Dear Readers,

Our writers covered sex, scars, Costa Rica, death, Whole Foods, spelling bees, drug addiction, freckles, planes, and nervous tics. We covered the decisions, the layout, and the music.

Harmony like that is rare and, in this case, free. Enjoy.

Faithfully,
Eva Kokopeli
COLLISION STAFF

SENIOR
Eva Kokopeli

MANAGING
Hali Felt

PROSE
Jessica Adamiak

POETRY
Laurin Wolf

ART
Curt Riegelnegg

MUSIC
Ian Clemente

EDITORIAL
John Steele
Mac Booker
Katie Kurtzman
Robert Williams
Nicola Pioppi
Anna Cheng

Jennifer Brown
Dalene Mohler
Evan Newman
Liz Grater
Kaitlin Wingard

and many thanks to our advisor, Jennifer Lee
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Collision would like to thank Dr. Stewart and the University Honors College for supporting us, philosophically and monetarily, in everything we do.

Many thanks to Karen Billingsly of the University Honors College for keeping us together and running smoothly. She is integral to Collision’s success.

Endless, endless thanks to Chris Chirdon of the University Honors College for not only supporting us, but literally helping us do it. He is, simply put, amazing.
GUIDELINES

Collision welcomes nonfiction prose, poetry, art, and photography submissions year round.

Students enrolled in any university undergraduate or graduate programs may submit.

Please e-mail all submissions to collide@pitt.edu as attachments.
WINNERS

ONE

The Orthographer
Matt Randon

TWO

Nightclub Napkins
Z. Ferrari

THREE

on holiday.
Michael Hellein
CONTENTS

The Orthographer 10
Matt Randon

on holiday. 22
Michael Hellein

Child’s Play 28
Robert Lerrigo

Nightclub Napkins 30
Z. Ferrari

Photography 39
Various Artists

The WFB 50
Gabbie Nirenburg

Not Tonight 54
Angela Remington

Montezuma, Costa Rica 64
Jon Levin

The Writers 68

Music 70
THE
ORTHOGRAFER
BY MATT
RANDON
Oh yes. H-O-U, Fiehu...?
“Speller number 0224, please step to the microphone.”
“Your word is gemshorn.”
Frankie stiffens, breathes in deeply, clasps his hands behind his back, and twists his torso from side to side. Frankie is small at twelve years old, so he lowers the microphone.
“Gemshorn?” he says, unsure of himself. “Am I pronouncing the word correctly?”
Frankie goes through his routine. His nervous tics.
One: he touches his glasses, thick and cloudy like oyster shells.
Two: he scrunches up his face, trying to make his upper lip touch his nose.
Three: he touches his hair, massaging that weird cowlick that makes Frankie look like he has permanent hat head.
“Yes Frankie, that pronunciation is correct.”
“Um, may I have the definition please?”
Repeat nervous tics one through three.
“An organ stop with conical tin pipes, Frankie.”
Frankie pumps his fists and returns to his seat.

***

If you were going to ask Frankie for advice on how to spell, he’d tell you to abandon ship. Get out now. Save yourself while you still can. He’d tell you to pick something less competitive, like baseball. At least in baseball you get second chances. Frankie would tell you to pick something that would make you money, or something that would get you fame.
No one loves a speller.
It all started when Frankie was in fourth grade, years before he was on the spelling bee circuit. Frankie’s class went on a field trip to a one-room schoolhouse in the heart of rural Virginia. It was supposed to be fun, a living
museum, devoted to doing things as the Colonials did. But see, everything about this old one-room schoolhouse was authentic, from the rows of desks to the teacher, Miss Evelyn. The year never changed for Miss Evelyn—she was trapped in 1776 and everyday brought a new set of squirming outsiders. In her mind, the only reason to miss school was to help on the farm, so she checked the hands of her students before they entered her class, and if you had dirt under your nails for any reason, you had better stay away from school and from Miss Evelyn.

Frankie had no nails though. They had been chewed off for years, gnawed on by Frankie’s anxiety. Having no nails is worse than having dirt under them, by a mile. It was unacceptable. Miss Evelyn raised her ruler as terror filled Frankie and the kids waiting in line behind him. Frankie stood there hoping that something in the field trip permission slip was protecting him. He was hoping that some force would keep that ruler from lowering. Nothing did.

And that’s where this spelling story starts, with that ruler and Frankie.

It came down squarely on Frankie’s wrist, sending pain through his body. The hurt shook him like hitting a funny bone would, but this was not funny. The back of his hand was covered in a beet red that felt dead to him. Frankie was mad. He hated Miss Evelyn with every atom in his body. He hated her like he hated the gum that comes in his baseball cards, the kind that tastes like a two-by-four that he feeds to his baby sister. Frankie didn’t want to feel that ruler again, no matter what.

Fast forward to the end of the day. Zoom in on the slightly swollen Frankie. He’s standing against the blackboard, old chalk dust from hours of math lessons flaking onto his sweater. Miss Evelyn has the class lined up for her end-of-the-day ritual, the spelling bee. Except in her old-fashioned version, the winners stayed in line, and the losers got slapped with the ruler and sat down.

Now, Frankie had managed to keep a low profile that day. More so than Tom, who sat on a stool in the corner, the dunce cap towering over his head like a fairytale princess hat. But there was no more hiding for Frankie. He shuffled
along the line, envious of the dunce, but mostly dreading being in front of the class and that ruler.

“Next speller please.”
Frankie stepped forward.
“Ah, it’s you,” she said, looking over her list of words, picking out a good one for him.
“Spell borough.”
And Frankie, who had showed no predisposition for spelling words at any time before, spelled borough. And he spelled ensign. He kept on spelling: lacquer, knowledge, and mahogany, until only he and the smartest kid in the class remained standing in front of everyone. Call it divine intervention. Call it a miracle. It wasn’t that Frankie was smart, though he wasn’t stupid, or that he read a lot, because Frankie was an average reader. Frankie was just scared to death of that ruler, and so he thought real hard and the letters eventually came to him.

He won his first spelling bee that day. The other kid accidentally started to spell discernible with an A. Maybe it was pressure. Maybe he was too smart for his own good, but once you say the wrong letter, there’s no going back.

“You can’t blame him,” Frankie tells me. “If I was smart like that guy I’d talk a lot and mess up a lot too. I mean, A is the first letter that you think of, isn’t it? Can’t really blame him.”

Everything happened pretty quickly after that. Not long after his spelling miracle, teachers were calling home, telling his parents the good news, wanting to be the first to take credit for his victory. And as you might have guessed, Frankie’s parents, John and Lisa, were thrilled. They reacted as most parents do when they find out their kid is good at something: they force the issue.

Within the week, books were coming home by the dozen. First they were books for mom and dad. Books akin to parenting guides like, “What to Do if Your Child Exhibits Spelling Ability!” Then, in time, they switched to large encyclopedias from which Frankie could soak up information, training his photographic memory. Then came the specialized dictionaries: separate volumes
for chemistry and biology terms, literary and linguistic terms. After that, books filled with page after page of common root words in five different languages: Spanish, German, French, Latin, and Greek.

See, in the spelling world, Frankie’s parents are what they call Optimists. John and Lisa are the most laidback of any of the three types. They’re not like the Stage Moms, who live vicariously through their kid and craft homemade pins with clever puns on them like Mis-bee-havin’ or Bee-Happy! Nor are they like the Wanderers, who are so nervous about their kid’s spelling that they develop obsessive behaviors, like finding any reason to wander around the parking lot and check the air in their tires.

No, John and Lisa just think it’s great that Frankie can spell, and they do everything they can to accentuate their son and his differences. They don’t really care where Frankie places in the bees... that is, just as long as he doesn’t place last.

And to keep Frankie from coming in last, they went ahead and hired a spelling coach, a high school English teacher who travels to Frankie’s junior high to work with him after school three days a week, for three hours at a time. The two sit in a deserted classroom day in and day out, completely devoid of any motion save for Frankie’s fingers maneuvering Scrabble pieces on his desk. The game pieces are supposed to help him visualize the words, but instead, Frankie’s mind has become full of clumsy block letters. He doesn’t remember much—maybe a couple words a day. But his hands move across the letters like an Ouija board, infused with an eerie sense of one part knowing, one part instinct.

His teacher throws him a dictionary.
“Pick a letter for speed drills today.”
Frankie already has one picked out though.
“E,” he says without thinking.
“Why E?”
“Well I’m going to be writing it a lot, right?”
“Yes.”
“So I like the way it looks lowercase.”

And so the teacher paces around the room, reciting E-word after E-word as Frankie struggles to scribble them down. The problem of studying the dictionary is making sure you extract the most important of the words. So some teachers have their kids study from beginning to end, starting with A, and others study a different letter every night, slowing finishing each letter at the same time. Some prefer the statistical approach, and compile a list of all the words ever spelled during the seventy-nine year history of the spelling bee, and find which letter, on average, drew the most words in competition.

Frankie rejects all that nonsense—his strategy is just to stay sane. Frankie will be the first to tell you that studying three thousand words a day changes you. So he takes himself out of the routine and acts compulsively. Frankie goes against the rules in a competition where that’s all there is to go by.

But John and Lisa keep Frankie regimented. Frankie and his parents work after dinner on arranging the words of the dictionary into neat little groups, clusters that can be easily managed. Every night, they try to tame the English language. They have a group of words for S words that sound like C words and vice versa. A group for exceptions to the I-before-E rule. A group solely dedicated to words that contain the string of letters S-C-H. Frankie calls this the Schabootie group. Because Schabootie sounds cool.

Every night while they’re working at the dinner table, the phone rings, and Frankie pops up to answer it. The interruption always makes John and Lisa break to wash dishes, because no one can stop him from getting that phone. He slides across the kitchen tile in his socks, stubbing his toes against the wall and grabbing the receiver from the cradle in one motion. Every night, around eight, but always before nine, Samantha calls over to the house to see what Frankie’s doing. It’s like clockwork and the answer is always the same:

“Studying, what about you?”

“Studying,” she says.

“Cool. Did you see the Orioles game today?”
“No.”
“They won.”
“Cool.”

Samantha and Frankie don’t go to the same school. They met at an ice cream social for competitive spellers and since then the two have been inseparable. They’ve been each other’s dates to every spelling function since last season: the sock hop, the crossword puzzle race, the mixer, the bee orientation meeting. The word girlfriend comes to mind, except it would embarrass them, so, not quite.

Except for the greeting, the two don’t actually say much on the phone. They just sit there and let their ears get sweaty, because it’s more about the connection than the conversation. It’s about that comforting feeling you get when you realize you aren’t alone, and that right now someone else is doing the exact same thing as you. So they just study together, close but far away, silently mouthing their new material into the mouthpiece, creating a language all their own, composed of inaudible whispers and random consonants. Frankie works on committing his new word list to memory:

Escheator. Schabootie word.
Schiavone. Schabootie word.
“Scholium. Schabootie word.”
“What?”
“Oh, nothing.”
“No, what was that?!”
“I just got this cool word that helps me remember other words...you know?”

The frightening thing is that Samantha does know. She understands Frankie and the idea that because Schabootie just sounds really cool, the coolness, in some roundabout way, helps Frankie remember.

***
It’s this kind of illogicality that’s helping Frankie now, here at his regional qualifying round for nationals. This competition is the precursor to the Scripps Howard National Bee. All over the country, in high school auditoriums, fire halls, and gymnasiums—any place with a stage—similar contests are taking place.

Frankie’s word, right now, is eschatology.

“Eschatology?” he asks the panel of judges. “Like studying the end of the world?”

“Yes, Frankie,” heads nod up and down across the panel of judges. Frankie exudes confidence with this one. It’s what they call a gimme, like in golf when the ball is so close to the hole, your buddies just give it to you. Eschatology was one of the science words he studied. And it’s an E-word. But most importantly, it’s a Schabootie word.


He turns around without waiting for any indication that he’s wrong, because he knows he isn’t. The other spellers are much slower, though. They’re more cautious with their turns at the microphone, because a win at any one of these 250 regional bees would mean an invite to the big one. Scripps Howard. The one that makes elementary school marquees all over the nation flash messages of good luck. The one that makes local news channels do exposés on the world of spelling. But most importantly, it’s the one with primetime ESPN coverage. The Scripps Howard is where all these kids want to go. But you have to win a qualifier first.

So Speller 0012 takes his time and repeats his word in a low whisper while searching for the answer: reminiscences, reminiscences, reminiscences. Speller 0012 looks frail enough to fall over. He sounds like the air being let out of an inner tube, like his soul is escaping from his body, rising up and dissipating in the heat of the stage lights.

No one wants to see a seventh grader self-destruct. The word mortification comes to mind, and to the mind of the parents in the audience, but 0012 gets his word correct, so everyone relaxes. One slip. One letter. Just one misspeak and
there is no next inning. There is no next at bat in spelling: being wrong is like ending the year on a permanent strikeout.

Speller 0215 is the methodical type. She asks for a re-pronunciation of the word and asks if her pronunciation is correct. She asks for a definition and asks for it to be used in a sentence. She asks if she understands the root word correctly and asks if the language of origin is Greek. Then she spells her word confidently, every time.

That makes it Frankie’s turn again. He returns to the front of the stage, squinting a little. This time his word is fichu, and he’s visibly scared. Frankie’s dad is absent from his seat, pacing around in the back of the hotel ballroom with his arms folded. Frankie uses all his tools, all the legal questions he can ask to buy time. He pulls up his placard, the one with his speller number on it, and tries to pencil out the word with his finger nail. Finally, the judge speaks.

“Frankie, it’s time for your answer.”
“Fichu. F,” he pauses, “I-C…”
Another long pause.
“What do I have so far? Oh yes—H-O-U. Fichu…?”
Mayday.
Mayday.
The clerk bell sounds, the dreaded signal that he’s wrong. A look of anguish spreads across his face.

“I’m sorry Frankie, the correct spelling is F-I-C-H-U.”

One more year, gone. And one more word to add to his blacklist. Frankie hates the word roturiel from year one. Botticellian from year two. And now he hates fichu. The next time Frankie needs a word for a woman’s triangular scarf made of lightweight fabric, worn over the shoulders and tied in a loose knot, you can bet he won’t use fichu out of spite for the word.

When I catch up with Frankie after the bee, I find him in the comfort room, appropriately named because of its contents—ice cream and chocolate. This room is at the end of a long hallway after the spellers exit stage left. It’s a lonely
corridor that makes the kids look small, but when they emerge on the other side, all competitiveness subsides. Like the misty calm after a thunderstorm, the room is peaceful and energized.

The kids huddle around small monitors to watch the rest of the bee. They trade spelling stories, stories about how so-and-so got an easy word right before they got slapped with pusillanimous. They gaze into the tiny screens, mouthing the letters of the words being spelled on stage, as if telepathically helping the remaining competitors. When they get the words correct, they talk about how easy that word was. The kids talk about luck a lot, and in some cases, make excuses for themselves.

But not Frankie.

When I spot him, he is talking enthusiastically to a girl. She is straightening the wrinkles in her khakis and laughing at Frankie. I hardly recognized her when she isn’t trying to spell something. It is speller 0215—Samantha.

Before I leave, I ask Frankie what his plans are now that he’s done with competitive spelling. He’s turning thirteen soon and becoming a very young ninth grade student, which disqualifies him from the Scripps Howard. Frankie looks at Samantha and smiles. His chest puffs with pride and he looks excited. His eyes are focused on someplace a thousand miles behind me.

“I don’t know,” he says, “it’s time to see what else I’m good at. Maybe read a lot, bury my study books, and learn how to drive cars and stuff.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh and...I’m going to buy a baseball glove.”

Frankie eats a spoonful of chocolate ice cream, and it freezes his brain. For a moment, he can’t remember his science words, his root words, or anything that starts with the letter E. Most of all, he can’t remember Schabootie. He smiles, stunned, and eats another spoonful of ice cream.
ON HOLIDAY
BY MICHAEL HELLEIN
chattering and heavy under blue humming lights
the car ferry plunges through cold water wind in the clear day across the sound from anacortes to port angeles and south through the peninsula to olympia where i will slosh out on night docks and to the pulsing tide kiss drunken and furious until too late to say goodbye at all to everyone, just pack my things in the dark and catch the breakneck airport taxi roaring at ninety, the curves of i-5 banking my sleeping head against the window hard enough to bruise enough almost to wake me, and i’ll remember this, remembered resting my skull on the porthole of the airplane home, remembered years later sitting stirring coffee thinking of trips to washington: with family, flying alone, driving cross-country with my now-dead father, the flight with her through chicago like this one, nervous on landing, holding hands knowing that even if the worst happened, even if. this too early morning i droop, in the international airport, near the end of the moving walkway, as tireless robot voices crackle to caution: the moving walkway will end, but with their voices every fifteen seconds and the low all-the-time rumble of sliding steel plates it just doesn’t seem that way, and i allow my tired self to believe the moving walkway will never end. “i’m going to plant a couple dogwoods,” my grandfather tells me relaxed and even, “and the paper birches around the pond,” he says, “places where it’ll look pretty and won’t get in the way of my views,” and i remember last year when we came and circled the crimson king maple planted for my great-grandfather whose ashes cast in the sound off cypress island, whose long coat i received by mail, the tree’s now bare branches breathe the clear cold light of spring just started and this week i picked the right week to visit the northwest this spring i keep hearing, the lurid sky like summer like any summer like that summer. i wasn’t then allowed to leave the state, but dangerous protesters or not she and i flew to the memorial, to the island in puget sound where my grandparents own land, we drove to vancouver where she had lived and where her uncounted stories and lives would be street and stone to me, brief and real. i say to myself at the island house in the dark kitchen window, how living has a lot to do with ignoring, and remembering what it is you’re up to is when you break momentum, and stop. i think about being here,
remember our trip together that year and some things vividly like sex in chris’s parents’ shower walking on the beach at kitsilano with the vast freight ships sliding in the harbor not holding hands laughing sometimes, not-quite-knowing it was ending, remembering then. “so do you want to talk about mark’s death,” my grandmother was asking, no i want to talk about my ex-girlfriend without getting into what a nice girl or the impression she made on actually i don’t want to talk at all but if we could what if and i said, “sure, the uh, the funeral was horrible,” and my grandmother talks about death and tradition in western pennsylvania the word “peasants” hidden among others like heirlooms to petty aristocracy, i listen and want only to talk about her, no not on the island but later with chris in seattle conquering the drunken streets eating fast food climbing to the old art museum in the park art deco and magnificent in the moon-glow stomping proudly on marble chris says “i never even had sex in that house,” and in british columbia by a narrow river quiet in a tent sleeping bag not overheard, louder the sounds of trucks on the highway and later a passing train or the ranch-workers in the next site debating the u.s. embargo against their beef desperate and optimistic and drunk, but us just fucking in a tent canadian water flowing the sky open and summer-cold the sky dark and pricked with stars and gauzy white light along the horizon from nearby cities swelling, holding hands on landing like a contract, letting go sweaty safe on the tarmac, or sitting alone by the wing a seat between me and the aisle watching just the air outside and thinking of my father i don’t want to talk and above the blasted twisting contour of wyoming the pilot opens her up, starts a climb and i look to the north and a thousand feet below another jet shoots at five hundred miles per hour, some seconds later we rock abruptly and gently on the wash of that plane’s engines over the thick vein of ice, some river stalled across the face of the crumpled plateau, the sky cloudless and all haze, the landscape below indistinct and edging into the muck of the sky not far from here and the interrupting plane in the vast blurry snow-streaked brown is shocking and distinct and i bend toward the window looking up i can see the sky i’m in become space with no clouds at all from mud to cornflower to
cobalt, the sky above. the sky. the sky darkening except at the horizon and after my grandfather joined our conversation and left we see a heron on the tall pine out front, long neck crazy against the sky, "now isn't that strange," says my grandmother because the heron is at the crown of the tall tree, usually they perch lower, but because the stalk neck and angular tufted head jut from the impossible top surrounded by dusk sky and nothing else we sit and watch it and sit and watch the sky the dark serration of evergreens the light cut lawn and the glimmer of water across the neighbor's land past the decaying house where he was raised that stands empty surrounded by the rusting equipment of a farm now pasture for beef stock, stands like unvisited memory like shadows on a cloud and once i crossed the road and stood by the disused gravel drive thinking to go in there but didn't instead crunched the packed-pebble road with walking somewhere else and at home here went almost straight to the library to put books in place pacing shelves cart chattering and heavy under blue humming lights i am laboring with one hundred of four million books in the electric throbbing house of i remember i remember i remember i remember i just what are these holidays if a break is the thing you can't bear if the engine coughing careful you're going to stall it again i imagine him say easy on the clutch or i love you, son or the angry one i always laughed at michael, this shit is for the birds thinking just i need five days time away clothes and things for writing grinding coughing lurching on but no i shut it off
CHILD'S PLAY
BY ROBERT LERRIGO
Clambering into the rusted trash container, his arms dig deep into the refuse, searching for the familiar jagged edge of crushed aluminum or the slick surface of plastic bottles. The screech of rats and the scampering of tiny nailed feet on concrete resonate off the brick walls in the alley. He grows weary of listening to midnight’s lullaby, when the cars pass less frequently and the wailing sirens sound more distant. Ripping open a large garbage bag, he allows the week-old collection of trash to pass between his fingers. His scarred hands stop, clasp a faded yellow box. Perplexed, the boy rips the top open and pours the contents onto the trash heap. Crayons of all sizes escape like brilliant pieces of rainbow against a foggy night. He grins. Calloused hands carefully clasp crimson. He draws scarlet waves lapping the copper shores of some distant turquoise island. The jaded sky home to rouge birds that glisten under an amber sun and fade into mossy palms. Saffron lizards scramble up great mango trees whose tanned leaves shield their fruit. Beyond the chrome of driftwood, rusty crabs skitter across the embankment, chasing after the swift silver of geckos sliding into crevices of black. Terra-cotta apes rest blissfully beside a lavender bush, their hands tucked behind their heads. By the gold of dusk, the light blue air settles into puddles of glistening white dew as multicolored life merges under a violet moon.
NIGHTCLUB
NAPKINS
BY Z. FERRARI
I was queen of the virgin sea
Touch Yourself.

That’s the most important rule to remember. There are others, hard-won and well-practiced, but if you want to make real money at a strip club, you will learn to touch yourself and act like you like it.

This is the story of a story of a stripper, the byproduct of a whorish tour into pasties and fuck-me boots. It is not the story of the stories of strippers, the kodachrome shots of rock-hard quads in *Cosmopolitan* (2004), *Glamour* (1988) and every indie zine out there. I told myself that I went to the strip club to harvest a story. You can shoot smack for the same reason. But it’s never the reason. I went to the strip club to strip.¹

I should be ashamed, telling you all this. I should keep my mouth shut. But I did what I did and I’m done. What’s left are lots of nightclub napkins in a ziplock bag from what I wish was longer ago.

**Rule #2: BOLSTER THE FAÇADE OF TRAGEDY.**

You must look unhappy, or, alternately, lustful, an animal out of control mentally and physically.

Amy, with dyed blonde hair and knock-off Gucci purse, faked it well. She’d strut across the stage looking like her dog got run over by a drunk driver. At first, I believed that she was unhappy, but when her boyfriend walked in the door and slipped her a five, she winked at him and flirted with the other patrons. You make more money with the spectacle of innocence lost, unless you have your legs wide open and draped across the stage next to someone’s face.

¹ There are several stories, called “hopes and dreams stories,” of women who trade in the currency of beauty: Pamela Anderson, who played a stripper on TV, Brook Burke, who made millions off of her face, the porn star Jenna Jameson, and the classic, *How to Date an Exotic Dancer: For Men Who Prefer Extraordinary Women* by Selena Valentine.
Rule #3: TELL THEM YOU’VE GOT EXPERIENCE.

To find a strip club expeditiously, flip through the Yellow Pages to the entertainment section. You can also find a list in the City Paper. Nearly all such nightclubs identify that they include dancers. I chose Chez Kimberly because it was one of the first listed (alphabetically.)

At my interview, I told them I used to strip in L.A. After one dance, Kimberly, the owner, took down my phone number. She didn’t even ask for my last name.

Rule #4: TAXATION.

When I pocketed the $254 I made that night, I pondered whether or not I should report my earnings to the IRS. But I figured, given deductions, that the U.S. government wouldn’t make much money. Is your subscription at the tanning salon tax deductible? Designer make-up? What about the six-inch heels? Parking? Certainly pasties would be deductible. Pennsylvania law requires them. Six bucks. Bring your own glue.

Rule #5: PICK YOUR CLUB SHREWDLY.

I made the mistake of stripping at Chez Kimberly’s, 966 Liberty Avenue (catty corner from Doubletree downtown). The club, a bar with two stages, no bouncers and watered down vodka, was the size of a small classroom. Paint peeled on the exterior. The toilet didn’t flush. If you choose a small club, you will make less than half of what you would make in a big club.

An attorney I dated at the time told me I should strip at a club in West Virginia, since you don’t need pasties and consequently make a lot more money.²

² I had written him, “...it’s also Lent, which means I’m clocking a lot of hours at the church. So I’m too busy to chill here [my paralegal job] as I have obtained a very high-paying part-time job that allows me to express myself in amazing ways. You wouldn’t believe how much money people would pay to see me naked.” He told me I was crazy.
Rule #6: WALK WITH CONFIDENCE.

Notes from a napkin:

Carve it into my chest, between my breasts, kick it into my belly. Drive it into my shins, my hips, my scalp. Just tell me that I’m beautiful. If you could make me believe it, I would not need the lights so bad anymore.

My head is a Hallmark card of what used to be. My soul is a miracle gone under. When a body’s all you’ve got, you learn how to use it.

Purple, I grant you. But I have always wanted to be treated like a sex object. Stripping taught me that while I’m not pretty, my six-pack abs are worth a quarter of a grand.

I have a face like a train wreck, but the body of a Mustang. (Exercise. Helping ugly people get laid since 1969.) Objectively speaking, and my brother would tell you this too, I’m not a pretty girl; my face, shaped like a hand, is scarred by acne, but in that dark, it does not matter. The lighting in a strip club makes every woman beautiful.

I will always see myself, at best, as a comma in someone else’s sentence, a prick of ink that is functional but, ultimately, unnecessary. For this reason, my body, and all within it, is yours.

Take it or leave it--after all, romantic passion is a sign of immaturity.

I only say this when I have forgotten that I have a name.
Rule #7: LEAVE YOUR THONGS AT HOME.

I don’t have much lingerie. I mean, I’m Catholic, for Christ’s sake. But you can’t wear thongs, no matter how cute the furry cat one is.

Rule #8: ACT LIKE YOU BELIEVE THEM.

The men tell you the outrageous, and they must be believed. Everyone is playacting. One of the men told me, in an Irish accent, that he was a manager for U2. At another table, another man with another Irish accent told me that he was an international businessman and came into the club thinking it was just a neighborhood bar. I wanted to believe them, and I acted like I did.

Rule #9: TIP THE BARTENDER.

The owner’s father, a former steelworker, worked behind the bar. A sign in the changing room said, “If you Don’t Tip, Don’t Expect Good Service.” He was taciturn and didn’t smile, but he didn’t frown either – stoic, he looked at a wall with nothing on it.

Rule #10: PLAY WELL WITH OTHERS.

The cancer of success, for strippers, is like failure in the market: once you’ve got it, it just keeps coming back.

I didn’t ask them why they were strippers. They told me. For the money. For the lights. To get back at their fathers. The why/why not dilemma.

Amy told me she liked the attention, that it turned her boyfriend on. “When they cheer for you,” she said, “it makes you open up. I don’t know. You want to come
back."

I watched her balancing her checkbook – past purchases a record of an American life – while her boyfriend shouted down the stairs to hurry the fuck up.

Amy’s expenses monthly expenses are $200/rent; $200/food and $60 to get her nails done.

I knew less about Monica, but I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. Her body was supple and straight like an icicle; her starter-marble eyes wide over the tragedy of her enormous lips. I wanted her out of the business: it was her eyes that made me want her out. I hoped to God her mind was as pliable as her liquid body.

I learned to strip from a girl who worked at Elite, one of the bigger showrooms in the city. She was a virgin, and I always referred to her body as “the church of Kathleen.”

Kathleen taught me more about the rules of stripping than I could ever have learned at Chez Kimberly.

“They [men] don’t want texture. They want the initial level of simplicity – they want to see women naked to get aroused. It’s sad because they should get that out of altruism – out of their wife/girlfriend.”

Some of the men, drunk and tired from work, would shout “whore” at her, which was ironic. She felt that it was because she didn’t pay enough attention to the poor tippers.

---

3 We were guardians of our bodies, Kathleen and I, me because I was once religious, Kathleen because she was a gold-digger.
"I give talk, conversation. Most girls are too drunk to give."

Rule #11: STRETCH BEFOREHAND.

I was queen of the virgin sea, cut the waters like an insult. My whole life I passed by boys, men, without even seeing them. Two or three saw me, took me to dinner. Stripping transposed the ailment of blindness into an arc of leg, a quivering ass. With ten pairs of eyes on me, I felt a tremendous angle of joy. You’re on your knees, but you’re so damn high.

For a Catholic, losing the waters of whatever purity you thought you had meant you had nothing left to give. It’s old hat, you knew that, but did you know that in an age of birth control we still believe it?

Rule #12: TURN YOUR KNEES INWARD WHEN YOU STRUT. IT GIVES AN EXTRA SWITCH TO YOUR HIPS.

Touring into the world of a stripper makes you feel like a whore, not because you would feel that way naturally, but because you’re trading on someone else’s tragedy. At least when you’re a whore, you know they’re getting their money’s worth.

A woman, who I felt got particularly ripped off, came in with her boyfriend and gave me a five. She asked me for my real name, but Pittsburgh is a small town, so I lied.

Rule #13: NEVER GIVE OUT YOUR PHONE NUMBER.

They won’t call anyway. There is a no-contact rule in Pennsylvania; lap dances are technically illegal in PA, Kimberly said. While you can’t touch customers,
table dancing is OK. You couldn’t do table dances in Chez Kimberly because the tables were too unsteady.

I told Amy I intended to break up with my boyfriend, and she said not to tell Kimberly.

"Being single won’t last you long, anyway." Her shift was done. "You may not get what you want, but it will be what you want."

Rule #14: NEVER LEAVE WITH A CUSTOMER.

I asked the U2 manager to walk me to my car, and Kimberly shouted at me to never come back.

Getting kicked out of the biggest stripper dive in the rotting heart of a nearly-bankrupt city would’ve been funny, but I’d had ten years of ballet, damn it.

Their anger was unrequited. As I left the fury of black and blue lights, I remembered that there were other clubs. Too soon, though, I remembered I had a name, and the doors swung shut.
PHOTOGRAPHY
BY VARIOUS ARTISTS
THE
WFB
BY GABBIE NIRENBURG
extra push into granola superstardom
I was suspicious from the beginning, but now that I’m a regular Whole Foods consumer, I can say with complete certainty that this is the slyest of corporations. You’d think it would be enough that they have overpriced organic delicacies, and that every yuppie post-hipster would already be eagerly shelling out the hundreds of dollars they may or may not have in an effort attain Linda McCartney-esque proportions of health consciousness, but apparently Whole Foods had to make that extra push into granola superstardom. I can’t believe nobody else has thought of this. I don’t think any other company has been so completely aware of its demographic. It’s pure genius.

The trick is simple. They hire boys. Lots of boys. Boys for every occasion. Younger boys, older boys, bald boys, mohawked boys, pierced boys, preppy boys, tall boys, short boys, dimpled boys, serious boys, punk boys, emo boys, black boys, white boys, hispanic boys, bespectacled boys, goateed boys, androgynous boys. Of them, approximately 90% are attractive, and the other 10% could conceivably be found attractive by some sizeable portion of the hetero female or gay male population. The really, really gorgeous ones work the cash registers. The particularly charming, but somewhat less attractive, ones are baggers. Everybody else is a box boy or an unpacker or what have you. Girls work there too, of course, but I’m convinced that this is only to maintain equal-opportunity standards.

Even without the boys, Whole Foods houses a lingering sexual tension. Cute couples shop there with abandon, hands in partners’ back pockets, cooing over pomegranate juice. Attractive singles push their mini-carts around, scooping out the goods, so to speak. But Whole Foods realizes that the majority of the cute singles are female, and that men are probably at Shop n’ Save where they belong. Enter Whole Foods Boy (WFB). WFB smiles his “I just noticed you across the room” smile. WFB asks if you need any help. You bite your lip and stare at the floor. No thanks, you’re doing fine. WFB shimmies away, giving you a primo view of his perky buttcheeks. You sublimate like Freud’s lovechild and buy ten organic dark chocolate bars to console yourself. Mission accomplished.
The checkout is unbearable, though, because you’re stuck. You have to talk to them. And they will chat you up. WFB, the cashier version, locks his piercing blue eyes at you as if to say, “your perfect smile would only be complimented by this $4.99 pack of organic chewing gum.” You don’t even chew gum, but who could argue with that tantalizing twinkle? You buy three, because, who knows? Maybe if your breath smells like anise root, you’ll wind up in the backseat of his car, making out like teenagers. Next, the slightly less attractive bag boy asks you if you want paper or plastic, flashing perfect teeth. You could swear that he winked at you. Unlike their somber, gum-snapping counterparts at the generic supermarkets, these boys make loads of small talk, flirting easily and eliciting giggles from every female waiting in line. When the bag boy asks if he can help you to your car, you piss yourself.

They are shameless. I am broke.
NOT TONIGHT
BY ANGELA REMINGTON
a bright red trail
My husband hates it when he comes home from work and I’m just sitting there, surrounded by pop cans and candy wrappers, glasses of water and whatever art project I have taken on for the night. He hates it, and he says things to me like “Angie, will you please clean up after yourself?” I usually just look up at him, standing in the doorway in his crisp black pants and royal blue collared shirt that reads “security” across the pocket. I smile at him because usually it works and he’ll sigh and bend down to kiss me on the forehead. But not tonight. Tonight he’s pretty grouchy—probably from chasing skateboarders out of the company parking lot all day. He throws down his bookbag and heads straight for the kitchen.

“What’d you have for dinner?” he asks me. I struggle to remember.

“Oh, um… I didn’t feel like cooking just for me, so I didn’t really have anything.” He peeks his head around the corner and narrows his eyes at the tiny foil shrapnel that surrounds me in the living room.

“Nothing, huh?” I smile at his sarcasm, hoping he was making a friendly jest. Instead he disappears again and a moment later I hear a pot being angrily snatched from the cupboard and the click of the stovetop’s gas being ignited. I know better than to talk to him again until he’s eaten. So I start to clean up a little, hoping that will lighten the mood in the apartment, but I’m too tired to actually get up so I push my candy wrapper remnants under the skirt of the couch that we bought together last fall with our wedding money.

The eleven o’clock news has just started, and Joe emerges from watching his macaroni boil to catch the top story of the day. I take this as a good sign and bravely try to coax him into conversation.

“I talked to my mom again tonight,” I say. He grunts, and without making eye contact, he returns to the kitchen to check the progress of the pasta. I know it’s just a matter of time before he responds. He knows that any reference to my mother is loaded, and any moment now he’ll be pressing me for information.

He waits until the water begins to boil the macaroni into light foam—his own cooking gauge—and as he pours the fat, tender noodles through the strainer
he calls, “So what’d James do now?”

Joe, though he won’t admit it, never tires of hearing how dysfunctional my family is compared to his own. I hear the eagerness in his voice and for a moment consider not telling him the truth, but it’s too late now. He’s knows that something is up and whether I tell him or not, he’ll be quietly gloating for the rest of the night. Besides, talking about my brother does help to remind us both that as flawed as we both are, there are worse things in life that we could be.

“Oh, well I guess he’s back in jail again,” I say nonchalantly.

“I figured it was either that or back in rehab,” Joe counters as he briskly stirs the packet of powdered cheese into the steaming macaroni. He holds the old-fashioned wooden spoon up to his lips and tastes a noodle. When he thinks it’s done he’ll cock his head to the right and murmur to himself in surprise, as if he’s never made instant macaroni and cheese and is surprised that it actually tastes good.

Once he reaches this point, he remembers that we were in the middle of a conversation. By this time I’m lost in a human-interest piece about a young girl who hands out blankets to the homeless downtown. He interrupts Suzanne Geha’s voiceover with his own.

“So, what was it?”

“Huh?” I’m confused. He rolls his eyes at me for already forgetting what we were talking about.

“Your brother…. jail?”

“Well,” I begin. I’m already struggling to recall the details that my mother gave only an hour before. Neither my natural tendency to forget conversations nor my complete lack of storytelling skills are to blame tonight. In my mind I’m trying to separate this night from a similar night last month and another a few months before that. If I thought long enough I could go back a few years and come up with many nights that began or ended with a phone call from my mother. James is in jail. James is in rehab. James has been stabbed or has nearly drunk himself to death and is now grasping for life on the clean white sheets of a hospital bed.
I remember the first time that we all thought James might die. Even then, my parents, my oldest brother, and I didn’t seem to take the threat on his life too seriously. We were used to him pulling stunts like this—worrying everyone sick while he jumped out of tall trees with nothing but a garbage bag as a parachute—only to walk away unscathed. The family felt a collective sense of invincibility when it came to James. So when he lay in the hospital bed, white as chalk while his body battled an infection in his blood, we visited and prayed, knowing that he would be back home in no time. Soon enough the color returned to his flesh, although he remained hooked to an IV that pumped antibiotics which smelled faintly like urine and mildew into his blood. A nurse would come to our home every morning and help him change his IV needle and bandages, and she would leave perplexed as to why he was once again becoming pale and soaking the bed sheets through with sweat. It wasn’t long before he was back in the hospital, dangerously ill, and soon after we learned the truth—that James hadn’t been recovering because he had been shooting methamphetamines into his veins late at night via the big fat entrance ramp that had been so conveniently created for him.

He had lied to my parents—told them how his arm had been scratched inadvertently. He hadn’t realized that the red ring spreading rapidly from the festering sore was so dangerous.

“See,” he would say, holding out his arm for us to see. Red streaks snaked the length of his arm. It wasn’t until they saw him laid out in that hospital bed, too sick to cover himself, that they saw the faint red tracks that twisted up both his ghostly forearms, down his legs, and even between his toes. We were all sick then.

James began his pattern of destructiveness as an adolescent. He suffered from learning and behavioral disorders which landed him in special education
classrooms. Feeling isolated, he allied himself with the other misfits—the only group that truly accepted him, embraced him even. There was one boy—I can’t remember his real name—he went by Raccoon and painted black rings around his eyes. Another, Kelley, wore all black and lived in a nice suburban split-level home. They were the best of friends, James and his ragtag crew. They were together all of the time, except when he was sick in the hospital; no one came to visit him then. They showed up eventually though, only to disappear again later that year, when James was 18 and arrested for accepting stolen property from a house that had been burglarized by his friends. Or at least that’s his story.

That was the first time James went to jail, and he’s been in and out of jail four or five times since, not including a pending warrant in the state of Illinois. He’s been on his deathbed in the hospital at least three times, in addition to the time he was beaten to oblivion by his old pals and showed up at my slumber party with a bright red trail of blood following him through the front door. My fifteen-year-old friends were so freaked out by the sight of his head—one whole side red and pulpy-looking, as if his skin and skull had been beaten clean away—that they took off, which was probably good since the police showed up not long after.

I feel bad that when I hear that he’s back in jail I feel a rush of relief, but I know that’s the one place that he can eat and shower and keep warm. Mostly though, I’m glad when he’s in jail because I know that he can’t hurt anyone else there—especially my parents. My mom doesn’t even have to talk to him if she doesn’t want to; she can just refuse his collect calls and not answer when she sees “Polk County Jail” on the caller ID.

When James is not in jail it’s a lot harder for my parents. He’s a drug addict, mentally unstable and prone to fits of violent anger. He’s a thief, stealing pills and money and pawning my parents’ property—he even pawned one of my grandpa’s clarinets once, knowing it was his prized possession. Luckily in his stupor he grabbed the wrong instrument and left the truly valuable one behind.
My dad takes a passive role in the relationship and though he puts up a harder front, he really has a weakness for the needs of his second son, his namesake. He wants to help him magically change his life and become a functioning adult. My mom, on the other hand, refuses to enable him and has kicked James out of the house repeatedly. When this happens he usually ends up back on the streets for a while, or maybe at a mission downtown. They have a curfew though, and rules restricting drug and alcohol use, so he never stays there very long.

James likes the bridges and viaducts the best. He likes squatting underneath them as long as it’s fairly warm outside. James is friendly, when he’s under the soothing spell of marijuana anyway, and he’s made a lot of friends on the street, established himself as a “homeless youth” in Des Moines, a title that tugs the heartstrings of the compassionate in the city. Sometimes reporters go downtown to do human interest pieces on the homeless –like the one I watch now with the girl and her blankets. Reporters like James; he tells a good story about his life of addiction and his happy family that kicked him to the curb instead of supporting him –as if his addictions were minor speed bumps down our road to perfection. He doesn’t mention all of the sleepless nights, the vigilantes over hospital bedsides, the lawyers or the long drives to court appearances around the state. He doesn’t mention the time he stole all of his grandmother’s medication or the time that he screamed at my mother, “I’m going to KILL you, you FUCKING BITCH.”

He probably doesn’t remember my dad coming home from work and pouring himself a tall glass of mostly vodka and a little bit of orange juice, night after night. He probably doesn’t even know about all the times that my mother would sob quietly to herself as she drove home from work –weaving in and out of rush hour traffic with snot dripping out her nose and down onto her collar. He doesn’t know that I used to do the same thing, only late at night into my pillow until it was soaked through with tears and saliva. It was God, not James, who
heard me praying every night, asking Why God? Why did you give me this brother? What have I done to deserve this?

As the news goes to a commercial break, I realize that Joe is still waiting for me to finish my story.

“Well?” He asks, “What’d he do this time?”

I recall the tale my mother told me earlier that evening. How James and his girlfriend had gotten into a violent argument over his drunkenness and he had lost control, leaving her left cheek red and stinging as the skin around her eye rapidly swelled and turned deep blue—all while she clutched their wailing newborn daughter. Before I can answer my husband, I think about my brother the monster and the child that he will never be able to provide for. I think about how he must feel when he looks at her pink, supple skin and her deep brown eyes. He must know that she will grow up and learn that her father is an addict, a loser.

I turn to Joe just as he stabs the last of the macaroni with his fork.

“Oh,” I lie, “public intoxication again.”

Joe gets up to clean his dish without comment. After all, it’s just another example of what a drunk my brother is—nothing exciting. I know that I’ll tell him the truth eventually, but not tonight. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I actually feel sorry for my brother. I’ve spent my life hating him, and for the first time I’m not alone. Even my mother, who loves her son, hates him for what he has done. Even his daughter, too young to hate him tonight, will someday feel the anger burn behind her lungs as she cries to God and asks him why: Why did you give me such a father?

She, like everyone for whom James’ existence is the bane of their own, will never know the answer to her question. Instead she will learn, as I have, to dwell on the good times—the moments during which his soul peers out from behind his drugged haze. I think of the time that he taught me how to drive, and coached
me through my first traffic light. Or the time that he trudged through knee deep water in the creek to catch an assortment of insects for my seventh grade science project. These moments, I think, are gifts from God; ways of reminding me that for all the nights I cried into my pillow, hating my brother, there were those that I actually smiled to myself and thought, *Thank you God.*
MONTEZUMA,
COSTA RICA
BY JON LEVIN
Freckled skin.
Morning. Standing in the street,

Watching over the palm trees and the shoreline bars,

I spin Monticristo
Between my thumb and forefinger.

Rain clouds
Leave to sleep in the Pacific, while I alone
Listen to the Holler Monkeys.

About Kristen,

A tour guide with light,
Freckled skin:

She, the Irishmen,
Dad and I
Sat together in the café.

I asked her why she, a Coloradoan,
Is where she is—

Montezuma,
At the tip of the Nicoya Peninsula,
In Costa Rica—
And she said she didn’t know,  
Then laughed forcibly.

Dad explained to her that he,  
Back in sixty-nine,  
In the Haight-Ashbury,  

Hadn’t known either.

[3]

Turpentine.

I like slippery rocks against my bare feet, said Kristen.  
And I said, Me too, because

I’m agreeable like that. And when the sun moved  
Behind the trees, I climbed out to dry myself,  
And she followed.  
The sky became orange, the water grew,  
And she sat next to me on driftwood  
Talking about the current:  
How it flows like turpentine.  
She sang to me from The Black Album,  
And I told her that I’m fond of Gray.

But the river continued—  
Murmuring, always murmuring in the background.
The Writers

Matt Randon
is a writing major at the University of Pittsburgh.

Michael Hellein
desires not feignedly, but of truth to remove himself to the fulfillment of a better life; he wishes to vow himself solemnly to continece and perpetual chastity and to let himself be shut up in a narrow place in the parish church of Schire, that therein he may be able to serve Almighty God more worthily.

Robert Lerrigo
is a sophomore biology major at Stanford University. His minor is in creative writing with an emphasis on poetry. He was born in Fresno, California but has lived in Jakarta, Indonesia his entire life, hence inspiration for his work derives primarily from eastern culture and its interaction with the west.

Z. Ferrari
is a junior majoring in English writing. She lives in Pittsburgh and has worked for every major newspaper in the city.
THE WRITERS

Angela Remington
was born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa, and now lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a Creative Writing major at Grand Valley State University.

Gabbie Nirenburg
attends Oberlin.

Jon Levin
is a junior English major at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a staff reporter for the Daily Pennsylvanian and an editor for 34th Street Magazine. His journalism and non-fiction pieces have appeared in Rockpile, Drexel Online Journal and Israel Campus Beat. “Montezuma, Costa Rica” is his first attempt at poetry, ever.
FALL
Fin
2004