachers would ask me questions about my religion that I could not answer. I would take them home to my father, and after hours of heated, heart wrenching, soul-searching discussions, the answer would always be the same. FAITH.

Oh ye of little faith. Matthew chapter 6 verse 30.

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Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in higher education. It is unnecessary because the end of the world is coming soon. It will destroy this wicked world system along with all its places
of learning. That will usher in a new righteous and peaceful world system. It is more important to devote yourself to God's work now in order to make it into that New World.

I was a B-average student. I graduated eighth out of 35. I took all the college entrance requirement classes, but it cost $50 to sit the SAT's.

"Why would you need to take that?" Mom asked. "You're not going to college anyway."

I got a job waiting tables after graduation. Like most children who are strictly raised, when I got out on my own I began to cut loose. I was the good Christian soldier out knocking on doors by day, and partying most every night after waiting on the bar crowd. I became a master at weaving and maintaining a huge web of lies. Then I met an Army Recruiter.

Staff Sergeant Karr wouldn't leave me alone. He would sit in my section all night watching me wait on others. Finally I gave in and agreed to go out with him. He was 33. I was 19. He offered me the GI Bill and a one way ticket to anywhere, among other things.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, and they are fornication, uncleanness, loose conduct, ... envies, drunken bouts, revelries, and things like these. As to these things I am forewarning you, the same way as I did forewarn you, that those who practice such things will not inherit God's Kingdom. Galatians chapter 5 verses 19 thru 21.

JW's are ardent conscientious objectors. They do not believe in any form of military service. They would rather go to prison and even die than be conscripted by a draft. In 1994 there was no draft. I volunteered. I enlisted.

My dad used to say, "It's not a religion, it's a way of life. You have to have the right heart condition to believe." My being a JW was one great big heartache for everyone involved. My heart never felt anything but pain and sadness; I was a constant disappointment to my father and mother. I was tired of lying and tired of trying.

I joined the military, was a thousand miles away the very next day, and would get my education paid for. It seemed like the perfect plan. In reality, it was the only plan. I wish I would
have met a merchant marine, a pilot, even a rodeo clown, anyone but an Army Recruiter.

I am not a crier. I cried twice in basic training. Once the first week, when they sat us all down in a large room and talked about the various dysfunctional reasons why people joined the military. I sobbed like a baby and could not stand up when we were dismissed. A black hulk of a man, named Evans, put his hand on my back on his way out the door. I stood up and walked out—as my father would say, you’ve made your bed, now you’re going to have to sleep in it.

The second time I cried was the day I received those letters. My father had meant those words to drop like bombs, and they did. Never again would I know the warmth of unconditional love.

I cried until nothing was left inside, and then I dry-heaved tears. They let me have a military moment, a time out. The Chaplain came and spoke to me. I was sitting under a tree just outside the company compound. It was August in Georgia and must have been 90° in the shade. I do not remember feeling hot. In fact, I felt unusually cool. The breeze dried the tears on my face. I do not remember a word he said. In my mind he was mumbling like in a Peanuts cartoon, Wha, wha. Wha, wha, wha-wha. He was trying to comfort me, but I wasn’t seeking much comfort from God at that point.

* * * * *

While home on leave between basic training and my first duty station, I saw my mom and dad for the first time since I’d left. I stayed at my Grandmother’s house. She was invited to dinner at my parents’ and had neglected to mention she was bringing me along. My family had gotten a new dog since I had left home. He was a stray named Herby that my mom could not resist at the shelter. Herby growled, and would not let me near the house. Mom opened the door and said, “It’s okay Herby.” She let me in. Grandma was all smiles and giggles. She had never approved of her daughter’s religious choice and loved to stir the pot where I was concerned. My dad wore his
usual calm exterior but kept clearing his throat. I can’t remember what we talked about but I know he didn’t ask how basic training was or where my next duty station would be. Dinner was good and horrible. It was the last mom-cooked meal I ever ate. We had spaghetti. It about killed my father, literally. His face was red, and he had either forgotten how or couldn’t bear to chew his food. He choked on his meal more than once. I was worried I was going to have to perform the Heimlich maneuver.

But now I am writing you to quit mixing in company with anyone called a brother ... not even eating with such a man. 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 11.

When you leave the Jehovah’s Witness faith you are in effect turning your back on God. As a result he can no longer hear you and no longer acknowledges you—at least that was what I had always been taught. It is very hard to forget those teachings, and those beliefs will always remain default in my mind. I will spend the rest of my life sifting through what I have been taught in an attempt to decide for myself what I believe and what I do not.

Do I believe that God exists? If so, in what form, and how do I begin to address that form? Will it even hear me? Am I going to heaven or hell? Do I believe there is a heaven or hell? Will the world end before I am able to enjoy a long happy life? Can I have a long happy life without my family?

Right now it is easier not to believe.

* * * * *

Keep on asking and it will be given you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you. Matthew chapter 6 verse 7.
A Talk with John D'Agata

Carey Smith

"Because this essay is written in collage, I ask you to just relax and not listen too hard," John D'Agata says, "Because some of the pieces don't fit too well." Standing before the audience of University of Pittsburgh undergraduates and faculty, D'Agata adjusts his black-rimmed glasses and takes a swig of water. With the melodious intonation of a poet, D'Agata begins to read from his essay collection, *Halls of Fame*. Tonight's essay—composed of collage and lyrical digressions—chronicles the life of schizophrenic artist, Henry Darger.

Henry, until his death in the 1960s, lived anonymously as a dish-washer. When Henry's landlady came to clean out her deceased tenant's apartment, she was shocked to discover the largest collection of outsider art ever created by an American. Henry Darger had covered all four walls of his dingy room with collages—apocalyptic landscapes pasted with little girl's pictures, their eyes crossed out with ominous X's.

Along with examining Henry's remarkable apartment, D'Agata's collection of essays explores various halls of fame and unusual landmarks in America. These landscapes vary from the Hudson Dam to Big Daddy's Drag Racing Hall of Fame to the headquarters of the Flat Earth Society (who claim the notion that the world is round is just one giant global conspiracy). Throughout *Halls of Fame*, D'Agata thoughtfully investigates these places, and the often obsessive people who inhabit them. As he reads, D'Agata's paragraphs become large, lyrical stanzas. By incorporating poetry into his text, D'Agata breaks the
rules of the more traditional, narrative school of essay. Quotes also are pasted, intermittently, throughout the essay, mimicking the collage-style art he’s describing.

The morning after his reading, I sit across from John D’Agata in the lobby of the hotel where he’s staying. His cropped brown hair is spiked up slightly in the front. D’Agata smiles and begins to talk, but the hotel bartender interrupts us to deliver his drink—a tall glass of Coke. D’Agata takes a sip, and sets his glass on the front page of the Wall Street Journal; he can’t find a coaster. Tucking one leg under himself, John D’Agata leans forward and begins to talk about what inspired him to write his innovative collection of essays.

*When writing *Halls of Fame, what was the common thread that drew you to places as disparate as the Flat Earth Society and Las Vegas’ Luxor Hotel?*

I guess what generally ties the essays together is my own little obsessions, which generally turn to be the obviously absurd. I’m attracted to trying to figure out what’s beyond the absurdity or what’s beneath the absurdity. Take, for instance, the president of the Flat Earth Society. It’s kind of kooky to think that the earth is flat. But, what ultimately interested me in him was the story underneath his own personal obsession, which is a story about—I know it sounds corny—him trying to find God. In his attempts to try to prove that the earth is flat, he’s trying find his garden. He’s trying to find what our own personal little religions do. And as I got to know him, I got to understand that his spiritual quest for the flat earth was, in fact, an almost perfect religion because proving that the earth is flat is something that he would never be able to do. So, for him, it’s a quest that would never end because he would never reach his goal. For me, that’s the perfect definition of religion because it’s so much like desire. Desire is best—or we feel it most potently—when we’re still in pursuit of the girl, or the guy, or the job, or the car, or nugget of information, or whatever. Once we actually get the thing, it’s usually much less appealing than the pursuit.
So, in a vague sense, that's what ties all the subjects together. There is a kind of surface quality to them all that's absurd, but hopefully, what runs underneath all the essays, is my attempt to see beyond the absurdity.

Many of the people in *Halls of Fame* are obsessed to one degree or another. They've dedicated, in some cases, their lives to maintaining a monument or hall of fame for something rather obscure. I've been told that, when you're writing about a person, it's not so much what he's passionate about that is interesting but instead the passion itself that is interesting. You would tend to agree with this idea?

In writing the Flat Earth essay, I wasn't trying to help him prove that the earth was flat. I was just trying to figure out what it was that he believed in. I really didn't have that much of an interest in the individual subjects that were celebrated by all those little hall of fame museums I visited. I don't really care about Barbies, but I traveled to the Barbie Hall of Fame because I wanted to try to understand why the hell someone would dedicate a museum to Barbie. Same thing with checkers. Same thing with shuffleboard. Same thing with race horses. It always is the passion involved that intrigues me.

You have MFA's in both nonfiction and poetry from the University of Iowa. Though your work is considered essay, you blend poetry throughout your paragraphs. How do you feel that your decision to study two genres in graduate school has affected your approach to writing?

I guess what most makes the work a little odd is that I don't consider nonfiction's closest kin to be fiction. And I don't think that's just because poetry is the other genre I studied. First, I don't like the term "nonfiction." It's a vague term that really doesn't define anything. All it does is simply suggest the genre is *not* something. I like the term "essay," which we've abandoned because it's kind of a scary term that reminds us of bad high school days. The poem and the essay, in my mind, are more
intimately related than any two genres because they’re both ways of pursuing problems, or maybe trying to solve problems. Maybe the works succeed, maybe they fail, but at least what they both do is clarify the problem at hand. They’re both journeys. They’re both pursuits of knowledge. Once could say that fiction similarly, metaphorically, is a pursuit for knowledge, but ultimately it’s a form of entertainment. That probably pisses a lot of people off, but that’s what I feel. I think, at least, essays and poetry are more directly and more urgently about figuring something out about the world. Fiction may do that, too, but not in the fiction I’ve read.

I think studying both the essay and poetry simultaneously influenced that thinking, but it also influenced me stylistically. Studying poetry gave me the confidence to make bigger leaps in the essays, to be more associative, to play more liberally with the white space. By white space, I just mean the unknown part of an essay. When working in any genre—in my case, in the essay—any opportunity that a writer has to engage the reader intimately in the very act of creating the text is an opportunity to grab onto. White space does that. The lyric form allows for that interaction by relying more on imagery and metaphor than narrative and reportage. You’re leaving a lot of blank space, and you’re requiring the reader to do a lot more interpretive work. I personally feel excited by that interaction when I’m reading. I like to be engaged as a reader. I like to have something to do when I’m reading. It’s an odd thing to think about, but I get bored sometimes when I’m reading. I don’t ever want to be bored, and I certainly don’t ever want any of my readers to be bored. I much rather risk them getting annoyed and frustrated than bored. And I think that’s what the lyric form, or more poetic form, allows me to do for my reader.

I’ve heard you say that, despite your interest in poetry, your first love has always been the essay. You attributed part of your fascination with the form to the history of the essay. Could you explain that?

I love Cicero. Part of that love comes out of my back-
ground in Classics. My mom is a little weird and had my brother and I studying with a Latin tutor by the time I was 8. I continued to study Latin all through junior high, all through high school, all through college. It became my major. Even though I eventually moved away from Classics as a profession, it’s still simply in my blood.

My mom loves to remind me of this story…who knows if it’s true. In the mid ‘70s, when I was born, there was a thing that you could buy apparently called a “baby phone.” A pregnant woman could place the baby phone over her belly. The phone had a kind of receiver that she could talk into that would supposedly send, more directly, the vibrations of sound to the fetus. My mom claims to have read Cicero, who she also likes, and Emerson to me, in the womb. My mom was heavily involved in a lot of the protests of the ‘70s, so I was also getting Ms. magazine, she says. There was a certain urgency to the literature she read me; my mother was reading me nonfiction. So, almost literally, the essay and classical essays like Cicero’s are in my blood. Because I was listening to this stuff while I was growing.

More importantly, what excites me about Cicero is his biography, his story. He was absolutely not the first essayist, but he definitely perfected the form. In my opinion, he’s probably the best prose stylist who’s ever lived. What excites me about him is the kind of devotion he had to the art form of the essay. The essays that we read of Cicero’s today are actually speeches, or even legal arguments, that he was making in the Senate House or in front of enormous crowds in the Forum. Cicero was writing essays under very high stakes. He was writing essays not in the leisurely way that Montaigne was writing essays from his gentleman’s farm. Cicero was writing essays in the heat of one of the most crucial moments in world history, in that very contentious transition between the Republic and the Empire in Rome. Cicero was one of the leading forces against Caesar, and then eventually against Octavian and Marc Antony. It’s because of the power of Cicero’s essays and because of the influence that he had on the everyday citizen that he became such a threat to the forces in power—to Antony and his people who wanted to see Rome move into an Empire state. And Cicero was killed for
Marc Antony, in March of 43 B.C., sent a gang of men to Cicero’s home to kill him. They chased him out of his house, out of the city, caught up to him, wrestled him to the ground, killed him, and cut off his head. They nailed his head, then, to the podium at the Forum where he had often read his essays—a very symbolic gesture. If you want to think of this romantically, as I tend to want to do, it could be said that Cicero died for not only his cause but died for his essays. Or, at least, he died because of his essays. And I find this history an important thing to keep in mind as an essayist because that is the root of the genre I’m working in. And even if most of us don’t have, at the moment, in our lives as urgent subjects to write essays about, I think it’s important for us to at least acknowledge the seriousness of the essay’s roots.

You’ve used a collage style in Halls of Fame, collecting newspaper snippets, quotes, or other texts and integrating them into some of the chapters. Also, there are sections when your footnotes continue the narrative and become an essential part of the essay. There are also pages where you’ve only printed a single sentence, describing halls of fame such as the “World’s Largest Petrified Tree.” What do think is the advantage of breaking away from a more traditional, narrative essay structure in favor of these more fragmented, experimental forms?

I think, if you care about this genre, you can’t help but feel a burden to raise it up out of the slump it currently seems to be in. I think it’s important, just as I’ve said, to remind ourselves of the essay’s roots, but also to remind us of its artfulness. I guess whatever I can do to just push the envelope, I see as an important gesture.

There’s always the argument that, as writers, it’s our ultimate obligation to “communicate.” Supposedly, whatever you can do to communicate your idea most clearly and most coherently, you should do. But my first loyalty is to art. I need to be true to the emotion that’s fueling whatever I’m writing. And if I’m feeling confused, I think it’s important to replicate that, mi-
metically, for the reader in the prose. In other words, if I’m feeling confused by a subject, or angered by a subject, or saddened by a subject, or disjointed by a subject, I think it’s important to help the reader experience that, too. That’s often why I use styles that are disjointed, or even hard to follow.

Ultimately, I think I rely on collage or fragments or disjointed narratives simply because that’s how I experience the world. And the alternative, the more traditional essay form or the more traditional narrative form for any genre, feels unnatural to me. Because I just don’t experience the world like that. I don’t wake up in the morning with a thesis statement waiting for me on the nightstand, telling me what the day is going to be like. And I don’t go to bed at night with a conclusion ready to write in my journal. Some days have no meaning. Some days don’t fit into the general flow of your life. And so, for me, a fragmented and untraditional essay form is the best way to replicate how I experience the world. It could be that I’m experiencing it in a much more dysfunctional way than most people, but I have a feeling that’s not true. At least, I hope that’s not true.

John D’Agata earned MFAs in both nonfiction and poetry from the University of Iowa. D’Agata has been published in such journals as Utne Reader, Paris Review, Gettysburg Review, Ploughshares, and Creative Nonfiction. He is also the editor of lyric essays for The Seneca Review. D’Agata has taught at the University of Maine, Colgate University, and the University of Wyoming. Halls of Fame (Graywolf Press) is his first book-length collection of essays. He is currently working on an anthology of contemporary, experimental nonfiction, to be published by Graywolf Press in the fall.
Water

Ryan Anderson

My father had the idea. It was all him. He preferred graffiti to blank walls. He even called the landlord and asked if we could repaint the back wall, write some things on it that would make it feel more ours. He would paint over it before he moved out.

And they really did say okay.
So we took the paints and started painting. We sucked. We thought we would be able to do stuff, like graffiti artists, like the album covers we admired, like the kids we knew who were doing graffiti at the time. But no, it all ran and dripped and looked fucked up.

But we persisted. It really looked like shit but our hearts were in it. My father, on a trip to Jamaica, had seen written on a wall, “WATER,” with an arrow aimed at a spigot. Our wall had a spigot and he repeated the strange marking. He also wrote, “TAKE NO PRISONERS” and “PLAY FAIR” – two of his many mantras. I’ve got a picture of the wall and my father, my friend Fritzner, and I in front of it. It is probably the last picture I’ve got of me and my dad. Separating us in the picture is one of the things that I wrote, “FIGHT THE POWER.” I had no idea what I was talking about, really. I knew what it meant but not on the inside, not as a participant. I just wanted to impress my father. The next day he got a call from the landlord. Our neighbors to the rear had complained, the same ones who had put up no trespassing signs aimed at our yard. We had to paint over the wall, and we did.
But that wall stands as the perfect metaphor for my relationship with my father. Even though it turned out all fucked up, our hearts were in the right place.
Directions: After a Party

Heather Bowman

Wake up. The pillow is the edge of the world. Ask, where am I, who am I, who is that... The night falls into place, a mirror falling in reverse.

Stumble down the stairs of an Escher drawing into the living room, creep over bodies, faces covered by hair or someone’s arm, and don’t feel too bad when you reach into a girl’s jean pocket (her back arching) and slide out her last cigarette. Tap the ash into a beer-soaked slipper.

Find your socks. They’re under the couch, the one with the half-dressed strangers. Open the front door, only 5 steps from where you were all this time. Outside the sky is bright with haze as you and the world burn off last night’s fog.
Lehi, Utah, 1999

Dane Roberts

My grogginess dissipated with each jolt of the green, jacquard carpet beneath my cheek. The spare bedrooms were filled by relatives for the upcoming family reunion so I had made my bed on the floor of my grandma’s parlor, next to the old Ivers & Sons piano. The morning sun filtered through the leaded glass windows, and the deep “BOOMS” followed by floor-shaking forced me to lay awake. I contemplated getting up to find out what was happening.

My grandma’s home is no longer the stately mansion it used to be. Once among the finest houses in Lehi, Utah, it is now deteriorating and shrinking in comparison to the castles young yuppies are building on the outskirts of town. The Victorian house was built on Center Street in 1906. When my mom was just a girl, my grandfather sold his dry farm at the base of the Wasatch Mountains and used the money to buy the house, a ‘56 Chrysler, and new dresses for the girls. He had to make the sale to move his family of seven children—and growing—out of their two-room home. A few years ago the site where his farm used to be was purchased by Micron, an integrated circuit manufacturer, to build a $2.5 billion dollar manufacturing plant. The IC market turned sour and now a huge, empty factory sits where Grandpa’s fields had once serenely approached the foothills. And now that stately Victorian mansion, too, is empty, except for my aging grandma.

Lonely in her empty home, my grandma ritually uses the AM radio to lull herself to sleep. But for the past few months,
the radio personalities were aided in the task by the sound of pitter-patter feet in the attic. The owners of these feet turned out to be a family of raccoons who entered by a tree limb leading to an attic vent. My grandma didn’t mind sharing her house, but Uncle Jim, an avid hunter, was determined to remove them. His arsenal of firearms was rendered useless by an ordinance prohibiting their use within city limits, so Uncle Jim decided to use his bow and arrows. One evening he crouched beneath their exit, bow in hand, ready to pick off each one of them as they embarked on their nocturnal foray. Hours later Jim came in scavengerless and cramped. Next he tried traps. They didn’t work...and neither did cages, nets, bait, nor anything else he could think of. Demoralized, Uncle Jim called in an expert from Salt Lake.

The first question the man asked my grandma was, “Do you have any pantyhose?” Not sure why he wanted them and why he wouldn’t bring his own equipment, my grandma begrudgingly retrieved some old L’eggs-brand hosiery. He proceeded to squeeze large mothballs into them and tie them together. In no time at all he returned from the attic and explained that he had thrown the pantyhose over a rafter beam and that the smell would keep the coons away. He also explained that there was literally tons of “coonshit” up there. He also explained that the bill came to $300.

The sheer weight of the feces, according to the expert from Salt Lake, was a structural hazard. As a family, we gazed at the cracks in the ceiling of my grandma’s room. But proper removal of the material would be an expensive imbroglio. Some of my aunts and uncles opined that the house didn’t have much longer anyway, so it wouldn’t be worth it. Some said the mere thought of it crashing down onto our Thanksgiving table justified the expense. But the final decision was, of course, in Grandma’s hands: she’d never noticed a smell, she trusted her house, she didn’t have the money, and she didn’t want her house turned into an E.T.-style tent full of men with bunny suits and vacuum hoses—the poop would stay. Grandma got her way this time. With the sycamores she wouldn’t.
My grandma’s sycamores had been the house’s guardians and companions for eternity as far as I’m concerned. Summer family get-togethers and games of croquet were cooled by their shade. Their green leaves and hoary-antlered trunks were the backdrop of evening visits on her porch swing. And their “bombs” provided the cousins with itchy entertainment. Along with the pioneer museum and the old police station, they were landmarks on Center Street. And with the old trees across the street in Wines Park, they were part of an old-growth arboretum whose roots were, in fact, the town’s roots. In the park, a scarred, lumpy heart marked where lovers—now dead—had carved their initials. During the height of the Cold War their branches arched over the sidewalks where children ran home as the air-raid siren blared. Thin rings in their trunks bore record of a difficult year for farmers. A notice came in the mail that they were to be chopped down.

The City had decided that, it being 1999, time had come to install curbs where, for ages, irrigation ditches had lined the streets. That would require removing the trees that stood nearby. Grandma called City Hall. “These are my trees!” Sorry. “But they’re at least a hundred years old!” Sorry. “They’re the only thing that keep my home reasonably cool in the summer.” Sorry, the decision has been made; the trees are going to have to come down.

The crews arrived early one golden morning. A cherry-picker lifted a man with a chainsaw to cut down all the limbs. Because the gregarious back hoe operator wouldn’t have a job to do until sections of the tree were ready to be lifted into a dump truck, he stood with his hands in his pockets, making conversation with my aunt and I on the lawn. It was already getting warm so he rolled up his red plaid sleeves, revealing a dirty, thermal undershirt. His ruddy cheeks were barely covered by sparse, wispy facial hair. He shared in our disgust that such beautiful old trees had to be removed.

“This is just m’ job,” he said in an apologetic drawl, “but if uh had m’ way, we wouldn’t be doin’ this. Lehi ‘ould stay at 5,000 people, just how it’s always been. But the new people want their curb n’ gutter fer some reason. It’s good fer me,
though. I always got work now. But it's just gettin' too big here. I can't believe all the people n' the traffic. I'm gonna go out t' Fairfield. They only got one sheriff fer the whole town—that's all they need..." My aunt and I nodded politely at his ramblings.

All they left were the huge trunks that would—somehow—have to be yanked from the earth.

I rubbed my eyes. I had slept well on the floor—the same floor that now trembled with each "BOOM." Everyone else was already awake. Through the open front door I could hear them talking on the porch, in between the booms. I sat up to look through the window. A large Caterpillar back hoe accelerated, ramming its steel shovel into one of the trunks. The deep-rooted tree stood up surprisingly well to the pounding it was taking; but before long, the dirt-covered roots were peering over the deep hole that was left in their absence. It was like a tooth had been removed; the perimeter of the yard had a sore hole in its gums. Saddened, I laid back down, staring ahead blankly. Soon the machine was working on the next tree. BOOM-SHAKE. BOOM-SHAKE. BOOM-SHAKE. BOOM-SHAKE. All I could think about were the cracks in the ceiling.
Vermont

Wes Harris

Rattle and bang and buzz through Windham, my rebuilt, hand built sixty-four Land Rover makes my back hurt and my knees ache but shit, give me pain any day if I get to drive this battered British truck through the perpetual, impossible green. Dad, I was always your passenger way back then. I sat on your briefcase to see over the dash of your Pinto. Now you ride next to me. Stopping at the Summit Diner, the October air bites like bad coffee, the waitress is cold and pissed off. “What makes people out here such crabasses?” I ask you. The boy I was becomes the man you were when I was the boy. My father still but friend now too, as we talk, drive and stop to get a quart of oil at the Exxon in Bridgewater.
Contributors

Ryan Anderson was born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1977. He was raised in and around Lake Worth, Florida where his family still resides. He has lived in Pittsburgh, Pa for just over two years and is a senior at University of Pittsburgh.

Amanda Blair is originally from Erie, Pennsylvania. Though it is her photography that is featured in this issue, she is a poetry major at the University of Pittsburgh.

Zachariah Blott likes walks on the beach, classic movies, and a fine Chardonnay. He is seeking a SWF, 18-27, with similar interests and a knockout body. Anyone considered “conservative” need not apply. Unless you have a knockout body. Leave your message and measurements in box #4761.

Heather Bowlan is a sophomore English Writing major with a concentration in poetry. She is currently a columnist and critic for the Pitt News, and runs a bi-weekly undergraduate reading series, the Supernova Series, through the Campus Women’s Organization. Heather would like to thank the Collision staff for publishing her, and thereby assisting her in her plan of world domination.

Tavonne S. Carson is a senior writing major from Erie, PA. She is also pursuing a film studies certificate. She hopes for a career in magazine writing and has recently decided that it just might be possible.

Kate Dunfee doesn’t know what to write for her bio. She enjoys the following stuff: cheese, cats, Toy Story 2, and living alone. Not necessarily in that order. She has been a student for a long time, and has racked up two majors (writing and communications) and also a concentration in neuroscience. Interesting fact: All four of her parents (biological and step) are ordained ministers. So is her stepbrother.

Addie Eichman is currently an undeclared freshman in CAS. She enjoys photography, but only when she has the money to support her hobby. Besides devoting time to her photography ‘habit’, Addie spends her time practicing with the crew club, an organization which has slowly taken over her life.

Alec Fatone endured relentless teasing as a youth by his classmates who mocked his weight problem by pronouncing his name “fat one.” The correct pronunciation of his name is, in fact, “fa-tone.”

Wes Harris first attended the University of Pittsburgh in the fall of 1988. He
Stayed for two years, pursuing a history degree, and then decided to “take a semester off”. The interim lasted 10 or so years, during which he was occupied as a dishwasher, a swimming pool builder, a carpenter, a soldier and an electronics technician. He lives in Observatory Hill with his partner Lisa and her two children. He spends his time working on his house, cobbling together his ‘64 Land Rover, reading, and writing. This is his first published poem.

ZeAnne Hesterman grew up in Montana where she began her college degree quest at Montana State University-Billings. She always wanted to live in a big city and managed to check the box while living in Hong Kong. From the “big noodle” she attended Central Michigan University via correspondence while attempting to fill up an entire passport. She didn’t quite accomplish her task, but did have to get extra pages added. She is back in the states finishing up her degree at the University of Pittsburgh. After graduation she hopes to fill up the rest of that passport. ZeAnne would like to thank her editor, Chad Hesterman, for his undying support.

Dane Roberts, when he’s not studying philosophy at Pitt, likes to do menial labor back home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He dedicates his piece to his grandmother, who has passed away since it was written. She was the model mother, grandmother, reader, writer, editor, supporter of education, promoter of town spirit, and all around human being.

Tara Rockacy finds herself among the throes of nontraditional students at Pitt. She has recently returned as a full-time student after a lovely two and a half year hiatus from all things academic. As wonderful as that was, it puts her on the eight-year plan for graduation. She plans to (eventually, hopefully) receive her undergraduate degree in creative nonfiction writing and further immerse herself in unimaginable debt by going on to earn her Masters. After this excursion into the world of higher education, untold amounts of time and money spent, you will probably find her working as the checkout girl in your local Giant Eagle.

Mike Scalise is a senior English Writing major at the University of Pittsburgh and a freelance journalist. His work has appeared in the Pittsburgh City Paper, Contrast magazine, pittsburgh.citysearch.com, Pittsburgh magazine, Animal Fair magazine, MAGAZiNO, and the Three Rivers Review. This is his first essay for Collision.

Carey Smith is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh. She is a nonfiction writing major with a minor in history.
General Submission Guidelines

Undergraduate and graduate student submissions are welcome. Students must be currently enrolled in a college or university, but they do not have to be majoring in creative nonfiction or students at the University of Pittsburgh.

For any questions regarding your work or the journal, visit our website:
www.pitt.edu/~collide
or e-mail us:
collide@pitt.edu

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Send submissions to:
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University of Pittsburgh English Department
501 Cathedral of Learning
Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
Writing Guidelines

COLLISION is dedicated to the best qualities of creative nonfiction; work that seeks to inspire, converse with or provoke, the thoughts and emotions of readers. If you’ve written something moving, gritty, enlightening, offbeat, or funny, if there’s a sense of discovery in your piece, or it shows a writer’s “mind at work,” then we’d like to see it.

The following genres are encouraged:
- memoirs
- essays
- profiles
- immersion features
- experimental nonfiction forms
- nonfiction prose poetry
- nonfiction poetry

Our editorial staff will be seeking the best of the submission pool (read: the crème de la crème). If your piece is chosen for publication, you will be assigned an editor, and asked to submit an electronic version of your piece. Include a cover page with your name, address, phone number, e-mail address and word count. Word limit: 3000 words. Do not e-mail submissions. Submissions will not be returned.

IMPORTANT: Include a source sheet (when applicable), as we will fact check.

Writing deadline: Monday, February 11, 2002

Art Guidelines

COLLISION seeks art that is creatively composed, but firmly based on real life. We accept photographs (both singular and in a series), prints and sketches, drawn or photographed from reality. Submissions must be in black and white. Prints are GREATLY preferred, but if need be you may e-mail submissions to collide@pitt.edu. We cannot accept bitmap files! JPEG, EPS and TIFF formats are acceptable. Include your name, address, phone, e-mail, and title of work.

Art Deadline: Monday February 11, 2002