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This issue of the *Eclectic* is dedicated to

David Van Vorst

serving in Iraq since April 2003
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Poems
They dug me up, and you lifted
my shell to your ear:
The moon throttles the brine,
and you wiped my dent away.
Kevin Ammons

Superstar

Test my life,
its unruffled blue.
Nothing but space here,
a bundle of nothing to my left,
a maritime of obscurity to my right.

To you I must be undersized,
j ust one punch into your midnight,
barely measurable at all.

Although I am smoldering,
cast into the relish of friends,
there is only smart darkness here.

The word
I want to be holding
will shoot so very fine

you will wish I flutter.
Sequence of Huff

Hours, indentured in double acid, depart with growing hands. So said, the tick like a drippy faucet, the face orb with the whole story, property of an unmarried thread, looking at time like bullets in milk. Hands cluster together in the silk bomb, listening.

Time has no middle finger, but I have seen the twelve faces, a disease growing on skin and walls.
I, in a drift dive,
    pass too quickly to see
a parrot fish crunching
    ancient coral.
On the boat it’s Omar’s birthday.

Seconds before midnight,
    the new year waits above.
Two lion fish in my torch light
    fight to the death.
Omar eats the worm from his bottle.

There’s a wreck near this reef.
    *The Thistlegorm*, split in two,
casts shadows
    on an empty pair of boots.
Omar calculates the poison in our underwater blood.

A catch of stars
    in the night’s cast.
Toward sleep,
    I feel them blaze,
blanketed in Arabic, Afrikaans, and Omar’s drunken laugh.
City of the Dead

I’ve taxied through filthy streets, marveling at tombs with antennae, sepulchers with color TV.
   The living moved the dead out long ago.

Garbage children kick crushed aluminum cans on concrete pitches.

Once, in the tombs, my Egyptian escort’s eyes scanned for Anubis and thieves, my camera capturing early tenants, premature corpses.

Missing is any measure of shame.

From an overpass heading to the airport: obelisks combing the sky combat minarets and muezzins for the sunset’s affection.
The Marriage Stone

I married a boy in Lebanon.

I visited the village of wild dogs and fields of children playing among red blossoms of hash.

Yahia showed me the stone and asked me to move it across the yard.

He hugged me when I put it down. He showed me the mountain caves.

That night, the ghosts of the village came to his olive grove and whispered *Tell him.*

Yahia tells me the custom. When two in love wish to be wed, one carries the stone for the other.

*We’re married now,* he says, placing his hand on my cheek. I kiss his palm.
But I have to go back to America. That’s ok, he says. I just wanted someone to move the stone for me.
Deanna Carter

Down the Gravel Road

On concrete steps behind Friendship Church, “Amazing Grace” explodes from my mouth. I look straight up at blue, tilting left then right, as brunette wisps brush my father’s sermon in my ear: The Heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament shows his handiwork.

I hopscotch up and down the stairs, the round Roman stage facing our Holstein heifer bawling, as my body cartwheels after itself, while others lie planted nearby, behind the chain link fence, two acres of daffodils, crab grass in chat, and the dead. Later, I stand holding my mother’s hand as clouds spit snow at us. The wind penetrates coat and pinafore and laughs at the ground numb to the grandiose, as it receives my uncle Joseph. Next to me a gray slate, and further away an ungarnished rock,

the earth dipping the way a grin creates a dimple. Is this the face of God?
Dirt mounds to one side, Missouri granite shines, black specked, crowned with a date and a dash—a lady waiting. The air is thick with cold light beckoning the *Sweet By and By*. 

My fingers fold the pillow around my face, my breath catches and surprises me, the sound of the fan clicking through the darkness stirs the words *The Heavens Declare* . . . Now, I sit on steps and slip out the card from the plastic stem and read no name.
To My Brother Mark

You ignore the missing ivory
of middle C and begin the after-dinner hymns,
your fingers over sharps and flats,
right foot tapping the pedal in time,
no songbook on the stand. I come
in wrong again, yet know where I belong,
here, beside your shoulder, peering
at the upright, music vibrating
through my hand.
We wear socks against the wooden floors
and sing of crossing over. I feel the rhythm
look for another way to me. I remain
among your hands, your grin forgiving
my haste, as the potbelly stove pushes
the Missouri winter outside.
Churning Butter on a Saturday
—For my grandmother, Silvia Merckling

Late in the afternoon, we all had to shake, each one taking our turn with the skimmed cream in a mason jar, sitting in the living room counting beats, minutes, the rhythm of liquid sloshing against the lid, soft lumps at first, then thick pale yellow, while you rolled out dough, running the cutter through, dropping handfuls of long strands into boiling broth for chicken and dumplings.

Earlier, head lifting, lips tightening, you said, *You’re the cream of the crop*, patting my hand with thin wrinkled fingers, and later, talking to yourself in the garden, *They just need to sweep off their own back porch*, the hoe plunging deeper into your Missouri dirt as if to get in the last word, your straw hat flopping like the scarecrow’s clothes, mud boots to your calves meeting your apron hem. Now, 650 miles away, I need to ask you how long the cream takes to rise and how do I grow okra tall in this Georgia clay?
Amy Ellison

White Pickets

Everyone wants to hear about the unluck of adults. This person has one arm, that person two wives. Two-point-four children die in the birth of the talk show.

I watch you watching television and decide whether my scholarship will impress, how close we are to being my parents. For instance, if you had your shirt off and were cleaning a gun, you could be my father.
Letter from an Ex-Boyfriend

In prison, in love with his wife,  
in the process of divorce.  
The children look too much like her.  
She can’t read. (She can’t read this.)  
He had never been punctual.  
My husband asked if I could write.  
I thought of one long sentence  
spent on him. That night, shouts  
from the couple in the apartment  
upstairs, seed-husks of insults  
spit, and the sobs. I listened  
to myself crying overhead.
Carrie Fitts

Toxic Woman

once a day at two she is born
in frantic synapses
exploding from some genetic misstep
like a quiet Athena blooming

beneath the skin. I may have nothing
but night skies fading to peach
as cells dissolve into the realm of fairy godmothers
with pumpkins and wands

beneath the skin, I may be dying
as I fight
the nuclear medicine navigating my veins
like pilgrims riding slipshod over sea,
like bloodhounds chasing the fox

beneath the skin, I may have nothing
but tapazole, blood, and a childish belief
between the muscle aches
and the rat-tat-tat of a taut snare,
delusions of breathing, no iodine dreams,
three days of water, sweat, and spit,
three days of no touching,
three for the ablution to
melt the pieces in a puddle
beneath the skin, I may be building
an empty house for a home
lost in ablution
while ultra-sounds reveal the
swollen lump of arsenic-like thyroxine
hidden in my throat.

I board up the windows,
suffocate the chimney,
feel my liver for swelling
as the needle pinches.
Pecan trees usher Lela
stripped from magnolia through sleek, Greek columns
where a cycle governs her days.
She stares at whiteness,
every item branded “State Property.”

In the cafeteria, Anna convinces Lela
of her son’s deaths, that they may be used as yeast
to make the rolls fluffy.

Time swirls
like soggy bits of newspaper.
Therapists rummage
like raccoons

and a shimmery crescent moon
finagles through the cracked window.
It tattoos her thigh
as a radio flutters in stillness
like a tar-winged thrasher trapped.

Lela stares at metal
inscribed with one word—“Intensity”—
as a wingless butterfly emerges from her breast
precisely where the kissing bug
burrowed beneath her shell after
electrodes attach to sunken temples
making her toes curl.
Amby Johnston

Poise

Poplars pose, bent here and there
like children.
We all pose and stand,

unwitty like scientists
trusting drugs, pricey picture books.

Or we dream of lavish buildings and lights,
lakes and skies
devouring coastlines
with a never-ending ending.

Funny how they pose.
Poplars, I mean.
As if they could teach us how to stand,
or punish us for making them do it.
Beth Jones

_in the Blood_

In America, five years before,
Samuel the Lamamite scaled
the walls of Zarahemla
proclaiming the prophetic signs.

Believers crouched in a cave,
awaited execution.
Then came the night without darkness
followed by the blazing star.

I close the book—
I lift my sleeping child, unfold him
in my lap. Matthew, my olive-skin treasure,
eyes fluttering in dreams of heroes
whose blood races through your veins.
Killing Chickens

Every summer Daddy killed the spring chickens.
In rubber boots and jumpsuit.
Newly sharpened axe.

Chickens ran headless, bloody,
fighting to breathe.
Then they dropped.

Mama and I dipped their bodies
in scalding water
and plucked them naked.

Sunday dinner,
Daddy carved.
Digit

Reverend’s sermon
of tithing and ten
rambles in the middle.
Woman eats an apple while
man inserts his finger through a hole
where the core used to be.
Man always insists, “Cores get in the way.”
Just as woman takes the last bite,
man rips woman’s sleeve
to give to beggar.
Accordingly, beggar unsoils his ear canal,
and returns the sleeve to man.
The juiciness of woman’s bitten digit
is known in some instances as adultery.
Adultery was no instance,
but it was next Sunday.
Glance to the moon, to the Muriel,  
the mud clouds certain, but unsurprising.  
Signs of tragic red feathers, under disguise,  
converging to pillows.  
This is undiscovered, the slag curve confined,  
slinging soft stars back to where they fell.  
All justifiably so: elephants, mice, more.  
The wavering of slow-motion,  
of thought and food.  
Swinging happily, horridly, the tamarack  
stops. Frame again is cruel.  
Smatterings justify silver from the sea,  
cutting and cut, wired from nerved.  
Still defenseless of their ponderer,  
the bruised articulation,  
that naughty lack of feeling.
Billboards

Like a cardinal entering the pain of a closed window, you’re stolen, singing those usual sounds, artificial in your car’s thin, plastic shell. Hidden? Seems unlikely. The paused cows unspelling, cropped, selling you nonsense and chicken. Unmolding the sky, they witness which way the white walls lend. Lend to them a glance, a smirk, a smile. Simply, they are abandoned, as you were once, left weeding your own way through your parents’ root vegetables. The billboards’ faced replacings go and come, and come again, cycling around like ’70s wallpaper, florid, full of invisible bees. You were invisible once. You dreamed of sunflowers among fake tulips, imagined their smell. Think of them as hummingbirds on a false feeder. One dry afternoon, stucked surgeons ascend their ladders,
operate on the billboards’ uselessness.
Glance now.
Observe those frowning faces
as the frost deadens to field
and the beetles chase the bees away.
April Meadows

Picture Your Dog in Needlework

You’ll look astonishing in pink, she said.
His poodle body quaked, his collar tightened.

She embroidered the evening.
The work went easy
when he quit squirming.

That night, she couldn’t sleep.
Her fluffy pillowcase lumped
under her head and yipped
no matter how many times
she hushed him.
What Alice Do

To spite her anorexia, Alice ate the bear. She cooked him first (of course) and followed with an ice-cream sandwich.

Ravenous Alice. She liked bear well enough, especially the tough hide. It made her mouth water, even when the heaving wrecked her stomach.

All her friends—knowing vultures—once did see her insides out.

The way they sniffed at what they saw left Alice starved.
Susan McNeel

A Veranda Courting

It begins with desperate gestures in the same dark, scratchy from cigarettes. Hands and hair babble over beer while the night’s sun pinballs on a black mirror.

Once and only once say naked or say lake.

Minutes ricochet off naked birches that echo be doth etcetera. The luck to die young is wasted on the youth who find meaning in debris and coal smoke. The katydid chatter and gossip and always remind our beautiful girl. It always ends with the idea of a visible wound, or the inability to provide one.
In Another Life I Encounter
Sylvia Plath

Fall has settled on our tongues,
the wind blackens our eyes.

Sylvia and I were once one,
now I am her shadow,

a Christ-like form
our disciples fill,

a conversation with her eyes.
I know that she knows what we both know

with more bitterness
than the season that surrounds us.

We abandon our congregation
and strangle our pom-poms.
Eric Parks

Glass of the Day

The sun laid out
over folding cliffs
contains
acetylene dusk,
the dry winds’ excrement
warping raindrops,
ragged mist
consuming a corporeal sky—
nothing going in,
nothing coming out.
Chanbory Pey

Back in the Loop

You cannot diagnose what you do not learn
until you transfer back into the womb
to see a baby choked by the mother.
Lupus roping around me tight.
Tight enough to suffocate Bangkok,
where I was born with no middle name in my name,
except with a birthmark that
leaves its permanent marker on my body’s aftermath,
scars believed to be
descendants of unknown wolves
howling silently every time the sun pokes
through my skin, while the frost bites
the lesions on my fingers.
Dangling. Freezing.
Butterflies stamped all over my face.
I shove my foot into the earth.
Earth unroofing its mouth to trip me
every step. Panting, but with perseverance,
I claw my way out of the loop, only to be
mocked again by disproportionate clown disguises.
Taunt me now.
Revenge is never too late.
This resident alien is going back to where
humans drown in green.
The Body: A Parable

They say it begins with an appetite.  
The brain becomes a hollow day  
when there is nothing left to cook,  
neuronless, purposely clogging up  
the sink with leftovers. These old minds  
search to thread young fish,  
praying for the prey to bite.  
It is the thrill of the game.  
Sugar-Daddy-coating adds to the bait.

Inexperienced scholar pigs and piglets  
consuming each other in car parkings,  
in the bathroom. Hurry up  
before Mama comes home to her bed.  
No need for sterile bags or pills to stop  
these paperclip legs from opening, closing.  
Let's give birth to a seed and spit it out.  
No extra money to spend on  
diapers. No milk.

One plus one of the same kind does not  
equal two. Whatever it takes  
to pay for the surgery that can fix you.  
Liars get caught. They do have  
freedom to make that choice.
God created the body
not to have clothes to cover it up
but to see through.
I wonder how long our throats can bear it, blistered by night, waiting for a taste of the cooking trout in the oven that should be hot. Take it out and the flesh is cold. How many times our ears are slaved by chants from the lips of the seducer who knows how to open the furnace. A fire, we know, cannot burn, even when we bite the heart with one eye closed. We lounge around, only to find lip service. Odd. It faces us and we still cannot kiss it. Nothing will change because our teeth cannot escape the saliva hinging on each morsel detached from its kin. Who says we can’t eat the core? Whatever the liar says was true. We cannot be the liver. We cannot be delivered.
Erica Rohlfs

_A Week of the Good Daughter’s Summer Break, 1982_

L-M-N-O-P was a word.
I waved the orange flag heaved from Oskaloosa mud mixed with leaves, sticks, and katydid shells.
Soup.
I carried Mother a handful of prize roses; she walked me to the dandelion hill.
Fishing lure in the couch hooked Sister’s stomach.
Father finally caught the big one.
I assisted him with supper.
Fish casserole.
Floating with plastic boats and soldiers in the lavender porcelain,
I etched mature designs on a soaped towel.
Waking, I found the human ivory still under my pillow.
“Look in my coin purse,” mother said.
“The Tooth Fairy went to bed early.”

Walking Jupiter

I am the Ice Queen
slut smart girl dumb woman
I see the big picture think too small
fat ass bitch
worth the bottle of wine
high maintenance a bargain
diet pill junkie
warrior worryer cunt
built for good breeding
I slit my thumb cutting frozen hotdogs
tall cool drink of water
a catch throw back
My tits are desert bloom pink
nuttier than pecan pie
My pussy smells sweet from the candy I eat
a toxic seed strangler
the woman with train smoke hair
Every evening I’d watch my father shine them
with a stained white cloth
smothered in black polish,
dull until he expertly buffed,
causing the circles of resin to fade
into a perfect sheen.

Mornings, I’d see fatigues, SASSER emblazoned on his chest.

Each day the same routine, same polished surfaces
for thirty years.

Now those boots sit scuffed
in the corner of the closet.
Loafers,
nice work shoes, shine brown.
He must have breathed through the floorboards, 
seeped up like paint fumes. 
My lids slashed open—his finger along my hairline, 
leaving a scratch in the polished porcelain. 
I had been dreaming yellow tulips, 
charcoal children. 
My sheets were cool—cotton and autumn 
with me in between. 
His breath was kerosene 
threatening to catch, 
my sweat 
fogging the mirror above me that witnessed, 
wishing it could shatter. 
One panicked sound found its way 
through my lips, 
sizzled to a stop before it formed a word. 
“Damn, little girl,” he whispered like a crocodile, 
“I was just getting started.”
Daughter of Atlas

I bore the scar like an ant
lighter than its cargo.
Black Maryjane Roots and Pleated Petals

I could scour my vagina till it blushed raw
   but searing genitals won’t erase
the Creekside Golf and Country Club Halloween party—
six vodka and cranberries—
   three beers . . . half of one I spilled
on my way out the door,
I was supposed to be
working, but instead I worked the dance floor,
an earlobe,
the karaoke stage,
   where I touched myself in front of
Gary Graham the lawyer and went home with him after
my school-girl thigh-highs fell down nine times.
Pulling them up
   when I knew he was watching, I saw
his hand shake a little as he
   wiped his left eyebrow usually
so
composed . . .
Suzanne was there, yammering in her nasal drawl as some car-
toon space girl.
   I wonder
what she’d dress like if she knew I’d slept with Ty nine days
   before
their wedding and he smiled as he left my plant-filled room . . .
Mr. Tyson’s wife was grinding her old self on Mr. Gantt who has no teeth
and I saw the oak tree wrinkles twist into a nostalgic grin . . .
He didn’t know the rest of the club was watching
his hand slide up the front of that awful corduroy dress she wore . . .
I couldn’t look long; Mrs. Gold came as a man and kept flipping up my little plaid skirt to show everyone
red and black velvet underwear.
My legs looked good that night: black maryjane roots and pleated petals.
Waking up, my clothes passed out on the perfectly vacuumed carpet,
my temples full of travel dust
I could already feel the members’ judgment following me past the putting green.
I cleaned up my crime and never did find those boy-cut velvet panties.
On the Steps of the Lambertikirche

A black Newfoundland in the fountain
soaks the cobblestones,
water soothing the hot pavement,
spilling through the gaps in mortared stone.
It runs under rows of bicycles,
the feet of coffee sippers,
heads wreathed in lazy ovals
of blue cigarette smoke.
Having settled since the last
concussions of old explosions,
birds sit watchfully along the Platz,
squeezed into rain-blackened tiles,
while men lumber over scaffolding
in the business of restoration.
I think of the Stadtmuseum,
of pictures from the war,
edges dulled and scarred
with creases at right angles
propped on the walls of Lamberti.
They waver in their blur,
the muddy colors spilling into the gallery,
consoling with age.
Among the knots of people in the Prinzipalmarkt,
schoolchildren fidget in loose lines,
play tag among the columns
and streets lined with blue signs
double-slashed red,
pointing to the spires of the Dom.
The narrow monks’ steps here at Lamberti
carry me to wrought clovered doors
where the wind waters my eyes.
I look again into the sepia of old photographs.
Muenster returns to rubble.
I pick through the debris of debris as women
weave through the arcades,
their fists wound in shopping bag cords,
clenching handles of carts chunked with masonry,
their hair stiff as helmets.
The tower shakes under my feet,
the bells’ peal pounding
on the cobblestones below.
The Accordion

Feet shuffle in their waiting dance, platform scents compressing like brakes against the tunnel walls. Doors yawn at the commuters, open into rows of two-toned chairs where we sit, half-reflected in black frames, sharing mints broken into halves. Your hands, red in the cold, chase hair back under a cap, while I fold mine into a bowl to catch a breath of me. Amber lamps sputter and unfold on spotted sails of scrap paper. Sagging weakly against its straps, an accordion catches its breath. The player’s eyes are rivered with cataracts. His hands, shot blue in foreign tributaries, coax chords from the chipped, ivory teeth, as he draws one more breath, thready at the edges. The doors open and you squeeze my knee. I see in your eyes the wait of the train, the length of his years, and the half-sigh of an accordion on the edge of the platform, swallowed by footsteps.
He looked up at me
& grinned
showing his god-awful whites.
He had been kissed by the sun in the womb.
The sun burned black around the edges
of a paper I was reading with glass eyes.
Nothing here is black
except for the water
& Narcissus who’s looking through
& wondering about the delicate
fingers running through the smooth surface of forever.
I watch the black bodies running the strange beach,
sparking against the sun’s beating.
Now in my head, I see bright yellow,
orange & fluorescent green
annihilating the tapestry of pavement, tarmac, sand.
Palm trees drive off in the distance—
a Caribbean of paradise.
I’d forgotten how beautiful I am
seeing my Ibo face for the first time below
& now at the bathroom mirror stand.
In that stitch of St. Petersburg
tourists never visit
wrinkled church ladies asked for dollars
never rubles
for lacquer icons of St. Nicholas
cassette tapes of the Kazan choir.

I would always make her stop as I shook
off my sandals,
sat on some rock
spat on my hand
to wash the poverty off the bottoms of my feet.

She lets anything get her feet, dragging
me to fling Frisbees in the campus quad—
she’ll curl up in grass
and watch me out of the corner
of her hair—
oblivious to my distances.

In Russia we couldn’t hide from beauty if we tried
and with the bitter help of 80 proof Russkaya we created our
own
uncertain sunlit nights,
clutching in a parking lot.
Yes

Laugh at people who wear watches.
Cut your own hair, without a mirror.
I only have three-and-a-half friends.
Chess and marijuana go perfectly together.
Sing loudly and out of key at red lights.
Start sinning early so you can get good at it when it matters.
I never got over my first love.
Pants don’t really make any sense.
Always pet stray dogs.
Any amount of money is always worth risking—on anything, at any time.
The pillow never asks for anything in return.
Jerking off for the first time can be a confusing experience.
I might as well have married the first woman in traffic who said “yes.”
Sonja Traylor

Scarecrow

Shit on my shoulder,
mush for a brain,
one shoe forgotten,
the other untied.
I try to remember the warmth
of human touch.

You gave me form,
but no breath.

Why can’t I taste?
You walk past like I’m not here.
Even the birds have begun to ignore.

Only your daughter speaks to me.
She is too frail to loosen
the ropes you’ve tied me with.
She looks for my other shoe
and a knife.

Perverse crucifix,
I am no messiah,
cannot save your hay.
Rachel Tucker

*Chicken Salad Sandwiches*

The brown paper sack covering an old Nike shoebox containing a pair of size-4 camouflage pants, a brown army t-shirt like the one I have slept in every night for four years, a poem, “for Terry,” and a recipe: plain yogurt, diced apples, sliced almonds, and lemon juice, not the kind in the yellow, plastic, lemon-shaped urn, hand-squeezed just as my aunt squeezed my hand on November 22nd when my cousin was buried in a brown envelope of Alabama soil.
Katie Vance

Drowning in America

Rain intoxicates even the most
gray-suited body with its ornaments.
It commands me,
takes me confidently to where I am perfect.
Somewhere, someone tries to eat
the whole 22-pound turkey.
I know about impossible tasks:
the timer ding-dong out of time,
alcohol as stupefying as country music,
in love with broken hearts and Texas,
drowning as an act of compression,
the Polaroids of pressed families
in the back of an album.
Meanwhile, the rain and I huddle
at the bus stop. We bicker
at one another, then at reality.
Our inebriated song lends us
the sense to know.
White Hair Dreams, *Crystal Barron*  
(linoleum print, 12"x12")
Age and Wisdom, *Anne Cavanaugh*  
(mixed media; 22”x28”)
Break, *Joseph Caylor*
(oil pastel; 18"x24")
Third Prize: Figure in Nest, Jane Fier
(acrylic on canvas; 20"x20")
Empty Nest in Window, *Jane Fier*  
(watercolor; 16"x20")
Woman from Stewart House, Jane Fier
(watercolor, charcoal; 16"x20")
The Bridge, Robert A. Hall
(silver gelatin print; 11"x14"
Coatlicue at Underworld Gates, *Robert A. Hall*  
(block print; 8"x12")
Celebration, *Joseph Herring*  
(watercolor; 22"x29")
Do You Know the Difference Between Liberty and Freedom? *Joseph Herring*
(mixed media; 24"x36")
Second Prize: Ill, T. J. Powell
(mixed; 25"x54")
False Pretenses, Bryan Ramussen
(stoneware, wood, hemp string, bronze; 20"x8")
Snare, Bryan Ramussen
(aluminum, wood; 3"x18")
First Prize: Closure, *Casey Westbrook* (cast iron, steel; 6'x6'x6')
Caliper, *Casey Westbrook*  
(cast iron; 4'x1'x1')
Governor, *Casey Westbrook*  
(cast aluminum, steel; 6'x6'x6')
Fiction
The time I swallowed a penny while trying to imitate William Bentley during nap time and the teacher led me down the hall to the clinic with my face red and throat swollen, I don’t remember recess before Tia called me a jerk after eating Reese’s cups, and having Mr. Gordon pick me up and run down the hall after Mrs. William, so much as the sight of my classmates crying because they believed Ms. Till, the nurse, was going to take me away to a dark cave and hang me from my tennis shoes, and once we reached the clinic I thought for sure I was dead but Ms. Till pleasantly grabbed my hands, knelt down towards me. “Just relax,” she said, and then we walked over to the cot together, but she made it over to the far side of the room first and cleared off the cot so that she could lay her coat down. I just looked at her, the penny in my throat throbbing. “Cherry Kool-Aid,” she whispered, glancing at the refrigerator, “plenty of it in there,” and then she grabbed my hand and together we walked to that refrigerator, each of us with throats throbbing with different anticipations—each with a bit of redness—the older in her finest night gown, the one that nurses always wear in school.
Sharon Black

Excerpt from “Kingsdown”


I notice a dark cloud hovering in the distance. The closer I move to my destination, the darker the sky grows. I glance at the clock—time for work. I pull into the parking lot, weaving through construction barrels. I park and walk toward the huge gray building with large roll-up doors for loading and receiving.

Inside, customers bump into furniture, trying to maneuver through the maze. Furniture is crammed together, the aisles small as pig trails. Boxes are piled on boxes and all the other employees surround the only desk in the office. Flies at a bug zapper. The tension is thick, papers flying. I hear my aunt frantically say, “I can’t find the Broyhill 4040 armoire, and someone is coming to pick it up in thirty minutes.”

A customer asks the all-too-familiar question, “How do you know what you have in here?”

I continue past the hundreds of boxes of American Drew, Basset, Cochrane, Leather Bella, Ashley, all coated with black dust.

My sister walks by as I hear hammers pounding and chains clinking. “What’s that?” I ask.

“Big B is building a mattress store in the back. He’s mad that Kingsdown cut him off because he didn’t buy over one-hundred-thousand dollars in mattresses this year. Now he’s going to build a separate store and buy from their competitors to make Kingsdown sorry.”

Big B, the owner of the furniture store, is my uncle. He looks like Herman Munster and Jimmy Carter combined. Dark splotches of hair cling to both sides of his head, a bald spot in the center. He always
wears blue and green plaid shirts, dark slacks and black shoes. He never
laughs unless he is making fun of someone.

I walk past my sister and head for my favorite Barcolounger. I de-
cide I don’t care what Big B says about my work ethic. I recline and
stare at the ceiling and the dangling cobwebs.

Big B and I haven’t talked much since my twenty-first birthday last
month.

My family and I were gathered at my aunt’s for our usual Sunday
meal. The smell of roast potatoes, green peas and corn filled the air,
then my aunt served me a piece of strawberry pie. Everyone began to
sing happy birthday when Big B chimed in with his own rendition of
“Happy Birthday, Dummy.” He had called me “dummy” one too
many times. I slammed my strawberry pie with whipped cream over
his bald head. My family sucked in a deep breath. No one had ever
stood up to Big B. He was speechless—for a moment. Then he smeared
his plate of green peas in my hair.

Sissy, Big B’s granddaughter, walks up to my recliner. She’s nine,
but acts twenty. Light blond hair. Silver-blue eyes. Once she stabbed
a little boy in the hand with a pencil at school. Her mother blamed
the teacher and pulled Sissy out of the class. They went shopping for
a new dress. Sissy also likes to make messes with my aunt’s beauty
supplies, often mixing hair dyes and fingernail polishes into wild con-
coctions.

Even though she can be a handful, she and I get along. While ev-
everyone else complains about the messes she makes, I encourage her cre-
ativity. She often shares with me the stories she writes and what she’s
learning in school. I sometimes take her to church functions and on
fishing trips. Once she was leaning over the dock, waving a worm
through the water with her hand, when a big fish finned her. She didn’t
cry, even though it left a huge red mark on her hand. She didn’t cry
either when her dog Molly ate her bunny. She just told Big B that
Molly owed her five dollars for the bunny in her tummy.

Sissy often follows me around and asks all kinds of questions about
God and why we are here—questions most nine-year-olds don’t ask.
Now she is telling me that she has learned all of her memory verses
for church. She asks if I want to hear them, but before I can answer
she starts reciting John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life,” and 1 Peter 5:7—“Cast all your cares upon Him for He cares for you.”

“Good,” I say. “Did you do your extra credit?”

She hands me her papers. I know she is the only child who actually does extra credit work for church. She shows me the pictures she has drawn of Jesus being baptized by John.

“Great,” I say. “I’ll stick these in your folder tonight at Awana’s.”

I hear Big B walking toward us. I can always tell when he is coming by the way his shoes swish across the concrete floor, as if he’s too lazy to pick his feet up when he walks. He finds us sitting in our recliners.

“What are you doing?” he asks. Sissy and I look at one another, and she shrugs her shoulders innocently.

He looks at me. “Why don’t you pick up some trash outside. You can handle that, can’t you?”

Sissy follows me outside, reciting her memory verses. Her voice makes the job go by a little faster. We talk for a while, and then she says she’ll see me at Awana’s, the club for our youth church group. I am one of the leaders for the third and fourth graders.

Later that night, the kids gather in one classroom, shouting and running wild, while the leaders hold a meeting across the hall. I am half tuned in to what the others are saying when I notice my younger brother walking down the hall with an ice pack on his face. I ask him what happened, and he shows me a swollen red shoeprint on his face. “Sissy kicked me.”

I feel heat rise in my chest. “Where is she?”

Suddenly Sissy runs up to me and says, “I didn’t mean to, but . . .”

“Don’t. Just go and let your mother know.”

“She said I was trying to stab her with a pencil,” my brother says, “but I was just kneeling down to talk to her. I swear.”

“I believe you,” I say. “Go upstairs. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I try to compose myself before confronting Sissy’s mom. Toni is Big B’s daughter. She never leaves the house in anything but a new
outfit. She thinks she is the best thing that ever happened to Georgia.

Sitting down in the pew behind her, I say calmly, “Sissy kicked
William in the face.”

“You’re just trying to make it worse than it is,” she replies.

“Oh, really. Did you see his face?”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Why don’t you try whipping her for once?”

“Look, you’re her cousin. I’m her mother,” she says. “Don’t tell
me how to raise my kid.”

“Don’t ask, then,” I say, and walk away.

When I look back, I see Toni hugging her daughter and staring at
me as if I have caused Sissy some kind of mental anguish.
“I’m telling you this because I don’t think you’ll panic,” said the strange man in the yellow raincoat. He was tall, and his frizzy orange hair poked out from under his rain hat. His shiny yellow boots stood on dry cement sidewalk and his raingear glistened and reflected the afternoon sun. “The world is gonna end,” he blurted. “Tomorrow morning at dawn.” He sounded proud for having told me.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said in distant tones. “Thanks for letting me know.” My answer was both what I thought he wanted to hear and what I wanted to say anyway. I believed him. I’m not sure why.

“Okay, bye,” he said, his words tripping over each other as he walked away aimlessly, as if he weren’t sure what to do next. I almost replied “See ya!” before he disappeared around a corner but stopped myself. If the world were going to end tomorrow, I wouldn’t see him.

I turned around and meandered, my attention shifting to the scene in front of me. Doors to little shops squeezed next to each other. Long cream-colored awnings shadowing display windows etched with store names.

Mom enjoyed browsing here. I considered most of the merchandise to be for gullible tourists. Mom came out of a glass door less than a block down the street. In her black business suit, the curve of her hips contrasted with the white cement sidewalk. I began following her with long strides, staring at my muddy sneakers and frayed jeans cuffs and using my peripheral vision to navigate the scattering of shoppers. I could have called out for her to wait for me.

At some point, we arrived back at our old, dark-red LeSabre. Only then did Mom check to see that I was there before we wordlessly got in the car. I studied her face while she drove. She had Mona Lisa skin,
a wide, expressive mouth with dimples rather than age lines, and blue eyes like mine. Mom would have looked younger if she didn’t wear so much makeup. When she wore that much blush, she looked like Auntie.

Auntie, as she insisted on being called, was actually my mother’s aunt, my grandmother’s sister. My grandmother died a long time ago and it was when Auntie’s husband died last year that she came to live with us. We were her only blood kin left on earth, she would tell us.

As Mom pulled the Buick into the garage, she spoke to me. “Pumpkin, you’ll want to change pants and clean your shoes before Auntie gets back from bridge club.” I knew better than to argue, so I nodded and climbed out of the car. I was sure to take off my muddy shoes at the door before I went into the kitchen.

The last time I argued about clothing, Mom made me regret it. “You never used to care if I wore my comfortable jeans or not!” I burst out. “Why do you care so much now?”

My mother’s lips folded into a grimace and her face reddened as she answered, “You want to know? You really want to know?” She was about to cry. She shifted her gaze from me to her lap as she collected herself. After a moment she said in a flat, breathy tone, “We have to make a good impression on Auntie. She lives with us now and she likes for things to be neat and tidy. I don’t think that’s too big of a request, do you, Pumpkin?”

“Don’t call me Pumpkin!” I yelled. Auntie called me Pumpkin religiously, as if she had forgotten my real name.

I carried my shoes upstairs and into the bathroom. Retrieving a small white scrub brush from under the sink, I sat on the closed toilet seat and shucked the still-wet cakes of mud from my shoes into the tub, washing the mess down the drain after I was done. I took off my blue jeans, making sure they made it to the very bottom of the white wicker laundry basket outside the bathroom and put on the black corduroy pants hanging from the bathroom towel rack. The pants matched the black stripes on my t-shirt. I didn’t wear these pants unless I had to. They weren’t stretchy enough for climbing trees.

When Auntie glided in the door half an hour later, my mother was cooking dinner and I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my math
Belief

homework. She had gone to the hairdresser in the morning, so her wiry gray hair was slicked upward and then back in a bouffant. Her jowls drooped below her chin in a distracted frown. The double-handled, extra large quilted handbag perched on her bony elbow was a gaudy pink and red design matching the dress that came down to her shins.

“I hope you’re cookin’ something yummy, dear heart,” she told my mother in a southern drawl. “I just lost three big ones at bridge and I’m looking fo’ some comfort food!” The comment actually made me smile. Auntie and her friends played for quarters. Three big ones meant three dollars. Seeing me grin, Auntie hurried over to pinch my cheeks. I rolled my eyes and wondered if she tried to act like a cliché. “Oh my, Pumpkin, I don’t see how your mother can let you mess with all those numbers. Don’t hurt your head.” The comment irritated me but I grinned anyway. Auntie didn’t do math. She idealized the school of thought that men should do all the learning so they could support the women. There was no man in this house.

“Dinner is almost there, Auntie, I promise,” said my mother hurriedly. “I still have to make the topping, and get out plates, and find my serving dish . . .” Mom trailed off, scurrying to finish dinner. Auntie watched her, puzzled, while I pretended to be absorbed in my fractions.

I closed my teeth, which fit together because I had a good bite, and bore down to keep myself from saying anything about mom’s kowtowing. My cheeks felt round. Abruptly, I imagined Auntie standing with crossed arms looking down at me and my mother as round-cheeked toddlers. I turned my face away from my mother. In that moment, I could not even stand to look at her.

Dinner was quiet and unmemorable. I don’t recall mounting the steps with oatmeal-colored carpet, but I did.

The plum walls of my bedroom, though they made the room look smaller, gave a warm, satisfying feeling to the space. Mom had wanted to paint the walls cream when she was preparing for Auntie’s arrival, but I wouldn’t let her. The headboard on my bed, my dresser on the right side of my room, and my nightstand by the window—I had
stained them all myself with antique purple finish. A purple spot on the rug under the window from that particular activity was covered by a giant red corduroy floor pillow with fraying seams. On top of my dresser, a red beta fish named Hector circled in a round fish bowl with smooth blue glass stones on the bottom. The spidery roots of a handful of healthy, green bamboo shoots intruded on his space.

I raised the blinds at my window and stopped to admire my collection of colorful stained-glass crane ornaments. I opened the window all the way and wedged myself into the square between my room and the wind.

I had a little set of wind chimes in my dresser drawer by the window. It had five cylindrical silver bars attached by white string to a flat silver ornament: a pair of finches offset by gardenia flowers. I took it out and held it at arms length out my window, letting the breeze play with it for a bit. The chime sounded like monarch butterflies gossiping to each other, so I considered the numbness in my arm worth the effort.

I was doing my staring thing. What I thought about, I couldn’t really say once I was done thinking about it. I thought about new sneakers, handbags and round-cheeked toddlers. I thought about eccentric people, rich people, and people who didn’t believe in anything.

I wasn’t sure what time dawn was, so I set my alarm for five. I wouldn’t miss it. I wondered what the end of the world looked like.

I woke up to a radio commercial. My room was cool, as I had left my window open. I reached forward with both hands, grasping for the darkness and stretching my back muscles. I felt stiff from sleeping in my clothes. My formerly muddy sneakers were dry, so I wedged my feet into them and took a throw blanket off my bed. I climbed out my window to the front of the house. I flattened the pansies that had been growing there. I had planted those with my mother. I grimaced and walked around the house, being quiet so that no one sleeping would wake.

Our backyard opened out into acres and acres of tree-enclosed meadow. I walked along the uneven forest edge until I found a spot to sit. The neat row of houses on my street couldn’t be seen over the
grassy little hills. I felt far away from them.

I wrapped myself in my blanket and sat at the base of a large tree, tilting my head back to follow the squirrel routes up the trunk and then to where the tiniest branches fingered the night sky. The weather was breezy and wet. It was also very dark. The cuffs of my jeans clung to my ankles with dew. I could not make out details very far away. Looking down at my hands, I wished it were darker so I couldn’t see myself.

I decided that I would like to die here in the roots of the big tree, out of sight of Mom and Auntie. I curled up and cried. I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke, the sun was up.

Years later, I returned to the old house to visit my mom. I had recently graduated from college and a guy Auntie would have called “a proper gent” was asking my mother’s permission for my hand in marriage. Auntie had passed away some years earlier.

For old time’s sake, I visited the strip my mother used to shop in. It wasn’t quite as nice now, and some of the stores had been replaced by businesses.

Then I saw him. His hair had more gray than red, and he wore blue rain gear instead of yellow. “I want you to know something,” he said. “The world is gonna end. Tomorrow at noon!”

Resisting the urge to laugh, I smiled as warmly as I could. “I’m sorry to hear that. Thank you for letting me know.”
April Meadows

*Cheerios for Bobby*

Absolute truth was impossible. Bobby knew that. Even Mrs. Peabody’s eighth-grade science class, with all its experiments and formulas, couldn’t convince him that gravity was the reason his feet stayed on the ground. The rocks in his tennis shoes kept him on the ground, and they didn’t rub blisters, just air pockets. And those helped absorb some of the smell after his cross-country meets. So, after emptying his shoes of their rocks, he clambered up a shaky ladder, took a deep breath, and jumped off the roof. The fall nearly shattered his confidence in the relativity of things. It did shatter his elbow. But months after the cast came off and after all his blisters had healed, he found a tiny pebble wedged in the tread of one of his well worn and, for a matter of seconds, airborne tennis shoes. Now he understood his newly acquired limp. The unnoticed pebble—a single pebble!—had kept one foot more securely anchored to the ground than the other. Stupid pebble (or maybe it was a glorious pebble): it had almost convinced him of gravity’s pull.

Having determined the source of his error, he decided to stage another experiment. Last time he’d broken an arm, but he’d learned a valuable lesson. Now he knew to check for pebbles. He’d probably even take off his shoes next time. Higher stakes, less percent error. He could handle another broken bone if it meant perfection. A week after graduation, Bobby headed for the oak tree on the corner of his street. He shimmied up, and near the top he pitched his shoes, heavy with rocks, to the ground. He wished he had picked a more strategic jumping place. As it was, the threat of traffic and curious onlookers made him nervous. But it was too late to think about that now; his shoes were at the bottom, and his grip wouldn’t hold him to the tree.
for much longer. Ready to be on his way with the gospel of his dis-
covery, he inched out on the branch. But it couldn’t support him. After
the limb snapped and before he hit the ground, Bobby remembered
the Cheerios he’d eaten for breakfast.
Mary is lying on a low narrow bed with a short wooden headboard, metal rails, a pastel bedspread faded from wash. Propped on pillows, she watches as I label the collars of her shirts and the soles of her socks with a washable marker and place them in the closet or the small chest along the opposite wall. On the chest are two white business cards her son left. “Glamour Photography, Portfolios a Specialty” and a phone number are printed in black.

“Put that stuff up and let’s go smoke,” she says, her thin gray hair standing on end, plastered to her head on the sides. From her elbows to her wrists are stocking-like coverings to keep her skin from being torn and bruised every time the nursing home staff lifts her to change her clothes or to move her from the bed to the Gerry chair. Her left arm is bent at the elbow and held tightly to her chest with fist closed, muscles frozen by the stroke.

“I’m almost finished. How is Ellis?” I ask.

“Ellis is mad,” she says.

“What’s he mad about?” I ask cautiously.

“He’s mad at you and W.E. and somebody else,” she says, wrinkling her brow. “He says people are gossiping,” she finishes and looks at me steadily through brown eyes like my daddy’s and mine.

“Gossiping?” I ask, glancing at his business cards again.

She hesitates and asks, “Have you got a cigarette?”

* * *

Mary is Daddy’s only sister. I became her guardian after her stroke, when my uncle, brother, and cousin called to say that Ellis, her son,
had taken her home to die.

I went to her house on the first Thursday in February. She was lying on the sagging couch underneath a fog of gray smoke. Ellis’s new friend, Tiffany, and her girlfriend were holding lighted Winstons, and the one they had just taken from Aunt Mary was smoking in the overflowing ashtray on the table.

We grew up together in rural Northwest Georgia. Our Jim Walter home, built on an acre of Granny and Pa’s land, across the field from their house, was about three-quarters of a mile from Aunt Mary’s. If you walked the trail worn through the woods, it was less than half a mile.

I don’t remember Ellis taking a gun to hunt with Pa and my brothers, or walking with us through the fields to check and reset the wooden rabbit boxes. I have seen a picture of Ellis at about the age of two, sitting with Pa on the old orange Allis Chalmers tractor, but I don’t remember his helping us in the fields.

Sometimes we all built huts in the pine thicket just off the trail or played football in his yard. But if he didn’t get his way he took his toys and went inside to play with his G.I. Joes and his collection of baseball cards. He always had lots of flat square bubble gum that he used to bribe us to play with him.

Ellis and Aunt Mary lived alone, since Uncle E.L. left when Ellis was nineteen. They lived in the frame house on forty acres that she bought in 1956 for twenty-five hundred dollars. Almost fifty, Ellis never married and, though he graduated from high school, rarely held a job.

Over the past thirty years I saw Aunt Mary and Ellis a couple of times a year. When we visited he usually stomped off to his room and slammed the door or sat slumped on the couch with the television up so loud we had to go out onto the porch to talk. If he spoke at all it was to grumble because he couldn’t hear the game or to argue with the announcer. Sometimes he came out of his room and thrust a brown paper bag filled with pink square bubble gum at my children.

After Aunt Mary had her surgery, which resulted in a stroke, Ellis began to call me once or twice a week. I talked to him more than I
Beth Spears

had since elementary school when he met me outside Granny’s every morning to walk the half mile to the bus stop. The Power of Attorney he acquired at the hospital put him totally in charge of Aunt Mary. The access to her savings made him suddenly quite attractive to women, he thought, and he wanted to talk about it.

The first was a twenty-two year old named Christy. She borrowed money for rent and utilities and picked out lingerie for him to buy at my sister-in-law’s consignment store. Next was a married woman from his church. Closer to Ellis’s age with bleached blond hair and heavy makeup, she claimed to love coming over to help with Aunt Mary. Neighbors saw her in his truck when he went into the store to cash a two-hundred-dollar check for a trip to the flea market in Collinsville, Alabama.

Then there was Tiffany. He met her at one of the four hospitals he had taken Aunt Mary to in the five months since her stroke. He bought her a television and promised to pay her an hourly salary and even to build her a house in return for helping with Aunt Mary.

He seemed as lost as the day the first grade teacher sent me to look for him when he didn’t come in from recess and I found him in the edge of the woods sitting on a rock crying.

Ellis lumbered in just as I arrived at the house that Thursday to see Aunt Mary. Dragging his feet as if they were too heavy to lift, he threw a red and white carton of Winstons across the room at Tiffany. Laughing his nervous laugh, snorting through his nose and showing his overfull mouth of brown and yellow overlapping teeth, he said playfully, “Next time y’all better get cigarettes when you’re out. I’m not making any more trips to the store.”

Tiffany and her friend giggled and went into the kitchen. Ellis tagged along. He had on his usual blue denim overalls that seemed too large, always hanging crooked across his chest. The wide legs were rolled up over his tennis shoes but dragged on the floor.

Like the black and white family photos in the wooden box with the broken hinges, the living room where Aunt Mary lay was colorless. The one small window was covered outside by the limbs of a fig
bush and inside by a dark curtain. The panes were dull and dirty. The floor sagged toward the darkly paneled left wall, and the linoleum rug was so worn it was hard to tell the original colors. It smelled like the wood-burning heater, cigarettes, left over food, and dry dust.

I sat down beside Mary and took her hand. “How are you feeling?” I asked as a spot of color over the television caught my eye. I first thought it was a photo of our cousin Nancy and then realized it was an 8x10 color print of Bill and Hillary Clinton.

“Ah, I’m all right,” she said. She was wearing a long-sleeved sweat shirt, elastic waist pants, and white crew socks. She had lost quite a bit of weight, and her fingernails were long and dirty, her teeth and lips yellow from cigarettes.

“Are they taking good care of you?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Have you got a cigarette?”

“No. I don’t.”

She turned slowly toward the kitchen. “That’s Tiffany,” she said. “Ellis likes her. She’s only twenty-two and she’s got a couple of kids, but they live with their daddy. Ellis says she’s got a Mexican boyfriend.”

As I attempted to change the subject, Ellis motioned for me to come out to the porch.

“Is she leaving now?” I asked.

“Yeah, she’s just here Monday through Friday, 8:30 to 4:30,” Ellis said.

“How are you going to manage when she leaves?”

“Ah, we’ll be fine. She left me some supper on the stove.”

“Who is going to feed Aunt Mary and get her dressed for bed?”

“She can walk a little. I can help her to bed.”

“Ellis, please take her back to the nursing home,” I begged. “I am not being critical. I have raised two children, and I couldn’t take care of her like she is now.”

“Look, Tiffany will be back in the morning, and I’ve got some neighbors lined up to help this weekend.” He paused. “It’s like Spring Training. You don’t start off hitting home runs.”

By Saturday he was calling me to come and get her for the week-
end. “She is driving me damned crazy, yelling all night,” he said. “I’ve
got to have a break.”

When I picked her up I knew I wouldn’t be taking her back. I called
in family to help for the weekend and planned to call the Department
of Family and Children Services on Monday to report the case as el-
der abuse. When I called, the Senior Services representative said I had
removed her from the danger so they could not get involved. The only
solution was for someone to file for guardianship.

While I was waiting in their lobby and calling doctors to arrange
to get her back in the hospital, Ellis filed.

He hasn’t spoken to me since, even though I have left phone mes-
sages and sent him letters. After the hearing, the judge asked me if he
had ever been “Diagnosed.” The preacher from his church said I should
be careful.

It didn’t take long to figure out that, in less than six months, Ellis
had gone through her thirty-thousand dollars in savings, was trying
to sell her property, now worth around two-hundred-thousand dol-
lars, and had taken her out of the nursing home because he needed her
monthly checks.

I took three-thousand dollars of my own and paid for her first
month’s care in the home until I could arrange to get her qualified for
Medicaid. I stopped the timber company from cutting the timber Ellis
had illegally sold for seventy-six-hundred dollars and began proceed-
ings to revoke the deed he had forged transferring ownership of her
property to himself. I took a small loan to pay the past-dues hospital
bills and continued to pay Ellis’s power, phone and water bills so he
could stay in the house.

* * *

When my cell phone rang, it was the sheriff telling me Aunt Mary’s
house was on fire. When we arrived the fire department, the neigh-
bors and Ellis were gone. The uncut yard was covered in weeds and
overgrown shrubbery. A rose bush scraped the right side of my car as I pulled into the muddy drive. The house looked unharmed from the front, but yellow fire investigation tape circled the trees around the perimeter, a bright blue tarp covering a portion of the roof. The row of white plastic milk jugs was still lined up along the foundation beneath the drip of the house to catch the rain.

I walked through the tall wet grass to the back of the house and stepped onto the stoop to enter the burned out kitchen. The singed back door was off its hinges. I had to walk across it to get in. The clutter left on the kitchen table and across the cabinets was charred and covered with a layer of black soot. The cabinets just inside the back door were totally destroyed along with the wall and the window above the sink. The smell of burned wood soaked by the fireman’s hoses felt damp and heavy in my lungs. Broken glass crackled as I stepped carefully in my sandals over it and the chunks of sheetrock that had been ripped from the ceiling.

As I passed through the burned out kitchen into the front room the policeman following me said, “Doesn’t look like there is much here worth saving.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Then I told him, “You know it looks like everything is okay here. I don’t think Ellis is coming back for a while. You guys can go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I will be fine,” I said as I continued to look around.

The walls and ceilings throughout the house were shadowed with soot from the fire. In the front room was an old chest of drawers covered with a hundred miniature toy soldiers carefully arranged for battle. The prints on the walls had been replaced by photos of young girls in cheerleading outfits or shorts and halter tops. In one corner were cardboard boxes filled with unopened packages of toy soldiers.

Ellis, her only son, had collected forty years of baseball cards, stored them in boxes that filled the closet, covered the floor underneath the bed, and were stacked as tall as me along the walls.

The top drawer of the night stand was open. Inside, on top of a
pile of first edition comic books in their original cellophane covers, were stacks of 8x10 color photos of young women dressed in revealing outfits. They were posed in isolated wooded settings near waterfalls or creek beds. On a shelf near the window were several photo albums containing more photos and twenty to thirty X-rated movies.

In Mary’s room, mixed with the things she left behind, was a strapless blue sequined dress and a couple of empty costume packages. One had a picture of a French maid and the other a lady in a bunny outfit.

Trying to get an idea of what kinds of things need to be stored for safe keeping, I walked out to the old shed and noticed the trail we walked as kids. A hundred yards or so down the trail were four or five huts built of slabs and pine straw filled with old furniture, years of junk and *Playboy* magazines.

Leaning against one hut was Granny and Pa’s old mailbox, and inside another was Pa’s rusty band saw. Nailed to some of the trees were the skulls of squirrels and other animals. Around the camp were hundreds of two-liter Coke bottles. Some were open and arranged in a series of circles in a clearing waiting to catch the rain. The filled ones lay on their sides, one on top of the other, like logs in a woodpile, forming walls around the area like a fort in one of his Civil War books.

Shivering, I rushed back to my car and drive away wiping tears. If I had looked closer I knew I would have found his initials carved on one tree or another.

* * *

After she smokes we come back through the door, the huge fan overhead roaring loudly. The alarm screeches until I enter the proper code to silence it. There is a visiting minister and his wife sitting in the corner of the dining area conveying their message of salvation and deliverance to the few patients who have ambled in or have been wheeled in to listen. I push her Gerry chair back to her room and stop near the foot of her bed debating about removing some of the things Ellis brought to her room before he stopped visiting.

On the wall above the bed he’d hung a brown-toned photo of him-
self as a baby in Pa’s lap and another of Granny and him when he was a toddler. On the nightstand he’d left a small black and white picture of himself around five with his Mama watching him open Christmas presents. Aunt Mary has said more than once that she is embarrassed for people to see the photos of those shabby rooms.

On the window ledge and shelf above the bed he had arranged about twenty ceramic angels. Some are partially painted, others off-white. When I ask Aunt Mary if she collects angels, she says, “No, Ellis does.”

* * *

It has been almost a year. I’ve almost grown accustomed to the clinical smells of cleaning solutions on the floors and the carts mixed with the smell of urine and feces.

A nurse walks in and asks Aunt Mary where she’s been. She says, “I had a date.” The staff enjoys her sharp wit. One day last week they overheard her tell me, “These folks are hell on baths!” She often tells them that my husband is her boyfriend.

The residents who share her room don’t enjoy her quite as much. When no one is with her, she constantly calls the name of her last visitor or yells, “Help me! Help me!” When they complain, I want to tell them that Aunt Mary would hate to know that she was yelling and disturbing them. She would be embarrassed to be clothed and fed and bathed by strangers. I want to scream that she does not belong here; that although she is eighty one, last year she drove herself to town, cooked her own meals, managed her own finances and took care of Ellis; that she worked for thirty years at Rich’s in downtown Atlanta as a supervisor in the Sales Audit Department; that she caught the Trailways bus in Yorkville every morning at 5:30 a.m. and traveled forty-five miles to work; that she read the paper every morning and went to sleep each night reading a book; that she could never have friends over to visit because of her son; that her husband was an alcoholic with a bladder injury from World War II; that he often wet the bed; that after she retired she left the house only to go to the grocery
store, or to church, or to a shower for a neighbor (once when I asked her, she said she would have liked to have gone to Disney World); that she lived in a dark colorless house, but that in her forwarded mail was a subscription to *House & Garden* magazine.

I want to say that during those years when she escaped to Atlanta each day, I hope she had a passionate affair with someone who treated her to lunch and sent her bouquets of beautiful flowers. But I don’t tell them anymore than I tell Aunt Mary that Ellis was arrested for writing bad checks; that there was a fire and Ellis won’t talk to the fire inspector, so the cause has been ruled as undetermined; that the contractor says the house was damaged beyond repair, and I don’t know where Ellis is living; that in spite of her telling the court-appointed attorney that she wanted Ellis to take care of her, for as long as she lives I am her guardian; that I will be unable to say goodbye, because the funeral home director says Ellis made pre-arrangements for a “Private” grave-side service.

Instead, I open the gift I brought her and take out a pair of red winter socks with Santas on the cuffs and put them on her feet.

“I like those,” she says.
Writers on Writing
Bryan Gunter

I’m going to take a cue from the philosopher Thomas P. Kasulis and write an *intimate* bibliography of my poems. Kasulis, while doing research for a book of comparative philosophy, was having trouble relating the seemingly complex and twisting teachings of the Buddha to a Western audience. While on a train ride home, he noticed a Japanese couple who stood close and “suggested volumes of their intimate relation through their every look, every gesture, and every meager word.” This idea of intimacy became the basis for his book *Intimacy or Integrity*. How is one meant to cite this? Is a citation of the two lovers, whose names he did not know, appropriate? Or does the credit go to the monk he’d interviewed that morning for putting him in a state of mind able to receive the clues that led to his revelation?

I sometimes feel guilty, much as Kasulis did, by not paying proper respect to the “road unmentionable” that led to the creation of my poems. To present my poetry, explain the symbolism, the metaphors, and the imagery—like a nurse taking vitals—is not only missing the “where?” of each poem, but assumes, first of all, that even I know what everything means. In workshop, I was amazed at the readings my poems received. Some readings were certainly weaker than others, but some were so incredibly close to what I actually thought while writing the poem that I cannot deny the possibility that I may have, on some level, intended them to be there. (Again, how do you cite your unconscious?) Understanding the context in which my poems took form is the only way to understand where they fit in the scheme of the poetry universe. I’m sure that I could never list all of the factors resulting in a single poem of mine.

Before my college creative-writing class, I had attempted a few lines of pedantic crap for high-school poetry assignments, but I had never truly sought to portray that part of myself longing to have some creative light shone on it. The layout of my high-school class was like any typical workshop. Work was brought in and we would talk about
it, but workshop could be summed up in two words: “back patting.” We would sit, forum-style, and pat each other on the back for a job well done, then rub our bellies with creative contentment. Criticism was thrown around very lightly and for this, it seemed, every poem was an utter masterpiece where revision would only hamper the depth of emotion and substance.

To be sure, many poems had the lines, “I love him a lot, but I’m stuck in this cage where my walls are closing in—oh yeah, and I’m depressed.” The problem was that we had no idea about how to write poems. Reading the work of the masters was not really encouraged, so we were all at sea with not much to cling to. The strategies of serious creative writing were never discussed, making it wholly impossible for anyone to understand why his or her poems were unsuccessful. I did, however, gain from this high-school experience the awareness that I had some potential for poetry. I knew that I could deal with subjects of emotional depth, that I had stories to tell, and that I didn’t necessarily write poorly. Unfortunately, I lacked everything else.

One of the best facets of a successful poem is its ability to display emotions, tell a story, or portray an idea in a manner that is non-coercive. Poems, in this sense, are better off when they do without doing. In my high-school poetry, there is a lot of doing. My voice was extremely tyrannical with the emotions it meant to convey. By being discursive, the poems robbed from readers the freedom to make their own inferences and take away their own meanings. By unthinkingly using words such as “love,” “despair,” “shame,” etc., I was telling the audience, “Feel sad here.” By foregrounding these discursive words, any story being told in the background was lost. A poem doesn’t have to be a bowl to pour angst and discursive emotions into. Also, my line breaks back then were purely arbitrary. I wrote in a style I’d heard one of my classmates (also a poor poet) talking about . . . this style being to write a stream-of-consciousness rant about something in completely prose form and then break it up into separate lines. I simply looked at what I had written, decided how long a line should be just by eyeballing it and saying, “There, that looks about right.”

On the other hand, in my college writing class—the one hoping
to teach me the art of poetry—we began by reading. I was amazed at
the amount of poems that we were given to study, the idea here being
that it is impossible to think we can write if we don’t know how a
poem looks, sounds, or “feels.” We discussed how a poet writes and
what strategies worked for the particular poet. Some of these include
the use of leaps, de-familiarization, and RENNS (reasons, examples,
names, numbers, and senses). We were shown how other writers climb
ladders of specificity, ask questions in the middle of poems, how they
sometimes focused their attention on the consequences of events rather
than on the events themselves, and most importantly (to me at least)
how they accomplished such pointed emotion without telling the
reader, “This is where you should feel depressed.”

We learned most of this before we were even asked to submit a
poem for workshop. Consequently, we were all much more prepared
as writers. As we all submitted, we never stopped reading. All of us
found at least three poets who seemed to be saying the emotions we
were attempting to write about. For me, the poems of Derek Walcott,
Mark Doty, Charles Simic, Eugenio de Andrade, Patrizia Cavalli, Wis-
lawa Szymborska, and Edward Hirsch have been the most influential.

After this semester, it is clear to me that my growth in the art of
poetry has been phenomenal. I do not dare to make the assertion that
I am an incredible poet, only that the increase of poetic awareness from
high school to the present is impressive. As to my situation in the po-
etic universe and where I fit in, I could not be bold enough to claim
any position. I don’t know whether I am aligned with the ordinary-
to-extraordinary style of writing typical of Mark Doty’s somewhat
object-obsessed poetry, or whether my brand of surrealism is similar
to Charles Simic’s. Hopefully, I will become the synthesis of both these
great masters, just as I am already the synthesis of the things that have
provided the context for each of my poems.
Amby Johnston

Everything I have ever learned about poetry ran contradictory to what I was taught this semester in my creative writing class. So many things that were engraved in my mind about poetry and what was “beautiful” were challenged. For example, one of the first activities we did in class was to make a list banning certain words and phrases. Many of the items on the list I had used a lot and actually liked, though there were also many I was thankful to be banning—“clear blue sky,” etc.

I think it was this rebellion that attracted me to the creative writing class and to writing.
Catherine Mekas

Don’t explain every detail of your story; let your readers make some of the meaning for themselves. It is important to let readers come to some conclusions, which is what keeps them interested.
The poet Peter Klappert has written, “I start most often with a swatch of language or with an image that, for whatever reason, holds my attention. I do not start with an idea, a theme, or an abstraction.” I found this quote to be very useful, because that is exactly what I was doing with my poetry before I read Klappert: using abstractions and starting with an idea.

The first change for me came in my poem, “Fallen,” an assignment to mirror a poem by Mark Doty. Describing a fallen tree, I wrote “We cannot know / how wide its / branches spanned— / though picturing the standing / trees among this / fallen one / leaves the fire / in the sky.”

My poems from then on seemed to have an edge.

As we talked about in class, to produce a good line or two in an hour is a great achievement.

I kept writing and I stumbled onto the subject of my father.

The words just piled onto the page.

I still feel an urge to keep forming and changing my poems and now I see why it takes people years to compile enough polished poems for publication.

I feel that I have only struck the first string in my poetry.
Interview
An Interview with John Poch

A finalist for the Yale Series of Younger Poets and winner of the 1998 “Discovery” / The Nation Award, John Poch is the author of a collection of poetry simply and deceptively entitled Poems (Orchises Press, 2004). He is also an assistant professor of English and director of the creative writing program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, as well as poetry editor for 32 Poems Magazine. A “semi-native” of the Atlanta area, Poch recently visited the State University of West Georgia and gave a reading in support of his book. In addition to his campus reading, Poch also chose the winner of the Kay Magenheimer Poetry Award as well as the other literary prize winners for this issue of the Eclectic.

Smith
When did you begin writing creatively?

Poch
I didn’t really begin until I was in my early 20s. My parents had split up, and I moved to Arizona to help out my mother and sister. I couldn’t get a job except delivering pizzas, and I didn’t have any money. I wanted to continue college, but Arizona State didn’t allow me in-state tuition, so I found myself hanging out in public libraries trying to get lost in literature, namely the short stories of John Cheever and all the Best American Short Stories from various years. Somehow, I stumbled into some poems, too. I found myself writing short fiction and sending it to The New Yorker and The Atlantic, but I couldn’t fig-
ure out why they wouldn’t publish it. I didn’t know how writers lived or even that you could go to school to learn the craft. I was as naïve as they come.

Smith
Obviously you have continued to write despite those early rejections. Do you remember what it was like receiving your first rejection letter? Do you have any advice for unpublished authors looking to get published?

Poch
I don’t remember my first rejection letter, but I do remember the one I got last week. And the one the week before that. As a writer, you have to persevere through the rejections and do two things. First, so that you’ll continue writing, you need to have enough ego to think that these editors are wrong and probably have no ear; they probably prefer Edward Thomas to Robert Frost. Second, you need to have enough humility to think that they might be right and that there is room to improve the poems they didn’t accept. Go to your closest university library, read all the literary magazines, find the ones you think are strong, and send your work there. I go to the library and find myself alone with the literature. “Where are all these hungry writers?” I ask myself.

Smith
At what point did you decide or feel that creative writing would play a major part in your life? In other words, when did writing leave the classroom and teenager’s spiral-bound notebook to become more than a hobby?
Poch

We moved near Atlanta, and I still had that fire from Arizona smoldering in me. I was writing poems and stories rather than studying my nuclear physics formulas for my studies at Georgia Tech. The problem for me was a bit different than you’re stating the question. In other words, I needed to get into the classroom and to buy a real notebook. When I discovered I could take writing classes at Georgia State with David Bottoms and Leon Stokesbury, I jumped at the chance. David let me skip a prerequisite and join his Saturday morning poetry class, and my life was changed. I remember walking the four blocks or so from the train station to the classroom building in downtown Atlanta, thinking “I am a writer,” and I was about to burst out of my skin. More naivety, but it felt good. There was hardly anyone on the street at that hour of the morning. If someone had seen me, they would surely have been frightened by my ecstatic smile and gait. Of course, I wasn’t really a writer, but passion goes a long way. I try to remember this when I’m teaching now. I see an image of myself in those students who are long on passion and short on talent. I should say that writing was never a hobby for me.

Smith

Was there ever a point when you thought writing wasn’t for you? If so, when?

Poch

I never thought I’d quit writing. I did pray about entering seminary after I left the Iowa Writers’ Workshop on bad terms in 1993, but I started another MFA program at Florida the following year. I had a second stumble right before I finished there. William Logan wasn’t accepting many of the poems I was writing for my thesis, and I had only a few months before graduation. They were awful, pining, sappy love poems, and I couldn’t break through or even see that they were awful. We argued whenever we sat down with my poems. He wanted
me to write more historically and dispassionately, but I had come to poetry by way of love poems. For me, they were the heart of the matter and at least half the tradition. I finally thought to ask, Who writes good love poems? He pointed me (reluctantly) to Yeats, and two or three others. I remember Logan having a hard time coming up with the list! This combined with the fact that a very fine poet, Austin Hummell, invited me to Florida for a weekend to look at my poems and give me encouragement, was a turning point. I came back to Logan with new and revised poems which he found acceptable and, possibly, good.

Smith

A number of your poems carry epigraphs from other poets—Donald Justice, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and James Merrill. Would you count these poets among your figures of inspiration? If so, why? Also, are there any other poets you consider important influences?

Poch

I’d say Merrill would be the most influential of these three, but there are others much more important to me. Auden, Bishop, Lowell, Merwin, Plath and Eliot are a few of my favorites. An epigraph, for me, is a way of leaning on the shoulder of a better poet or a better poem or line. Dante couldn’t have made it through hell and purgatory without Virgil. It’s important for a poet to be alone in that solitude that Rilke writes about, but you could go mad without some of these “better makers” showing you the path. I guess I do this on a smaller scale from poem to poem, rather than on a bigger journey, though I’d like to, at some point, apprentice myself to Dante.

Smith

This question is not to imply any sort of egotistical aim to your po-
etry, but in your passion for writing, do you hope to see yourself in a list similar to this at some point in your life, counted not only among a poet’s personal favorites, but as one of the “greats” of modern poetry? Similar to the previous question, is there a part of you that would like to be a Virgil to another poet’s Dante?

**Poch**

I hope my poems will do well, but I don’t think I’ll ever know. If I garner praise, I’ll doubt it; if obscurity, then I’ll blame television culture and poetry cliques. I do think I’m a pretty good editor/teacher. But Virgil, no.

**Smith**

The blackberry has been a popular image in twentieth-century poetry—Robert Hass has a blackberry poem, as do Galway Kinnell and Sylvia Plath. Was your poem “Blackberries” at all inspired by these poems, or is it similar to the image of the crow, just one of those images that everyone has to write about?

**Poch**

You’re right. The poems you mention here are all excellent poems. My poem was just something that actually happened. I know, how dull. And, of course, I’d love for my blackberry poem to be considered alongside these others, but that’s silly. The poem is a little language game I was playing. I should have been patching things up with my girlfriend (whom I later married), but I was enamored with the sound of my own voice out in a blackberry patch. How selfish I am. It’s not pretty, is it?

**Smith**

Why don’t you tell us? Is it necessarily “bad” for a poet to be selfish?
David Hockney talks about painting as superior to photography because it’s more moral. He says you shouldn’t take a picture of someone dying; you should help them. That kind of selfishness, I mean. I think you have to count the cost. If I close my office door when my wife really needs me, what good am I? “Oh, you must wait, I’m making art,” is not going to cut it. I want to be more loving. But then there’s that horrible movie, every artist’s nightmare, Mr. Holland’s Opus. The last thing I want is for people to say, “You’re poems were okay, but you were a swell teacher.” I left that movie sick to my stomach. Only artists understand this.

One of your poems—“The Kite”—carries a different sort of epigraph: “Port au Prince, 1995.” Is this poem nine years old, and if so, how did you decide nine years later that it was finally “finished”?

I hammered at it every year for eight or nine years. I don’t know if those two Haiti poems should open the book, as they are older, but I thought them more accessible and I’d been trying to get my book published for ten years. I wanted an editor to make it through the first two poems and not get lost in some occlusive lyric, only to throw the manuscript onto the heap with all the others. I almost think these two don’t belong with the rest of the poems in the book. I probably shouldn’t say that about my first book, a book that I want to do well, but I might as well be honest about my doubts. It’s so hard to be objective with one’s own work.

Since you’re being honest, do you have doubts about any of your other poems that are effectively “out of your hands” because of publication
or the book? If given the chance, would you make corrections, or do you see published poems as outside of your realm of manipulation and correction? Are they still wholly “your” poems and as such correctable, or are they now partly owned by a readership, and as such should be preserved as is?

Poch
I like the poems right now. The revision thing is tricky. Lowell, Moore, Auden, Justice: they all revised well, but they also over-revised poems for various reasons. I try not to think about it. I’ve got to live with these poems for a while.

Smith
How do you know when any of your poems, regardless of age, are “finished”?

Poch
For me, it’s three things. When I’m happy with the way form and content have merged. When a few of my very closest readers pronounce it sound. When I’m tired of tinkering. But you can never know. There’s almost always one more thing you can do to make your poem better.

Smith
Many of your poems are also very grounded in a “place.” The first two poems in your book seem very grounded in images of Port au Prince, but other poems, like “Snowshoeing,” “House Finches,” “Why I Just Dropped the Nature Bouquet,” and “Home Life,” exhibit the same sense of being firmly rooted in a very specific place. Could you tell us why your poetry tends to start (and often dwell) in these carefully designated places?
An Interview with John Poch

Poch
I tell my students that if we can stand in the “place” of a poem without confusion, then it’s easier for us as readers to appreciate all the other effects of a poem. A poem need not have this quality, but it can help. Funny, though: to me, “Home Life” is dreamlike and not at all grounded in place.

Smith
Is this similar to Richard Hugo’s idea of the “Triggering Town”?

Poch
I haven’t read Hugo in a while, but that book was one of the first guides to poetry I ever read. Much of it is embedded in my consciousness, I’m sure.

Smith
Do you decide beforehand if a poem will be formal? Do poems ever evolve in and/or out of formal structures? What kind of limits, if any, do you impose on your poetry at any point during its genesis?

Poch
Rarely, but sometimes I sit down to write a sestina or a sonnet or rhyming quatrains. For me, they evolve much more often into traditional formal structures. There are always limits, but I never know what they’re going to be till I see some form taking shape. That’s one of my beefs with the “new formalism.” A lot of contemporary formal poets have almost no sense of vision or passion or imagination. I want to write formally as well as Gjertrud Schnackenberg. The Lamplit Answer is stunning throughout.
One of your poems is simply titled “Aubade,” which, in addition to a very rigid rhyme scheme, maintains the traditional “point” of an aubade poem: a dawn song to signal the passage of night into day and the effect the rising sun has on two lovers. Another of your poems, “Re-Wiring the House,” references Dante. What do you find personally rewarding about stylistic and poetic references to very classical images, poets, and styles? Similar to the previous question, why do you return to these classic images that many poets now eschew?

Who eschews? Everybody loves a sonnet. How could they not? Some are in denial about it. Even Frank O’Hara wrote sonnets. It would upset some people to know this. Brad Leithauser calls the sonnet one of the greatest inventions of the last millennium. And if we don’t ask ourselves why this form has lasted for so long, we’re deluding ourselves about something important. Now, certain critics might say that the reason we’ve kept all this “square” poetry around is because violent white male patriarchy has made it so. But I’d give more credit to the diversity of poets who still write sonnets. We still read these classic stories and appreciate certain images and forms because they tell us who we are in the most profound ways.

With this in mind, where do you think poetry is going? Do you have any desire to see poetry act in a certain way, or fulfill an artistic, social, or other kind of role in the coming years?

William Logan once said, “the state of American poetry is North Dakota.” I like that. Poetry is going to be read by a very small audience, like it always has. I don’t think we’ll ever get the genre back to what
it was in Homer’s day. We have film now. That’s the literature of our world. And that’s fine (unless you consider *American Pie* to be literature). Movies are different than poetry, though. Poetry requires more imaginative work, and there’s a big payoff if you are a good reader of good poems. You, as language-ready reader, have helped make the poem.

*Smith*

Finally, why do you write?

*Poch*

I’m going to lean on the shoulder of Flannery O’Connor who said, when asked that same question, “Because I’m good at it.” Of course, I’ll qualify that and say that I’m not good at much else.
Contributors’ Notes
Contributors’ Notes

Taylor Adkins is a Sophomore Linguistics major who plans to teach language after graduation.

Jason B. Allen is a senior at the State University of West Georgia. His major is English with a minor in Africana Studies. Creative expression is the inside of the soul. When in doubt remember, “Always be prepared and always expect the unexpected because that is life.”

Kevin Ammons is a student at West Georgia.

Bric Barker is the poet-in-residence at West Georgia and is currently pursuing a masters in English.

Crystal Barron is a graduate art education student who plans to finish her masters in education and pursue an MFA in ceramics. She hopes to later have a career as a college art professor.

Sharon Black is a senior Psychology major.

Deanna Carter, 44, lives in Douglasville, Georgia. She and her husband, John Carter, married for 25 years, have three children, two of which also attend West Georgia.

Joseph Caylor, 22, is from Newnan, Georgia. He is majoring in graphic design and hopes to start his own design company after graduating.

Anne Cavanagh is a senior and an international student from Canada. She is majoring in biology and pre-medical illustration.

Cat Cram is currently finishing up her junior year at West Georgia as a Psychology major with an English minor. She freely admits to being eccentric.”
Contributors’ Notes

Amy L. Ellison currently attends West Georgia. This is her first publication.

Jane Fier is a senior fine arts major with emphasis on painting from Carrollton, Georgia.

Carrie Fitts is an English major and plans to pursue a career in writing and would like to go into music journalism or editing.

Robert A. Hall is an art major with concentration in photography. He will graduate this fall and plans to continue his education.

Stephanie Henderson Hollenbeck, 27, is a Graduate student in English at UWG and works as a Graduate Research Assistant. She resides in Newnan with her husband, Ted, her son, Caleb, and her daughter, Emma.

Joseph Herring is a senior majoring in graphic design and painting.

Amby Johnston is a student at West Georgia.

Beth Jones, 53, lives in Griffin, Georgia. A devout Mormon, she is a wife, a mother of five, and a grandmother of three.

Jon Lacy will graduate in August with a B.A. in Communications. He plans to travel abroad.

April Meadows, my life is hid with Christ on high—the rest doesn’t matter

Susan McNeel is a student at West Georgia.

Eric T. Parks, 23, is from McDonough, Georgia. He is a senior at State University of West Georgia and will be graduating this spring. He dedicates this poem to his mother Sandra Parks.

Chanbory Pey is a student at West Georgia.

T. J. Powell is a senior photography major. He plans on pursuing a masters degree after graduating and possibly teaching.

Bryan Rasmussen is a senior fine arts major with concentration in sculpture.

Erica Lynn Rohlfs is a senior English and Political Science Major at West Georgia. She graduates this summer and plans to attend law school.
Angela Sasser is a Graphic Design major with two minors in English and Business. Occasionally a hopeless dreamer, she can be found wandering aimlessly around the Humanities building.

Rebecca Schwab is a student at West Georgia.

Eric Smith is an English major at West Georgia. He will graduate in May 2004.

Beth Spears graduated with honors from Floyd College in 1982 with an Associate Degree and began a career in business. In 1988 she entered the banking field where she advanced to Assistant Vice President. As a mother of two daughters she coached softball, served as PTA president and coordinated fund raising efforts of various organizations, which led to twenty plus years of involvement in civic functions including: elected member of the Paulding County Board of Education, Treasurer of Paulding Christmas Inc, founding member of Paulding County United Way and many others. Beth returned to college in the Summer of 2003 when a break in full time employment allowed her the time to pursue writing interests. She currently works as a correspondent for the Paulding Sentinel Newspapers and as a Regional Trainer for Georgia CASA, Inc. She and her husband Eddie reside in Fairfield Plantation in Villa Rica, Georgia and are the proud grandparents of five grandsons.

William Stafford is a graduate student in English Education.

James Thomas is a junior English major.

Sonja Traylor—Fine Arts major. Special thanks to Alan Dixon for creative inspiration.

Rachel Tucker, 35, is a senior English major concentrating on secondary education. A master gardener and community activist, she is a wife and mother of two.

Casey Westbrook, 23, is a senior sculpture major on track for graduate school with the intent of teaching college level sculpture.

Katie Vance is an Education major at West Georgia. She will graduate in the spring of 2005 and plans to pursue a career as a middle school Language Arts teacher.