

# Stylus

2005-06

the literary annual of  
midlands technical college

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The *Stylus* editorial staff reads and judges all submissions anonymously (without authors' or artists' names), ensuring objectivity throughout the selection process. Each published work is chosen according to the creative and artistic merit of the individual piece. Only works received by the deadline were eligible for awards.

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*Stylus Awards*  
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*Fiction:* Carl Wendell Ward

*Nonfiction:* Stacy Cato

*Poetry:* Daniel Renedo

## The Jewel Is in the Lotus

CARL WENDELL WARD

*“...One must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise...”* – Henepola Gunaratana on Vipassana Meditation

**S**WEATING A GALLON JUG OF GREYHOUNDS consumed the night before, Gatlin lay in bed. It was already early afternoon, and the sun was glaring in vertical shafts of heat through the grimy, unshutable blinds that haphazardly hung from the only window in his one room apartment. The dirty sock he used to cover his eyes from daylight’s harshness did little to quell today’s unspeakably brilliant sun. In spite of his impromptu sleeping-mask’s scent, Gatlin directed his attention to his breathing, to the in and out movement of air through his wheezing nostrils, clogged as they were with an unusual mass of nicotine-stained mucous. Snorting hard, he gathered a chunk of phlegm just above his tonsils and spit it into the large Mason jar he kept by his air mattress, for the purpose of urination, in the event he was too hung-over to walk to the toilet. Today was such a day; but more important, today was a new day, a special day. Today, Gatlin would rid himself of that Mason jar, along with every other possession he valued, and to which he was “attached.” After relieving, and then pleasuring himself (as he did in that precise order, every morning), Gatlin hobbled to the shower to cleanse his body for the last time —

as a layman. For today, Gatlin would fully commit, would join the “Sangha,” and begin his journey toward “enlightenment.”

After his body rinse, while gazing at his bloodshot face in the cracked, steam-tinted mirror, Gatlin again turned his attention to his breath, to its flow through his nostrils, in for a count of ten, out for a count of ten. He rubbed a solution of three parts water to one part baking soda under his armpits and between his thighs, and swished a generic mouthwash around his gums and teeth for precisely one minute, or three sets of in and out breaths, toward which Gatlin was trying very hard to focus his attention. (He thought for a moment about the fact that using mouthwash was as effective as flossing for removing plaque. He felt a sensation of gratitude for this fact, followed by a shudder at remembering his aversion to flossing. Then he tried remembering where he had read this fact. Then he remembered he had seen it on television, on a commercial for Listerine. Then he remembered hearing Doctor Sanjay Gupta on CNN talk about this fact, and about how the study that reported this finding was, in fact, sponsored by Listerine. Then he felt a physical sensation of disgust brought on by an intellectual sensation of moral superiority which caused him to audibly grumble at the greedy, shortsighted, corporate ruling elite who manipulated the media into dumbing-down the general public so as to sell more of their products to an already strapped working class for the sinister purpose of controlling more of civilization’s wealth.)

At this point, his most-likely gingivitis-ed gums started to burn, and Gatlin spit the mouthwash into the sink, with some vehemence, and yanked the half-empty bottle from the medicine cabinet, dumping its remaining contents into the commode. It was then that he noticed a whistling noise coming from his nose, caused by some emergent blockage. He suddenly remembered he had dropped his attention from his breathing! He had become a victim of the “Monkey-Mind Phenomenon,” and he urgently refocused his awareness on the flow

of air as it moved in and out through the “delicate gates of life” that were his nostrils, after blowing from them, into a few folded sheets of toilet paper, a slimy, oyster-like mass.

Gatlin ran his fingers through his dampened, matted locks and stared at his bloated reflection, trying to imagine himself bald. Knowing what had to be done, he grasped his Norelco Fancy Trimmer while remaining conscious of his breathing. Following the in and out breath of air around the rims of his nostrils, he flicked on the power switch: silence. Agitated, he momentarily stopped breathing while shifting his gaze up to the fluorescent bulb above the bathroom mirror. Wincing at its brightness, he noticed the empty electrical socket. “Fuck,” he thought. He opened the vanity’s center drawer to search for the razor’s power plug, and rummaged for a few seconds amongst the lotions, matchbooks, Tylenol packets, Q-tips, and dull nail clippers before seizing the thin wire with its phallic insertion jack that connected at the other end to the black-box power source. Jamming the jack into the underside of the razor, he plugged the power source into the socket over his head and flicked the switch: nothing. “Shit,” he mumbled, and, tossing the Norelco onto the counter, he stomped from the bathroom to find his Tracfone.

“Chrissie,” he said with gravity and precise diction over the crackling of a weak signal, “I need you to come over right away and bring your father’s beard trimmer.”

“What for?”

“So you can help me shave my head.”

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Dead ‘serious. If I am to practice the Dharma with any truth, it is absolutely vital that I adopt the external as well as the internal. My appearance is a crucial aspect of my commitment to the Sangha and to The Way.

“You’re a retard.”

“Do not argue. One day you will understand. As a Bodhisattva, I promise to remain in the world to help all sentient beings escape the Wheel of Birth and Death. I will aid you, too, in your quest for Nirvana,” he said, wondering what teen spirit did, in fact, smell like. He then returned his focus to his nostrils, and so to his breath. “And please stop by the Dollar Tree and pick up some candles and incense for my ceremony, for which you’ve already promised to join me.”

“Whatever,” she said.

“I do not expect you to fully understand. You have not yet chipped away at the wall of illusion that hides you from the truth. Ignorance is a primary hindrance. Remember this prayer: ‘May all beings everywhere, with whom we are inseparably interconnected, be fulfilled, awakened and free. May there be peace in this world and throughout the entire universe, and may we all together complete the spiritual journey.’ Remember this prayer like a mantra. And please stop by the 7-11 and get me a pack of Marlboro Lights, in a box.”



Later that evening, with a bumpy, bald head ripely shaved, Gatlin tripped walking into the Kings Hospital Thrift Store, his nose landing squarely between the buffed and shiny breasts of an otherwise filthy, headless mannequin, which broke his fall. Before picking himself up, Gatlin lay for a moment on top of the naked and plastic humanoid, wishing to refocus on his breathing, and so followed with his attention the in and out movement of air around the rims of his nostrils, from which the new pain in his just banged, left elbow was now distracting him. As he breathed in and out, his awareness shifted from the sensation of air around his nose to the musty stench of the store, emanating from the rows and rows of dusty, moth-riddled clothing, surrounding him on all sides like an army of ghosts. As he lay breathing, he became faintly aware of another stench: that of a cross between the malt vinegar he enjoyed sprinkling on his fried whiting at Captain’s Fish and Chips, and the grated parmesan cheese from his refrigerator, which just yesterday he had used to hide the taste of a can

of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee Ravioli. Finding the combined smells particularly out of context and revolting, Gatlin opened his eyes to find himself staring at a pair of bulbous and calloused feet housed in a pair of tiny, pink flip-flops. It was from between the ten, yellowed toes hanging over the front edge of the rubber sandals that the bottom-of-the-hamper smell originated.

“Are you ok?” said a voice from above. “Let me help you up,” and suddenly a hairy hand was thrust in Gatlin’s face.

“Fine, thanks,” he said, ignoring the hand.

Gatlin pushed himself up on all fours and hovered for an instant above the decapitated, synthetic lady with whom he had had just shared a moment, thinking briefly of Chrissie and wondering just how much of a challenge his chosen life of celibacy would be. Using a coat rack covered in what seemed to be furs made of patchwork rodent, Gatlin hoisted himself to his feet. Standing before him was an unshaven, middle aged man wearing Jordache jean cut-offs, a polyester shirt with a paisley print, an ill-fitting sequined dinner jacket, and clown-sized sunglasses. A lime-green feather boa swirled dramatically about his neck. Stunned by the sight of his would-be rescuer, Gatlin quickly bent down to upright the mannequin. Lifting her by the shoulders, he was arrested by the voice of the stranger.

“May I cut in,” the stranger chuckled, and — grabbing the mannequin by the waist — he began twirling it around and around, culminating in a final dip, before setting her vertically on her stand. Now slightly broken from the scuffle with Gatlin, she bent crookedly, as if afflicted with severe scoliosis.

“So, what brings you by my little palace?” the stranger inquired, and then whispered: “You’re not planning to sue me for the fall, are you?”

“You work here?” asked Gatlin.

“More than that dear. I own the place; and it works me!”

“Is that get-up the employee uniform?”

“Oh, no, honey. My friends and I are going to the Elton John concert tomorrow night, and we’re picking out some costumes.” The

stranger turned and waved to three very well dressed young men, one of whom had donned a tiara. "But what about you, sweetie? What kind of a disguise are you looking for to go with that haircut — if you can call it that?"

Gatlin looked at the stranger and said, "I'm actually looking for a Bhikkhu's tunic."

"A what, honey?"

"A monks robe. Something a Tibetan monk would wear. I'm converting to Buddhism tonight."

"I see," said the stranger. "And you want to make it official. I have just the thing!"



Satisfied that the orange bathrobe would meet his purposes for now, Gatlin left Kings Daughters, making a mental note to ask his mother to sew a Buddha patch over the Holiday Inn Bangkok logo, a patch he felt sure he could purchase on eBay.

## Feathers and Scales

CALEB DORAN

I AM RUNNING. I AM NOT RUNNING. There is an element of speed. The speed makes me take my steps with a sureness and purpose that is misleading. Purpose fills me; sureness does not. As I walk, I imagine the movements of air particles that swirl around and behind me with each step. The little spheres are gray and white and silver, and they are spinning—always spinning. The distance that I must travel is eaten up in what seems like a single moment. The beat of rubber touching sidewalk keeps the time, and the rubber timekeeper stops. And I stop. The element of speed remains.

There is a door in front of me, the door of a house. There is a large and solid rusty knocker on the door. I have lifted that piece of metal many times. There is also an old doorbell. The doorbell doesn't work. I know this because of the yellowed, water-stained note above the doorbell (I have read it many times). I repeat myself and lift the knocker. I repeat myself and let it fall. Even the sound of metal on metal is old.

The silence that rings out after the momentary explosion of the knocker wraps itself around the edges of the oak trunks and oak branches and my oak legs and the two beige oak columns in front of the house. It stays there awhile. I can hear something, though. It's the

sound of shallow breathing, air dragged into lungs against its will. The breathing does not belong to me. It is separate. There is an element of speed.

The silence is conquered by the barely contained chaos that opens the door. A face appears, the face of Elizabeth's mother. It is a thin face, past middle aged, but not much. Her hair is straight, short, and a sort of off yellow. It picks its own directions to grow in. She is a dancer, a dancer in a house full of dancers.

"We're busy right now," she says. I know this. "Elizabeth is too busy to see you right now," she says. I know this, too.

"I just wanted to tell her that I'm sorry," I say. She opens the door.

Inside is preparation. Someone I don't know enters from my right. I know she is a dancer, too. She is young, but older than Elizabeth. I don't notice anything about her, really. I can't. Just as fast as one person appears, so does another, and there is an audience for the show. But they are temporary. Elizabeth walks slowly from the right, where the living room is and stops in front of me. We are about four good steps from each other. She doesn't say a thing. Neither do I.

Her mother tells us not to talk too long; everyone has places to be that they are not. Everyone is late for something. The audience leaves.

My eyes are drawn to the girl in front of me. She is wearing a dull pink skirt. It is long and old. She is also wearing a buttoned blue sweater, but these things are not what my eyes are drawn to. I look at her face, that face framed in brown oak-curved hair that barely touches her shoulders. I can see the fair skin with the band of freckles that lays itself across her nose and cheeks. I can see her green eyes that are actually four colors shaped in spirals. I can see a thousand thoughts going on inside those eyes.

I take one hard step forward. My legs pull me back and up and down and sideways all at once. They don't know where to take me. I make up their mind.

"I don't like audiences," I say. (I have already seen other people and family members in the rooms to the right of us). Elizabeth tells me that we can go to the kitchen. I walk there with her. She leads.

Another moment passes as we make our way to the dull yellow room, paved in tiles. She walks in front of me, and I see her for what she is, a handful of autumn fire-colored leaves. She is bright, but belonging to another time, and born too late. If she were born in the thirty's, by the time she had grown to the age that she is now- everyone would have saw her as gorgeous, dangerously beautiful. Everything changes. She looks no different, but she is. It is rare that anyone sees her as a child of the past, as I do.

And we are in the kitchen. And she is looking at me. And I am looking back. I do not move. I am living. I am breathing. I am running. I am not running. There is an element of speed.

Elizabeth reaches for my hands. She holds them, and they let out a small exhale. And some part of me feels softness, and some part of me is warm. It is always this way. One touch, and the homeless boy, he has a home. I tell her this. She smiles. Her lungs take in the cool air of the kitchen, and she uses it to make me words.

We are talking back and forth and moving to the rhythm that our syllables make. I apologize. I tell her things, things that are jumbled. Somewhere in there, there is:

"Who will I marry? Who will I grow old with?"

Somewhere in there, there is:

"You have so many holes inside of you."

Somewhere, I say:

"You are my best friend."

Somewhere, she says:

"And you are mine. That's why this is so hard."

Her hands have moved up my arms, and she is crying. The salt-water flows down her red and white cheeks, and it keeps on flowing. There is no more distance between us. She pulls me as I pull her back. We are hoping that with enough breathing, we can exhale everything. I do a better job than her. We are walking back to the door. It takes no time.

But there is a pause before she opens it. I am talking again (but I am also quiet). We have reached the period at the end of a sentence,



a very long sentence. The door opens. I move. I move. I move slowly, but with an elegance. It is one smooth turn and I am facing this girl of the past.

“Elizabeth.”

She replies, but no more words come. I am only tasting her name. She just stands there in the threshold, letting go, holding on, holding on to letting go. She just stands there and looks at me while that salt-water runs down her face and drips off her chin. She cannot stand there forever, and the door comes to a close. It is one smooth turn and I am facing the street.

A leaf falling next to me slows down. A dark red car driving down the road slows down. There is no stop sign. The songs that birds make in the oak trees slow down. And the world stops. I have succeeded. I have exhaled everything. I have exhaled time. I move in spite of it. I imagine the movements of air particles that swirl around and behind me with each step. The little spheres are gray and white and silver, and they are spinning- always spinning. I am running. I am not running. There is an element of speed.

## Of Grapes and Audrey

KC ALLISON

**I**T'S FUNNY HOW OUR MIND CHOOSES TO RETAIN certain threads of memory over other, perhaps more consequential ones. It would be like taking a vine of grapes and, instead of taking the large and firm one, I chose the tiny runt on the end predestined for raisin-hood.

June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003. I roamed the hallways, trying to enjoy the fifteen minutes allotted us for break. But my efforts proved futile against the stifling humidity. The air hung heavy, coming to me in short, shallow breaths. Beads of sweat dripped down the freshly-painted lockers. All this I remember. In retrospect, the climate was quite foreboding. I even remember what Patrick wore as he came around the corner the very next moment. Baby blue chinos cut at the knee and a green St. Athanasius gym shirt, the thick reversible kind used to differentiate teams in P.E. class. The other side was yellow, and it peeked out at the wrinkled bottom and at the torn collar. This too was quite foreboding, as his wardrobe rarely strayed from the fine linens of J. Crew's regal collection. And yet I cannot remember the words he used to tell me that you were gone.

I can see the pale mint-colored tiles of the Academy that came rushing out to meet me. My eyes fixed on the halogen lights as I envisioned you in heaven where it was just as bright. And I remember

that very next moment, when I tried to think of you but couldn't, for the life of me, recall your face.

I will always know that you only ate Oreos frozen, and that you had underwear for each day of the week. But when it came down to it, I couldn't even remember the color of your eyes. You see someone every day for what seems like a lifetime, and all of a sudden they're gone. And the minute they go, your mind immediately starts to erase their image from your memory. One minute we're dragging the zigs and zags of our friendship across the grey canvas of my Etch-a-Sketch. And with one casual tremor, the simple shake of its surface, half of you is gone, and what's left "us" is a faint contour of what used to be. I try desperately to salvage little tidbits here and there, but I find myself holding on to something that was never really there in the first place, something I thought was etched away in cement, like our initials we drew in the fresh cement with sticks. But it wasn't.

I'll never forget that rubbery-sweet smell of those dolls we used to play with, the plastic girls that morphed into cupcakes when you flipped their skirts up and turned them inside-out. That was back in the days when our parents could surround us with the world of Fisher Price; the safe, sterile, plastic world, with all the "grown-up" amenities our parents used only miniaturized. We made invisible eggs in a frying pan the size of a chocolate-chip cookie.

I remember you taught me how to braid hair using the tail of Princess Sparkle, the most regal of all the My Little Ponies. We couldn't practice on each other, not after the gum incident. I remember you decided to get your hair cut the same as mine so that I wouldn't feel so bad, a grown-up decision for a 7-year-old. But then you cried the whole time the lady cut it, looking at me from under your newly acquired bangs as though it were my fault your hair lay in auburn clumps on an undeserving dirty salon floor.

Mrs. Maguire herded us into the guidance office, Marti, Patrick, Kendall, Allison, Natalie, Patrick, and me. All I could think about was how it suddenly smelled like Bubblegum Lip Smackers. We each bought one at the dollar store in sixth-grade and held a race to see who

could use their's up first. I remember listening to Ms. Scott talk about Mesopotamia and pomegranates, and then seeing you across the aisle, swiping the lip balm around and around your heart-shaped mouth. I remember popping mine off the necklace it came with and vigorously applying the bubblegum flavored balm to catch up to you. To compensate for lost time, I would lick my lips a couple times and then reapply. If I remember correctly, we both got tummy-aches that night and decided to postpone our competition...indefinitely.

I remember Mrs. Maguire was flanked by a couple support soldiers eager to test out the "trauma" protocol. A myriad of terms poured past her lips, lips once adorned with obnoxious red lipstick but, due to the plethora of aluminum TAB cans and Virginia Slims that came in contact with them, they boasted a tasteful hint of rouge. The way she over-emphasized her gesticulation and looked at every person in the room, waiting for an answer, reminded me of Lucy Ricardo. Such a tragic tale of falling victim to the times, her fiery mane perversely muted in the grayscale mediocrity of television. I remember my heavy eyes watching an "I Love Lucy" marathon, snuggled up in your flannels that were lucky to graze the tops of my ankles. We shivered, remiss in our recent decision to dip in the Lake, fully-clothed and cognizant of the late November date. Determined to defy exhaustion, you appealed to my reliable humor with countless impersonations. You would mock the cherry bomb, your face stretched in a frozen whine as you looked from Marti to me and back to the screen, waiting for a reaction of any conscious kind.

But you were never a Lucy. You were most definitely an Audrey; your classic fashion and porcelain beauty were anything but tragic. Even in the professional shots your parents had, you looked like an Audrey frozen in time. Your small, delicate, and manicured hands clutched an antique handbag at your waist. Your warm brown locks parted to the side and pulled back in a low ponytail. A string of pearls lay on your neck, your flawless skin laid bare by the conservative scoop neck of your green and cream sear-suckered sun dress. You'd flash that shy, yet elegant demeanor conveyed through the half-smile

of your heart-shaped lips. That classic eternal beauty was kindred to Audrey and Audrey alone.

I remember rising from our chairs and walking out of the office, ignoring the inundation of buzzing discontent; it was an imploration we knew was made with ulterior motives in mind. We were leaving. We were moving in slow motion, but the lockers flew past us at alarming speed. I don't remember how we got to the Schuba's; I just remember tripping over a root in the front yard, cursing that I was going to "kill myself in these shoes" and regretting the words as quickly as they came. I remember the porch steps were lined with lit candles. A small trace of yellow CAUTION tape clung to the boxwoods. I can see Mrs. Schuba's face when I walked through the door, the screendoor slamming behind me. I can't recall what I said to her; I don't even know what I would say to her if I had to do it all over again. But I will never forget that heaviness that showed on her face when our eyes met, as though she saw her little girl in my very gaze.

I ascended the staircase, again in slow motion, as people buzzed around below. The moment I could see your room, even from the stairs, I felt my breath begin to weaken. Everything was where you left it, jewelry strewn about your dresser, geometry homework on your bed. It was just Tuesday that we stood on that bed singing along to Mr. Big, not knowing how lucky I was just to be with you.

I remember all these things. The way you pushed your shoes around the ground with your toes until they slid on just right; the way you wore your pearls in the pool at the club; the way you could only chew gum for thirty seconds, and that your favorite gum was Fruit Stripes, even though you cursed the manufacturer as their press-on tattoos never worked; the way you would start a new sheet of paper every time you weren't satisfied with your handwriting.

All this I remember. And yet only a vague silhouette of your angelic face remains. All that I have are a few photographs I must refer to for those times you are reduced to a blurry Audrey.

## Perched

JORDAN BLACKMON

**M**Y DOG DIED ON SUNDAY. His name was Warrior. He was a terrier with short, grayish, dark-colored fur. He was a gift in tradition of one of the nationally practiced annual festivities. Probably Christmas. The dog was more than likely from an aunt or uncle. It is imaginable that they decided to no longer want him, and acted as though a pet was something that we desired to obtain (as if three children and each other were not enough for my parents to worry about). But despite the fact that I'm not sure where or why we received him, in addition to the fact that he was not something I had ever really deeply hoped to receive, he was still cared for and loved. Warrior was a part of our family.

On that dreary Sunday evening that matched our dog's coat and hinted rain, my father let Warrior into our backyard to use the bathroom. The air was already wet, and my dad said that he noticed a large owl perched on the fence. When the time-out induced commercial break ended, my father rushed back into the house to check the score. When he looked into the back yard, Warrior was bobbing up and down in the chlorinated water of our green-tinted, filthy swimming pool. The veterinary autopsy could not give us an immediate answer to the cause of his death. He may have drowned; the owl may have grabbed him. All I got from my dad was a message. I didn't return his call because I'm already tired of thinking about it.

It was now Wednesday (a few days after the Warrior incident). I woke up to the rhythmic beep-beeping of my alarm clock. I had slapped the snooze button, but the image of a red 9:46 had burned itself onto the insides of my eyelids, and sunlight spilled from the gaps between the blinds. These distractions led me to somehow instinctually hover to the bathroom. I looked at my puffy-eyed, unshaven face, and the clumps of hair matted on the top of my head. The appalling reflection brought me to the conclusion that even though a shower would probably be a good idea; stealing my roommate's deodorant and wearing a hat seemed like a much better one. With minimalist hygiene, less work was required, and that allowed for more time to move slowly. I brushed my teeth, rinsed my bleeding gums, and gave my manhood area a quick scratch or two. Morning masculinity at it's finest. Then I found my way back to my room.

I wanted music. I looked for a record from the top of my bedside shelf to play... I decided it was an *Electric Warrior* morning. Not too hot, not terribly cold yet. The sun wasn't all the way over head. It was still very much morning. T Rex could wake me up, but not obnoxiously. To the tune of "Mambo Sun," I danced to a pile of suspected clean clothes. Upon smelling them, I figured that they would work well. If any stench existed, my roommate's deodorant (that was scented to be "mountain fresh") would more than likely overwhelm it. Thank god someone in the house had some money.

*"I got stars in my beard... and I feel real weird... for yooooouuuu you oh yooou you..."*

9:53. I walked out of my front door and glanced at the piece of shit that I tried to pretend was not my automobile. I felt like the neglecting parent of the deformed. It sat lifeless for almost a month now. Tree sap and dirt had claimed it their own, so I ignored the brown, sticky, used-to-be-white car and relied on my feet to get me to where I needed to go. The only difference from now and when I could drive from place to place is that my newly rendered useless vehicle's state had hindered me from visiting my parents on the other side of town. Neither they, nor I have complained yet.

I walked about three blocks down the street and remembered that I had left the record playing. Hopefully no one will complain. It will click to a stop when side A is done anyways.

It was 10:04 and I approached the door to my place of minimum wage, part-time employment. It was my day off, but I wanted to pick up a paycheck from the week prior. My boss was busy, so our conversation barely made it through the "hello" phase. I noticed the hat on his head, two puffy eyes and week old beard. I also smelled his deodorant. I guess we were having similar days. Well, with exception to the fact that he doesn't like to listen to T Rex. I turned and began my stroll towards the door.

On my way outside, my boss turned to me and said, "Oh, I heard about your dog... that sucks, man."

"Yeah."

I didn't care to think about it anymore.

With my check in hand, I walked diagonally across the busy intersection to the bank where I placed money into my account. Well, not so often. I usually just cashed my checks.

"Hello sir, how are you doing today?" She was probably in her early thirties, and spoke with a slight southern accent. I had never seen her there before, so it is safe to assume that she must be new. I never looked at her nametag. She looked like a Bonnie.

"Not too bad. I just need to cash this."

"May I see your I.D. and get your account number?"

I handed her my driver's license. She looked at the check, then my plastic identification card, and began punching numbers into the computer as I recited my designated assortment of numbers and zeros. Her customer-friendly smile ceased, as her brow rose.

"Sir, you have an overdraft fee of three hundred and twenty two dollars and nineteen cents."

"Goddamnit," I mumbled to myself. "Okay, keep the check."

What a lovely, hungry week it would be.

I left the bank and walked three blocks towards the gas station. I took what change sat in the "give a penny/leave a penny" tray. One

dollar and twenty cents. After I walked outside, I sat on a bench and called my girlfriend, Joan. We had been dating for a few months now. She was a relief to my seemingly endless supply of shitty past relationships, and for once nothing felt one-sided. Life was good. Or better.

“Hey lady,” she said the second she picked up her phone.

A seemingly degrading stab at maleness was actually a term of endearment that began to sound like music at that point.

I was a little startled by the sudden response that broke through mid-dial tone. “Hey... are you downtown yet?”

“Almost. Give me ten minutes. I’m on the interstate.”

She must have left a little late. Or maybe I finished early. Joan was still living at home with her parents. Well, sort of. Her bedroom was over the top of the garage, which was detached from the house. It was similar to having a one-bedroom apartment... only an apartment that was next door to her parents, who keep a careful eye out the window where her father drinks at the kitchen table to catch the hours that I leave. It’s frightening, really.

Ten minutes was probably an overstatement. It was 10:42. Maybe she left on time...or I finished on time. She was arriving to the park bench where I was sitting in what was probably closer to five minutes. I was grateful for her early arrival, because I had an eleven o’clock dentist appointment.

Since the beginning of high school, I hated going to the dentist. Not just because of the obvious distaste for uneasiness brought by drills, needles and hooks being shoved into my mouth, but for the “catching up” that my dentist liked to play.

His son and I were good friends throughout all of elementary school, part of middle school, but then for some reason he decided to start sucking horribly at life. We stopped speaking to each other in any form other than insults and obscenities. I guess his parents also watched him plummet to the depths of failing to exist in an acceptable manner, and clutched onto the glimpse of hope that they saw within his childhood friends.

“Do you remember when you guys would watch Ghostbusters and jump on the bed?”

Thankfully it was a “yes” or “no” question, because he had numbed both my tongue and the left side of my face. I nodded.

“So, what are you majoring in again?”

“Schmadio archests”

His response would become a simple humming noise whenever he was distracted. I found it to be un-amusing when he would pretend to show interest in the gibberish that was spilling alongside of the sandy toothpaste drool. “So I heard about your dog. Do you think it was the owl?”

I hated him.

He looked for great detail in unintelligible responses. He also showed great interest in everything I was attempting to say. And that (as well as the obvious distaste for needles, drills and hooks slamming into my teeth and gums) were the reasons that I despised him and his occupation.

After suffering through the reclined tooth agony, Joan picked me up from the dentist. I sat in silence through most of the car ride. I would have been yelling appalling remarks and shaking my fists towards the dentists with their war prisoner torture devices. But due to the circumstances, I could not get out much more than a monosyllabic grunt or two. I was on my way to lunch... her treat.

12:28. I thought I had hummus for lunch, but it felt more like my lip and cheek. After rinsing out what appeared to be blood and pieces of my mouth, I thanked Joan for lunch and I was dropped off at my place of dwelling. I walked past the filthy white automobile with my eyes set on the front of my house, ignoring its presence. I quickly got to my door.

The next few hours of the day were dedicated to watching silver streamers leave my lips. I sat on my front porch and smoked through the last of my pack of cigarettes. Marlboro Menthol Lights. It seems like everyone hates menthols, so I forced myself to enjoy them. That way people would stop bumming cigarettes off of me. As my pack

emptied itself, I slammed the last tiny torch into the side of the ashtray. It was now 4:03.

Ramen for dinner again. 5:14.

I was a traveler. I was a caregiver. I was a hermit. I was a king. I outlived everyone. I died alone. Heaven was beautiful.

After the nap, I began walking across downtown. The night was engulfing the city, sending us into a frenzy of headlights dashing along the sidelines of the millions of rows of street lamps. I must have walked four or five miles. Winter was nearing, and my breath was visible for the first time this year. The buildings seemed larger at night because their shadows had disappeared. As I approached the stairwell leading into the underground bar, I looked at my wrist. It was 9:02.

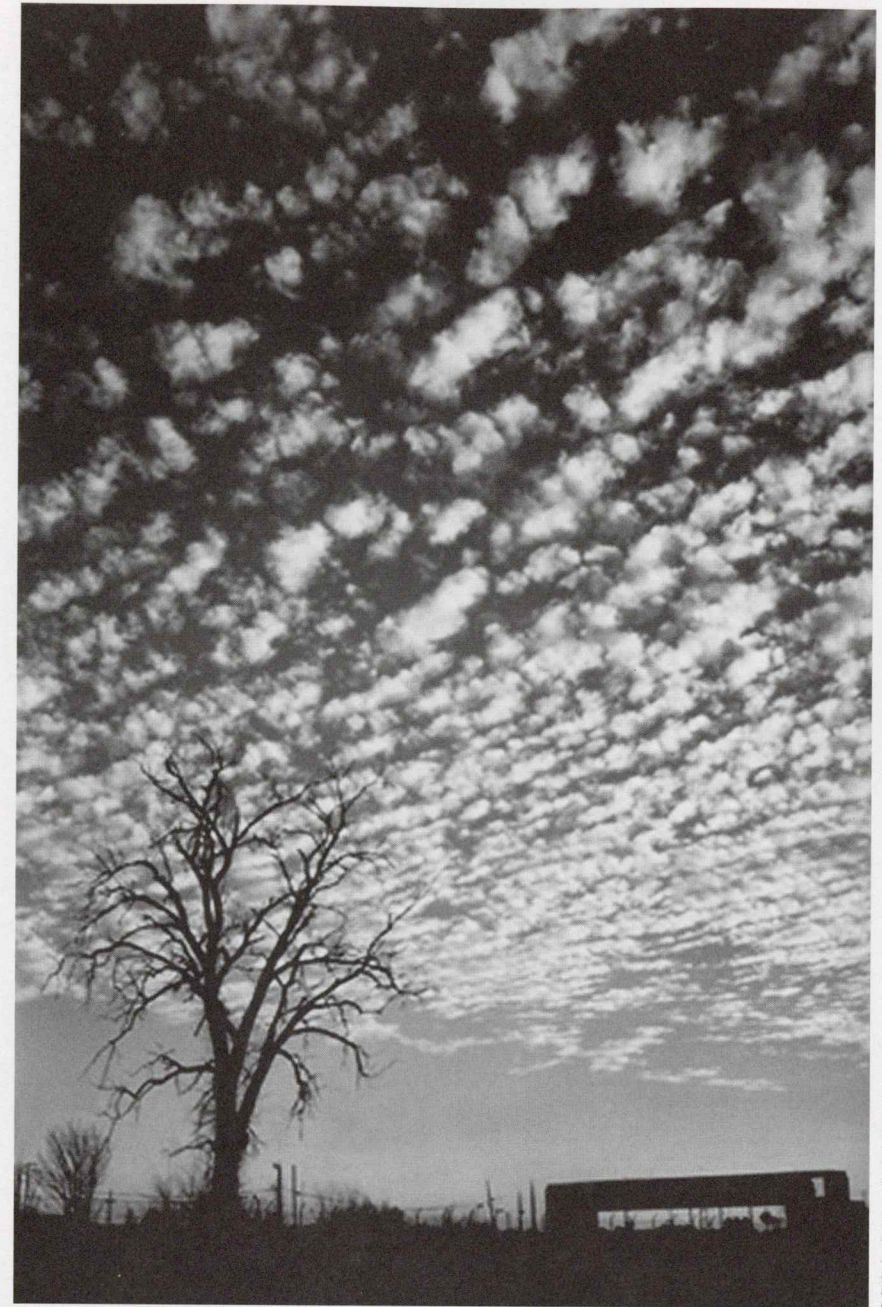
I entered the bar with a dollar and twenty cents in my back pocket. I saw friends in a corner booth, so I sat down beside them. We talked about our days, our weeks, and our years...

"I heard about your dog. Have you found out whether or not it was the owl?"

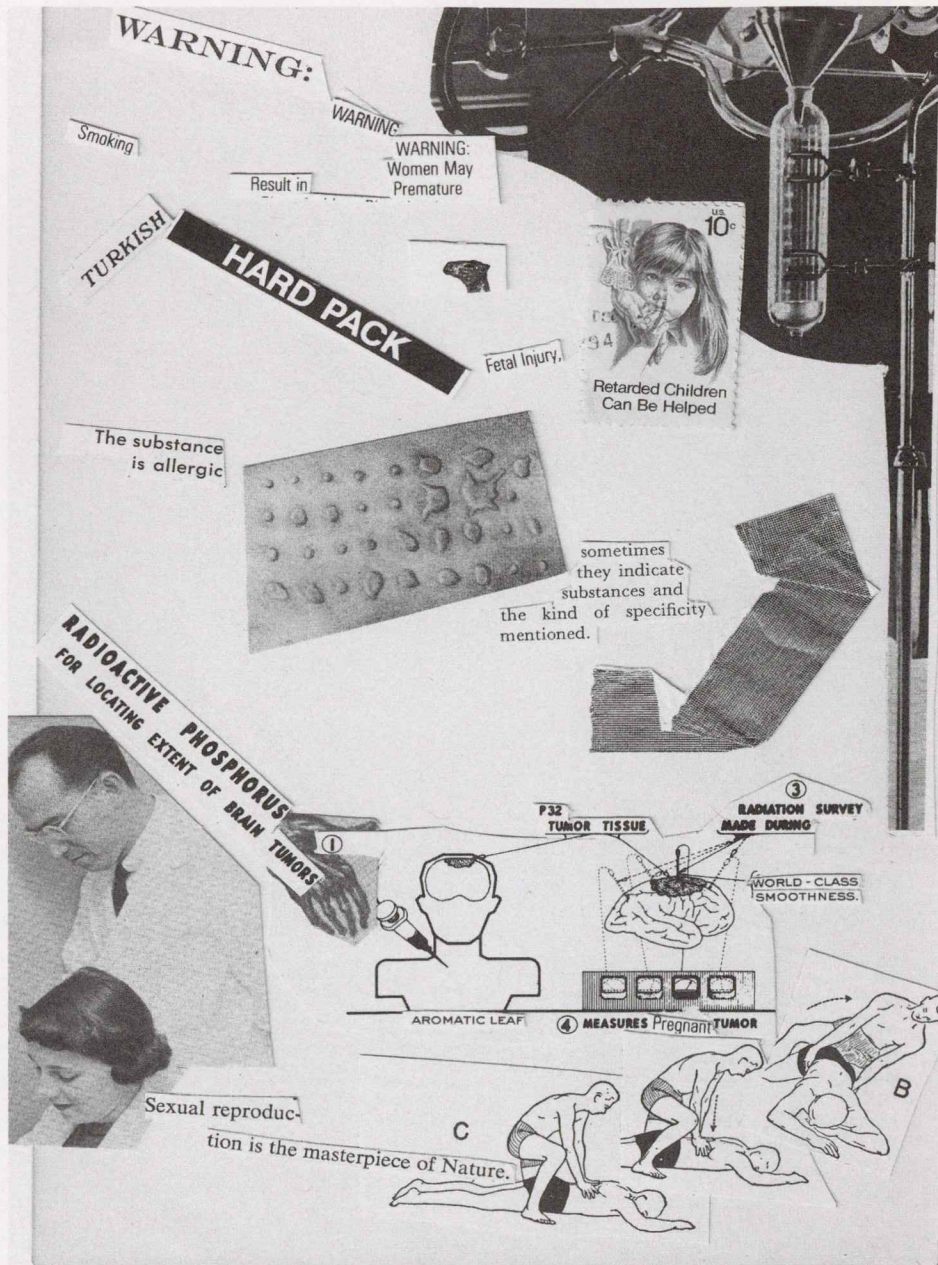
Goddamn.

I told them I did not want to talk about it. Knowing that the subject must be a sore topic, several drinks were purchased for me. A rum and coke. A bourbon and coke. Two Pabst Blue Ribbons. A shot of tequila. I will continue to not speak, thus you will continue to assume I'm angry, and my one dollar and twenty cents will go much further than I could have imagined. My old friends in the corner booth must worry about me. Then someone bummed me a cigarette. Shortly after, someone also called me a cab. 11:28 sits in green lines on the radio.

We buried Warrior in my mother and father's back yard. He now lies in the dirt beside the holly bush where he pissed and shat. I wasn't as sad as I had assumed I would be. We just dug a hole, put his body in there, and covered it up. The vet told us that it was probably the owl's fault. I guess I will have a response next time the question is asked. I went to the end of my parent's driveway and waited. Joan picked me up and we went back to my house. We were both a little hungry, so we ordered some delivery food.



STACY CATOE



DANIEL RENEDO

## Bullet

Blackberry busted trust slips out,  
juice drips off my finger.

Tasting metal black, iron dull, pulled in unwanted directions-  
mislead, misjudged, missed the meaning somewhere,  
miles back.

The black comes whisper soft into my ears-  
smoke like tar slides around me,  
sucking at my skin, pulling twilight.

Linger-slide into my dreams like serpentine,  
like vicious, nauseous sick liquid dark comes out.

Rivers flow to unknown riptide,  
to bloodpump-the thump of hitting pavement hard.

Seeping into everything,  
it sings a siren's song.

CALEB DORAN

## Daily Holiday

pitch black closet swallows  
the canary parka pitch white  
walls where the  
mirror used  
to be  
rusted chains  
constrained swing-set  
only-daughter sweats through  
the sheets in  
the inheritance bed  
parents nap  
undisturbed  
daily holiday  
in the  
dirt

JORDAN BLACKMON

## The Hurricane vs. Rainbow Row

Here you are yet again,  
Shoulder to shoulder, standing tall and proud  
Your stately appointments, unwavering.  
Yellow, pink, white, and blue  
You smile happily,  
Silently waiting to face the beast.

A shrinking ocean marks the battleground,  
As the furious dark approaches.  
Angry thunder sounds the battle cry  
As Mother Nature's fireworks light the way,  
The war has begun.

Swelling waves and violent winds advance impatiently,  
They riot at your very doorsteps.  
Still you stand without fear,  
Your colors a beacon of hope against the cruel black sky.  
Still you smile, knowing that you will survive.

JAIME L. BLALOCK



## Insomnia

Dead isn't the right word,  
but it's the first one that comes to mind.

Lidless eyes  
held on  
with Scotch tape.

Bored,  
like in bad porn.

Just going through the motions.

DANIEL RENEDO

## Old

My hair is old. It doesn't shine anymore  
Like when I was a princess  
living in the tall tree out back.

It crinkles like stiff paper  
and the pretty pink tissue wrapping  
the present from Granny so many years ago.

It sounds like static from the television when  
we watched nature stories on cozy Sunday evenings  
and the microwave that was the first on our block.

It doesn't smell like the strawberries in my shampoo  
or the ones that were frozen in the freezer  
and thawed for homemade ice cream.

It feels crisp sometimes  
like fall leaves under cold bare feet.

Sometimes, when there is too much product  
it feels sticky like the insides of caterpillars  
that didn't survive my petting.

My hair is old. Old like the memories in my head  
of my favorite days gone by.

SUSIE MATTHEWS

## One

I cannot feel.

You know – the place between  
loving and healing  
between prayer and kneeling...  
Caught in the unbalance  
of longing and needing.

My bones creak and ache  
like unopened books  
my mind blank pages  
suppressed and overlooked.

I have written my secret across you  
in the architecture of your palm  
in the foundation of your embrace  
the child's hand in wet concrete.

STACY CATOE

## Silver

The wind blew caught up snow down.  
The ground saw grass turn brown.

Leaves wrap up the soil of sound,  
and grateful branches snatch out  
to catch caught crystal ice.

A carpet of white, a rug of wet,  
a cover, a sweater, sweating out.

Sky is crying feathers,  
because the sun has left her.

Because green is gone,  
because hot sweet is gone,  
silver ever covered clouds are weeping.

Because light lingers on,  
but being sucked away into the stars,  
because Venus is relied upon,  
and has the sound of Jesus  
but not the sound of Mars,

Sky cries.

Silver leaks out of her linings.  
Twilight come and twilight gone.  
The soil of sound sings out,  
cries out, shouts out, blacks out  
the memories of roots.

CALEB DORAN

## Teenage Wasteland

Puberty's forgotten ones  
a sea of brass-clad preteens  
march to a beat not of their own

a cloud of colored/glue-tipped/spiked  
all pierced and tattooed  
in homage to the brazen idol of  
uniform non-conformity

under-inflated Good-Year's scream as  
pimple-popping adolescent  
clutches learner's permit  
and father's knuckles whiten  
the patience is short  
and of course the pride is way too tall

screaming whistles resume as  
middle-aged chauvinists take the field  
with vicarious motives and  
last night's Budweiser clinging to swollen bellies

the female flock clumps  
swallowing the space between each other  
as if for survival  
they feign oblivion  
as the wolves circle  
casting jeers of which  
they thrive on

mothers' Land Rovers  
quietly wait  
engines-a-hum until  
the whistles, giggles, ass-slaps and feigned wrath  
adjourn for the day

And with the blink of an eye they are gone.

all the khaki cargos that  
desperately cling to  
that last inch of flesh and  
dignity

the pumped and padded  
preparing for war  
equipped with titanium shafts,  
mouth guards, mesh, and  
premature masculinity

the primped and plastic  
with their spray-on smiles  
and caffeinated athleticism  
send the boys to war

all gone

and just like that the  
black asphalt has swallowed this  
hub of Teenage-America  
without so much as a sole survivor  
to tell the tale

only the occasional whisper of  
forlorn Spanish compositions  
dancing from one painted yellow line  
to the next  
reveling in their survival of  
yet another day

KC ALLISON

## The Home of Mrs. Gaphf

Completely empty and  
full of memories.

Walls half missing, with little  
strength left, wires  
and mold show.

Darkness shines through the  
windows and the bottoms of the walls.  
New, worn out clothes  
litter the ground, while tear stained  
hands gather them up.

A picture on the wall  
of Mr. Gaphf, black and white.  
His navy uniform  
covered in stains,  
with no legs.

The stench of nightmares  
waft from the muddy floor,  
rise up, and choke  
words of encouragement.  
All is silent now.

BENJAMIN T. MATTHEWS

## The Steam Engine

Metal grinds and sparks and screams.  
The engine is fed; the engine steams.

The rhinoceros bone pushes and pulls.  
Gray stretched steel growls and groans.

Dawn, dusk, dawn, dusk,  
a quick cleaning and a meal of coals,  
the heart catches fire and the tendon rolls.

The crack of the back of the spine on the track  
Makes no sounds except...

Dawn, dusk, dawn, dusk,  
the load is given, the load is taken,  
shattered consciousness is shaken.

More powerful than a locomotive,  
the superman engine of flesh and iron.

Cold, dark, inevitable metal incases  
the glowing red soul of the steam engine.

Giving and living, and snapping and breaking,  
voltage on voltage makes stain for the taking,  
and the work is done and the day is gone,

But the engine keeps chuffing and spinning,  
and turning and rolling and bending,  
and lending what it can,  
to further the progress of the worthy man.

I try to be worthy, for I am thankful for the steam engine.

CALEB DORAN



STACY CATOE

## Balancing the Line

SHIELA HAWKINS

I WAS RAISED AN ARMY BRAT. I met people from all walks of life and learned a lot of interesting things about other cultures. I believe each individual that has touched my life has made it richer and more interesting. Through my life experience and worldview I have become color blind. When I say this I do not mean that I am not aware of the skin color of someone, I mean that it has no affect on my judgment of him or her. Most people I have encountered in my life have found my open-minded attitude refreshing and comforting. Then I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee and found that crossing the color line is not really welcomed here by either side.

I am white or at least that is my skin color. Culturally I fit in better with the African American society. No, I don't run around listening to rap music and behaving like a "wigger." That's just not me and I would never pretend to be something I'm not. I have been accused of "acting black" many times. I am not sure what it means to "act black" but I believe people say this because I don't tolerate people disrespecting me and I have a great passion for fighting a good fight. If this is "acting black," then I suppose I do, and I wouldn't want it any other way. I was

raised in a lower middle class family so the neighborhoods I grew up in tended to be more culturally diverse. I have been a friend to people from all races, religions, and walks of life. So you can see how moving to Knoxville where everyone stays on their own side of the fence leaves me quite puzzled.

Knoxville, Tennessee is a beautiful city full of life and wonder. It has activities for everyone and a pretty low crime rate. It is almost an ideal place to live except for the dirty little secret that is displayed openly. Knoxville has a very deep-rooted color line and there are great social consequences for not staying on your side of the line. No one talks about the color line, though it obviously plays a factor in everyday life here. Knoxville feels a lot like the days before segregation was outlawed. There is a white part of town and a black part of town. This way of life doesn't seem to be changing anytime soon. It has been this way for so long and each side seems overly content with their piece of the pie. I, on the other hand, am miserable living on my side of the tracks. I miss the diversity and the joy of living around people that aren't carbon copies of myself.

I live in a little retirement community in east Knoxville. It is called Halls, and how it got its name eludes me. This community is entirely white. When I first moved here I suppose I choose not to notice the lack of color in the community. I was drawn to the fact that it was a community low in crime with excellent schools near by. I live close enough to every kind of shopping center and restaurant that I never have to travel far. It wasn't until I lived here for about a month that I started to notice that I never saw any black people in Halls. I would go to the grocery store or Wal-Mart and there would only be white people. This situation was odd to me and a little uncomfortable at best. After I had this epiphany I met with great disdain the color line. It was staring at me and taunting me to try to cross. I knew that the color line had been here long before me and there is a good chance that it will be her long after me. I am caught balancing the line like a tight rope refusing to pick a side.

I promise you I am not exaggerating when I say there are no black

people in Halls. Finding this perplexing I asked my brother-in-law what was going on. He then proceeds to break up the color line in Knoxville. Halls is all white, while Magnolia is all black then he went through all these other communities listing the proper color for them. He then told me about my community and what he told me of my neighbors appalled me. Apparently about three years ago there was a black family that moved into Halls. They lived here for a short time and as far as my brother-in-law knows they were nice people. They left after they were woke up one night and found a cross burning on there front lawn. The police never found out who did it but rumors began to spread like wild fire. Some believe that the family themselves did it in attempt to get a huge settlement from the city, others believe that it was the neighborhood that burned the cross and then hid behind the "good old boys" code of silence. Regardless that family didn't stay around long after that. My jaw dropped I could not believe what I was hearing. Knoxville has one of the biggest and best universities in the south how could this city be so segregated? Then the answer hit me; it has been this way for so long no one cares to change it. The root of my disgust was apathy. It all began to make sense.

I was naïve and still didn't believe that my community could have absolutely no diversity. I asked around and everyone confirmed my brother-in-law's tale of the cross burning and ignorance. Then I began talking to my stepdaughter who attends the elementary school out here in Halls. She told me that there were no black kids in her class or her school. I was skeptical so when I picked her up from school one day I asked the school administrator if this was true. She conformed that there was "very little to no minorities" that attend her school. She said it in an almost proud and condensing way. I was disgusted and offended because she assumed that I would be pleased by this information. I looked at her with contempt and left with my blood boiling.

I moved here to help with my husband's sick grandmother. This takes a lot of time out of my week, but also leaves a lot of idle time. So I decided to get a job. I was a waitress for Cracker Barrel in Columbia, South Carolina so I just transferred up here. My store isn't located

in Halls, but it is located in East Knoxville. Out of a staff of about one hundred and fifty we have six minorities. Three are Hispanics and three African Americans. I quickly befriended a girl name Keisha; she is the only minority in the entire store that would talk to me. We get along great and have a genuinely good time together. It started as pleasant conversations and soon grew. One day I asked if she would like to go see a movie with me. She said sure and I offered to pick her up so we could ride together. She looked at me with great disappointment and apprehension in her eyes. Keisha told me that she didn't think that was a good idea because she lived on Cherry Street. I smiled because I knew where that was and could find it easily. Then the situation got awkward because she explained that it probably wouldn't be "safe" for me to enter her neighborhood. I lied and said that I understood. I was stumped and felt completely lost. How could we consider ourselves friends if we couldn't hang out each other's houses? I am still friendly with her, but a lot of times when her other friends, who are black, are around she changes. It is like our friendship is a huge secret that has to be hidden behind closed doors.

After my incident with Keisha I realized that both sides are happy with the way things are. Each side holds strong to their prejudices and way of life. There is no real villain here because there is no victim. The blacks don't want to live in the white community and vice versa. Each side is genuinely happy with their way of life. They have grown used to it and numb toward change. The color line here is as deep as the San Andreas Fault, and no bridge will cross it. Who am I to attempt to change it? Well, for one I am a person looking for a little more equality, and when you have that as a reason to fight you can't be wrong. It is time for people to stop hiding behind the way things have always been and start moving toward the way things should be. Knoxville isn't completely bad and I don't feel that there is a lot worth saving here. I know that Knoxville is not full of racist bigots, but to deny that it has an obvious color line would be lying to myself.

I find myself without a home here because neither side of the line is welcoming me with open arms. I have trouble abiding by what I see

as archaic social norms. I have trouble figuring out which side of the line I fit on or if I even fit on either side. It is hard to have open and liberal ideas in this town. I wonder sometimes why I just don't pack up and move to a more diverse city. Somewhere that I will be more comfortable and better accepted. But I know in my heart that if I run now I will only disappoint myself. What I have to do is find more like-minded people somewhere in this big town and hopefully by doing so set a new norm. I am not running because I feel passionately about equality for each man and I know I have to stick around and try to make it happen here. I know that climbing on my soapbox wont change things over night, but I also know that I see the problem clearly. Hopefully with a little patience and heart maybe I can stop balancing the line because there will be no line to balance.

## Words Worth Watching

STACY CATO

**I** DON'T LIKE YOU," I mumble in the direction of the open cabinet, hoping my animosity will translate into cathode ray consciousness. For almost a year I have been despising the continuous schedule of electric waste flowing from my parents' television set. It's not so much a nuisance or a distraction—but rather an insult to my very existence. Let me explain.

My memories of childhood are not so much blurry as they are boring. I didn't see any of the big movies of my time (Star Wars, Gremlins, Nightmare on Elm Street, etc, etc.). I was home-schooled for half of my educational career. Even when my family went on vacation to Orlando we didn't go to Disney World. My overprotective parents somehow thought that shielding me from any remnant of pop culture was their duty and calling. Not that I minded at the time; I had only vague ideas as to what my peers considered normal. I heard them talking of Madonna and Big Daddy Kane, but although I was curious as to why these people were so popular, I wasn't all that inclined to care. However, as I reached the years of rebellion and individualism (which for me was about 17) not only did I have strong evidence that I was in fact supremely abnormal, I had the vocabulary and the passion to revolt against it.

It started in high school. For the first time in my life I came across that innately human ambition to fit in. I guess at least *that's* normal. Upon entrance into Dutch Fork High School I was the thin-as-a-rail, naïve stranger that made good grades—and boy was I picked on. I had taken acceptance for granted until then, and had no idea of how to be cool enough to associate with my fellow alumni. It was then that I realized the gaping chasm between us.

They mostly talked about music. Silverchair, RHCP, Nine Inch Nails, The Sex Pistols, Jane's Addiction, Dave Matthews, The Grateful Dead. Of course I had the intense need to relate—to find some common ground with the people who would decide my social fate. It didn't work. You can't fake being cool. Kids who had known each other for their whole lives, whose parents were just as adept at bullshitting and socializing as they were, who had inherited the care-free casual self-righteousness that we called "cool"—they would never accept a small, pale outsider into their ranks. An outsider who had no idea who Lenny Kravitz was.

I struck upon the ever-elusive "coolness" in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I finally developed breasts, and had observed enough to know that if you made bad grades you were almost automatically accepted into the slacker crowd. These were the people who were at the absolute pinnacle of the social strata. Apparently people don't feel jealous or threatened when you are failing.

I read somewhere that the strongest desire among humans is to be accepted. From childhood on it's what we want—what we innately need to feel complete. If we have to choose the self over the loving acceptance of a friend or parent, we will most often choose to sacrifice the self. Mix that with youth, ignorance, and peer pressure and it's no wonder half the kids in my school were either getting stoned or going on drinking binges every weekend. The pressure gets to you.

At home nothing changed for me. There was no "letting go" or "promoting individual growth." The same sheltering strangle hold was on my life and actions as it had always been. We still had no MTV, and I was only allowed to buy CDs from out of my own money (I had no



allowance). I eventually turned to alcohol for an escape—mostly hoping that someone would see my digression and save me from my extremely moderate parents. It didn't work however; getting drunk only contributed to my coolness. I developed disrespect for authority, apathy towards educational achievement, and began to truly loathe my parental units.

Of course this is all in retrospect. I didn't know what was happening to me at the time. I didn't have any specific justification for my actions. I was only aging—growing into my own brain without any realization that I might need it later. My brain that is.

About two years ago I moved back in with my parents. Yeah, I've read all the statistics and hype surrounding my generation: how it's harder to find jobs now and less likely that you'll be able to support yourself right out of college. Well I think it's bull crap. I've seen my "generation." I know what their problems are. We learn what we need to know in order to survive. For us survival wasn't feeding ourselves or supporting the economy. It was social. My peers and I learned social survival by watching television. It created an intimate, esoteric context for all the issues and confusing things that were happening in our lives. We had our own common medium that provided language, icons, heroes, storytellers, legends, and idols delivered into every home simultaneously. Of course we all chose different channels, but we all received the same energy.

Except for me. I was not included in the chain—the secret code of culture that worked to connect my classmates and the parallel opinions they all seemed to have. Now I'm not saying that I was just some sad drunk that sat and wondered how I would communicate with these oh-so complex beings. I was just different. To this day I have a distinct way of making people feel unsettled. It's because I'm a foreigner. I never plugged in to the neon glow of homogenized thought that is my country's "culture." I'm not privy to the subtle gestures of compliance and carelessness that are promulgated by the media. Maybe I'm off on the wrong track though. Maybe I'm just a freak like everyone tells me.

I have a son now. And although I do not prescribe to the ultra-

conservatism of my blood relatives, I sometimes find myself spouting the very values that I used to despise. I don't want my son to be a television zombie. By no means. I keep an eye on his television viewing because of what I see on it every time I watch it: violence, sex, profanity and all that jazz. However, I don't want him to be some kind of social retard either. I mean, where do you find good influences these days?

Although I don't prefer to surround my son with electron bombardment technology, I cannot as yet escape it. The television here in my parents' abode is on constantly, regardless of my frequent attempts to quell its glory. I suspect sometimes that they would be more upset at a malfunction in the television than by another severe drop in my grade point average. It just eats at me. I mean, the first part of my life was totally sheltered from the thing, and the other half has been composed of constantly trying to get their attention away from it long enough to ask why they're so attached to it. I asked once for a television free day—just one 24-hour period without the power button on. Bad idea. It turned into a debate about property rights and schedule prerogatives and I definitively lost. I learned that it is not my television, not my house, and apparently I have no freedom from its supremacy.

So, what's the point? I try to step back and ask myself that on occasion. If television is the medium through which our culture receives its fodder, what's the use in fighting it? Everyone else is doing it. If you don't watch it you'll inexorably be left out of water cooler discussions, betting pools, inside jokes, and the like. But if you watch it constantly what do you really gain? I mean sure, television is a great tool, but what are we using it for? Exactly what part of society equates entertainment with art and culture? I find that currently my answer is simple. I'll be at the library.



TRAVIS ELLIS



TRAVIS ELLIS



TRAVIS ELLIS

