Collision
Spring 2006

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Spring 2006 issue of Collision. This semester's journal is comprised of prose, poetry, photography and music—not bad for one little college publication.

I'd like to thank our many contributors, as well as Collision's editorial staff. How many people do you know who will sacrifice their Sunday evenings to review an unexpected surge of submissions?

Finally, thanks to you, the reader, for picking up the latest copy of Collision. You're really the reason the artists and the staff go to all this trouble.

Enjoy!

Jess Adamiak
Acknowledgements

Collision thanks…

Dr. Alec Stewart for his support and encouragement of the undergraduate literary community.

Karen Billingsley for her invaluable help with all matters financial.

Chris Chirdon for keeping our office up and running.

Matt and Nate from Deek Magazine for their infinite printing and layout wisdom.

Jennifer Lee for judging our staff writing again and for taking time to offer her insight and support when it’s needed most.
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By our contributors...
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by Debra Lytle

There is only one subject: What it feels like to be alive. Nothing is irrelevant. Nothing is typical.

-Richard Rodriguez

306 Culture and Institutions

The library will be closing in ten minutes. All books must be checked out by 8:25. The tone was accusatory and far from friendly or helpful. I was thirteen and still within the stacks of the small township library whispering to my best friend, Emily, who shelved books there for a few hours a week. My mother was standing on the curb under the dim greasiness of the parking lot lights, talking through the passenger side window of a white Chevy Tahoe to Emily’s mom, Margie. They had just met for the first time, and my mom complained about the crankiness of librarians, in the way that mothers complain about things like that. Margie is a librarian, of course.

973 General history of North America United States

Thomas Jefferson had a library of 6,487 volumes that he sold to the Library of Congress after all of its books, except one, were burned during the War of 1812. Jefferson was a catalog-minded individual whose classification system consisted of three main branches: memory, reason, and imagination. His books were categorized quite methodically into 44 subcategories. Also, his shelves were not of equal height. The tallest books were on the bottom.
The periodical room is on the fourth floor. I can get a copy of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* of my very own for fifty cents across the street from my apartment, but, instead, I walk to the library and read their copy at one of the long wooden tables in one of the stiff wooden chairs. The other periodicals keep me company in the self-proclaimed QUIET ROOM. My international friends are clean and crisp, and someone asks me if I am almost done with the local section.

813 Fiction

*On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, paneled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas.*

* A stout, middle-aged man with enormous owl-eyed spectacles was sitting, somewhat drunk, on the edge of a great table, staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books. As we entered, he wheeled excitedly around and examined Jordan from head to foot.

"What do you think?" he demanded impetuously.

"About what?"

He waved his hand toward the book-shelves.

"About that. As a matter of fact you needn't bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They're real."

"The books?"

He nodded.

"Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact they're absolutely real. Pages and--- Here! Lemme show you."
Taking our skepticism for granted, he rushed to the book-cases and returned with Volume One of the “Stoddard Lectures.”

“See!” he cried triumphantly. “It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?”

023 Personnel administration

As a child, Melvil Dewey cataloged his mother’s pantry and taught himself shoemaking to save money. He was born with plenty of fervor for efficiency, but when he was given two years left to live (after running repeatedly into a burning building to save books and developing a persistent cough from the smoke), he became truly obsessed. When he became a head librarian, he wrote notes in five different colors of ink, depending on the department they were designated for, and stuck them in pigeonholes for his employees, a system that enabled him to handle over 500 pieces of mail daily. He predicted that the average child wasted three years on the absurd spelling of English, and so, in his twenties, he changed the spelling of his first name from Melville to Melvil, then changed his last to Dui, an alteration which never caught on.

708 Galleries, Museums, Private Collections

Margie was in town one week for a librarian convention of sorts. She invited me to a reception at the Warhol. I got reasonably dressed up and caught a bus downtown, then wandered around until I found her hotel. At the Warhol she offered to buy me a glass of wine. Red, please, I said, and then spent the next hour looking like a circus act
while trying to hold the glass of wine and balance a plate of fruit and cheese while eating off of it. See? You can still become a librarian, Margie said, introducing me to a librarian friend who had shared my major, anthropology, as an undergraduate. We elected the Garbage Project as the topic of conversation (how elegant) before proceeding upstairs to the supermarket display and the room of silver teeth.

594 Mollusca & Molluscoidea

...the King’s Library in the British Museum. In that great, neo-Classical hall—the oldest room in the world’s first national museum—sea shells, astrolabes, ancient coins and chronicles of exploration fill shelves built nearly two centuries ago to house the King’s 65,259 books.

753 Symbolism, allegory, mythology, legend

Remember that story you told me about the library that was sinking, because the engineers forgot to account for the weight of the books? Do you remember where that was?

I don’t know. You told me that story.

This friend is my library, a collector of facts that I have forgotten. I had forgotten the details, and the fact that I ever told him. He remembers where he was when he heard that story, and that it was me who was on the other end of the phone.

With minimal research, I discover that I had perpetuated an urban legend. But it might be in Indiana.

365 Penal & related institutions

I step off the bus and onto the curb right outside the library. I have
an astronomy exam the next day. I should study at the library, I think to myself. I'll get more done there. I have just come from dinner and a movie (pizza and Red Dragon), and I hold a small Styrofoam container with a few slices of the leftovers. NO FOOD PERMITTED IN HILLMAN LIBRARY (Judicial Board Offense), the glass door says to me. Judicial Board Offense? Sounds serious. My purse isn’t big enough to hide the pizza container or its smell, so I turn around and walk home.

898 South American Native Literatures

First: The Library exists ab aeterno. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by any reasonable mind. Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the product of chance or of malevolent demiurgi; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical.

025 Library operations

Please leave beverage and food containers in the Cloister.

The Frick Fine Arts Library is an overbearing parent whose children are forbidden to eat sugar and will never been seen playing outside in anyone’s yard, because there are too many germs and dirty bugs. It has so many rules that walking though the doors makes me immediately uneasy, but it is beautiful. Freshly washed hands...only use pencils. I wander around peering at the books that line the walls
of the first floor, and then I climb the stairs to the second floor balcony. I half know that this is not where I will find the book I am looking for, but it is my first time in the Frick Fine Arts Library, and I am struck with the urge to explore it. It is a striking library, with handsome wooden chairs neatly pushed under long wooden tables, exposed staircases and high ceilings. The employee/student-paid-to-look-snooty sitting at the desk also knows that I will not find the book, but he says nothing until I am forced to approach him.

*This is a closed stacks library*, he tells me.

*Oh.*

*Have you ever been to a closed stacks library before?*

*Not that I know of.*

Not only can I not find my own book (not supposed to), but this is not a library suited for exploration either. He finds pleasure in telling me that there are five floors of books that I do not have access to. So I can't pull my own books, can't even look at most of the books, and have proven myself utterly incapable of entering a library without letting on that I don't know the rules and therefore must be carefully watched. They are right. I cannot be trusted in there with a beverage container or a pen.

326 Slavery & emancipation

It is late May, and I miraculously find myself in Pittsburgh with nothing to do except wander the streets and wait for my sister to call me and tell me that her appointment is over. Alas! There are all those books in Hillman Library that I have been longing to read for semesters, frustrated by the presence of rows upon rows of beautiful books, when I was confined to the study of fifteenth-century Spanish poetry and the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. I am suddenly
on the fourth floor, sitting in one of the armchairs by the windows in the periodical room (QUIET ROOM), the tendrils of a hanging plant forming a canopy over my head as the most recent issue of *Cosmopolitan* lay open on my lap, and I read comical stories about sexual mishaps. *Something is not quite right about this,* I think to myself.

121 Epistemology

Where will these get us, these records of presidents past, these vain recollections of our successes and defeats, these tomes about all the times we were sure we had found the answer and we hadn't? How long before everything within these walls is proven false in some way or another? How long before all the pages and the walls that contain them disintegrate into dust?

689 Not assigned or no longer used

*Information.* At the library, what is labeled *Information* with three signs suspended from the ceiling by gold-toned rods is a quarantined area behind a cluster of desks and little swinging doors. A trio of women sits in *Information,* and their faces pop up from behind computers with the cell phone use policy taped to the back as they guard copies of the MLA handbook.

I look over to *Information* about to approach it with my antiquated library query, when I spot it. There, right next to *Information,* is that cabinet of relics, the card catalogue. It is tiny, six drawers high and five across, obviously unsuited for a library of five floors, and is probably there no thanks to the students who are paid six dollars an hour to sit in *Information* part-time, but to the crusty old librarians who are nostalgic for the time before the computer lab
became the most popular place in the library, the only place where library patrons would line up in a building where who knows how many books have never been checked out or even opened.

When I walk over to the catalogue, made of a golden wood, I see that it contains older items which may not yet be listed on PITTCAT. Six of the drawers are completely empty. The cards are of slightly differing heights and offer my fingers a rough edge, like the side of an older book with uneven pages. Some of the cards are not in English. Most of the ones that are are labeled microfiche.

399 Customs of war & diplomacy

A friend and I weave our way in and out of the stacks, sighing loudly every time we see another occupied table. The best tables for studying are isolated inside the stacks, hidden from view. We circle the floor several times. There are no empty ones. Finals week. We come across one with a few books sitting on it and a coat over one chair, but there is no body in sight. We claim it as our own, raising a flag in the center of the thick wooden table. Should he come back, he will accept our imperial presence and become a mere colony of ours or fight to the death for this prime fourth floor land. We will devour him alive before returning to our literary analyses.

638 Insect culture

The fluorescent lights offer the soft background buzz of bugs on a summer evening spent in the back yard, but without the placid feeling that comes with the coolness of a fresh breeze. The lights fit into the matrix of the ceiling, and their hues span from a white so bright it is almost blue to the rich honey of the lightening bugs. Sometimes you
can see bugs that have been laid to rest inside the lights, unable to escape the stale library air.

408 With respect to kinds of persons

I have read that book on the fourth floor on symbolism in Hispanic literature (well, parts), but I quickly doubt my ability to count when I can’t find the book on orchids. I look, and I look, and I look, staring at the same shelf for who knows how long. Reluctantly, I go to Information. The librarian takes my notebook and checks the number. I give him a look that says, I’m not stupid, sir. Maybe I can’t count for myself, but I know I can copy numbers. He sends his younger, friendlier counterpart with me to the shelf and we make awkward, forced conversation along the way. Books are always shelved wrong in this room. We find the book one shelf up from where it is supposed to be. The library has turned me into a damsel in distress. The book is slow, and I return it after 100 pages, after the library has fined me $4.

676 Pulp & paper technology

This accumulated knowledge, incised on votive stelai or gravestones, or recorded in papyrus books, on parchment and on paper manuscripts, or, later, printed on paper, is expressed in a thousand languages and dialects and serves as an ark of human thought. Whether it is imprinted on a cheap fragment of some “anonymous book” or in a sumptuous parchment manuscript, it is an irreplaceable part of an eternal book, like the Book of Humanity, which is said to have been written by Hermes Trismegistos, which, according to priests of [Thob] is said to have consisted of 36,525 books. This vast material, existing through time, has been collected, systematically copied, reproduced and stored in private and public libraries of all civilisations, often accompanied by a vision of
the creation of an ecumenical library to be the ark of human knowledge.

631 Techniques, equipment, materials

If my personal library is a bibliography of my life, these are some annotated selections:

*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*—Only for when absolutely necessary.

*Dubliners* by James Joyce—Please don’t ask me what it’s about.

*Readers’ Digest Complete Guide to Needlework*—For knitting.

*A Writer’s Reference*—For when I don’t remember how to write a bibliography.

*Home Medical Handbook*—I get infections sometimes, but usually not from going to the library.

And journals, empty journals. I imagine them full one day, but doubt they ever will be. I want them to be organized, too organized perhaps. In my mind I have separate journals for essay ideas, personal entries, interesting facts and quotes, random observations and tidbits, et cetera. Various purposes require journals of varying qualities. I need at least a dozen, but my frugal side, the one that goes to the library instead of the book store, can’t justify buying that many until I write in the ones I have, and I won’t write in the ones I have until I can organize my thoughts to fit into them.

094 Printed books

The Gutenberg Galaxy is said to have consisted of 150 million items as of 2003. *The medium is the message.*

818 Miscellaneous writings
On the first floor I find taped to the wall on plain white paper either an admonition or a poor attempt at haiku.

Guard Your Valuables.
Including Text Books.
Multiple Thefts Have Been Reported.
10-29-04

026 Libraries for Specific Subjects

One historian called Jefferson's catalog a blueprint of his mind. The Library of Congress stopped using it after 82 years. Our libraries start with 000 Generalities and end with 999 Extraterrestrial worlds, and the book on orchids is not where it belongs.
Meeting Li-Young Lee
by Sten Carlson

On the day I saw Li-Young Lee read, it had been two weeks since I’d estranged myself from Deborah. And I was nervous, because I thought she might come to the reading, too, and we weren’t speaking, and the violence of her feelings toward me was a mighty force. I’d botched the job poorly, our break up. I’d gone like a lumberjack to the tree of our life together and chopped it down, because we’d both been treed like cats up there, and now I was hauling that tree around on my back. I entered the auditorium that day limping under its bulk, keeping half an eye out for Deborah in the crowd.

I saw Li-Young Lee seated in a chair near the podium, looking nervous as a boy at school, but immensely handsome, too, in a black blazer and pearl-buttoned shirt and dark-rimmed glasses. His black hair was shiny and looked wet like he’d been in the rain, and he combed his hands through it fretfully. Seeing him, I forgot about looking for Deborah. I went to him, feeling eager to introduce myself, and started talking fast, telling him I was a poet and I loved his work and even quoting a line from a poem of his about birds to let him know the work had gotten inside me little. Li-Young Lee regarded me with some alarm, saying nothing—not offended exactly, but profoundly disoriented, I think, by the way I’d apprehended him. We were at the front of the room before a crowd of about a hundred people all milling around waiting for things to start. I just kept talking, “So when I was in college we had this big wooden box in the student lounge where people could bring everything they were getting rid of like toasters and old shoes and sweaters and ski boots and
used notebooks and dented pots and pans—everything got thrown into this box, and you could go in there any time and root through it and come out with some pretty cool and useful things. We called it the Free Box.” He peered at me intensely as I spoke, scrutinizing every word. “Anyway,” I said, “I was looking through there one day and I found this book of yours, *The City in Which I Love You*, and I was excited, because I loved poetry but hadn’t ever read your poems. So I took that home and read the poems and . . . Jesus, I don’t know, they were like fresh air to me. Or wind—I felt ventilated. I loved them. And I started carrying that book everywhere. I stuffed into my back pocket and hauled it around, pulling it out and reading poems to whichever woman I was courting at the time. I used your book in all my seductions that year. I carried it around for so long it swelled and frayed and started to look like a sandwich. Pages fell out like lettuce when I held it in my hands.”

Li-Young Lee gripped the sides of his chair, his legs and arms were perceptibly drawn back, and he seemed frozen in that pose. He said nothing in response to my story—which I had practiced before I’d come and thought a good one, full of praise and interesting allegory. But looking at him now, I worried I’d frightened him. I thought, perhaps, it was scary the way I was towering in front of him like this—I was so tall!—so I crouched down the way one does to beckon a cat. “Anyhow, I love your work,” I said, looking at him now at eye level. “I wanted to let tell you in person.”

“Ah!” he said, “Okay—I see,” and was nodding his head a little wildly, like maybe he didn’t see but wanted me to believe he did. He pulled a pen from his breast pocket and was glancing at the notebook I held under my arm like he wanted to autograph something. *You dear man,* I thought. *You dear, startled, humane man with your pen like a toy sword.*
"I don’t have the book anymore," I said. "It finally fell apart. Anyway I’d memorized most of the poems. I put it back into the Freebox but it just fell apart in there. I went back and looked later and the pages were all mixed into the sweaters and socks like leaves. I’ll hopefully get another of your books some day."

He was still nodding his head weirdly. Everything I said seemed to fluster him a little more. I was endeared toward the man—I wanted to take care of him, not frighten him—so I waved and muttered farewell and left him in peace. I hurried up and found a seat in the fifth row, forgetting altogether to look for Deborah.

As awkward as he’d been on the ground, Li-Young Lee was even more troubled at the podium. It was painful—I think anybody in the audience would have agreed—to watch him stand up there at the front of the room under the lights. There were long silences, a minute or longer, where he just fretted, raking his hands through his beautiful hair, shuffling his papers, his stack of books, speaking half sentences like, "For a long time I was frightened by my happiness—" but flusterering the thought and lapsing back to silence. He said at one point, "So, what do you want me to talk about?" and this seemed a real question that he wanted answered. He stood there, squinting out at us, but, of course, got no response. He rattled off what seemed a list of epigraphs invented on the spot, as if looking for the right preface to the poems he’d come to read. "Poetry," he said, "is demonized speech. Poetry is alienation by ascendance. Art is like marrying God. Yoga means getting back to the original place—the place where you are saturated. Poetry is a kind of yoga in that way." None of it made any sense to me, but I scribbled it into my notebook thinking one day it probably would.

Then Li-Young Lee started reading poems, and they were
lovely and not awkward, and everyone was relieved. He seemed to gain strength and clarity and grow larger with each poem he read. The things he said between poems still didn’t make sense, but it mattered less and less. I wondered: Does wisdom always sound deranged when you first hear it spoken aloud? He told a story about his family: “My father came to us one day when I was small and said: ‘When you breathe in say Thank you; when you breathe out say Goodbye.’ And so we did that—for three years, Thank you, Goodbye, Thank you, Goodbye—and then my father came to us one day and said: ‘Ask yourself, every moment, Where am I?’ So we started doing that: Where am I? Where am I? Where am I? Where am I?’

Eventually he stopped talking between poems and just read from his books and papers. I fell into that good dream of listening and not thinking and feeling grateful, which is like being on a boat in a harbor with water slapping the hull.

And when, in the city in which I love you,
Even my most excellent song goes unanswered,
and I mount the scabbed streets,
the long shouts of avenues,
and tunnel sunken night in search of you...

That I negotiate fog, bituminous
rain ringing like teeth into the beggar’s tin,
or two men jackaling a third in some alley
weirdly lit by a couch on fire, that I
drag my extinction in search of you...

I was happy and sobered and carried away, and so I don’t remember exactly how it happened that I came to see Deborah
sitting two rows in front of mine. I think I noticed a mutual friend of Deborah’s and mine—Elizabeth—first. Emerging from the spell of a poem, I saw Elizabeth’s face and it registered as such, and then I had the vague, somewhat amused memory that I was supposed to watch out for Deborah today in this crowd. I saw Elizabeth lean over and whisper into the ear of a woman in the next seat. I registered the woman with the ear as purely a woman—with pretty long hair and a sweater that fell from one shoulder to reveal the black strap of a bra. Li-Young Lee was reading:

And the ones I do not see
in the cities all over the world,
the ones sitting, standing, lying down, those
in prisons playing checkers with their knocked-out teeth:
they are not me. Some of them are

my age, even my height and weight;
none of them is me.
The woman who is slapped, the man who is kicked,
the ones who don’t survive,
whose names I do not know;
they are not me forever;
the ones who no longer live in the cities in which you are not,
the cities in which I looked for you.

Then it happened. The woman with the ear and the sweater and the bra straps turned her head to address Elizabeth—the mutual friend of Deborah’s and myself—and a terrible flashbulb went off, it was the side of Deborah’s face and its outline burned against my mind—it was Deborah, my old love, my only love, my life for all
this time it was Deborah, make-up on her face, the long hair hers, why hadn’t I recognized those freckles on her shoulders, the same ones I’d looked upon from every vantage, under all conditions, seen them shudder with pleasure like loose constellations, touched them and kissed them and said I’d loved them, used them, they were like pepper on eggs to me, the laughter the shouting the sex, they were friends and helped me, they helped to make me whole. So my heart pounded like a little man with a hammer against a bell, it was Deborah, and my brain was throwing a fit, because I’d picked a seat not five feet from her freckles, the ones I’d loved. I could have leaned over and put them in my mouth they were so close; they would have burned my lips like they had so many times in the past.

I wanted to flee the auditorium but was surrounded by too many people creaking in their chairs, and Li-Young Lee was still going on about the Iron Leaf, the Unaccountable Fire—a poem I could no longer hear. I gripped my armrests and scribbled words in my notebook: Flashbulb, Orchestra, Where am I? I tried but failed to look away from the back of Deborah’s head. I watched her whisper to the man sitting next to her and I noticed his whiskered chin, his wide-wale corduroys, his plastic glasses, his horrible plaid shirt. I thought, War! I thought, Famine if she’s sleeping with that man! Blight! I felt small and somehow heroic in my smallness, a pilgrim with a notebook and pen in an auditorium full of giants. I was unprepared for this, I hadn’t worn the proper shirt or pants, and I was pissed off that Deborah seemed to calculate the whole event, that she’d known I’d be here and so had come in her pretty sweater, mascaraed and poised with the corduroyed man, thinking I’d see her and stammer and flee.

But the joke had been that I’d not seen her, that I’d sat here in the sixth row so near her freckles. It was a joke played by the world on us both to illustrate an old point: that love is both happiness and grief; it
breaks us open to fill us up but leaves us emptier, lighter in the heart, trampled by gods and taught how to fly but the memory erased. My Deborah mine no more; the joke being that she never was. We’d met in a pasture ringed by wildflowers. We’d had our love but had to leave that place, and to go back now to look for those flowers would be to lose my way and crush them mistakenly underfoot.

When Li-Young Lee had finished reading, the people in the room were all clapping and standing up to leave, and so I did the same. I pushed through the crowd toward the podium away from Deborah, thinking for some reason about the morning she’d found me banging around our kitchen at two a.m., tears on my face, frying eggs and burning toast. “What’s wrong?” she had said. “I don’t know!” I said, and dodged her approach. “What are you feeling?” she said. I was shaking the eggs around in the skillet and crying more now, looking around everywhere for the salt. I flung my arms around the kitchen. “This!” I screamed, probably too loud, and then unraveled sobs. Deborah plucked the salt shaker from the cluttered table and I let her bring it to me. She sat me down at the table and hugged me and told me—generously, I see now—how there’s not enough acknowledgement given in our world to ambiguity, to the dumb inarticulate pain in our hearts, to that This! I was feeling.

As I pushed my way through the crowd in the auditorium, it occurred to me that perhaps I should go to her and say something, to acknowledge the strangeness and the funny coincidence of me sitting behind her, but I could think of nothing to say that wouldn’t come out as a sort of apology. I needed a fistful of flower petals to hand her, or bullet casings, or puzzle pieces. I pushed past her row, thinking now of the trunk she’d found on the street the year we’d lived in China. We’d been broke and had no furniture in our
cinderblock house, so Deborah's pretty clothes and underthings had lain next to our bed for months in neat piles. To me they were beautiful and delicate sitting there, like rows of tulips and roses and such—but she hated it, they got dusty there, they were too exposed, and the disorder of this had begun to make her unhappy and berserk. So when she saw the trunk abandoned on the street and wanted it, I ran around for half a day in the blazing heat amidst the million bicycles and motor scooters trying to borrow a van, then getting one and lashing the trunk to the top and bringing it to our house. It was very old and built of wood that was blackened now and broken and peeling back in places so you could see light coming through its walls. It was the kind of bloated, ruined thing that an orphan would cling to in a shipwreck then wash up somewhere days later on a beach. But Deborah loved it, she kissed me endlessly when I brought it home. She arranged her things inside the trunk with great care. And I'd loved her for loving it, but it also made me sad. Locked inside that dresser was a sadness for me, and the key to the sadness as well. There were so many small, practical things she wanted and needed—conveniences, comforts, all quite simple—and I was pained with the desire to provide them for her. Which pain had exhausted and confused me and gave way eventually to a raw sort of pity that I mistook for love.

I had given so much of myself to Deborah, unselfishly—but it turns out I'd given the wrong parts. I'd given praise and gifts and humor and sympathy and my muscles for heavy lifting, but the vital and difficult parts—the ambiguities—I'd hoarded mostly for myself. I kept them secret, and eventually those secrets grew larger than my talent for giving unselfishly. I could see now that I hadn't let her know me—for all the living we did, all of our goofing and running around, all of our good and important suffering—I hadn't let her
know me. We’d been trapped in an innocence waiting to fail but never failing, and the waiting had eventually made me feel old and afflicted. Eventually I wanted more than congratulations for bringing the correct and helpful items home. In my confusion, I wanted to bring the wrong thing home for once, and so I brought an axe and cut our life down with a few hard, ungraceful blows.

Here in the auditorium, I thought it possible that Deborah would be angry at me forever for cutting our life down, and that I would feel villainous forever. And I wanted it to stop, the anger and villainy; I wanted the forgiving to start. But I also saw that it wouldn’t, or that I had no power over such things, so I made another wish: for a larger, less specific, more ongoing grief which was like breathing—which contained gratefulness and bereavement, happiness and unhappiness.

I moved down the stairs toward the podium, not stopping at Deborah’s row. I went to the front of the room where the poet Li-Young Lee stood gathering his papers. I wanted to let him know that I’d been here—here in the auditorium where he’d read his poems. I put my hand out and shook his saying, “Thank you, thank you for reading your poems. Goodbye.”
Gravity
by Amanda James

Some words are weighted.
Stare hard enough and see
strings tethered to tiny
anvils, black and square; hard-edged
like an unfinished building. Dead
is a heavy word. The d's refuse
to float. The a hides,
while the e gently
moans; quietly,
like a broken
dove. Even with a push,
the letters fall,
spat-stones,
to the ground.
December 2005: Leaving at sunrise on a two-lane road
by Sean Capperis

We are all
made of wire:

one strand
doubled back
guitar-strung
taut like a blues

& electrified
best at dawn

I am a man
looking in rearview

& God
is pliers

On the way
unsheathed

I'll write home
in cursive

tweak my bends
with pliers
from the glove box
& sleep:

bare ground
Out here

you’ll always find
a road you know

& never use—
that quiet—

so when fire
burns the woods

you’ll still find
my metal here

voice bending
after the wind

& shaking
like a fence

with something more to say
In Search Of...
by Rob Feinberg

I blame Carrie. That cosmopolitan swigging whore from *Sex and the City* and her three equally affected friends who romanticized loving and living in the city that never sleeps (in the same bed). For six season these ladies who brunch have transformed a generation of women, and at least one gay man, into believing the glamour and eventual pay off of dating in New York. That a fairy tale ending lies somewhere on the horizon, a fairy tale ending that all four girls, at one point or another, so cynically and extensively scrutinized. But for me, the blame doesn’t rest squarely on the four Manhattanites’ shoulders. I’ve been bombarded with images of romance and love my entire life. Romeo and Juliet, Buffy and Angel, Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman (or rather the bohemian lovers they play in *Moulin Rouge*): I blame these epic love stories for embedding themselves in my brain just as much. Like every other aspect of my life, this ridiculous notion of love and fulfillment would be the basis of my two summer stints in New York City.

Having the first summer start off on such a high note, and the second on such a drunken one, I foresaw my so-called sophomore season in NYC putting my first one to shame. B Bar, Slide, Phoenix, Starlight, Opaline: all a weekly occurrence. Our drinking routine: loosely based on the lyrics to Chumbawamba’s “I Get Knocked Down.” And for all the new faces we were meeting, those first eight weeks we’re both enjoyable and exploratory. But on that revelatory eighth Friday when Fabricio, the bartender, gave me that all too familiar look of recognition while handing me my two watery cranberry and vodkas, I realized something: the scene had
become tiresome.

Feeling tired was not something that was supposed to be in the cards for me. The previous summer I spent in New York left me brimming with energy and enthusiasm for all that was to come. It was last summer that I met Sergio, a Nicaraguan nephrologist who was finishing up a fellowship at Columbia. He was gorgeous, charming, a doctor: if he was Jewish he would have been all the things my mother could ask for. He was also 30. Most would think I was just a conquest for him, a 30 year-old dating a 20 year-old, but it was the other way around. He was mine. His world renowned chest, his cavernous eyes, his massive arms, his accent. But for the entire month we spent together, I never felt a cliché anywhere on my body to signify that he was anything more than fun. The only kiss when I felt more than just his lips (or our racing libidos) was our kiss goodbye. There was a spark of potential there that was conceived too late for it to evolve any further.

That summer everything was new and fresh: it was my first long term stay in NYC, my first real relationship, and the first time I allowed myself to be all the gay man I could be. I felt that I had laid a good foundation for myself. So when I returned the following summer, it was less about exploring and more about evolving.

I found that at the week’s end I owed it to myself to have a drink or ten and decompress as best I could. Because I worked at a publicity firm that specialized in “gay marketing,” my summer was all gay, all the time. It was an odd experience for me as I found myself exchanging drunken exploits with my superiors who frequented the same bars. The candor I experienced there, in addition to the level of comfort I felt is something seldom found in a work environment. I didn’t have to be the “Rob that works hard, but vagues up his personal life”, I could be the “Rob who works hard and is also
a proud homo.” It still surprises me how much heterosexuality is constantly assumed. And while personally I was comfortable, business-wise I was crazed. The friendly atmosphere did little to cushion the fact that the work was high volume and fast paced.

“What drawer should I file these clips in? Top or bottom?” I so naively asked my supervisor that eye opening first day. A perfectly professional question to the ungayed ear, but we gays, we’re a quippy bunch and that question was ripe with innuendo. My supervisor snickered, as I sat there on my knees in front of the tiny filing cabinet next to his desk. “Well…if you’re asking…” But I cut him off before he could go there. And so began the continuous, uncomfortable, and unprofessional flirtation from Anonymous Co-Worker #1, the first of three.

When I wasn’t deflecting advances from various co-workers, I was busy doing anything and everything I could around the office. From filing, faxing, and photocopying, to shipping, clipping, and phoning, I did what I could to win the gold for what amounted to the day’s intern Olympics. Looking from the inside out, the job was far from glamorous. I was working 40-plus hours a week for minimum wage. That is the minimum wage one received working in 1976, when it was $2.30. But the job had it perks: tons of swag, two blockbuster premieres, and an after party with the likes of Steven Spielberg, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins. Even with the glossy coat, it was still a near thankless job, and it burned me out sooner than I thought. When Friday’s came around, I was more than happy to be the city’s bitch, instead of the office’s.

It would all start at approximately 6:45 PM. Daf, a name my longtime friend and roommate received through a linguistics mishap, would be waiting outside the dorm with cigarette in tow. As I vented about the day’s stress inducing activities, we made our way to the
corner of 11th and 3rd. "House Chow Fun with Curry Flavoring and Vegetable in Black Bean Sauce?" Mindy, our favorite cashier at Yummy House would ask. A rhetorical question if ever there was one. And after only five minutes of waiting and small talk, our deliciously cheap Chinese food would be ready and we’d be on our way. Once we got up to our dorm room, Daf and I would sit at our respective desks, while we would catch up on our entertainment news and gossip from the usual list of websites we visited hourly. Repeats of Will & Grace or Friends would play in the background, meshing abrasively with Coldplay's "Fix You."

After dinner I’d make feeble attempts at a power nap, but the sound of Daf’s beard trimmer prevented this from ever happening. The trimming was all part of a two hour process of primping that became increasingly irritating as the weeks passed. It began in the bathroom where I was forced to shave his Mohawk with the same trimmer that had grazed his hipster stubble 10 minutes earlier. This was usually followed by a quick shower followed by an even tinier electric shaver to manscape his unibrow. Once the electric devices were put away he would apply some French product that he swore was not liquid foundation to his face. Finally, right before he doused himself in at least a half a cup of cologne (which to this day still permeates my lungs) he would pace in and out of our walk in closet choosing an outfit that looked "fit."

The only reason I took as long in the closet as he did was to stare at the Colin Farrell poster I had hung in there. I would like to say that part of me kept the poster in the closet because I secretly hoped Colin remained there in real life as well, but the more plausible reason was our straight suitmates.

There was a subtle, but apparent dichotomy upon entering dorm room 510A:
• As Alex and Joe watched the NBA finals, shouting loudly for Shaq and Co. I blasted the American Idol finale, cheering loudly for Carrie Underwood.
• Our room had a distinct scent of grooming from various moisturizers and hair products, while theirs had that evasive straight guy aroma (a combination of a dirty locker and a stale bar of soap.)
• They came to the dorm with nothing but a computer, a suitcase, and golf clubs; I came prepared with a kitchen’s worth of cooking supplies, the latest technological gadgetry, and a subscription to Entertainment Weekly.

And as much as we blasted British Pop, danced around the dorm, and referred to Kylie Minogue as simply Kylie, they still assumed we were straight for most of the summer. I guess I unknowingly pull off a pretty convincing straight guy, and Daf, well he’s British, so you know, thin line.

Aside from Daf’s hygienic rituals, there was one weekly occurrence that could be enjoyed by all: “Jell-o Shot Fridays.” When I came home from work one Friday, Daf was beaming with pride that he was able to follow the recipe I printed out for him online. Each week he would surprise me with a new flavor. There was that one night, though, where he decided to get experimental and add pieces of Granny Smith apples to the equation. The apples soaked in most of the vodka, rendering the shots uneatable. But for the sake of his sensitivity, and my sanity, I choked them down with artificial glee. Once shots were administered, clothes were picked, and cologne was diffused, the time was right to hit the streets. One to 17 checks in any reflective surface later and Daf and I, two of New York’s most narcissistic, were ready to go in search of whatever it is we were looking for.
Arriving unfashionably early at 10:05 to BoysRoom with 2 or 3 other regulars, we didn’t have to wait in much of a line on Avenue A. A quick flash of the ID, a slip of cash, and the slap of wrist band and we were on our way to a delightfully sad existence. The mirrors on each side of the hallway ushered us in as the muted bass line began to thump louder and louder. Laid out before us was a deserted room with one or two patrons rallying around a most spacious bar. BoysRoom shared the same qualities as most East Village bars: dank, dirty, and moderately seedy. Half a spinning orb covered in broken shards stood in for what I assume was suppose to be a disco ball. The tiny fragmented mirrors seemed as if they would shatter any minute and rain down upon us all. Skull and cross bones ominously adorned the walls; a detail I overlooked for many weeks, mostly due to a distracting presence located on the TV screens above the bar.

Like most of the patrons, I was mesmerized by the porn playing on the three monitors behind the barely clad bartenders. I’m not sure which was more embarrassing: being enthralled by the porn or completely captivated by the old 80’s wrestling clips from the WWF they randomly played one night. Apparently the Tonga Twins, in all their sumo thong glory, were quite a force to be reckoned with. Porn in a gay bar does what one would expect it to. It succeeds at engraining in many a young mind, like my own, that gay men go out to do one thing, and one thing only. Fuck.

Add boys, booze, and a whole lot of sexually energy, shake well, and pour. This little mixture is the basis of gay night life. It’s simple and it sucks. At midnight, a parade of terribly skanky go-go boys clad only in towels took to the top of the bar. These “Boys Gone Wild”, as they were called, even had their own theme song. “We like you naked! Glad you could make it!” the boys would shout. Memorable lyrics that would stay with you for a while, much like the
STDs that you could contract from these go-go boys if you looked in their general direction. When the song ended, the bare-assed boys on the bar would distribute free shots of tequila or offer up an overused beer bong. That is of course if you wanted to take part in the increasingly frat-like atmosphere. Popped-collars, witty t-shirts, jeans that were two sizes too small, a sweatband somewhere on the arm. These all too common items came flooding in shortly after midnight, making the once desolate bar congested with unoriginality.

By this time, if you could see past the bartenders, porn, and go-go boys, the bar was filled with a sea of achievable men. All of whom were too short, too skinny, too flaming, or all the above. I didn’t want any of them. Even though physically they were different, they were all the same to me. Not good enough. I should have been reveling in the ways of the man whore like my gay forefathers had taught me, but I could never bring myself to settle for mediocrity just for a meaningless lay. I guess that’s a gay defect of mine: more concerned with love than sex. But I understood the rules. New York summers were a slim window of hope for me. Being trapped in Pittsburgh for three quarters of the year with its nearly barren gay scene was depressing. In New York I was submerged in an endless supply of men who liked men. It was a time when I could freely peruse the merchandise on the street with the hope that the man smiling back at me would be the man I could one day be denied equality with.

When I went out to Boysroom, and every other gay bar in the city, week after week, I wanted to find love. Those epic loves stories, that I so foolishly worship, they were all doomed. Did you notice that? Of all the archetypes, those are the ones that singe the neurons of my mind and scorch the inner workings of heart. Which just proves that at 21 I really don’t know what I want. I guess you
could say I’m a scavenger of love. Picking at remnants of fictional emotions that aren’t mine, circling for hours, waiting for fate to relinquish its grip on my future love. But maybe it’s like the bar, and I’ve arrived unfashionably early to my own destiny. Maybe all I can do is call the bartender over and ask for another drink, and wait for the clock to strike midnight, however long that may be. Because it’ll happen for me, just like the bar becomes full in time, so too will my heart.
Soap
by Amanda Hansen

An irrigation ditch barricades my childhood home. My brothers, B.J., Brandon, and I fish for carp and catfish in the canal forking from the Green River. We slide salmon eggs and rainbow bait onto hooks hanging from tamarack branches. A fat-like foam lies on the water surface and collects at beer cans and cattails. Our great-Grandma Fraley tells us it’s lye. She used to make soap out of it. I dip my fingers into the foam and rub the waxy bubbles. In thirteen years, I’ll take organic chemistry and learn about fatty acids and saponification, the chemical process of soapmaking. But, right now, the oily film in my thumbprints puzzles me. I feel dirtier. Not clean.

After fishing in the ditch, we strip off our sweatsuits and tiptoe into the hot water. Mom tells us to get clean. She doesn’t scrub us because she’s scrubbing the linoleum. The bathtub acts as a bobsled, then a row boat. Both brothers take turns shaping my shampooped hair. They mold it into cones, mountains and mohawks. We glide the Zest bar over one another’s backs, then draw pictures in the lather. We quiz each other on what we have drawn. Ball. Bug. Wash Me. The bath water looks like milk because we’ve left the soap dissolving at the bottom.

Forgotten soap is Mom’s “pet peeve.” According to the November 1995 Consumer Report, most soap users surveyed agree that Zest Original “dissolves more than most in water.” I beg Mom to buy Ivory soap because it floats. But she buys Zest in bulk. So we use Zest. We scrub the detergent-based bubbles into one another’s armpits. Between each other’s toes.
A couple years later, I stop bathing with Brandon and B.J. I ride my bike to the grocery store and buy Ivory soap with birthday money. I walk past the bathroom door to hear laughter and splashing. My brothers file out wrapped in Batman towels, and I take my turn. A light blue sludge sticks to the empty tub. I peel away the gluey soap then draw my own hot bath. I wash my own hair. I scrub my own feet.

******

Most anti-bacterial soaps contain a chemical called Triclosan. In August 1998, the Soap and Detergent Association allied with the Food and Drug Administration. A sort of soap coalition. The two forces conducted a study on triclosan-based products. The coalition’s results proved that Triclosan “controlled or reversed outbreaks of bacterial infestations in hospitals.”

However, at the same time Dr. Stuart Levy of Tufts University Medical School published an article in Nature magazine. He states, “People think they are sterilizing the world by using these products, and, in fact, they are potentially changing it.” The Levy troops discovered Triclosan contains an enzyme that inhibits the production of E. coli’s cell wall. Even microorganisms fall subject to Darwin’s natural selection. Each E. coli generation grows stronger and meaner.

My mom mails me scented hand cleanser which “kills 99.9% of bacteria.” I want to mail it back with a note saying, Dear Mom,

Do you realize that if we use this shit for fifty more years, E. coli will have wings and fangs and foot-long legs?

Amanda
I don’t send it because I’m too broke to pay the postage. And the word shit would offend her.

*****

During my freshman year of college, my boyfriend patches cracked coal-mine shafts for $14 an hour. He dangles down steel chutes and welds until evening. Burns pepper his forearms from liquid metal droplets. Blue sparks and blackness. Eight hours a day. It’s hot and dark and cramped and it “fuckin’ sucks,” but its “okay.” He says, “I think about you when I’m down there.” I think those were his words. I don’t know. I was probably thinking about what I would say next. A ribald joke. A political complaint. Something different and indifferent.

His wheezing showerhead welcomes as I saunter into a waft of steam. I pick up his soot-covered coveralls. His steel-toe boots. As the jagged, plastic shower door wheels open, I scan the grey lather spilling from his moon tattoo. He scrubs with Dawn then Irish Spring. Head and Shoulders shampoo. The plink and plat of high-pressure rain echoes off the ceramic.

“Come in here,” he says, while standing in the shower.

He asks every night. But I never join him. I slip on his clean T-shirt and slide into his starchy sheets. In the dimness, the whistling water lulls me to sleep. Later, the pine-like scent of his skin stirs me. He kisses bones at the back of my neck. I keep my eyes tight. My back turned.

*****

According to the October 2001 Consumer Report, the cheapest
soap was Shield Surf Scent bar soap. 2.4 cents per full-body use. At 23.8 cents per use, Neutrogena Moisture Boosting liquid soap was the most expensive. Sometimes I use liquid soap, body wash, shower gel. I pay ten times as much for fragrance. It comes in pretty bottles with pretty names: *Love Spell, Amber Romance, Endless Love*. Liquid soap contains synthetic detergents called syndets. Unlike pure bar soap made of organic materials, the syndets create more suds. Liquid soap lathers, plasters and convinces me I’m clean.

My mom buys body wash at Bath and Body Works during the semi-annual sales. She saves the pastel shower gels for co-worker’s birthdays and unexpected Christmas-gift givers. “You can give soap to anyone,” she says.

My best friend, Aloha, gives me soap for Christmas when we’re high school sophomores. *Cucumber Melon* shower gel. I hot-glued Russian olive twigs together and constructed a wreath for her room. I wrapped the craft in her favorite-color sweater and tucked it in a cowboy boot box. On Christmas Day she calls to say thanks. “You’re so hard to shop for,” she says. “I knew I couldn’t go wrong with soap.”

That evening, I squirt the body wash into a ball of nylon netting. I dip the puff into my bath water and knead in the soap. It smells tart. It smells familiar. It smells like everyone else. I dab suds onto my elbow.

Why am I hard to shop for?

*****

I write poems and papers for professors. They scribble in the margins, “your prose has an engaging voice,” and “nice tone.” They can hear me, but they can’t feel me. One professor types, “What is at stake *for you*?” and “you’re not yet fully in this piece.” And I agree. I rub and scrub until the white tiles of my mind shine, sanitize,
sterilize. I’m a victim of natural selection too. Each aseptic wash exterminates my weak pieces. The resilient parts divide and multiply growing sharper, longer. I could write about force, fight and father. But I don’t. I write about soap. I write about soap because it’s safe.

******

Various street drugs hide out under the name “soap” such as G.H.B. Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate or Georgia Home Boy or Great Hormones at Bedtime. A derivative of drain cleaner. Project GHB. org posts stories and Polaroids of people who have died from G.H.B. Samantha Reid drank “soap” after two male friends poured it into her Mountain Dew. She stayed on life support for 18 hours, then died.

According to the OED, sodium pentothal also poses as “soap.” In the book “Why America Slept,” Gerald Posner, a journalist, claims that U.S. interrogators injected Abu Zubaydah with sodium pentothal—truth serum. The drug represses the heart, lungs and inhibitions. Therefore, information about Osama Bin Laden and Saudi Arabia bleeds from Zubaydah’s lips. In the film Meet the Fockers, Ben Stiller’s character, Greg Focker receives sodium pentothal injections from his father-in-law, Robert Dinero. Drip by drip, the soap hammers out truths.

I’d like a few milliliters of truth serum. I’d shoot up veins and seek out answers. A few more spoons and thimbles to add to my knick-knacks of truths. I know my little brother told my parents I smoke pot. I know the janitor at work doesn’t change the soap dispenser once a week. I know my mom wants to leave my dad.

I’d probably inject myself with the leftover soap. I turn on my tape recorder then talk. As the drip assaults each nerve cell, I make known that I attend rock concerts alone. I only bathe every other
day. I watch Lawrence Welk when no one’s home.

Some truths would never surface. I’d never admit my father
beat me. I’d never confess my neighbor molested me when I was
five. I leave that truth under the Care Bear blanket beneath their
grapevines. It lies below the Southern Utah sky where my parents
will never find it. It rests below the cumulus clouds were God slept.
I’d never admit I think God’s still there, snoring.

I might say other things. But without sodium pentothal, they
stockpile inside my dark parts. Like canned goods, they rust and rot
and take up space.

*****

For $7.75 an hour, I bathe the elderly at a nursing home.
Verla Milling suffered two strokes leaving her slow in speech and
step. On her 90th birthday, I wheel her 300 pound body into the
communal shower room and help her slump into a PVC pipe shower
chair. She grunts inaudible directions. I take off her garments and
tie on her shower cap. The handheld showerhead spurs lukewarm
water over her big limbs. Latex gloves protect me as I massage
aseptic medical cleanser into her back. She giggles and squeals. She
mumbles through clenched teeth. Quickly, I rub, lather and rinse
every inch of her body. Every liver spot. Every wrinkle. She taps
my arm with her paralyzed hand.

“What?” I snap.

I look at her wet face and wait for a groan.

“I love you,” she says.

I drop the showerhead. Water sprays soaking my pants. But
I don’t notice. I embrace her water-laced torso. She creeps her heavy
arms around my back. With my cheek pressed next to her damp
shower cap, my scrub top dries her wet breasts.

"I love you, too"

It's wet and weird and uncomfortable. But it feels good. It feels true.

******

The Germanic root of the word soap is *sib* which means to pour out, sieve, drip, trickle. I don't know why I'm hard to shop for. I don't know why I roll over and pretend I'm sleeping. I don't know why I can only write about soap. Drops of evidence fall on my bare neck. Trickles. Drips.
Self-Painting

after Carolyn Forche

by Michael Hurley

A sedentary life, you said, is not possible. A season of England, On the Road and Lorca drying on the sill, a rooftop to smoke cloves, always cars passing. A roommate who stole your wife in a past life and smoke hiding the sneer of your remembering. These are the things you award by inclusion in your aerogrammes. Remembering days by ink abbreviations on your hands, you turn the alphabet into downstrokes so the skin will not resist. Nineteen-year-old poet. To want so badly a girl to walk beside, to have her share a hostel bed for half price, eating quiet fruits while you thumb the veins of maps and watch her say her few words in Spanish and to learn this way, to also say entiendo with misplaced stress tumbling out of your lips like rice. The subtle smell of piss
and floss candy that
calls tourists to it like a tiny bone
whistle and the gypsies of Prague
who kneel like horses to beg. You

should live on a train, always leaving,
and so write your train letters. Good
if you find your cabin, the split wood
mornings, bouillon soup filling your throat
with flavor that is simple
but in some way whole. Nepal you said
or Cuba, eyes pierced just enough
when you laugh to be mistaken for
other than American. Laughing always, you,

you have been in Pittsburgh
one month now. What have you
become? Your poems sing
of the fragility of things; the donations
you are paid to sit children on your
lap, the moment required even to notice
it passing. You smoke cloves, you say,
because it reminds you of travel,
it allows you to pause. You wear
gloves because this world is too still
to wander around with flesh exposed.

Nineteen-year-old poet,
are your days well?
Do you steer away from
aging like destinations from
your every gray exhale?
Ichiro, 259
by Bobbi Dykema Katsanis

on an October morning crisp and bright as a fresh-picked apple,
the news was good.
last night, a beautiful young Japanese man
broke a record that had stood 84 years.

perhaps they’ll name an apple after him,
as shiny as a newly minted dime,
as compact as a baseball,
with a bite like a wooden bat connecting hard.

and so the meaning of victory changes:
a team that spent its season in the cellar
stands behind this man
hands clasped above their heads,
so proud, so proud.
11 Children Are Found Locked in Small Cages in an Ohio Home
The New York Times, September 13, 2005
by William Slowik

Had they tried to scream the neighbors
might have known
he brought them in at night
their mouths bound
tight with scraps
of t-shirt he tore from himself
the weight of wanting each
so clean so clean
he’d scrub their bodies in shifts
no sleep and never understood
the anger after all
he was helping them his lost
children his cost
the timer on the kitchen table
stiff wire wound tight
meant for small dogs the size of
groundhogs stacked double high
with one alone in the corner though
each was alone each latch just
out of reach the sound of passing
cars mailmen once
even the mother of the girl
two over one up blonde
freckles searching four days
at the door said she was in the yard
and gone said whatever he was
cooking smelled delicious.
Eric & Son: A Trifle
by Brandon Taper

The Players:
Eric, the father
Brandon, the son.

Eric: Brandon, I want to ask you a question. I know this is a personal matter, but I feel I have a right to know as your father. This is difficult for me, so I want simply to ask the question.

Brandon: Fine.

Eric: Brandon, are you a lawyer?

Brandon: What?

Eric: Christ, Brandon, this is hard for me. Don’t make me ask again.

Brandon: I really don’t know what to say.

Eric: Either “Yes, I’m a lawyer” or “No, I’m not a lawyer” is good enough! I won’t judge, but I do want to know.

Brandon: Why would you think I’m a lawyer?

Eric: I’ve suspected for several years.

Brandon: You’ve suspected? Do I have sheaves of testimony
underneath my bed? Are law books on my shelves?

Eric: No, but your mother told me a few months ago that you wanted a subscription to Harvard Law Review. Brandon, please, could you give me an answer?

Brandon: Why do you feel you have a right to know whether or not I'm a lawyer?

Eric: I'm supposed to know who you are. God forbid we find you dead one day in a courthouse without ever knowing.

Brandon: I don't have time for this. I'm going to the library.

Eric: Brandon, I know you don't go to the library.

Brandon: Yes, I do. I go—

Eric: You say you go to the library, but I know you visit your lawyer friends to talk about jurisprudence.

Brandon: You followed me?

Eric: You've left me no other choice, Brandon. When I ask about your day, you say, "Fine," and that's it. That is the only answer you've given me for years. How can I learn about my son if he refuses to let me in? Brandon, please, are you a lawyer?

Brandon: Yes.

Eric: Do you practice law now?
Brandon: I’ve handled a couple of cases, but nothing impressive.

Eric: Well, I hope you have a license. Please don’t practice law without a license. I don’t want to see you hurt.

Brandon: I promise. Why did you suspect anything in the first place?

Eric: You talk like a lawyer sometimes. Your voice is strong, you punctuate your sentences with hard words, your terminology is always professional.

Brandon: Well, not all lawyers have that...
By our editors...

Maybe, Sometimes
first place
No Place, Maybe
by Leighann Calamera

My professor mentions a poll, saying something like 90% of Americans would rather attend a class on the concept of a “utopia” than actually live in one. I think he’s crazy. He asks us to jot down our own “utopian dream”: No violence. No hate. Plenty of sex! is all I can come up with before he moves on to Chekhov.

Sometimes, I forget my utopia is buried in a box: A stack of letters tied in parachute cloth is tucked under my bed with the rest of my life so far.

A Welcome Home Party for my love’s two-week leave. In the silhouette of a South Oakland front porch, he was slouched on the brick wall, laughing under Snoop Dog in stereo and probably thinking, “Five more months and I’m home for good.” I shook his soft leather hand and spat an introduction. A guy with thick-rimmed glasses and dark-chocolate hair long enough to grip, a Dean Martin grin and a voice to match. And I turned as red as my plastic cup. He told me later he didn’t remember that.

Our two-hour talk turned into a quarter-year of AIM conversations and e-mails, a few Christmas-gift shipments and one high-strung phone call from the barracks. I had already created maps of his tones and pitches. Round and warm for “I love you,” shallow and scratchy for, “I want you.” He sighed and apologized for the connection with
an “I miss you so much.” I grinned at the irony: he didn’t know what to miss yet. He didn’t know me.

An hour outside Baghdad. He may as well have called from the moon.

My days were glossed with 4×6 printouts of him in standard-issue gear, creating mascots from American cartoon animals; they posed with semi-automatic toys like cowboys and Indians. The Iraqi desert splayed in the background like a dried cockroach waiting for the inevitable crunch of a giant shoe. The pictures I sent him tried to be memorable: puffy midterm eyes, tired hair and too much pink lip gloss.

Sometimes, I bury myself in the memory of his smirk. Lips pursed at forty-five degrees, eyes creased and tasting me…

He wrote letters. Described me in generic adjectives, cliché even: **bot**, **mature**, **intelligent**, **nice**. Even on his Army-issued desert paper, scratched between graph lines and reeking of his cigarettes, his words were no more original than if he had professed his love in an AIM profile, maybe with “established 12.1.05” as the tagline. He covered his index finger in ink and pressed it to the page to “add a personal touch.” I ran my hand over his fingertip to remember he was more tangible than love letters.

Sometimes, those first months taunt me, a familiar plotline. I waited for him to come home and love me.
In March, he called from the lobby and I ran into his nervous bear hug. I absorbed him before he pulled away. I made a diary of my happiness, listing “Beyond the Sea” as our song after he sang it to me in the car, smirking that smirk over the trumpet breaks. We watched the city yawn from Mt. Washington and he showed me where he helped build a giant concrete column in PNC Park.

The green in his cocoa eyes sparked with the votive candles on the microwave, the only available surface in my tiny room. We learned when and where to press our fingertips before daylight brought Starbucks runs for venti chai teas and white-chocolate mochas.

I made my list: No violence. No hate. You under navy-blue cotton sheets, blinds clicking calloused heels, our chords matching and blood wakening every corner. The sun must rise and set every day with the smell of you in my clothes. The coffee is better when you make it, the song richer when you sing it. Everything about me waits for your approval, in this world.

Maybe you thought we were ordinary when a war wasn’t our interpreter. Either way, you left me in May.

“I’m not ready.” And you drove from me while the air smelled like rain and dandelions, the light stretching out to die for heavy night.

I still dream of you, standing in my doorway, arm in a sling, gear at your feet. You smile that opal smile, home for good this time. The Reserves have squeezed one last tour but you have enough juice left
for a kiss. I absorb some of the Iraqi dust into my pores, lighten you, clean you, and we arrive together at the utopia that is our life together...

But these are dreams after all. And my professor tells us that “utopia” comes from the Greek “ou topos.” No place. And this time, I believe him.
second place
Uprooted
by Shana Kraynak

1.
Sometimes
as a child
I would replant lost limbs
in loose soil
thinking that maybe,
just maybe, they would grow.
Maybe lonesome, forlorn
limb without companions,
without knobby needs and leaves,
could not grow, could not embrace
stitches of grass and puffs of air.
Sometimes I thought, maybe you, new
little tree, could be majestic and wise
again, branching—
reaching out to lost
skies, lost leaves, could grow taller, maybe,
than me, and scatter flying,
dying leaves like a quilt
in the growing grass.

2.
Sometimes,
I wonder if this city
can still feel
me and sometimes I want to plant
seeds in the cracks
of sidewalks. Ridge and rock
worn treads skulking quickly past
the wearing plates of cement, ignoring
what we can't feel.
Maybe the broken
pathways feel the cold
steamy kiss of wanting
to be remembered. Beer cans grow
on tree branches
and fall with the wrinkled, tinny
sound of ungratefulness to the ground,
empty. Oakland, the heart
of broken sidewalks and busses
huffing and puffing, the newspapers lie
in wait, pages soaring like dirty pigeon wings
to the open arms of the cracks
in the pavement.

Maybe Pittsburgh breathes
sighs of relief and large gulps
of frozen air under sidewalks,
cracking and lifting them—a sign
of life.

Scorned sidewalks still
guide us home.
The Monster in the Tabernacle
by Robin Florentin

I have nightmares about altar serving.
In these dreams, I slowly lead the church procession down
the aisle that separates two columns of cedar pews. Candles glitter
across the walls, lighting up frescoes of pious shepherds, mournful
saints, and dainty cherubs. I awkwardly carry a ten-pound brass staff
with a lead crucifix secured at the top, my back stiff and my eyes
fastened on the altar ahead. I bore this staff for years as a server, my
brothers walking behind me, wearing identical cassocks and carrying
candles. As I proceed down the tiled walkway, I feel the staff slipping
through my sweating palms, and the glistening, golden altar moves
farther and farther away from me though I stride faster toward it.

I haven’t served mass in eight years. I don’t attend church
anymore. Without an active role in the mass or an entertaining,
familiar priest residing over the sacrament, church has collapsed
under the credibility of education and prosperity. I sleep in on
Sundays. I go to work on Sundays. I stand outside Chick-Fil-A on
Sundays and wonder why they still choose to close on Sundays.

In these dreams I embarrass myself, and I embarrass the
priest, the other two servers, a Eucharistic minister, and the entire
congregation, including the organist. I know better, but I ring
the hand-bells prematurely; Father hasn’t yet blessed the host. I
forget my duties—do I retrieve the water or the wine first? I trip over my
oversized cassock. I peek into the tabernacle, the sacred, restricted
golden box behind the altar, and a monster inside it snarls at me.
I walk across the chapel in a candlelit procession, and I drop my
candle; the glass casing shatters and the church goes up in hungry
flames.

My priest was a bubbly, middle-aged man called Father Greg. He loved laughter, Christmas trees, and coffee and doughnuts with parishioners after mass. Void of the arrogance and monotone of most priests I encountered, he turned grave, Catholic matters like church and worship into personal, joyful concepts. God and Love were not fearful and overtly spiritual but accessible, like picking backyard violets in spring and hitting homeruns at the end of the summer. His bashful smile attracted doting church ladies, and his gentle nature helped bridge friendly connections between families in his congregation. We sang loud with him in church and laughed at all the appropriate parts of his homilies; throughout the week, my parents referred to his speeches as they taught us how to be good.

If I made a mistake during a real mass, Father Greg would just smile and pat me on the back after the service. It was okay, and maybe nobody would remember next Sunday. God was watching but didn’t mind mistakes.

Three years ago, Father Greg was accused of sexually assaulting a student in 1982. It was during a tumultuous time in the Diocese of Greensburg as priests across the county seemed to wait dreadfully for their names to be called and accusations to fall. Father Greg retired four days after the former student informed the diocese of his allegations. He vehemently denied them. The diocese bishop barred Father Greg from public ministry for life that July, and he disappeared from the church. It seemed to crumble under the weight of the allegation; half the parish quit showing up when a new priest was appointed.

My mother once owned a video tape that I eventually erased with wrestling programs and episodes of The Simpsons. The label read “Catholicism Crisis of Faith.” She had explained to me
that a zealous aunt had given her the tape after she articulated her embarrassment one Sunday. A surly priest had coerced her out of mass when her twin babies wouldn’t stop crying. She never watched the tape, arguing that her crisis of faith didn’t lie with God, but with the church.

Father Greg moved from the rectory into my old neighborhood. He doesn’t attend church now either. Sometimes I see him taking out the trash, a glimpse like sneaking a peek into the hallowed tabernacle. The truth in his world-weary face is a worse fate than any monster. It creeps downward with age, and lines still show where he used to perpetually smile; his frowning mouth is flanked by wrinkles. If he catches me peeking, I smile, and he smiles back and waves. The church might have broken him, but maybe God didn’t.

I have nightmares about altar serving, but I never have nightmares about God.
Sean Capperis is a graduating senior at the University of Pittsburgh with majors in urban studies and English writing. His poetry been previously published in Collision and Parallax. He has served as director of the Supernova Reading Series and poetry editor for the Three Rivers Review. After traveling abroad, he plans on applying to graduate programs in urban and regional planning. He sure does like riding the bus.

Sten Carlson is a first year MFA student at the University of Pittsburgh.

Rob Feinberg is a graduating senior planning on moving to New York City in May. There he'll begin his career working in publicity, where he will write press release upon press release so that he can one day publish a coffee table book about press releases. It will be called *Press Releases*. When Rob is not writing or playing with Tivo or listening to his iPod, he usually wishes that he was. His biggest pet peeves are broken escalators and people who smell like sandwiches. He likes to eat food, and will happily mooch if it is within arms length. He hopes to one day have a dog that barks “I love you,” like the pug he once saw on Letterman.

Amanda Hansen is a rural Utah native. She is a senior at Utah State University, majoring in English with a chemistry minor. She will begin medical school at Touro University-Nevada in August 2006.

Michael Hurley is a student at the University of Pittsburgh, where he is studying philosophy, English literature, and English writing.
Amanda “AJ” James (a senior at the University of Pittsburgh) is a native of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, and a graduate of both the Valley School of Ligonier and Greensburg-Salem High School. AJ is the author of three collections of poetry and currently resides in South Oakland, where she is working on her fourth collection of poems. In her free time, AJ enjoys the company of her family and friends, as well as anything involving letters.

Bobbi Dykema Katsanis was born in North Dakota and grew up on a farm, watching rolling vistas of enormous sunset-tinted clouds over the western horizon. That was what she thought angels must look like. She’s been writing poetry for at least twenty years, and has worked as a librarian, bartender, daycare teacher, and professional musician. She has a deep and abiding interest in women’s experiences and women’s words, and in reading the work of writers who love the world too much to keep silent.

Debra Lytle is a senior English writing major at the University of Pittsburgh.

William Slowik is William Slowik is an English writing major, concentrating in poetry, at the University of Pittsburgh. He is a lifetime resident of Pittsburgh and a graduate of North Allegheny High School. His interests outside of writing include photography and all facets of technology. His post-undergraduate plans are to attend law school at the University of Pittsburgh. He graduates this spring.

Brandon Taper is a recent graduate of Pitt’s English Literature department. While he is not yet a grad student, he is enrolled in
language classes this school year in a pursuit of a French minor. He is classified as a “Post-Bacc. Non-Degree-Seeking” student, which sounds more like a missile than anything else.
Submission Guidelines

CONTENT

Send us your personal essays and narratives, travel pieces, profiles, and poems. Art and photography are also welcome.

PRIZES

The top three nonfiction submissions will win $150, $100, and $50.

GUIDELINES

Writers must be current undergraduate or graduate students. Each piece should be under 3,000 words.

To submit, email nonfiction to collide@pitt.edu year round. Please include your name, contact information, sources (if applicable), and a brief biography.

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