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Mission Statement

As a student journal, Collision prints the best of student creative nonfiction: memoir, literary journalism, profile, essay, and autobiographical poetry. We value the discovery process and the innate truths creative nonfiction explores, striving to creatively inspire, converse with, and provoke the thoughts of our readers.

Acknowledgments

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Letter from the Editor

Kathryn Dunfee, Editor in Chief

Sitting at a bar last week, shamelessly flipping through a highly literary issue of People Magazine, I casually struck up a conversation with my neighbor, a man I recognized from the English department. I told him about Collision—a mimic of the same conversation I’ve had with dozens of others. It’s rare that anyone grasps the concept of creative nonfiction with the first pass, and I waited expectantly for the usual furrowed brow as I described to him exactly what we publish. But then, with the clarity of a child who has just said something brilliant in its simplicity, he said, “I think creative nonfiction and fiction are more closely linked than most people are willing to admit.”

The thought provoked me. We are permitted, under law of the genre, to take certain liberties in our writing. But this phrase, “certain liberties,” is thrown around like a hot potato. We use it to back up a piece we feel is justified, and to condemn writing we think has gone too far. The truth is, though, that no one really knows what these liberties are. There isn’t a list of rules, as there is with journalism. Yet we do abide by some unspoken belief system that separates us from based-on-a-true-story.

This issue of Collision spawned a lot of discussion within the staff when we accepted two pieces that challenge the laws of nonfiction writing—Family and Kansas City Dreams. Both authors delve into the same murky waters that Jo Ann Beard, the writer featured in this issue, enters in her own work. They recreate scenes and enter the thoughts of their subjects solely on the authority of
interviews and research. It's true that some details were imagined, and holes filled in. But had they not stretched the freedom allotted to them as creative nonfiction writers, the pieces would have been dry and unimaginative. As Beard says in her interview, "We must [write] in a way that makes the reader care.” Beth Dugan and Lauren Unger, authors of Family and Kansas respectively, risk raising a few purist eyebrows. But they successfully soothe the souls of the rest of us who just want to hear a good story. “It's not important if it's my story or the story of my friends,” Beard says. “I try and imagine my way into the human truth.”

A piece of creative nonfiction has the authority to blend the boundaries dividing fact from fiction, though it cannot be placed neatly in either category. It is both the beauty and danger of the genre; the sexiness that keeps us reading and creating new bodies of work.
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Family
Beth Dugan

Judak sat in the waiting area in the church with his hat in his hands. He was a small man who carried himself like a much bigger one. Even sitting, it seemed he was bigger than his 5'5" frame. Maybe it was the way his clothes fit him so tightly; the pants snug and threadbare, and the shirt, tucked in military style and worn shiny at the elbows, was a close fit on his narrow shoulders. His face was smooth, and without the lines it should have had at his 44 years. It looked as if his skin had been oiled and polished, perhaps ironed. His nose rose out of the smooth skin like an afterthought. It was enormous and didn't fit the rest of his face, as if it had grown at a much faster rate. It hooked over his mouth like an illustration of a witch from a children's book. His hair was an unbelievable shade of black. A black so dark it seemed to absorb the light around it, but there were tell-tale streaks of grayish paint that went from his hair line at the nape of his neck to disappear below his collar.

Father Ronald popped his head out of the doorway of his office. He was about 35 and fresh-faced with a spray of freckles across his nose, that were partially hidden by his glasses. When flustered, Father Ronald had a tendency to blush scarlet and stammer, looking like a 14 year-old boy in the thrall of a crush. Judak frowned at him, thinking he was much too young to be a priest.

"Mr. Luzak? Thank you for waiting. Please come in." The Father gestured for Judak to come in, and closed the door behind him. Gliding into his chair behind the desk, Father Ronald indicated
with a wave that Judak should sit in one of the two chairs opposite. Judak snapped into the chair, deposited his hat on his knee, and trained his sharp blue eyes on the priest.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Luzak," Father Ronald began.

"Vot is dis about? I am busy man!" Judak interrupted him, aggressively leaning forward and putting a fist on the desktop. Father Ronald smiled complacently, and held up a hand.

"Yes, I know. But I wanted to speak to you personally about this."

"Vot? Vot?"

"Yes, well, it's about your daughter..." the priest began again gamely.

"Stusha? She get in fight again? She cause trable alvays!" Judak almost shouted at the priest before he began to mutter in Polish under his breath.

"No, not Stusha. I wish to speak to you about..."

"Clara? I know she not good at school. But she never cause trable! She just baby. Vot is dis?" Judak shouted again, half rising from his seat.

"Mr. Luzak, please!" Father Ronald held out a hand again to calm the agitated man and urge him back to his seat. A tell-tale pink flush started to creep up the priest’s neck. “It’s Frances I wish to speak to you about.”

"Frances? Vot she do?" Judak asked, clearly puzzled as he slowly sank back into his chair.

"She has done nothing wrong. I wish to speak to you about furthering her education.” A snort of surprise and disgust from Judak punctuated the priest’s short speech.

"Further education? Vhy? Vot gut vill dis do?” Judak said the word “education” as if it tasted rotten to him. Father Ronald cleared his throat and pressed on as Judak crossed and uncrossed his legs and arms in impatience.

"She is very bright. She has done remarkably well in her classes for the last four years and the school really feels that she would do well to continue on to high school." Judak looked blankly back at the priest. He never troubled himself with his four
children's education other than to make sure they stayed out of trouble. The concept of high school for him was as foreign as the moon. He only had a few years of formal education before he left Poland twenty-two years ago in 1898. He saw little value in it, but knew that in America it was a different commodity. Education had been for the rich, or for priests and rabbis. In America any man walking down the street could have a college degree. They actually required children to go to school here. That concept alone had astounded Judak. Regardless of this, he could not fathom the purpose of further education for a girl. What good would an education do a girl if she was just going to get married, have babies, and help her husband in whatever business he was in? Girls took care of things. You didn’t need high school for that.

“Vhy?” he asked, wrinkling his brow.

“Well, to be a credit to you and your family of course!” Judak cocked his head at the priest and a faint gleam entered his eye. Father Ronald, seeing he had made a small bit of headway, pressed on.

“Not every child is gifted enough to make it through the rigors of high school at St. Theresa’s. It would be a credit to your family if you were to send Frances there.” Judak, his brow wrinkling at this, gave what the priest interpreted as a contemplative look.

“Hmmm…” Judak murmured, scratching his cheek thoughtfully. “Dis is true vat you say?”

The priest looked affronted at the question and Judak had enough tact to look abashed.

“My apologies, Father. Of course is true.” The men smiled weakly at one another, acknowledging the smoothing of an awkward moment between them. Judak continued, “Vell, vat is catch?”

“Pardon?” Now the priest looked confused. Judak paused and leaned forward in his seat again.

“Vat is catch? Vat is wrong?” he pressed. Then a thought occurred to him. “Vat this cost? Hmm? To send gerl to school. Is dis free?”
"No, I am sorry to report it is not free. It will cost you $3 a month to have Frances attend high school. That money is used to pay for the outstanding education she will receive at St. Theresa's."

Red faced, Judak leapt out of his chair. "One hundred and eight dollars! You vant me to pay $108 for girl to go to high school! You tink I am made of money? Zwi'ta matka Boga! Forget it! She vill vork and pay me back vat she owes me for raising her and keeping roof over head. Bernard can go to your high school." Judak nearly spat the words at the priest, clearly incensed by the idea. "Ve vill get some use out of dat boy. Vat good to send girl? Pah!" Judak jammed his hat back on his head and stormed out of the room.

"But Mr. Luzak, please reconsider for a moment," Father Ron called after Judak as he stormed out of the office muttering under his breath. "Frances will do very well in school! She will be a credit to you!" but he was talking to an empty office.

***

Dear Beanie,

I know you hate that nickname! You must be so thrilled to be away from us so you never have to hear it again. Well, I can't let that happen. Beanie, Beanie, Beanie! How are you doing at your fancy schmancy school in Boston? Learn anything useful yet? Well, I didn't want you to get too homesick so I thought I would write and tell you the latest episode in our soap opera! Hey, what are big sisters for?

Ziggy, your favorite cousin, is back in town. That's right, the big yutz came back and made a grand entrance as usual. He came rolling into town last weekend from Tijuana, with the back seat of that old, green, Gremlin full of tequila! I'm surprised we didn't hear him rattling all the way up from Mexico. Well, we found out that Ziggy stopped at Tuck's Place on Brownsville Rd. I guess he felt like he needed a little fortification before facing Stusha's sharp tongue. She was so mad he stayed away so long! His tour in Vietnam was over months ago, and he spent all this time in Mexico doing God only knows what.

He stopped at Tuck's for a drink. You remember Tuck, don't you? Lou and I took you there for your going away drink
before you went to college. That dingy hole-in-the-wall run by that no goodnik, loaf Tucker. I don’t think pure sunlight has penetrated that gloom for 30 years.

There was Zig, sitting on a bar stool at the far end of the bar, away from the door. Vince had wandered down the hill for a drink and found him there, he told me. Vince, not being one to interfere, just sat and drank for a while, chatting with Tuck. Zig was in one of those loud Hawaiian shirts he favors and his crazy red hair was everywhere which way because he never gets it cut when he is not on duty. So Vince came in around 5 p.m. and Tuck told him that Zig had been there since noon drinking whiskey and flapping his gums. That man can talk! Well, two hours later, Zig was passed out on the bar with his head down on the counter, drooling. Tuck thought it was so funny he took a picture of him before he woke him up. I went down the hill to see it yesterday. He’s got it taped to the bar.

Zig was drooling and snoring that Ziggy snore that sounds like he is having his tonsils pulled out with salad tongs. I think Tuck got tired of listening to it and gave Zig’s arm a good pinch to wake him up. Vince said that Zig didn’t wake up but just kinda flopped back in his chair with his mouth open snoring even louder (if you can imagine that). So, Tuck dumped a pitcher of water over his head. You would think that would wake him up in a hurry but Vince said Zig just kind of looked around and yawned, all dripping wet. Tuck told him he had to get the hell out and go home, and Zig, being an amiable guy, started to make his way to the door. Vince followed him out to make sure he got in his car since Zig was staggering and stumbling so badly. Vince said he offered to drive Ziggy home but Zig wasn’t having it.

Ziggy did manage to get out the door and into the parking lot. Vince said Zig messed around with one of those god-awful cigars of his for a good ten minutes before he got it open; said he wasn’t going to drive without it. Vince said he was real touchy about it. So Zig staggered to the car and wrenched that huge door open and poured himself into the front seat with his precious cigar clamped in his front teeth, unlit. He started the car and pulled away without shutting the car door! It swung around and hit Zig
so hard in the side Vince said he could see him jump and he just about busted a gut laughing at him.

So just picture him driving up Brownsville Road. That road is all rutted out and full of pot holes. There are no lights there yet and Zig is drunker than any man has a right to be. He told me later that he remembers making the turn up onto Anderson Road, and driving some more. He said he wanted to light his cigar so as he drove he started searching for his lighter. He knew it was somewhere on the seat next to him so he steered with one hand and searched with the other. He said he grabbed it just as the road curved sharply down by the Johnson's place and he had to jerk the wheel to stay on the road and he dropped the lighter onto the floor. Well, now he said he wanted the cigar the way a drunk can want something, single-mindedly. He leaned over, while steering, and felt around on the floor of the passenger side for the lighter.

Of course he wasn’t watching the road and of course he was still so drunk it probably didn’t matter if he was watching. He said he realized something was wrong when the ride got a little bumpier and there was a swish swish sound against the car doors, and the rattling of all those bottles of liquor got louder all the sudden. Just then he found the lighter and sat up and looked around. He had driven his car off the road, down into the ditch, up the other side, and into the woods. Of course there are trees everywhere and he is heading down at a sharp angle (that whole hillside is steep!) and it is black as pitch; and he is still clutching the lighter in his hand. He said that when he grabbed it, he flipped it open automatically. Before he can even think of what to do, the car smashed into something and came to a stop with a crash we heard all the way up where we are. If only we had known it was Zig! I just thought it was kids messing around and went to bed. I didn’t think anything of it.

Well, he must have sat there for a while, dazed (he hit his head on the steering wheel but nothing serious. It's a miracle he wasn’t killed!) before he slithered out of the front seat. He said he could smell something god-awful like rotten eggs and vomit, and it occurred to him that the car might blow up. He found his way up the hill, in the dark, though it took him almost two hours he thinks.
He woke up Vince who passed him in the dark and never even saw him. He got all the way home and into bed before Ziggy got there. They got in the truck and went down to where the car was. They found it by the smell. Vince showed Zig, who was only slightly less drunk at this point, what had stopped the car. It was a gas main and it had been smashed to bits. The whole hillside was without gas for two days while they fixed it! Vince used the winch to haul Zig’s car up out of the woods and they took it back home and never told anyone about it.

But here is the kicker, Beanie! Think about it! If Zig had lit that lighter right before he hit the gas main, he would have gone up like a Roman Candle! Can you even believe it! The next morning when Stusha found out, I thought she was going to have a heart attack right there. She went on and on about why had God punished her with his wild boy, and what had she done to deserve this. You know she will forgive him though. It burns me up to think that just because Ziggy is the only male this family has produced in two generations, he can get away with murder. But, you’ve got to love him.

Ziggy didn’t come out of his room until the following day when Stusha went to the market. That was when he filled everyone in on what happened, in his usual oratorical style, holding court in the family room. He told me he hadn’t had a hangover like that since his first one. Remember that Beanie? When he was 15 and he got a hold of Tony’s hooch at the wedding and drank a whole bottle while hiding under a table? The next morning when Father Ronald came by, Zig started crying. He thought the Father was there to give him the last rites because he was dying! He said he felt worse this time.

Well, that is really all the excitement you missed. I’m sure Zig would love to tell you the story when you get home though. He tells it better than I can. Mom wants you to come home for Easter and go to mass with us, so see if you can get a bus ride home. If not, I’ll send Lou to pick you up. Take care and write when you get a chance. I know you are busy but don’t forget about your crazy family. We love you!
Love,
Marie

***

Beanie sat quietly in the doorway. She was small boned and shorter than everyone else in her second grade class, and she looked like a tiny doll sitting just inside the room with her frilly nightgown on. It was tight over her knees, which were pulled to her chest. She sat quietly watching her mother and sister struggling to zip the dress. Her mother, red faced and sweating, bent double, holding the dress closed to try and get the zipper over the place where it was stuck. Her sister was crying softly and chewing on her lip as she looked at her reflection in the mirror in front of her. She knew how far away she was from fitting into the dress.

"Marie, hold in your stomach! I can’t get this zipped," her mother growled as she yanked the pieces of fabric closer together again.

"I am holding it in, Mother. Try again. It has to fit!" Marie begged while sucking in her stomach and holding her breath, wiping the tears from her cheek with one hand as she pressed the other against her stomach.

"What happened? This dress fit fine a month ago. Did you put on weight? It’s all the ice cream you’ve been eating," her mother accused, still trying to zip up the dress with one hand while holding the flaps closed with the other. "It just won’t close! I give up." She sighed with exasperation and walked away massaging her hands, stiff and cramped from wrestling with the slippery dress material.

Marie wailed, “No Mom! You can’t give up! I have to go soon! Lou will be here to pick me up! It’s Prom! I can’t miss Prom! What am I going to do?!" She spun around, the material of the dress swirling in a noisy wave of crinoline and blue taffeta. Lou had been Marie’s boyfriend for six months and Beanie knew that Marie didn’t like to keep him waiting. Her sister’s face was streaked with tears and her eyes were puffy and red from her crying. Beanie thought Marie looked like a princess, but she didn’t say it out loud. She watched her mother examine Marie with a critical eye and got a prickly feeling at the back of her neck.
“Marie stand still. Let me take a look at you” her mother commanded.

“Why? There is nothing wrong with me. It’s the dress! It shrunk or something,” she said as she turned around again to face the mirror. Suddenly she felt her mother’s hand on her waist and she squirmed to get away, the crinoline rustling as she moved.

Then Beanie watched her mother’s face drain of color as she backed away from her eldest daughter. “Oh dear Jesus!” The stubborn look on Marie’s face started to crumble and she dissolved into wailing and tears. She fell on her bed, the skirt of her dress foaming around her legs. Beanie watched her mother pace the room several times wringing her hands and muttering under her breath what sounded like the Hail Mary. Suddenly spotting her youngest sitting quietly in the doorway, she jabbed a finger at her and barked, “Beanie! It is past your bedtime! Go to your room.” Beanie skittered out of the room and down the hall as she heard her mother call, “Ray! Raymond! I think you better come in here!” Her sister continued to sob.

***

You know what the best thing about my Uncle Vince was? He had incredible patience with children. You could follow him around all day while he went about his chores and he never got tired of you. You know there are those adults who can tolerate children for a while, but eventually they get irritated, or just have enough, and send you away. He wasn’t like that, not at all. He was done working by noon because he drove a bread truck and it all had to be delivered in the morning. After that, he would go all around the farm doing his chores. You could just follow him, prattling child nonsense, and he would never send you away.

Sometimes Uncle Vince would spend all day in the big barn. It’s a massive thing. Its main beams are whole, huge, tree trunks. I don’t think that thing would move for the second coming. There were no less than three old cars in there at any time. Most of them didn’t even run but Vince would fool with them and try to get them running again. He had about fifty dead lawn mowers in there as well, that he would canabalize for parts. He was always tinkering with something. He used to scour flea markets for
Craftsman tools that were broken and buy them for a song. Craftsman tools are guaranteed for life, so he would collect a whole mess of broken tools from other people, and take them to Sears to get new ones.

While he puttered around the barn, messing with this or that, he would give you some little task, like sorting screws by size into jars. He would give you very detailed instructions about what to do, so it would keep you busy for a while. Then he would go about his work while you did your job, and you could talk at him about whatever flitted into your mind. He wasn’t a talker, like Stusha his wife, but he would answer if you asked him a question, and he made little noises, like he was listening.

Sometimes he would go out in the backyard and sort through the junk and he would let you help him carry things into different piles. All of the old appliances into one pile. All of the wood into another pile. It used to make Stusha so crazy that he would let whoever dump whatever they wanted in the yard, but Vince didn’t care. I think he liked to have all that stuff to root around in. The pile of junk was enormous by the time she put her foot down. When the Petcovich’s truck pulled up the driveway, and Stusha saw their truck bed was full of old junk, she ran out of the house in her house coat and stockinged feet, still wearing her apron from cooking dinner, and sat down on the front bumper of the truck. She refused to move until Vince promised that there would be no more dumping in the yard. Their fights were legendary in the neighborhood and this one lasted for hours. All the neighbors came up the hill to see the scene. She had me run and check the chicken she was cooking and baste it every twenty minutes. I brought her a glass of water too, because she was not budging.

Their fights, though frequent and sometimes bitter, were usually pretty one-sided. Stusha was a talker and Vince was the quiet one. He would just stand his ground, silently, sometimes reasserting his point, and let her rant and rave to the heavens. The fun part was watching Stusha get all worked up, and seeing if she would pull some stunt, like sitting on the bumper. One time she threw the dinner she was cooking out the window in the kitchen because Vince wouldn’t let her get a new stove. The yard was
covered in pork roast and crinkle cut carrots. She hurled the bread rolls out the window one at a time, like snowballs. Another time she was so incensed that Vince had bought another junker car, she smashed half of the plates and saucers on the tile floor in the kitchen before she calmed down.

I was in the barn with Vince one time, watching him make new screens for the upstairs windows. He was kneeling down hammering little tacks into the frame, when Stusha came into the barn. She walked up and stood over him, with her hands on her hips, yelling at him about something; I don’t even remember what. He let her go on for a while as he finished the screens. I don’t even think she noticed when he moved slightly towards her and nailed one of those tiny tacks into the edge of the sole of her shoe. She was still talking when he gathered his tools and walked away. When she tried to follow him, her foot was nailed to the floor and she had to just stand there as he turned off the barn light and closed the door behind us. Oh she was fit to be tied! I took off and went back home to my mom’s house; I didn’t want to be around for that one. I could hear her yelling, “Vince! Where are you? Get back here!” the whole way home.

***

The casket sat in a dim room surrounded by kneeling people. The words of the Rosary swam in the air around her head as she looked around. The strong sweet smell of flowers was everywhere and it itched at her nose. She knew her grandpa, Daddy Ray, was dead but it didn’t mean much to her. She was bored more than anything, and wanted to go somewhere else. Her cousin Chrissy held her hand very tightly, and she tried a few tugs to free it. She was getting ready to start whining when she saw a strange man, her cousin Ziggy. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a striped tie and a suit, and he had a cloud of curly red hair like Ronald McDonald. He was staring at her very intently and she stared back, enthralled by his clown-like appearance. He winked at her once, and made a motion with his hand to draw her eye to his suit pocket.

She was startled as he pulled a long and slimy looking worm out of his pocket; the kind her and her grandpa had used for fishing. Ziggy pinched both ends of the worm and pulled it so it stretched
long, like a rubber band, and then let it go back again. Ziggy smiled a crinkly-eyed smile at her astonishment. He pulled the worm out again, and swiftly tied it in a knot. She realized the worm was made of rubber and her mouth opened into a perfect O of surprise. The girl let loose a small squeak that made her cousin shake her hand in warning. She had been told that funerals are very quiet places and she had to be on her best behavior, but she just couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

With the worm now in a knot, the man gave her another wink and grabbed both ends with one hand. With the other, he drew the worm’s long flexible body out again, like a sling shot, and let it snap out of his hands. She watched, open mouthed, as the worm sailed in a graceful arc, out of the man’s hands and landed, with a rubbery exuberance, in her Aunt Marie’s special church hat. The worm looked right at home there among all the blue and purple plastic flowers. It was too much for the girl. She gave a strangled giggle as she pointed to where the worm had landed. Ziggy was standing very still, looking straight ahead, and murmuring along with the Rosary, clearly pretending that nothing had happened. Chrissy had had enough, and hauled her small cousin out of the viewing room. As the girl staggered backwards, pulled behind her cousin, she looked at Ziggy as he winked again and gave her a little wave.

***

Without fail my Aunt Marie and Nana would lock themselves out of the cottage once a week. I think it was because they never stopped talking. From the moment we decided to go to the store, to the moment we got back, and every moment in between, the two of them would chatter and bicker and pick at each other. It was strangely soothing in a way, like the sound of running water. There was a sameness to it, and a consistency.

Strangely enough, they never locked themselves out of the house when we were at home in Pittsburgh. It was only when we came to the cottage on Lake Erie during the summer that this phenomenon occurred. When they stood at the front of the door of the cottage, both of them rooting around in their mammoth purses, arguing about whose job it was to grab the keys, I would
slump onto the front step knowing what was coming next. They would try the door a few times, and huff angrily as it jingled musically, but stayed stubbornly shut. Beginning the second search for the keys they would haul me to my feet, and pat me down like a suspect in a robbery, assuming that I had hidden the keys on my person without my knowledge, and to some mysterious end.

After two purse checks and one me check, they would stop and think for a moment, still chattering away at one another. Retracing our steps, we would proceed in a line like ducks on the way to the pond, back to the car, hauling all of the groceries with us. We had to protect them from thieves my grandmother imagined marauding through the sedate rows of pastel painted cottages, looking for opportunities to steal our bananas and canned peas. After a thorough search of the car, the ground surrounding the car, and the path leading to the car, we would gather the groceries again, and go back to the cottage door. My aunt would then turn to me and say, "Maggie, we need your help." I knew what was coming.

My aunt and grandmother would position themselves face to face under the kitchen window. It was about two feet wide, a foot tall, six feet up the wall, and propped halfway open by a wooden spoon so that the bottom of the window stuck out at an angle from the cottage. My job was to stand on their clasped hands, and allow myself to be catapulted through the window. I would steady myself with a hand on each of their shoulders, inhaling the warm scalp, baby powder, and hair spray smell of them. On a count of three they would heave me up into the air. I had to angle my trajectory into the window, making sure my head went under the pane. Once in a while I misjudged and cracked my noggin on the wood part. There is nothing like a smacking your head that brings unbidden tears to your eyes. If that happened, I would be told not to be a baby, and to get back up and try again.

If I managed to get my head inside, I would, in doing so, knock the wooden spoon out and the window would fall down, and land on my spine. Now, with my legs flailing out the window and my head and arms inside, I would slither through the window, on my belly, feeling the ridge of the window ride each bump of my
spine like a roller coaster. Right in front of the window was the huge iron stove that my great grandfather had gotten for a song and installed himself in 1923. It smoked like brimstone, and was covered in the grease of a thousand meals that had been cooked on it. I would crawl over its iron burners that left star shaped indentations on my bare knees. The window would slam shut behind me, as I removed my foot. Flopping to the floor, exhausted and sweaty, to the sound of my aunt and grandmother telling me to hurry the hell up, I would roll to my feet and scurry to the front door to let them in.

The last time I participated in this ritual I was 12. After hearing numerous comments about how I should, maybe, go on a diet so I could move faster, and how I was getting a little plump, as they heaved me through the window, I had enough. Standing on the inside of the doorway, drinking a cool glass of lemonade from the fridge, I fanned myself with a magazine and made them both apologize before I let them back in. Sweet as pie when they were on the other side of the door, they were like harpies as soon as I let them. I was swatted with newspapers and told I was an ingrate. I had to put all of the groceries away myself and clean the gutters of the cottage. It was all worth it to hear them on the other side of the door, begging to be let back in.

I never had to crawl through the window again. When I called my mother back home and told her what I had done, it was almost ten minutes before she could speak, she was laughing so hard. Apparently this was some kind of family rite or torture that she and my cousins Chrissy and Franny had also had to endure.

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Marie, Delores and Lucille lollled on the front porch swing in the shade to escape the pounding heat. It was one of those summer days that reached 90 degrees before breakfast. One of those days that ripped your will to move out from under you. It was too hot to play. Too hot to do anything but sit and whine about how hot it was. The girls were bore but too uncomfortable to do anything about it. They had been in the kitchen standing on their tiptoes with their heads in the ice box, when Stusha found them and shooed them out to the porch.
“Whaddya wanna to do?” Delores asked in general.
“I dunno. Whaddya you wanna to do?” Marie countered.
“I dunno,” Lucille finished. They lapsed into silence again. Marie made herself go limp and slide off the swing like she was melting. The other girls giggled at her. She lay in a lump on the itchy wood of the porch and rolled her head from side to side trying to get the sweaty hair off her neck without touching it. Through the screen door, she saw the player piano sitting in the parlor. The parlor was the one room in the house the girls were forbidden to play in; the parlor was for company. Marie had an idea.

She rolled her head around to look at her cousins before she asked, “What do you think the player piano sounds like backwards?” Lucille and Delores slowly turned their heads to look at her.

“What do you mean backwards?” Delores asked, suspicious.

“If the music was backwards. You know, like if it was inside out.” Marie explained. After a minute of working that out in their heads, Delores and Lucille grinned at Marie.

All three girls scrambled up and flew into the house. They first peeked around the corner to see if Stusha was still in the kitchen.

“I think she went down to your house, Marie. I thought I heard her leave,” Delores whispered. All three girls giggled. They ran into the parlor and began a thorough examination of the player piano’s roll of music. It was about a foot around and it was twice as long. It would take all of them to accomplish this. It was simple enough to take out. It had to be removable to be replaced with other rolls of music if need be. Delores and Lucille got on each side of the roll and heaved it out on Marie’s direction. They anchored the end of the roll with the ottoman from the side chair and plotted their course.

“I think we should take it through to the living room, up the stairs, down the hall, through the bathroom that connects to Ziggy’s room, out through Ziggy’s room, back down the stairs and see how much more we have at that point,” Lucille said eyeing
the roll with a look of distrust. It looked huge! The paper was as thick as her arm.

“No no no. We should go around the living room, into the dining room and through the kitchen then head upstairs,” Marie said with finality. She was the oldest and usually in charge. They nodded at each other and started walking backward through their chosen route, taking turns holding the ends of the roll as it was fairly heavy. They had gotten all the way around, through the kitchen, up the one set of stairs, and down the other. The roll looked like a giant white tongue licking the chops of the house. They laughed and talked while they unrolled, forgetting all about how hot it was and how uncomfortable they were. They were debating just kicking it down the stairs instead of walking it down when Stusha got home.

“POTWÓRS! Monsters!” they heard her shout from the front door and all three flinched. They stood frozen for a second then scattered, dropping the roll as they went. It bounced like a slinky down the stairs, and ended up at Stusha’s feet. She kicked it to a halt with one foot as she shouted, “Get back here you little monsters! Wracaj tutaj!!” Marie headed down the back stairs, away from Stusha. Lucille turned and ran up the attic stairs, hoping that Stusha wouldn’t care to climb into the hot attic to get her. Delores scrambled into the bedroom and dove under the bed.

Stusha chased after the sound of Marie thundering down the back stairs, and caught up with her just as she attempted to flee the house. Grabbing Marie by the scruff of her collar, she tossed her into the kitchen. She bellowed for the other girls, who she knew were still in the house until they crept into the kitchen. They knew it would be much worse if they stayed hidden. They had tried it before.

When Vince got home four hours later, he found his daughters and his niece kneeling in the sweltering kitchen with their faces to the wall, and their hands held behind their heads, while Stusha continued to rant and rave at them in broken English. They had been forced to roll and re-roll the player piano music until Stusha thought it sounded as good as it was going to get (though it would never sound exactly the same again). They had
done the rolling and re-rolling on their knees, which were now red and blistered with carpet burn.

Vince heard the whole story from his furious wife. He sat watching the shoulders of the girls drooping with exhaustion as they silently kneeled and said, “Alright Stusha. Let them up now. They’ve done their penance.” She gaped at him for a second before relenting and barking at her daughters to wash up for dinner and telling Marie to go home.

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It was a beautiful, sprawling, three-story Dutch Colonial house, built in the early 1900s. It had a shady, cool, wrap-around porch. The porch off the back of the house was more enclosed, and in the summer, when it was hot, you could sleep out there on a cot, and catch a cool breeze coming down the hillside. There were grapevines covering every inch of the first floor exterior. They added a touch of protection from the sun in the summer, but had to be hacked away from the windows twice a year. The grapes they produced were sour and flavorless, but I tried one every year, just in case.

When my parents and I moved in, it was 1965. Judak had been living there for 15 years with his various “housekeepers.” He had bought his wife, Bupka, a big house and 25 acres on Anderson Rd in the North Hills, and had moved her there. She lived with her daughter Stusha and Stusha’s husband Vince and their daughters in the big house. We had lived in a little house we built down the hill, until Judak died. No one in the family commented on this arrangement of Bupka and Judak not living together. We all knew it was better than if they were living together. My mother told me that she was afraid that Bupka and Judak would kill each other when she was little. Their fights were constant and vicious. This was better for all concerned. Judak only saw his wife on holidays when he would come to the house for dinner. It was a peaceful arrangement that everyone had gotten used to.

Now we moved into the city and into his old house. The house was my mother’s inheritance. Stusha had gotten the big house on Anderson Road and the land surrounding it. Clara had gotten the tiny house set twenty feet behind the big house for her and her
two children. Ben had gotten every advantage, including a high school and college education, which none of his sisters could say. I know my mother would have done well in school, but I still felt like we got the best deal. This house was beautiful, and everyone loved it.

My grandfather was the cheapest person, ever. He could squeeze a penny until you saw both sides. He went to, what I considered, extraordinary measures, to save money. He had tried to do the electric wiring in the house himself. There was a game I used to play when we moved in. I would go into any room and try to guess what would happen when I flipped the light switch. If I flipped the switch in the bedroom, would the blender in the kitchen roar to life? The switch in the living room controlled the lights in the basement. There was one switch that turned something different on or off every time you flipped it. Eventually my father had to work out a deal with Mr. Mason, the electrician he hired, so he wouldn’t charge us for every job he did. We got a kind of a bulk rate since he made very little progress when he came by every week to work on the wiring.

When Judak’s lawnmower broke, instead of having it fixed, he let the grass grow into a wild and jungle-like tangle. The residents of this neighborhood, which was growing in affluence, complained about the eyesore lawn. Judak tried to burn the grass away, like he had read they did on the prairie. He stood on the sidewalk with a garden hose and lit the yard, doused in gasoline, on fire. Of course someone called the fire department when they spotted the flames shooting twenty feet into the air. The fire fighters quickly quenched the fire and issued Judak a $250 ticket. He was livid and sulked about it for weeks.

In another money saving attempt, Judak had bought paint on sale to repaint the sadly deteriorating house. The front foyer area was painted in high gloss orange enamel, the living room in a flat eggplant purple, the back porch in baby pink, and the rest of the house was an army surplus green. Light seemed to be enveloped by the paint. It didn’t matter how many lamps were in a room, or if the curtains were opened or closed; it was always gloomy. It didn’t seem to bother him that the house was hideously ugly. He
just didn’t think about things like decorating or matching colors. The absolute first thing that we did upon moving in, after airing out the place, was paint. It took four coats of paint before all of the noxious colors were covered up. The airing out was the more essential thing so that we could live there. Judak had painted the windows shut so they hadn’t been opened in five years or so. We had to cut along the edges with a razor and then use a crowbar to get them open. It still smelled of old man, dirty socks, wet scalp, and dust for weeks.

The house was full of birdcages, we discovered, as we spent weeks cleaning out each room and disposing of its contents. In all the closets, under the beds, stacked in corners and behind drapes were birdcages of every shape and description. Judak had a “housekeeper” named Marta living with him for several years. Marta was a bohemian woman who wore long flowing, flowered skirts, sandals, and had crazy poofy red hair. In the time of poodle skirts and sweater sets, Marta was one of the first hippies, or were they called beatniks?

She and Judak had gone to Woolworth’s one day for something, and Marta had wandered into the pet department. Seeing the beautiful and brightly colored birds caged had been too much for her. She methodically went from cage to cage, opening the doors and letting all the birds free. The air was suddenly filled with a chirping, flapping tornado of irritated and terrified birds from budgies to cockatoos. Marta stood in the middle yelling, “Be free! Fly away!” Amazingly most of the birds did manage to escape and, to avoid Marta’s arrest and prosecution, Judak had to purchase every birdcage in the place. It must have killed him to spend so much money on something so ludicrous. That was the last we saw of Marta. He always had a “housekeeper” living with him. In his small, immigrant, crazy, bad English, cheap way, I guess he was a ladies man.

Once we cleaned and repainted, fixed the plumbing and wiring and moved in some respectable furniture, rather than the sad second-hand mismatched things Judak had, it was the most glorious house in the neighborhood. It took years to erase what Judak had done to it, but the gift of the house to his eldest child,
Frances, was more than we had known it would be. I grew up there. My sister Marie and her husband Lou moved in later with her two. Marie made the house a beautiful home with comfortable, brightly patterned furniture that complemented the tasteful art on the walls. She collected things that looked like other things. Her soup bowls looked like perfectly curled cabbage leaves. Her lamps were the Eiffel Tower or a Greek goddess holding a bunch of grapes. The silverware looked like asparagus stalks with fork tines stuck into one end. It was a wonderous thing to walk through that house and see the collection of things that looked like they belonged elsewhere, but really fit in nowhere better.

Marie's daughters, Franny and Chrissy, grew up there and my own daughter spent her summers in that house. The third floor was rehabbed into an apartment and that was the place that all the newly married couples moved into for their first few years of marriage. We all felt the same cool peace on the porch swing, watched the light dance through the front stained glass window as the sun set in the evening, and sat on high stools watching while dinner was prepared in the spacious kitchen. It was really when all traces of Judak were gone that it felt like a home.

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The bathroom door opened quickly and Maggie poked her head inside.

"Aunt Marie, can I come in?" The woman in the bathroom jumped and clutched her chest.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you scared me half to death!" Marie had been holding a squeeze bottle of hair dye in one hand and had convulsively clenched her fist when her niece startled her. There was a dripping brown mess on the ceiling and she glanced up at it and frowned. "Get in here before Nana smells the cigarette smoke."

Maggie slipped into the room and closed the door behind her. She immediately started coughing and waved her hand in front of her face to clear the smoke.

"You know, the whole house smells like smoke. You've been in here an hour. You're not fooling anyone," Maggie sassed her aunt. Marie was wearing a silky white and pink bathrobe that
came to her knees. She had her hair piled up on top of her head and saturated with the coppery hair dye so that it looked like a shiny bathing cap. There was a ring of cotton wrapped around her hairline to catch the drips of dye. Marie took another drag and frowned at Maggie.

"You hush up. What, do you need to pee?" Marie peered through the smoke at her niece as she reached for the dye bottle again. She wore cut off jean shorts and a tank top with pink sneakers on her feet. She was tanned golden but her face was pale and tear streaked.

"No. Mom called," Maggie said, as she lowered herself into the empty bathtub and reclined there below the haze of smoke.

"Ah. I see. She told you about her and your dad?" Maggie nodded and hid her eyes in the crook of her elbow as her face screwed up in pain, and she pulled her knees to her chest. Marie put down the dye bottle and sat on the toilet next to the tub leaning forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "You want to talk about it?"

Maggie shook her head no. Looking at her niece for a moment before she stood up, Marie shook her head and muttered something under her breath. Maggie was peering at Marie through one red eye right above the bend in her elbow from where she was curled, fetal position, in the tub. The porcelain finish of the big claw foot tub felt cool and refreshing on her hot and sticky cheeks. It felt like when she was sick and her mom would flip the pillow over to the cool side.

Marie grabbed her cigarette from the soap dish she was using as an ashtray and took one last long drag on it. She lifted up the toilet seat and flicked the butt into it. It sizzled briefly in the water. Reaching for the pink plastic shower cap that was hanging at a jaunty angle on the mirror, Marie carefully stretched its mouth wide with all of her fingers splayed out and lowered it over her coppery wet hair. The dye had been soaking longer than it should have without being covered and Marie was idly worried that she would be too blond, but she wasn't sure there was such a thing. She massaged her dye soaked hair through the cap and it made a squishy sound under her fingers, like the grass in the yard after the
kids ran through the sprinkler all afternoon. Maggie slowly unfolded herself in the tub, stretching her long legs out and removing her face from her elbow. She had a red skin folded mark across her cheek but otherwise looked more in control of herself, Marie thought.

"Do you still have kids in your neighborhood to play with?" Marie asked.

Maggie blinked for a moment before she answered, "Yeah, Frank and Matt still live there. There is a kid next door to us, Mike O'Connell, but he is weird and we don't play with him. Frank's sister Aimee is two years younger than us but she doesn't like to play with us. She only likes girly games with dolls and stuff. My mom says she's a pill."

Marie smirked. "I remember Aimee. She is a pill. But you still play with Matt and Frank?" Maggie nodded. "Are they both in fourth grade too?" Maggie nodded again. Marie sighed.

"It's good to have kids your own age to play with. Your mom didn't have a lot of playmates growing up. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't. Why weren't there other kids around?" replied Maggie, cocking her head at Marie and then lolling it back at forth against the cool curve of the tub's corner. Marie continued to massage her squishy hair in front of the mirror. Maggie spun around in the tub so her long, gangly legs hung over the edge and she was sitting facing Marie. She was all arms and legs and feet, like a colt or a puppy that just hit its growth spurt. Marie hoped Maggie would grow into those limbs soon, and avoid as much of that awkward adolescent stage as possible.

"Well, she was a lot younger than the rest of us. When she was born I was 15, and by the time she got to be your age, I was already married and had Chrissy and Franny. She's only three years older than Chrissy but we didn't live real close to Nana and Daddy Ray and her then, so she didn't get to play with Chrissy and Franny much."

"That's too bad," Maggie said, truly feeling sorry for the little girl her mother had been. She was an only child, so, even though there were kids in the neighborhood, she spent plenty of
time alone. "Did you have kids to play with when you were growing up Aunt Marie?" Maggie asked.

"Oh my yes! There were just a gaggle of us up at Anderson Road! It was me, I was the oldest, then Delores, then Lucille, then Bernice and finally Ziggy. He was much younger than we were. He is only 5 years older than your mom. We used to get into so much trouble!" Marie smiled at the memory, and looked at her niece and winked. Maggie squirmed in the tub and smiled back.

"You did? What did you do?" she asked hopefully with a shine of anticipation in her eye.

"Oh well, we used to run wild up there. Let me think of a good story," Marie said as she fished in the pocket of her robe for her cigarettes and lighter and lit up another one. She sat down on the toilet seat again, her lips pursed in thought, and crossed her legs so that her mule slipper flapped up and down as she bounced her foot.

"Oh! Did I ever tell you about the player piano?" She looked at Maggie who was shaking her head no. "Do you know what a player piano is? I don’t think they have them anymore."

Maggie rolled her eyes in disgust and said, "Duh! It’s a piano that plays itself. They have them in the cartoons."

"Well aren’t you smart, Missy. My grandmother, Bupka, had one in her parlor in the big house on Anderson Road. Delores and Lucille and I wanted to know what it would sound like if it played backwards, so we took off that great big heavy roll, and we unrolled it all over the house. Up the stairs around the second floor, down the other stairs, around the living room, and into the dining room. Stusha finally caught us and chased us out of the house with a broom!" Maggie clapped her hands to her face in delight, and giggled.

"Did she spank you?" Maggie asked in hopeful awe.

"Oh no!" Marie shook her head making the plastic shower cap crinkle. "You weren’t allowed to hit children in Bupka’s house, no matter what they did. She didn’t believe in it and no one else was allowed to do it. Bupka loved children." Maggie giggled again and grinned at the thought of a house without spankings. "But
that wasn’t the worst thing we did,” Marie said, lowering her voice as if she was telling a secret.

“It wasn’t?” Maggie asked, matching her aunt’s hushed tone. “Oh no. We were rotten to the core.” Marie smiled wickedly. “There was this man who worked for Uncle Vince. His name was Klimpka. He was straight off the boat from Poland, spoke almost no English, and he lived in the basement at the big house. You’ve been down there, right?” she asked Maggie, who nodded yes. “Well it doesn’t have a real floor, only dirt. When we were little we thought he was so icky and dirty.” Marie stuck out her tongue and hunched her shoulders up, mock shivering. “We used to play practical jokes on Klimpka all the time. Our favorite one was to get balloons and fill them up with water in the little bathroom upstairs at Stusha’s house. We would hang out the window in the attic, the one that is right over the basement door, and call his name, ‘Klimpka! Klimpka!’ we would call until he came out.” Marie cocked her hand at her mouth, like she was trying to be heard over a long distance, and called his name in a singsong voice. “Then we would hurl all of the water balloons out the window at him when he came out the door and soak him!” She mimed a huge arc with her arm, all the way over her head and down.

Maggie’s delighted shrieking giggles filled the bathroom and danced off the tile walls. She was laughing and kicking her feet against the side of the tub. Marie smiled down at her. “He would get so mad! He would look up at us and shake his fist and swear at us in Polish.” Marie screwed up her face and shook her fist at the brown stain on the ceiling. “He never learned. We did that over and over and he always came when we called,” she said with a sad smile.

“Did you do anything else?” Maggie asked as she rolled around in the tub again, this time putting her head at the far end and her feet close to Marie’s seat on the toilet. She folded her arms behind her head and put one foot on top of the other, heel to toe.

“Sure we did!” Marie said with mocking pride. “There was an annoying girl named Mary Margaret Olsen. She used to follow us around and try and play with us when we didn’t want her to.”
Maggie wrinkled her nose at this and frowned, because she knew exactly what kind of a girl that was.

“One time,” Marie continued after taking a long drag on her cigarette, “she was following us around all day and we were really tired of her. So, we told her we were going to play Cowboys and Indians and she was going to be the Indian that we had captured. We got a jump rope and tied her to a tree, and told her we were going to go scout for more Indians, and we left her there. For hours and hours! She just stood there, tied to a tree, and didn’t yell or anything. She had long braids on either side of her head.” Marie moved her hands over her pink plastic covered head and down to her shoulders, “and they were so long they got tied up in the rope too so she couldn’t move her head much. And she had glasses too. Big thick ones and when we walked away from her, I could see the sun catching on her glasses as she looked after us.” Maggie’s mouth opened in shock as she stared at her Aunt. “Actually, to be honest, we forgot her there.” Maggie gasped and slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggle that escaped.

“Actually, the worst part of it all is that she was diabetic,” Marie continued, looking a little chagrined shrugging her shoulders, ducking her head. “And we totally forgot about her until her mother came looking for her later. After that, she didn’t really try and play with us anymore.” Maggie looked like she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. The confusion swept across her face and erupted as an embarrassed, dry laugh. Marie shrugged.

“We were kids. I guess all kids do stuff like that.” Marie paused for a moment and stared into the smoky middle distance in front of her.

“What else did you do?” Maggie asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“There was another time when Uncle Ben came home for a visit from the Army.” Marie began. “He was stationed somewhere else but he would come home and stay with Stusha and Bupka in the big house for holidays and when he was on leave. This was before he married Posey, and moved to California.” Marie smiled at the memory and took another long drag off of her cigarette
before standing, flicking it into the toilet under the lid and sitting back down.

"Kiddo, remind me to flush this before I leave so Nana doesn’t find the butts okay?" Maggie rolled her eyes but nodded. Marie folded her arms across her chest and leaned back against the toilet.

"So, Uncle Ben is a big tease. He used to tease us about everything. About our hair and our clothes and what we said and what we did. It was so aggravating! Do you know anyone like that?"

Maggie thought for a moment and answered, "Mr. Boucek, Frank’s dad is like that. He calls me Stretch and says I’m like a giraffe." Marie smiled at her long-limbed niece.

"Exactly! You know exactly what I mean then. But Ben was ten times worse. One time we got so fed up with him, we made a plan to get back at him. It was a brilliant plan!" Marie smiled smugly. "We chewed up huge amounts of bubble gum. Just mouthful after mouthful and made one big ball of it, all pink and slimy and disgusting!"

"Eew!" Maggie laughed and made a face.

"And we took all of that gum and we stretched it from one side of the hall doorway to the other. Then Delores ran into the other room where Ben was and said, ‘Nanny nanny boo boo, you can’t catch me,’ and waggled her hands with her thumbs in her ears and stuck out her tongue at Ben.” Marie demonstrated the waggling and tongue action for Maggie who smirked at her. "So Ben jumps up from the couch and starts to chase Delores. ‘I’m gonna getcha! You better run little girl!’ he yelled. Well she ran into the hall and ducked under that big stretched-out wad of gum we strung up, but Ben ran right into it!” Maggie shrieked with laughter again and turned over in the tub to face down, kicking her sneakered feet.

Marie, who was fighting through her own laughter, continued, "So there he was, in his fancy dress white uniform, with huge gobs of pink bubble gum strung out all over his chest. He was so insanely mad! He just stood there, like a big baby, calling for Bupka and we just about died laughing! We all fell down we
were laughing so hard!” Marie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and glanced at her wristwatch.

“Oops, time to take this stuff off my hair.” Standing up, still chuckling, she gingerly took the pink shower cap off and hung it back up on the mirror. The inside of it was crisscrossed with wet copper streaks and smudges. A wave of ammonia wafted through the bathroom as the air hit Marie’s chemically drenched head. The smell made Maggie cough.

“What happened to the ceiling?” Maggie asked, pointing above Marie’s head at the drippy brown stain on the ceiling that looked like it was starting to dry on the edges.

“Nothing, dear.” Marie answered.

“But there is a big stain on the ceiling!” Maggie insisted, pointing again.

“No there isn’t.”

Maggie frowned at Marie wondering if she was playing some kind of game. “Nana is going to be so mad.”

“No she isn’t, because there is nothing there.” Marie was running water from the tap and had her head down in the sink, so her voice was strangely muffled and echoed. She rinsed her hair until the water ran from copper to clear again and the platinum blonde hair tangled in her fingers like albino seaweed. Wrapping a towel around her dripping head turban style, she looked down at her niece again.

“You feel better? Not sad any more?” Maggie looked uncertain for a moment, like she had forgotten what she had been sad about in the first place. But she shook her head no and gave her aunt a lop-sided grin.

“Okay, then you run along and help Nana with dinner. And don’t tell her I was smoking!” Maggie climbed out of the tub and rolled her eyes at her aunt again. She slipped out of the bathroom quickly and Marie smiled as she left.
Her Garden

Kristen Jenkins

I. Bluebells

Dad told me once, when I was young that when they met, she was wearing bluebells in her ears instead of gold. Dark hair, indigo flowers and green eyes. My young self looked into the mirror, searching for some trace of the romance. I only knew fairy tales.

II. Saintpaulia Ionatha: African Violets

They were her favorite. With proper care, they can flower all year long. She kept them potted on windowsills where sunshine lingered late on lovely afternoons. I practiced the piano and she sang as she watered them. We scaled the notes like mountains. Despite her careful tending, the violets grew imperceptibly weaker each day. Finally, even I could not deny that they were fading.

III. Amaryllis

Some friend from long ago before my time, at least brought a towering amaryllis to the hospital, remembering her love of flowers.
It was only a small bud then, 
but slowly it bloomed. 
She said she loved 
having a little nature in her room. 
When I came home one day 
and saw it by the door 
with a stack of futile cards, 
I ran upstairs to hide 
because until somebody told me, 
it wasn’t true. 

Unlike African violets, 
the beautiful amaryllis 
only blooms one week a year. 

IV. Bluebells 

We have to wait a long time 
for a windy day. 
Nature won’t let us let her go 
just yet. 
It’s nearly six months later 
when he and I walk outside together 
with this new chasm between us 
and a box full of ashes. 
We are both uncertain, 
for it seems wrong to touch them, 
to hold them in my irreverent hands 
and wronger still to let them go. 
But we do. 

We perform the ritual slowly, 
silently, 
watching the breeze carry them— 
how did she become a them, 
I wonder— 
tenderly away. 

We walk back to the house alone. 
In the spring, tiny bluebells 
are the first to peak up through 
the rich soil of the meadow 
and find the world unchanged 
since they left it in the fall.
Letter to Jean-Michel Basquiat

S. Zoe Wexler

For my Magnificent (albeit, Dead) and Villainous Hero,

I miss you too much. Dead at 27, still beautiful but bloated with heroin and tranquilizers. I miss you more than my Alzheimered grandfather or my lumpy-breasted aunt. This is not right, never having met you and all. But I can’t help it. I find myself drawn to your paintings, feel some visceral pull at the MoMA, past the original “Starry Night” and a very good copy of the Mona Lisa and find myself entranced, sharing the secret with you, my dead love, of another sloppy “Untitled.”

I don’t know why I bother trekking across Fifth Avenue up to West 53rd, after making two subway transfers just to see a painting you only spent a day on. I don’t want to buy your paintings, to bid $400,000 of my dead aunt’s money, knowing you’ll never see a nickel. Instead, I want to have the day you created that painting. I want the day you woke up at noon next to some skinny hung-over chick you romanced last night, the day you wiped the sleep from your eyes and the sweat from your dark upper lip and plunged that twice-used needle into your arm and painted, just painted. I would only want your painting because you lived in it for those few fleeting hours, accidentally sloshing your black coffee here and tracking a footprint there and scrawling the words in waxed crayon that were floating in your head on August twenty-first or whenever, and titling it “Bird” for the Charlie Parker album spinning endlessly behind you.

Jean-Michel, I don’t know who you think you’re fooling. Don’t give me any of that Neo-Expressionism bullshit this morning
because I’m already too depressed from seeing some scrawny kid spray paint your tag on the side of the PS 1. “SAMO” it said, just like you said it. Samo, like same old shit; Samo like Sambo, you little dot of a black boy in a vast white canvas of art dealers and coke dealers, both eating you up all the time for more paintings and more dollars. And you played it up, too, you son-of-a-posh suburban accountant. Pretended to be this exploited black man, rising up from the ashes of poverty or racism, allowing the critics to label your paintings “primitive” if it meant white people would pay more for them. “Plush safe, he thinks;” you painted it like you weren’t one of them. You faked them all out, faked it to your gold-plated grave, with your cardboard box house in Washington Square Park and your dirty dreadlocks and paying for restaurant meals with waitress portraits you scribbled on paper napkins. But you don’t fool me. Because we are too much the same.

I feel too much like you must’ve. I sometimes think I’m your identical twin, only born into another race and gender, 300 miles away, twenty years too late. I know about cursing my middle-class upbringing, about longing for dinner parties and flash-bulb photographs with Andy at Mr. Chow’s, about agonizing over each word before just erasing it. I too have modeled my hairstyle after my lifestyle, have binged and reformed too many times. I know how it is to clamor for creativity with such desperation, to swing from art-noise band to jazz trumpet lessons to scratching records to making films to scrawling manifestos to slopping paintings – anything to cling to the safety of the avant-garde.

Art critics labeled your paintings as prophetic. Cryptic. But none of it ever seemed that way, since you make sense to me, even though interviewers called your words psychotic musings or chemically induced ramble. Like the time that big shot newspaper man asked you why one of your paintings, “Blue Bird,” I think it was, said, “23 24 25 leeches.” I remember you stumbling around, fumbling up the hill of attempting to turn art into language. “There are leeches everywhere,” you said. “Millions of them. These are just the 23rd, 24th, and 25th in an infinite series of leeches,” you said. And I know. I know what it is to try to fit an infinite truth into a finite space. I know fumbling uphill.
We would’ve been such good friends, probably more than friends on one of the many nights Suzanne broke up with you again. We would dance at the Mudd Club, all spaced-out and alone, the only people in the room floating in the zero gravity of new love. This time, you wouldn’t go lock yourself in a bathroom stall, cooking the heroin with a spoon and a lighter, shooting it into your neck or the folds between your fingers. This time you’d feel tired from the early morning hour, instead of from opal snowflakes slushing through your veins. You’d lean down towards my face, your eyelashes fluttering and lagging with slow blinks, and your smoky hair would make a curtain for our kisses. We’d go back to your loft at 57 Great Jones Street and slow dance to a Bird album that crackles and pops and you let me paint your portrait on your front door while you sprawl on the mattress thrown across the floor, just watching.

But this never happened, my dear Jean-Michel. Jean-Michel, with your name that sounds like the footsteps of Lady Godiva’s horse, and your hands that are full of paint and jazz and writing and passion. None of this ever happened, my dear, but not because I didn’t love you, or because people didn’t buy your paintings, or because I never made it to Manhattan. None of this ever happened, my dear Jean-Michel, because the hazy elixir in your veins was too fierce for a heart that had not yet been mine.
Background Information

Jean-Michel Basquiat, a painter from New York City's Neo-Expressionism movement of the 1980s, skyrocketed from a street graffiti artist to an international art world celebrity in less than a decade. Seemingly overnight, Basquiat went from living in a cardboard box to selling paintings for $500,000 and getting hounded by everyone, from the Whitney Museum to the *New York Times*. His paintings, scrawled with cryptic words and images and usually adorned with his signature crown or ©, dealt with racism, materialism, capitalism, pop culture and mortality. He loved jazz, dated Madonna, and befriended Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. Basquiat's overnight rise to fame left him leery of his friends and family, and the factory attitude he encountered made him feel immense pressure to produce paintings. After several years of drug abuse, Basquiat lethally overdosed on heroin at age 27.
Song For a Dead Pilot

Amanda Blair

You said
The air smells green tonight
I smiled and said
You’re unique
but I was just pretending.

It was the day I ran to you,
I do that, run, from place to place
away from people that tell me run
and toward people that say things like
The air smells green tonight.

Time out of time
You said that too
and I wanted to believe you
and I wanted to stay
and I wanted to love you and I wanted to say
Words shouldn’t sound so easy,

but I didn’t.

I used to say things like
I’m afraid of light and silence,
that was only yesterday
but I’d like to think I’ve changed since then.

I’d like to think I’ve grown
enough to know that we stay the same
from sun to sun and sound to sound;
that there is nothing to be discovered
between them that makes where we come from
any easier to ignore.

Forty miles away from my front yard
where I left the three of them standing
they were still my family.
Eighty miles away from my front yard
where I left the three of them standing
they were still standing,
it is easier to leave them
still, and standing.

One hundred miles away from my front yard
where I left the three of them standing
they were outlines of three people that I didn’t
want to need.

She made peach pancakes that afternoon,
she had never made peach pancakes before,
she had never made pancakes.
I said
They are lovely.

The night just before,
my brother, after seeing it on TV,
tried to make shrimp with butter and basil on the grill,
but they just tasted like the grill.

I ate them all but he locked himself in his room anyway.
And then my mother made pancakes,
and they were lovely,
and I left.

That was the day I ran to you.
It was the day I ran to people like you,
people who say things like
The air smells green tonight
people who let me say things like
I am afraid of sound and light.

We talk pretty but we don’t mean what we say.

That was the day that I missed them more than you,
we made words
we ate words
they were pretty
and I left.
Kansas City Dreams

Lauren Unger

A saxophone wailed and the band followed with a quiet hum. A 14 year-old boy, slim with large dark eyes leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed. He stood on stage, the spotlight warm on his face, his own saxophone resting in his arms. People came from all over to watch him play, “Did you hear that Nathan Davis?”

The upright phone rang with a loud buzz. The boy jumped up and turned down the jazz music that blared in the background. “Brownie’s Cabs.”

A voice answered, “Could you send a cab to 659 Stuart?” Davis glanced outside, “Yeah, but Mr. Brownie’s out on a run, now. He’ll be back now in about 30 minutes.” Davis hung up the phone.

He got up from the small splintery desk and shoved some more wood into the huge black stove that took up most of the room, not much larger than an outhouse. Sitting down at the desk, he gazed out the grimy window. Daylight faded and the cries of small boys began to quiet. The room filled with the smell of smoky wood and coal as Davis turned the radio up again and closed his eyes. But the dream wouldn’t come back. Tears fell and Davis angrily wiped them away. Only a few more weeks, he told himself. A little more money and I’ll get my horn.

Many years later Dr. Nathan Davis surveys his classroom at the University of Pittsburgh; few chairs are empty in the huge auditorium. Hundreds of sleepy student faces blink up at him,
and the classroom grows silent as he clears his throat then pauses. "Today we’ll be going over the recording industry and then we’ll talk about women in jazz." Davis’s words slide out on a rich, deep voice that often shakes in laughter or swells with importance. "But first, okay, who still needs tickets?" he asks. About fifty hands rise in the air, some shooting up fast, and some crawling.

Students want tickets to the upcoming spring concert, performed by the jazz ensemble. It will be Davis’s 31st, to correspond with his number of years as professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Davis came to the University as a well-known jazz saxophonist, who performed on radio and television in Europe, to find an academic world not only ignorant to jazz, but one that punished it. When Davis attended the University of Kansas as an undergraduate, the school expelled students who played jazz on campus. So Davis constructed Pitt’s jazz program around history, improvisation, and composition while helping to raise jazz awareness and respect.

Back in the classroom Davis leans on the podium, pursing his lips. "Triple, triple, triple x, you guys need to know this." Rows of heads tilt downwards, pens in hand poised to write. Davis shifts his weight emphasizing the words with a pointing index finger. "Now if you sign a record deal you need to know about all the royalties. You’ve got to look out for this. I know, I was there and I’ve made the same mistakes myself." Students’ laughter sprinkles through the auditorium as Davis continues by talking about his various record deals and experience over the years, how hard it is to make it big.

Rosemary Davis walked briskly down the road after work. Slim and beautiful, Davis had a quiet gentle voice that she never raised. Nonetheless, she was not afraid to be walking by herself. She arrived home with a white box, which she clutched tight to her chest. It held a Silvertone saxophone, the cheapest line of instruments, but still a lot for the family to buy. She smiled and
thought of her young boy standing in front of her, mouth set firm. She had tried to convince him to get a different instrument.

"Nathan, well, saxophones cost more money, I'll get you a trumpet." Davis said, "Nope, I don't want no trumpet." "Well, I'll get you a clarinet," his mother said. Davis shook his head again, "I want a saxophone, and I want a tenor, and I don't want an alto." She smiled at the memory. Laying the box down, she watched as Davis picked it up. Flipping through little spiral bound song booklet, Davis found "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." He played it with his eyes closed, his mother beaming from behind.

Chairs and music crowd the wide classroom as the members of the jazz ensemble enter the room. Between the rows of chairs black cases in all sizes litter the floor, empty. Papers rustle and the cases of the instruments bang, while a shrill saxophone pierces the noise, playing scales up and down. Another trumpet quivers fast, jumbling the saxophone's scale. The guitar twangs in another key and the flute shrieks high above. Bits and pieces of different songs clash in high and low notes.

Davis leans back in the chair in front of the group, surveying the disorganized jumble for a few minutes. He smiles at the nearest player and arranges his music. Finally ready to begin, he whistles shrilly with two fingers in his mouth then waits for quiet. "Alright, let's get down to business," he says. More rustling fills the rooms as the students arrange their music sheets. A last trombone burps out a low note and the jazz ensemble falls silent, all eyes on Davis. He claps the rhythm and counts, "One, two, one two three." His hands swing sharply, cutting the air in a cross shape, each with the index finger pointing upwards.

Davis nods his head, his right foot tapping to the music, his hands still mapping out the beat. The music gets louder and louder as the drums get faster with more clashes. Davis spreads his hands out and cuts off the note. Suddenly all noise stops. The musicians lower the instruments from their lips. Davis gives a low chuckle, looking at the music in front of him and shaking his head.
Davis grins, “That sounds good. No really, we really went up a notch or two.” The students smile and some tilt their heads downward.

Light filtered in the garage and the particles of dust swirled around. Piles of boxes fell with crashes and bumps as two fifteen-year-old boys rummaged through the mess and the dirt.

“Here it is Nathan,” the one boy shouted. “I told you it was here.” He pointed to an old trombone, lying in the corner, his dark skin and large brown eyes glowing with excitement. Davis picked up the instrument like it was made of gold. Dust fell out of the horn, which was caked with greenish brown dirt and smelled of mildew. Small patches of rust dappled the trombone with holes. The boy nodded at Davis, “Here, take it.”

Davis ran home, proudly presenting his new find to his mother. She glanced at the instrument and her eyes widened. She glanced back towards her bottle of Clorox, used for everything from wiping doorknobs to polishing floors. She meant business with her boys and didn’t like germs. Her voice raised a notch.

“What have you got in here? Boy, you better not put that on your mouth!” She got ready to shoo him out the door, then she looked at his face, shook her head and sighed. “Come on in here and let’s get busy, because I see you ain’t gonna change your mind.”

Still wearing her white nurse’s uniform, she took the instrument from Davis and walked to their small bathroom. She pulled out Clorox, alcohol, vinegar, and anything else that may kill germs, and dropped the trombone in the bathtub. A harsh chemical smell leaked out of the tub, overpowering the potpourri incense that always burned in a small Buddha figurine.

Two days later Davis fished it out, taped it up to cover all of the rust holes and taught himself how to play. Although the day Davis came home with the trombone he could play only the saxophone, today Davis can walk around the room, take any instrument from one of his students, and play it.
Back in the classroom the piano and the drums drown out the trumpets. The brass plays faster, completely losing the guitar. Davis shakes his head and gets up from his chair, heading over to the rhythm section. He picks up a drumstick and taps in time with the drummer. "Keep the rhythm steady."

Talking quietly to the pianist, he sits beside him on the bench and begins to play a rolling beat. "You can flow with it, but you have to make it rhythmic too." He signals for the band to play and he moves along, tapping out the beat with his fingers dancing up and down the keys. The pianist nods, but still sounds hesitant and Davis tells him. "If you go in there too polite, it sounds like a mistake. You have to play like that's what you want to do."

A 17-year-old Davis ran home, clutching $50 with a huge smile. "I'm going to Chicago," he said to his mother.
"What?" she cried.
"Yeah, I won first prize and you told me if I got my own money, I can go to Chicago. I got $50, so I'm goin'," he said.

The money was a prize in a jazz competition Davis entered with his friend Ronald Norman. After driving most of the day up to Chicago the boys came to the flashing Orchid Room sign. A poster on the door said 'Amateur Night, prize $100,' just like the ad in the paper. Norman, a big guy who looked more like a football player than a musician, walked in first, hiding Davis, who was too young to be inside. Calling themselves Ray and Nay, Norman pounded on the keys and nodded as Davis's horn wailed high and low. On the smoky room with its shiny lights and dance floor, they walked up to the front, sweating as a man on stage announced first prize: Ray and Nay.

Davis finished his story and looked at his mother. Tears ran down her face and she asked, "Nathan, what about your education?" Then she looked into his eyes and sighed, picking up the old upright telephone and dialing to Chicago. Davis's great aunt, Ollie Brown, answered in a booming, "Hello, child." In
between sniffles Davis looked at her son and said, "Nathan...he's coming up that way...look out for him, he's crazy."

Back in the classroom, Davis's head raises from the score as the piano slows down. A flute squeaks on a note, and plays behind the other instruments. Davis stares intently towards the rhythm section scanning for the culprit and starts to clap the beat, while keeping his foot tapping. "Don't drop it, don't drop the tempo." He watches the section and continues clapping until the end, cutting off the band in another large sweeping gesture. The piano slows again, and a squeaky wrong note jumps out from the music.

Davis shakes his head a little and squints closer at the music, flipping pages. "I want to hear the flute part," he says nodding towards the section. "Let's take it at eight one more time. One, two, one, two three." The piano plunks out the part, faster this time and the squeaky note is gone. Davis shakes his head again, spreading his hands. The room falls silent. The musicians look up, shaking their heads, looking down at their score. "Now I want to hear the balance." He claps the beat, "One, two, one, two, three." The same section repeats in the air again, only to be cut off after a few seconds. "That wasn't clean. One, two, one two three." The musicians shuffle their music and a few heavy breaths float through the air. The music booms through the room. The piano plays in time, the flute floats through the phrases. Davis waves his hands, not cutting off until the final note. He nods his head and smiles. "There it is." At the same time Davis glances at the stack of music that still needs work and the smile fades.

Davis sat on the back of a Greyhound bus, the floor littered with paper and gum, the air stale. Closing his eyes, he saw images of huge nightclubs and Louis Armstrong flash through his head. Famous musicians started in Chicago or New York and this was where Davis had to be to make it big. His eyes flickered open each time he began to drift; his stomach knotted over and over. Davis's
bags, packed hurriedly, stayed underneath the bus while his horn and $50 rested safely under his arm and in his pocket. All he knew was that he wanted to play music. The bus pulled into the stop and a large woman waved from the crowd, a fancy hat covering her long, sleek hair that fell to her behind. Davis jumped off the bus and ran to Brown. Her arms enfolded him and he was barely visible between her huge bosoms.

In the classroom a young woman belts out a song, her eyes closed, her hand on the microphone. "Lover man, oh where have you gone?" The jazz ensemble sails smoothly behind her until the final chorus. Davis waves his hands and the cutoffs come scattered. "You guys aren't following me. Let's do it one more time for posterity." All eyes turn, glued to Davis. "One, two, one, two, three." The instruments sail again, all eyes still watching Davis. The music trickles down then fades out. Silence. Davis pauses, still looking at the music. "Ok, thank you and I'll see you later." He pauses again and no one moves. "When's the concert now?" A few voices echo, "Thursday." Davis laughs and shakes his head, "Damn, we don't have much time." Chatter starts up and the instrument cases bang closed, while music rustles as the ensemble members stuff it into folders.

Brown pulled her flashy Cadillac up to a mansion with stained glass windows and real Egyptian stone. Davis barely flickered or registered surprise; he had been there many summers. Brown was a self-made millionaire who lived in the Marshall Fields mansion. Inside, the house held seven or eight bedrooms, more stained glass windows, and a huge ballroom, which Brown bought specifically so that she could hold her church services. With a booming voice and a soft spot for Davis, Brown was a deeply religious woman, a self ordained minister of a sanctified Holy Roller church.

Davis began to audition with smaller bands and in the next few weeks he played every night, moving from club to club.
At seven in the morning, the house lay silent and dark. Davis snuck into the house, his breath smelling of alcohol and his clothes filled with smoke. Light spilled out of the ballroom into the rest of the house and Davis heard a few shakes of a tambourine. The followers arrived early and set up for the service. Carrying his horn, he headed past the ballroom and up toward the bedrooms. Tiptoeing up the stairs, Davis glanced down towards the ballroom several times, looking for Brown. Just as his feet hit the last few steps a large figure topped by a fancy hat and long full hair poked around the corner. The loud, full voice boomed.

“Nathan! Nathan is a holy name. That’s a name from the Bible. And you’ve been playing for the devil all night, now you come on in here and play for the Lord, boy!”

Davis blinked and tried to look sober, unpacking his saxophone once again.

“Then I’d go and jam with the church cats,” he remembers, smiling.

The ensemble members trickle slowly into Davis’s office. “Hey Doc, what do we wear for the concert?” “Doc, what about the Jamaica trip?” The office grows crowded and noisy.

Ken Prouty, a professional trombone player and one of Davis’s teacher’s assistants squeezes into the office, adjusting his wire frame glasses. Davis beams, “How’s that doctorate going, Ken?” Prouty smiles and shakes his head, running his hands through his short graying hair. He gives a sigh, “Almost done now.”

Davis created the doctoral jazz program when he came to the University many years ago, making Pitt the first University to offer a doctorate in ethnomusicology that is based on African American music. Most doctorates in ethnomusicology during this time were based on other varieties of ethnic music. While other schools turned their noses up at the idea of jazz and academia working together.
The song heated up. Trumpets squealed and drums crashed in the sea of musicians, all dark skinned with flashy gold instruments and fine suits. A man of about 19, Davis leaned forward, eyes set on Jay McShann, the band director. McShann waved his arms to the music, his suit bulging a bit around the middle. Smoke and the quiet chatter of patrons filled the air. Suddenly Davis’s head raised from his music and focused on a point in the sea of white. A young girl, short and cute, winked at him. Davis smiled slightly and winked back, eyes dropping back to McShann. McShann’s arms flailed in wide movements, then dropped. The music halted and the Kansas City nightclub fell silent.

The sheets of music rattled as the musicians picked them up. A dull roar of chatter replaced the silence. McShann smiled at the audience, adjusted his suit and trailed behind them. They traveled through the kitchen into the basement, separated, but Davis stayed behind, walking off the bandstand.

The owner, a large Italian man with dark, thick hair and expensive suits, circled around, grinning at the patrons. His diamond pinky ring flashed in the light as he shook hands and gestured around the room. Then his grin faded, right by the stage one of the players, a tall man with dark skin, talked to a girl in the audience. Her straight brown hair danced and her smile grew wider. The owner recognized Davis, the saxophone player who just came back from Chicago. He cast a nervous glance to the back of the bar, where a few white men sat, leaning over, getting progressively louder and waving their beer glasses. A fight. Trouble. Definitely something that could ruin his business.

He rushed brusquely downstairs, not stopping to smile at the patrons or ask how the food tasted today. There he found McShann and the other black players. He whispered something in McShann’s ear and concern appeared in the man’s eyes. He nodded, “Yes sir, I’ll take care of that right away.”

McShann walked quickly to the table, face all smiles and ease in his voice. Davis’s head snapped up, recognition clouded his face, and his head dropped down.
“Come on Hoss, you know you can’t stay up here like this,” McShann said. The girl turned her head, her cheeks glowing red. Davis also turned red under his skin and tried to move further from the table, lowering his voice, “Oh, shoot, I forgot, man. I don’t mean no trouble.”

Softening a bit, McShann nonetheless still looked concerned, his voice smooth but firm, “You’re getting ready to hurt my business.” He then took Davis by the arm, leading him towards the basement. Davis turned his head down further and climbed slowly behind him. The girl looked on in his direction but neither met the other’s eyes.

The students begin to leave and the noise dies down. Davis leans back in his chair and smiles, glancing up at the calendar hung on the wall. Posters of all sizes hang around the room, each with a large number in the center and a list of famous names. There are 31 posters, all reading “University of Pittsburgh Jazz Seminar” across the top in big print. The past 31 years brought jazz greats, ranging from James Moody to Grover Washington Jr., to the University to work with students and give a whole concert of improvisation. Each year more students attend, learning about the history in action.

Queen Bey, a successful blues singer who grew up in Kansas City and went to high school with Davis, comments about his teaching. “Each note meant something to him,” she says. Her voice is low and rich, and her sentences come out like blues songs, but, when she’s excited, it rises, sparkling with excitement and some girlish glee. “So if it doesn’t mean that to you as a student you’re wasting your time with Dr. Davis. But, if he can see that passion in you, and feel that passion, you will learn from the best.”
An Interview With Jo Ann Beard

Erica Smith

If the general population demanded a colorful capsule in which to package Jo Ann Beard, it might hold things like this: her guilty pleasures range from true crime novels to watching “Animal Precinct” on Animal Planet. If not for writing, she might have been an oil painter. She doesn’t do board games, but fesses up to the occasional round of Scrabble. The proudly smoking narrator depicted in The Boys of My Youth hasn’t had a cigarette in almost two years.

There’d be a list of her publishing credits. Mention might be made of her family life, or that she’s teaching the next two semesters at Sarah Lawrence College. Fiction the first semester, then nonfiction.

Such is proof that the side you see all depends on how the origami’s folded. Perhaps the joy is that Jo Ann isn’t easy to capsule, and the general population is too busy perusing popular magazines for bios of authors they think they should know about. May she never be immortalized in some glossy sidebar. That leaves her to be savored by the rest of us.

As much as she’ll reveal, of course. Jo Ann doesn’t just offer herself up to a PR gristmill. Because her work is already so autobiographical, she says it surprises her when people want to learn more. She has never researched herself online. Despite the accessibility to discussion boards about her work, particularly her 1998 collection of essays entitled The Boys Of My Youth, there’s no
consumptive curiosity on her part to see what others are saying. She refuses to look over her shoulder.

This is most intrinsic in “Undertaker, Please Drive Slow,” a portrait of cancer patient Cheri Tremble. In 1997, Cheri sought—and was granted—Jack Kevorkian’s assistance with her suicide. Cheri had passed on before Jo Ann even approached the idea of writing “Undertaker,” leaving no chance of a firsthand account. Instead, Jo Ann visited with Cheri’s family and friends and immersed herself in their words. What she brought home from weeks of interviews was raw material requiring years of construction.

The resulting story poses inevitable questions about creative license. Allowing oneself to be carried in the piece’s arms would mean tolerating its blended fabric, a leap not everyone is willing to take. Numerous magazines proved squeamish. They shied away from the errant hybrid of fiction and nonfiction, rejecting the story. In the end it was Tin House Magazine who presented “Undertaker” to the masses.

Readers continue to debate Jo Ann’s choices. Nonfiction purists foam at her writing style. It lacks apology and can’t be labeled with a catchphrase. Some expound the sanctity of a line which should never be blurred; others feel it’s a violation that needed to happen.

Jo Ann visited the University of Pittsburgh for a few days in October. What follows is a compilation from various Q&A forums as well as my personal interviews, in phone and in person, with Jo Ann. This is no authoritative expose’. This is me saying, go forth and read Jo Ann Beard for yourself. Plumb the surface I have skimmed. Know that a writer in the truest sense is grounded by craft rather than category.

Why did you choose to write about Cheri Tremble?
I knew of her daughter, Sarah, through a friend. I knew the situation. After Cheri’s death, I heard how (Cheri) had ridden in the car all the way from Iowa to Detroit (to see Kevorkian) with her face in
her hands. That image of her stuck with me, and after that, I wanted to write her story. I wrote Sarah a letter. One year later, I got a response.

In *Undertaker*, you as the narrator are invisible. What made you decide on that approach?
I knew that I didn’t know what was going on inside (Cheri’s) head. I’d assumed I would use my own point of view but couldn’t find a way in. So I sat for two months in front of my computer looking for the opening sentence. Finally I caved in and tried her point of view. I imagine it was easier than falsely threading myself into the story.

So the memories in Cheri’s head—were they the product of interviews you did with her family and friends?
Some of them. Some were drawn from my own past, or friends’ pasts.

How do you justify blurring that line? What do you say when people ask what authority you have to fictionalize nonfiction?
People challenge me all the time on that, and I challenge myself, too. I don’t know the answer. I’m telling a story; it’s not important if it’s my story or the story of my friends. I try and imagine my way into a human truth. This is the fifth place I’ve visited in five weeks and I’ve been challenged in every place.

What’s the key to describing these things you didn’t experience firsthand?
I asked myself what feelings I would have about the situation and how to depict them with accuracy. I gave a lot of thought to the metaphors and imagery, too. Like the description of Cheri’s bone cancer being like a diamond in her hip. Once I had that image, I spent weeks on it. I drove around wondering, how would that diamond feel in my hip? And I tried to explain it.
When did you know when you’d gotten to the truth?
In *Undertaker*, the only truth was in my own experiences. I didn’t think I’d gotten to the truth about her, I only put her name out in my own way.

How does it feel when you can’t find that truth in your writing?
It feels like the radio’s on but it’s between stations. I feel myself getting closer and closer and then there it is. It could be weeks or months. Then it’s there, and I know I can do it. It’s magic.

Isn’t staying ‘in the moment’ difficult when it takes so long to write something?
I stay interested because I haven’t figured it out yet—it’s like a math problem. I work out the how and the what step by step. With *Undertaker*, I was thinking about it all the time, every day. At the end, I felt like it happened to both of us, but I got to walk away. She didn’t.

Can you recount the first time you ever got published?
It was probably eight years into my writing career. It was in a literary journal, *Story*, in 1992. I was pretty happy. I felt proud of my work. It was an essay published as fiction, so my response to getting published was tempered by the fact that I wanted them to call it an essay, and they insisted on calling it a short story. In the little paragraph they gave every writer to talk about themselves, I wrote how my piece was based in fact. When they printed it, I looked, and they had changed what I wrote. Even the first thing I got published fell through the cracks.

When did you know you were going to be a writer?
I was studying visual art at the University of Iowa. There were requirements to fulfill, and I thought taking a poetry class sounded like fun. I found it was much easier to express myself as a writer than a painter. I knew I wasn’t a poet, but I was getting at something. It was like when I was fifteen and had my first cigarette, I knew I
was a smoker. When I took this class, I knew I was a writer.

Many times when you read an author's work, you pick up on idiosyncrasies in their style. Do you find any that come up in your own writing?
I guess that would be using the same words over and over that I have to go back and comb out. Sometimes there's a special feeling attached to a word, or it's faddish. When writers revise again and again it's hard for them to find where they've put things. I give my writing character but its emphasis is on language. Big on style but small on content, you could say.

Which authors do you find had an influence on you?
E.B. White, Barry Lopez, Loren Eiseley—who actually made me want to write the Coyote piece (in Boys Of My Youth)—Annie Dillard, Joan Didion.

The coyote essay in Boys stands apart, not only for its subject matter but also because you write about it partially from the coyote's point of view. What's the significance of including that in the collection?
Coyote was written in a different voice and style. I'm fond of it. In some ways, it was the best writing experience I ever had. That's probably why it's in there, even if it doesn't fit. I wrote it before the others. There was a slide I had from vacation, and I looked at it while I tried to write. It took me two months to write, which is quick for me.

Can you talk a little about your writing process?
My process is very linear. I start out with the first sentence and make the other sentences go with that one. I don't go back. It takes a long time. I spend the same amount of time producing one draft that it takes others to produce five.
So you’ll type one sentence and sit there looking at the computer?
I’ve spent months, for hours a day, waiting for inspiration that doesn’t come. I’ll do laundry, get out of the house, come back, pretend to work, try again. I revise in my head, not on the screen. A lot of work happens before I commit a sentence to the page.

Doesn’t that make it just torturous?
I think everyone’s process is like a fingerprint. I can’t think about what someone else is doing or how they do it.

What sort of things do you enjoy reading and what do you look for?
Tony Hoagland, Rick Moody. David Foster Wallace. The language, I love language. Fireworks kind of stuff. I enjoy anthologies of short fiction stories. Over the past decade, fiction has become either so refined or so anemic that I rarely find longer pieces that I like better than short ones. Even more rarely do I find creative nonfiction works I like.

Speaking of this term “creative nonfiction,” there’s been a lot of discussion about how well it defines the genre.
It works and it doesn’t work. Though the form isn’t fiction and it’s not nonfiction, I’m not sure creative nonfiction is right either. I don’t care what people call it. I’ve been part of some fascinating debates and have tried to care, but I don’t. My job is to do what I do.

You spoke before about the overlap between writing and painting.
For me, it’s the same process. They feel exactly the same. It’s a buildup of layers until you’ve created an image. I’m interested in images, and can understand how poets work. They distill an idea down to the most essential language there is. There’s a psychological truth I’m aiming for. I’ll grab things. Like when I painted, the objects
there had no meaning but the painting itself had a narrative.

What's next?
I'm losing interest in memoir pieces. I'm trying to move away from personal things and find subject matter I can absorb and write about. Something I can research. Not journalism, I would never want to do journalism again. People wouldn't want to talk to me and I'd say, "Okay," and run and call the magazine, saying, "They won't talk to me!" I have no clue how to make people talk to me that don't want to. I don't have that personality. I don't want to do that in order to write.

What's the most valuable advice you're going to give your students this upcoming term?
If you can make art out of it, go for it. You may get tired of defending your choices but tell the best story possible. I encourage a writing mix. My writing wasn't like others' in the program, and I had professors that were very nurturing and supportive. At this point, in 2002, we've seen everything there is to see in movies, in books. We must do it in a way that makes the reader care. Find some element that can't let the reader look away. That's why we, as writers, are here.
Waiting With Luck

Elaine Ong

We are waiting for my uncle at six o’clock in the morning. It is nothing new or different; we are always waiting for him. Every morning, we arrive and he is not ready to go, as if leaving for work at the same time every day comes as a surprise to him. Often, he comes to the window scratching his head after my car horn wakes him up. Like all the other mornings, my aunt, his sister, sighs.

My uncle’s lawn is growing out of control. The weeds have invaded my grandfather’s old garden and the herbs have wandered beyond their fence. The wild rabbit population loves my uncle. The three of us in the car sit quietly: my mom in the passenger seat, my aunt in the back, and me in the driver’s seat. We each count the rabbits. There are six on his lawn and one is hopping across the street, all of them are fat and dirty brown.

“They look good,” says my mom. She has a habit of assessing how well an animal’s meat will cook. Rabbits, deer and geese are her favorites.

“That’s gross Mom.”

“In Cambodia, you would have been lucky to get a spoonful of rice a day. I once knew a woman who was so starved for meat, she ate her own daughter.”

I start to laugh because cannibalism is funny and my mother has a way of turning her morbidity into my life’s lessons.

“You don’t believe me? Her daughter was beautiful and
she drowned her in the bathtub to clean her off. The officials found
the body after smelling her cooking. You are lucky.”

“Yes I am Mom. I am lucky. Thank you for not eating me.”

My aunt lets out a chuckle and my mom tries to hide her
smile as my Uncle Steve finally climbs into the car. He immediately
gets comfortable and falls asleep before I even have a chance to
back out of the driveway. My aunt takes another deep sigh.

We drive in the direction of the sun and I spend the next
half hour craning my neck so that my eyes rest right above the
shade of the visor. I tell myself work is fun though I don’t think
about singing along to Patsy Cline with my aunt as we take the
chairs off the tables or chopping onions with my uncle as my mom
laughs at us for being weak in the eyes. Instead, I think about a
different sun beating into Prague’s rooftops. I think about designing
dresses and the kinds of flowers my cousin should have at her
wedding. I think about how much more writing I can get in when I
don’t have to be the oldest child and my mom’s only daughter.

My uncle shifts in his sleep and my aunt takes that
opportunity to ask me what I plan on doing after graduation. This
is the topic of the summer in my house. It’s the first summer that
I’ve been home since I left for college. I had planned on staying in
Pittsburgh to try living on my own, but then my mother called and
asked for my help. She was buying a Cajun restaurant and she had
wanted to know what kind of food Cajun entailed. That led to
other questions about licenses, taxes, zucchinis, and antique tables,
which ultimately led to the conclusion that everybody would be
much happier if I came back home to my family.

My aunt thinks I should open a Cajun restaurant in
Pittsburgh. She is always trying to appeal to an imaginary
entrepreneur in me. She tells me I can start a Casian restaurant in
Pittsburgh, or maybe go into catering.

“You don’t want to be your uncle,” she says a little loudly,
hoping he isn’t sleeping for real.
And I don’t. I want to go abroad and be an English teacher, or be an American diplomat in Africa, or an attaché, or a wedding planner, a stylist, a writer, a museum curator, a waitress.

My mom and I stay quiet because I don’t know how to say what I want and she doesn’t know how to ask her questions. It is a fact that American children will leave their parents. It is what they are taught to do, and ever since I was 16 my mother has been regretting her previous disdain for what she saw as spoiled and overly dependent Chinese daughters. Stories about girls who slept all day and played all night on their parent’s patience and money have now changed to stories of good daughters helping in the family business. My mother tells me about other children she knows. Her friend in New York has a daughter who moved to Virginia after college but after a year, the daughter figured that her living expenses would be much cheaper if she were living at home. It is the same story, different people, different kids, and different states, all with the same last line: “Your life will be much easier if you get a job near home.”

Tuesdays are slow at the restaurant. The first customer doesn’t usually come in until an hour after we are opened. My uncle has already finished his prep work and he’s swallowing his second cup of espresso. Espresso doesn’t wake up my uncle; it only makes him crabby to be awake. He is looking through the classifieds for a used BMW. My aunt tries to tell him that short order cooks don’t drive BMWs but my uncle doesn’t ever let that kind of negativity phase him. He grunts and takes the paper back into the kitchen where my aunt can leave him alone.

My mom doesn’t like to say things about my aunt and uncle’s relationship. In the privacy of the damp basement, she tells me about her two brothers. They had argued before they left Cambodia about whether or not the Thai border was safe. They both were angry about putting the family in danger and they both died worrying whether the other person was still alive.

“Your aunt and uncle are lucky they have the luxury of arguing with each other,” she has told me more than once. My
mom, the youngest and only daughter of Chinese Cambodian grocers, is the last person in her family still alive. Her parents died when she was sixteen after American planes dropped bombs in Cambodia. Her oldest brother died: starved, overworked, and ill from demons and beatings. Her second oldest brother was taken away in the middle of the night, only to resurface in nightmares and tell-tale sightings. My Uncle Roland, the youngest of the boys, escaped the Khmer Rouge but died of cancer in the States. My mother keeps a stiff face when she meets old friends and acquaintances that knew her family. She tells them that life is unpredictable and she listens to their praises for her parents and her brothers. But in the basement today, my mom tells me she doesn’t have too long. She doesn’t know an Ong that’s lived past fifty and she has aches, weird lumps and shooting pains all over.

I tell her, “You are out of your head. Besides, I will need you to help me blow out my candles when I am 50,” and she hides her smile again because hoping would mean that it is an impossible suggestion.
Linoleum

David L. Atkinson

Before we got our dog Silver
we would throw brussel sprouts
and tomato wedges
through the slats and into the heating vent.
Anything to not have to endure
the round firmness of a lima bean.

If I could have seen them forming
a mound of veggie matter, decomposing
hidden like the maggots
under the peeling linoleum
that my mother killed with a cup of bleach,
then maybe I would have stronger bones
and better eyes; I might have eaten my cooked carrots.

I could smell them though.
As the furnace hummed
the sour smell of rotting spinach leaves
would sink through the slats and onto the floor.

When we got Silver she ate
our vegetables, bland,
generic dry dog food,
rotting pears from the tree—
once she even ate a squirrel,
drug it limp from her jaws.

Since she'd let me, I was the one
who, when the time came,
forced the pills into her throat,
who got to touch
her sandy tongue and run my fingertips
along her incisors, to kill
the whipworms that swam in her liquid stool.

It was something about the blankness
of my mother's face when she touched
the bleach that swelled over the lip
of the peeled back linoleum
and turned the fuzz of her baby blue slippers
as white as the babies that swam in it.
The rainy season and Jesús

David L. Atkinson

Studying late in Guadalajara,
but not studying really,
the two of us walked into
a Burger King
and it started to rain
barrels of wine.

I swear they were crashing
down on Mexican Fords
and spilling merlot into the gutters,
but no one there took notice
because it was August
and this happens there in August.

Everyone has steel umbrellas,
has reinforced roofs that the
barrels riddle—imagine it—
We were standing in Burger King
ordering hamburguesas when
kerplack,
the first one collided with the concrete.

We tried to be low key,
not wanting to betray our American-ness,
but the wine on the sidewalk
looked like blood
taking the shape of a continent.

Behind the counter
the kid's name tag hung at an angle
on his chest, and then—and this is true—then
Jill spun, slapped my shoulder,
said in a roaring whisper,
"Oh my God, his name is Jesus!"
The people in the booths shook their heads, "Pinche gringa."

I wonder if Cortés felt this foreign when attacked by clubs lined with obsidian, marking his lack of tact maybe, his lack of enough things that shine.

At first I was scared—
the terror of a barrel falling from a great height.
But then I wanted to push open the door,
to leave behind the customers, Jill, and Jesus,
to dash into the falling barrels
and dodge them like Donkey Kong,
to lap up the pools of dark red—
So I did.
We are all postcard collectors. You know you have some pasted into a scrapbook, thrown in an old forgotten shoebox, or stuck in the corner of a bedroom mirror. Usually glossy, roughly 4x6 inches, these cards transport us to the Las Vegas Strip, to the Great Wall of China and back to the overweight beauty sunbathing on the New Jersey seashore. They are reproduced miniature masterpieces by Monet and Michelangelo, or headshots and profiles of our favorite Hollywood stars. They convey political messages and holiday greetings. They serve as a quick recap of a family vacation in incomplete sentences. *Wish you were here.* We send them to let others know the mystical foreign land we are visiting, often at the receiver's request. *Send me a postcard.* It is a thrill to open the mailbox and find that small rectangle of cardstock with a stamp and postmark from Prague or Thailand. So we keep these magical traveling cards—often more well traveled then we can ever hope to be. We tack them up to our bulletin boards and use them as visual aids to daydreaming when our own surroundings just won't do.

But there is another type of postcard collector. One who might fancy himself to be called a deltiologist. The term, with its roots in Greek, means the science or study (logos) of small pictures or cards (deltion). *Deltiology,* said with your nose high in the air. Who would think of such a prissy title for such a simple hobby?
Imagine the stereotypical deltiologist; an ancient little man in an even more ancient little used bookshop, rummaging, with magnifying glass in hand, through a drawer of old, dusty, musty smelling, yellowed and water stained postcards. Black and white photographs of hospitals, town squares and courthouses adorn the front of these cards, not as pleasing to your eyes as the flashy shiny cards you’re accustomed to. Boring. He picks up an old scene of Luna Park in Coney Island, which somebody from long ago decorated with dull silver glitter. *Having a wonderful time. Nate,* is scrawled with faded blue-black ink on the backside. Postmarked 1939. Nostalgic. Next he gently picks up a delicate card framed in old crumbling gold paint. In the center is a scene of a man and woman holding hands as the moon smiles down on them. “I’m afraid to go home in the dark,” is written across the bottom. As he turns the card over you can see beautiful, stylized handwriting, 

...And so you stayed out till daylight and slept while others were looking for you. *M.E.K.* It was addressed to a Mr. Bernard Gallagher. Postmarked 1909. Romantic and mysterious, leaving you wanting to know more.

Suddenly, we can identify with the deltiologist’s passion, the desire to preserve and understand these small pieces of art in their historical context, and for some collectors, the desire to preserve someone else’s memories that might otherwise be lost.

Vendors set up their tables at antique and ephemerae shows, carefully setting out the painstakingly categorized boxes containing thousands of postcards for the masses to finger through. Most buyers look for old scenes from their hometowns or childhood vacation spots. Others have even more narrow subjects, such as barnyard animal scenes—any will do. Still, others may take it one step farther and have even more peculiar specific collections such as sheep—sheep eating, sheep grazing, sheep at the nativity; as long as there is a sheep, there will be a purchase.

It is here, amidst the tables and tents of the vendors and buyers that you will find Bob Richards. He travels to shows like the Atlantic City Antique Show and The Paper and Ephemerae
Show in Allentown on a yearly basis. When approaching a postcard vendor he heads straight to the “H” box if they’re arranged alphabetically or the “Holiday” box if they’re arranged by category. He complains that you always find seven or eight inches of Christmas and Valentine’s Day cards, but only a half an inch of Halloween cards—if there are any at all. Bob is one of those collectors with a specific subject matter in mind, and his happens to be one of the most coveted postcard subjects amongst collectors today, Halloween. Bob explains that there was a huge run on postcards in the 90s. “They were all gobbled up by yuppies that have the money to burn.” It is rare that Bob finds a postcard he wants to purchase. There are so few left on the market, and many sell for upwards of $125. He says he never has and he never will spend more than $20 on a postcard.

Bob is not our stereotypical vision of a deltiologist; as a matter of fact he wouldn’t even call himself a deltiologist. He doesn’t even call himself a postcard collector, just a collector in general.

His story begins on a cool October evening in 1959. Bob was posing for a picture in his new skeleton costume. He held his scary mask in his hands so his mother could get a picture of his smiling, excited face before he went out trick-or-treating. Although he was only five years old in the picture, Bob looks much the same now as he did then; plump and jolly with the round nose and cheeks you might expect to see on a gnome or some other fairytale character. He collects Halloween postcards because he is so nostalgic for this time in his life. “I wasn’t a child who got all excited about the Easter Bunny,” he says. He remembers coming home from school for lunch when he was a little boy and seeing his mother putting the plastic pumpkin containers and paper decorations in the windows (decorations that would be worth a fortune today, Bob informs me). He found this very comforting—a constant of the season and something he could rely on.

As an only child, Bob was doted upon by his two loving parents, and grew up on a picturesque street in Forty-Fort,
Pennsylvania. Today, Bob lives in this same house. He has remained single and now dotes upon his two elderly parents and his dog, Holly. He says that even as a little boy he was a great collector, especially of G. I. Joes, and always took very good care of his things.

Sadly, on June 23, 1972 Hurricane Agnes angrily swept through Northeastern Pennsylvania causing the Susquehanna River to swell with dark, muddy, swiftly moving water. The levees broke, and Bob’s town of Forty-Fort was flooded with brown river water. The flood rushed through downtown destroying stores and businesses and covered two-story homes to their rooftops, one of which was Bob’s. He was twenty-two at the time, and sees this as a turning point in his life. He had lost virtually everything that ever belonged to him, all of his childhood treasures and collections. When I ask him why he is so passionate about collecting, Bob sighs, saying, “Here comes the psycho-analysis.” He explains that he collects because he is trying to replace all of those things that he lost, all of those things that he loved so much from his youth.

Halloween paraphernalia, especially paper products, like decorations and postcards, are extremely collectable today due to their fantastical graphics and rich fall color schemes. “Vegetable People” adorned many postcards. Different fruits and vegetables of the fall harvest were given human attributes and shown dancing, driving cars, flirting, chasing children, and causing all sorts of Halloween mischief. Some of the most famous postcard artists created scenes of witches, devils, ghosts, banshees, and small rosy-cheeked children enjoying the holiday that still appeals to us today and makes us think of Halloweens gone by. Bob was in a Massachusetts mall at an antique show in the early 80s when Halloween postcards first caught his eye. He was drawn to the intensely colorful graphics, and purchased an embossed postcard depicting three children “ducking for apples.” He paid $1.00. The card was originally sent to Roscoe Nickerson of Boston, MA on
October 29, 1909. A man named Elmer wrote a brief message on the back: *Hope you are well and happy.* Bob was hooked.

As a third-grade schoolteacher, Bob is very interested in the historical value of these cards and brings them in to share with his class each October. His collection is housed in a simple white photo album. He has affixed a red devil sticker to the center of the cover. Each card is displayed in its own individual plastic sleeve. The album looks beautiful and well organized, but Bob says he “didn’t do a royal job displaying them.”

The difference between the Halloween of today and the Halloween of yesteryear is apparent as soon as you open the album. Although this wasn’t his original reason for starting the collection, Bob has grown more and more curious about the evolution of the holiday. He points out several cards that show a young girl holding a candle, sometimes standing in front of a mirror. He explains that people used to believe that if you held a candle up to a mirror at midnight on Halloween you would see the face of the man you were going to marry, “or,” he adds, “something like that.” Bob never expected to find such a melding of romance with Halloween, but long ago the two were closely associated. St. Matrimony is the Patron Saint of Halloween, which made the holiday a bit like Valentine’s Day. Postcard fronts often display romantic messages such as:

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On Hallowe’en, when the hour is right
Let the witch mix a charm in a Pumpkin bright
Then rub this nearest to the heart
And the one who’ll tarry you’ll surely marry
If you acted right on your part.
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The graphics on these particular cards reflect their romantic nature. Beautiful witches, that look more like goddesses than old hags, stir love potions and young, wistful women sit under smiling moons. There is nothing macabre or scary here. One postcard shows a woman looking beguilingly at a young man and reads:
A very good scheme on old Hallowe’en,
The finish of which is easily seen.
One bewitching miss one bewitching kiss
And one good tight hug to complete your bliss.

Bob also points out that many of us forget the strong ties between Halloween and the Harvest. Like most other Halloween collectors, some of his favorite cards show the “squash people” and “watermelon men” that were so popularly depicted. Somehow over the years these bright, colorful characters have been lost, and the only personified vegetable we see today is the pumpkin.

It is rare to find a vintage Halloween postcard depicting blood and gore. They are, as Bob says, “violence free.” Messages like *A Joyous Hallowe’en* and *Ho! For a happy Hallowe’en* were hardly frightening to those that received them. Bob laughs at how innocent the mischief depicted was. When he was a little boy, his grandfather used to tell him stories of the Halloween pranks he pulled as a child. A favorite was removing people’s garden gates, and it just so happens that this is the image depicted on Bob’s favorite postcard. It is one in a series of five European “Mischief Night” cards (Bob has managed to find and buy all five of them before their prices skyrocketed to over $100 per card). The postcard shows plump, happy, laughing children running away with a fence gate. “The mischief was fairly innocent then,” Bob says. But, he notices amongst this innocence, artists and postcard publishers of the time had no problem depicting and selling images of the devil and his little red helpers. Devils can be found dancing around fiery cauldrons or flying through the night sky. Bob thinks there would be an uproar if these images were marketed to children today.

Many of the cards in Bob’s collection were sent to or written by children. One such card shows a boy climbing over a fence with his hair standing straight up in fear of the pumpkin man behind him. *You will be frightened more than this boy is if you don’t get these boxes, bags and baskets out of here before Saturday night. Bring the other fellows along,* is written on the back and addressed to Rena
B of Scranton, PA. Perhaps one of the highlights of Bob's collection is a card showing a young girl who is frightened by a pumpkin reflection she sees in a mirror. The card seems to have been part of a little boy's game. On the back a drawing of a skull and crossbones is followed by a message in all capital letters in very child-like handwriting: YOU ARE A FISH CAKE. BEWARE. WE'LL GET YOU YET. J. HOVEY.

On the second floor of Bob's house is a small den that over the past 25 years has become his collection room. Bob says people don't know what to do when they enter for the first time because they see so many things that remind them of their childhood. It is here that Bob's Halloween postcard album can be found amongst a large assortment of science fiction and horror paraphernalia. Although it is just one piece of his extensive collection, it is by far his dearest treasure. While postcards of today can transport us to other places, Bob's cards transport him to another time. They represent all that he is nostalgic and sentimental for; they depict things he cannot find today, the things he has lost. It is here in this room full of horror movie memorabilia of yesteryear and, of course, his antique Halloween postcards, that this 48-year-old man seems more like a child surrounded by his favorite toys.
Graceful Hands

Alison Fairbairn

Graceful hands
    Long fingers
that still haven’t
lost their baby knuckles

Wide broad fingernails
able to do damage
if provoked, most of the time
painted some hue in between
    seashell pink and fire engine red
all depending on mood and
if her hands want to reveal
to her date what she is really like

Smooth palms
not too many wrinkles
although one says
she will live a long time

The back of her hand
knower of all things
connects to the wrist
which reveal greenish-bluish veins
and the idea that
she is alive
and cannot hide it.
Mayapple
Gwendolen Morton

peeking under May’s skirt
(she has so many)
I discover the white blossom whose smell
betrayed it.
hiding in the crotch of green stems
six luminous petals and one succulent center
asking to be tucked behind my ear
→ one less fruit for summer.
The old yellow school bus dropped me off a block from my house, and I rushed the rest of the way home. At the front porch I removed the key from the fake rock in which it rested and unlocked the door. In the dresser was where my mother kept her bandages and I stole into her room quietly. It was not so much that my leg was bleeding as it was that I wanted to erase from my sight the small dark pinpoint of lead which was hardly visible under my skin. I was joking around with Nick Jarecki when in the midst of our 6th grade homeroom wrestling match his number two pencil had sank deeply into my thigh. I had run into the third bathroom stall, and pulled down the drab blue khakis which were as much a part of the catholic school uniform to us boys as the plaid skirt and knee highs had been to Mary Ann Margaret and every other girl in our class. I had waited in the stall until homeroom, the last period of the day, had ended and had run straight for the bus leaving my coat and book-bag hanging neatly in my locker. In my mother’s room I pasted a bandage over the wound, and hid it from my parents. I was not embarrassed, but did not want to explain. Nick was my best friend and I did not want my parents to dislike him.

Elementary school ended and time changed the world around me, and somewhere along the way I lost my friend. I heard years later that Nick had been living around the outskirts of town and it was then that I chose to go and find him; to show him the
tattoo he had left me, one without symbolism or meaning, but only a memory. He was drunk when I found him, and only constant prodding could move him from his position laying on the ground, and from his insistence that he had never at any time attended Villa Maria Elementary on 26th and Greengarden just short of the bad part of town. He denied the fact that he had been friends with me or had for that matter ever even known me. He insisted that we had never played soccer together or laughed at the thick Irish accent of our coach. I begged him and promised him alcohol, but he would not admit that we had once convinced Danny Polonski to eat four servings of the school’s meatloaf, and then watched him explode from the inside out like a can of soda spewing forth everything inside of it onto the shiny new wingtips of Mr. Spizarney, the nicest history teacher I ever had, who had had the unfortunate luck of pulling lunch patrol that day. He refused all of this, said he had never sworn to me under our favorite climbing tree that his father was a private eye, and that he had never snapped Amber Hewitt’s bra for a dollar and the respect of every boy in the class. I was not sure if I believed him, but the rum in his breath burned my eyes, and I blamed that for the tears which hurt much worse than a pencil in the leg.
After Brueghel and My Babci

Vanessa Carroll

I should have told you that about anguish you were always right, like the Old Masters in the Auden poem about Brueghel's Icarus: "... how well they understood / (grievs) human position; how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just / walking dully along." I should have told you that you were never wrong the last time I put rollers in your hair—so thin I could see the pink lines of the comb dragging behind the teeth through the curler steam rising, condensing in droplets on my face. It was not an important failure. I did what I knew you would want me to do: I asked if you'd like more coffee, I poured in the cream. Through the window we watched the neighborhood boys steering their bicycles through gutter-muck and fallen leaves. Your hair always set too soon.

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I haven't ice-skated for nearly 20 years, but if I strapped the old, corroded blades onto the black rubber bottoms of my boots and turned the key to lock them into place I'd figure eight on the pond at the edge of the wood and never forget that even martyrdom must run its track. There was a day you took me skating when the sky was bulbous, puffed, holding its breath. This was when your job was to make sure I didn't do one enjoyable thing all afternoon because I'd been mean to my brother at breakfast. "Dip-wit," I'd called him. "Jerk-face." "Puss-face." "Fink." I was an imp with my language—blighted, untouchable. I wish there was a word, "blightable," because that's what I considered myself just then, but you held my hand and smiled the whole forested walk down to the pond, while my mother—your daughter—was making telephone calls at work. I never wanted to work. I wanted to be Dorothy Hamill slanting off on the clear, gray ice behind the house. I wanted rivers that would
never melt or get snowed on or crack. I wanted a sequined performer’s dress and soft leather skates. *Hbssskkek bhs skewkk bhs skkek*, my blades would hum, and *ha ha ha*, your laughter would ring, and now it’s this exact sound of your mirth that wakes me sometimes in the middle of the night when the air is cool and the room is filled with the low blue light pulsing off from the digital clock.

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It began as a mere source of income. Because the pay was decent and I thought it’d be short-term, I worked for a man dying of testicular cancer. I had little else to do but play dominoes with him, carry in the magazines, push the mop around. Let me make one thing clear: before I answered the ad, I never realized how hard some people have to labor for money. Some people sacrifice occasion; others sacrifice themselves. By the time my bills were paid and the paychecks didn’t matter anymore, I learned the fading man had squared himself away, put his past in order, cleared his debts. “But why not max your cards out? Why not celebrate?” He didn’t want to start anything new, he said. He couldn’t attach himself to something he couldn’t last through. That evening, I rang my best friend’s doorbell clutching two paper bags. “V, what’s in the bags?” she said before bending her head to discover a week’s dirty laundry in one and, in the other, pictures of you. I paused while the words banged like old aluminum cans against the strictures of my throat: “... can you help... me sort this out...?” I wanted to sift through my laundry and photos, pinpointing the central moments and throwing the others away. She told me she wouldn’t do it. She told me to go home. She’d lasted through two siblings, an aunt, three family dogs. I’ve lasted through you.

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With regards to Brueghel and Icarus, Auden says that for the miraculous birth there must always be children who don’t fully understand it, but I’d disagree. I’d say that for a birth to be a miracle no one—not children, not teenagers, not adults, not the reverently aged—can comprehend. I like to think of death as a type of birth. I like to think that you’re only now beginning to form, your toes budding like fleshy flower-heads from slender embryonic stumps, your heart as small and delicate as a bat’s heart, and the sound of it pumping like the copper echo of a penny dropping repeatedly upon a vacant pine-wood floor. It’ll be another three weeks until your fingers uncurl, your eyelashes form, maybe you’ll come out with hair on your head, maybe your skin will be pink and
whoever's around will compare it to her favorite lip gloss. If we're lucky, the lip gloss will be lifted from a pocket, smoothed on a rough, wind-cracked mouth while your mouth falls open in the first scream we'll come to identify you with, and none of this do I—nor will I ever—understand fully.

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What you tried to tell me from hospital mountain is the importance of turning away quite leisurely from disaster—having somewhere to go, walking evenly forward, your head balanced with steady and blameless weight on your neck. You wanted so acutely for me to believe that even as some are suffering great calamity, life for others continues. Between December and today, there have been moments when I've wanted to talk about your death and moments when only silence seemed appropriate. There have been moments when dogs go on with their doggy lives, when the torturer's mare scratches its blameless behind on a trunk, when I have passionately waited to be able to go to the grocery store again without seeing you there among the cabbages and corn, rooting through the parsnips; when I have watched your white legs disappearing into the wide green sea, and when I have been preparing myself to take the advice you—and Brueghel—always tried to give me: no matter what happens, sail calmly on.
Contributors

David L. Atkinson is from Michigan, where he will probably never live again, though he considers it one of the better states in the Union. He is a senior graduating with degrees in economics, English and Spanish, and he plans to teach abroad next year before returning to complete a Masters’ degree. He is a long time staff member and the current editor-in-chief of Three Rivers Review, and he is very excited to receive his first publishing credit.

Amanda Blair is a poet who likes to pretend she is a philosopher when no one is looking. She will be studying German in Vienna this spring and hopes to read her favorite philosophers in their native tongue.

Vanessa Carroll is finishing her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Colorado while simultaneously beginning her first year as a high school English and creative writing teacher. She has poems published or forthcoming in Colorado Review, Northwest Review, GSU Review and elsewhere. This is her first published essay.

Eugene Cross is a senior majoring in English writing and history at the University of Pittsburgh. He is very excited to be published in Collision. Next year, Eugene hopes to attend graduate school for creative writing, barring an untimely death from lead poisoning.

Kathleen Deeley is a junior studying microbiology. Despite this, she is known to produce some nifty works in occasional creative outbursts, for which the doctors say they have pretty good medication. She most recently hails from Houston, Texas, but she claims Imperial, Pennsylvania as her residence on financial aid.

Beth Dugan is a graduate student of Columbia College in Chicago in the Fiction Writing Program. She is from Chicago and received her undergrad degree in psychology from the University of Iowa. Everyone in the world to whom she is genetically linked was born and bred in Pittsburgh, and she feels a great kinship with the city.

Alison Fairbairn is a native of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and a senior majoring in psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. She writes poetry just for fun, but she seems to produce an unusual amount of it when she is angry. Once in a while, something lighthearted and optimistic emerges, and this piece is one of them. Alison traveled the world last year on Semester at Sea and now plans on staying in one spot for a very long time. Eventually, she will attend graduate school to
become a psychologist. This is the second time she has been published (if high school counts). Alison would like to thank her boyfriend, Robert, for inspiring her every day.

Maxwell Fetter is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in English literature, with a certificate in film. He took most of his photos in his hometown, Abington, Pennsylvania.

Kristen Jenkins is a junior majoring in English at Goucher College in Baltimore. She plans to spend next semester in Spain, where she will pursue her studies in another language. After graduation, she plans to return to Maine, where she spent her childhood. This is her first published piece.

Kathryn Komperda is a senior film studies and art history major who hopes to graduate in April 2003. Her career goals center on never having to photograph bratty little kids in a studio, and finding somebody who will pay her to travel and take pictures. This is her first time in Collision.

Norah Krakosky is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, where she majors in English writing and art history. She is also pursuing an Asian studies certificate. Though she devotes most of her life to learning the nearly impossible Japanese language, she also enjoys singing, traveling and painting her toenails. Like Bob, she has a passion for antique postcards and has been a collector since age 12.

Gwendolen Morton is a junior environmental studies and political science major, with a minor in theater. Gwen would like to thank her sources for “Mayapple”— her dad and Blendon Woods. Surprisingly, she is not edgy and she doesn’t smoke.

Elaine Ong is a student at the University of Pittsburgh. Her family would like to assert that she is Chinese, but she maintains that her Cambodian influences have made a large dent in her Chinese thinking.

Lauren Unger is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, pursuing a degree in nonfiction writing and political science while holding the job of assistant news editor at the Pitt News. Someday she hopes to work as a reporter for a news magazine show on television, but overall she just wants to travel and experience the world.

S. Zoe Wexler is a junior majoring in English writing on the fiction track. Her first national publication, a poem, will soon run in the magazine Poetry Motel, but this is her first non-fiction publication. She spent last summer traveling in Europe, taking an art history class which, sadly, did not cover Jean-Michel Basquiat. Her favorite movie is “Annie Hall,” and she’s getting over an obsession with writer David Sedaris.
General Submission Guidelines

Undergraduate and graduate student submissions are welcome. Students must be currently enrolled in a college or university. Individual contributors retain copyright to their original works, and all rights revert back to them after publication. If you would like us to return your submission, include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Send submissions to:
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Or, e-mail to:
collide@pitt.edu

For more information, about joining our staff, to learn about our upcoming reading, or to view previous issues of Collision, visit our web site: www.pitt.edu/~collide.
Writing Guidelines

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 Collision would like to see it.

We encourage the genres of profile, essay, feature, memoir, and autobiographical poetry. Please see our website for more details.

IMPORTANT: The following must appear on your cover sheet: your name, e-mail address, mailing address, phone number, college or university, year in school and the title of your submission. Your name should not appear in the body of your submission, although the title should appear on each page. If you submit a paper copy of your work, include two copies. If you submit via e-mail, submit as an MS Word attachment. Include a source sheet (when applicable), as we will fact check.

Art Guidelines

Collision seeks art that is creatively composed but firmly based in reality. 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. We cannot accept bitmap files; JPEG, EPS and TIFF formats are acceptable. Include your name, address, phone, e-mail, and title of work.
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