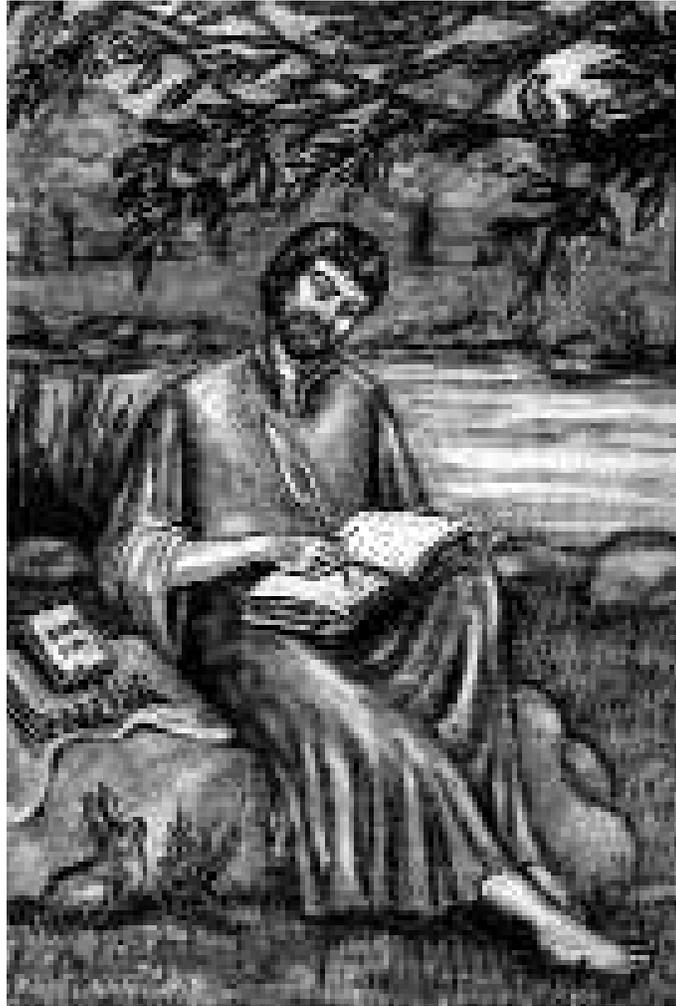
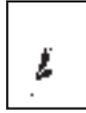


SPRING 2005
VOLUME 14

Apostrophe





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Volume 14 of *Apostrophe*, the University of Saint Francis literary magazine, contains seventeen literary works and five pieces of art from student and alumni contributors. Students also designed this year’s covers. These contributions represent a wide range of subjects, styles and forms.

The title *Apostrophe* refers to a figure of speech in which a person or object is directly addressed as if present. The following pieces, then, are an address to you our readers.

We congratulate those students and alumni whose creative efforts are displayed in the following pages. We extend a thank you to all who have helped in any way to make Volume 14 a reality. Enjoy your reading journey.

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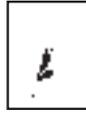


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Learning to Read

“It’s just ice,” she said,
small finger tracing
the letters on the page,
young face intent.

“Just ice?” I inquired.

(no blizzard to confuse?)

“Just ice.”

I guess that would be enough,
I thought, to send all cascading
through gates and over bridges-
a liminal slalom,
an iceberg calved for change.

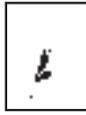
Light glinted through the frosty panes,
returned my eye from inner landscapes
to pale freckles and bright eyes.

“Oh!” she crowed, delighted,
her fingers wagging insight,
“That’s right – it’s really

justice.”



DEBERA KUNTZ
CLASS OF '08
SPIRIT



Falling Off tHE edge

i stood there at the edge, not stopping to think

others jumped.

just holding on.

I stood there waiting and watching as

others passed and

beckoned for me to follow.

but I just stood,

stood and thought too long about

jumping.

and as I stood and thought they left,

left me to think, think about jumping

into the darkness of trust.

Then you passed by,

i saw you pass by with another

and you looked. Looked at me

then were gone.

but I stood there still and waited, waited

for someone to come and jump with me.

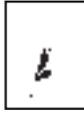
i soon got tired of waiting; of thinking

and gave up,

so I laid down and closed my eyes

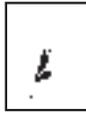
not expecting anymore, not expecting to

ever jump into the darkness of trust.



after some time had passed
i felt a hand on my shoulder
and a voice that said,
“Come, come with me and jump in the
darkness of trust.”
so i stood, took your hand,
and you led me to the edge.
but i stopped,
you waited, held my hand, and let me
think.
so we stood and i thought, thought
about jumping
into the darkness of trust.

you began to then hold me in your arms
the safest place i had ever felt and i
knew you cared.
time passed and you didn't go.
now I stand here with you, in your arms
looking into your blue eyes and you say,
“Trust me. Jump with me into the
darkness.” and i stop thinking.
now here we are standing at the edge,
embracing one another, trusting.
and i am with you, ready to jump
into the darkness of trust.



Grandpa

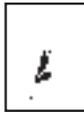
I was in the middle of gardening on a bright sunny afternoon. It had been the first time in a few weeks that I could find the time to plant my favorite flowers. The flowers had a vibrant yellow center that resembled the sun with dark green, veiny leaves. Two of the flowers were dying. One was completely spent and the other was wilted and weak, hanging low to the ground, as if it were sad to lose a friend. I quickly snipped them and threw them on the ground in an automatic motion.

I heard the phone ring from inside, and I was frustrated that I had to stop gardening to answer it. I had not been outside for more than five minutes and already I was interrupted. My mother was on the other end. She was speaking with an unusually solemn voice. Slowly words fell from her mouth and she told me that my grandfather just died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. I was so shocked that she could say that without breaking down. I didn't believe her. She asked me to come up to the hospital as soon as I could and I confirmed that I would. As I put the phone down, I covered my quivering mouth with my hand and sobbed.

I rushed upstairs to get cleaned up before I went to the hospital. It was so difficult changing my clothes and freshening my face because my eyes kept swelling with tears that blurred my vision. The frustration of getting ready kept my cheeks pink and warm. I felt flustered and hurried, and yet, it was a worthless rush to leave the house. I wanted to hurry, but at the same time, I knew if I arrived at the hospital any sooner, it would not bring my grandfather back to life.

I parked my car a few blocks away from the hospital, where I park every day for work. I walked through a brick road alley surrounded by Victorian style buildings. The sky grew darker as I walked. The extra distance gave me just enough time to compose myself so that I was ready to console my dad. It had not been easy for him to handle death in the past, and I did not expect the death of his own father to be any easier.

I crept up to the hospital and saw my mother and two younger sisters in a cluster, a few feet away from my father. Guilt infused my veins when I did not have the urge to run to dad with open arms. He was talking to his brothers and sisters, and none of them were crying, or even drying their



eyes. I assumed there would be more crying and holding and wiping tears. The lack of emotions made my brain twist in an effort to register what was going on.

I came to the cluster, and immediately my sister told me that Grandpa was now alive. *Now alive?* It was as if I suddenly could not understand English. *What is she saying?* She sounded like the grown-ups from a Charlie Brown TV show. *What did she mean? Mom said he died.* They all explained to me that after several tries with the defibrillator, the medical staff administered manual CPR, and Grandpa was revived. I then knew why they had dry eyes.

Within about an hour and a half, they transferred him to the intensive care unit. Our family had accumulated within that time and filled the visitor lobby from wall to wall. We all took turns visiting Grandpa's room. I tried to be polite and let cousins, aunts and uncles go first. Deep down the politeness was just fear. My kneecaps shook at the thought of seeing him. I knew that I needed to tell him how much I loved him, but also knew that if I tried to open my mouth I would choke with emotion. I did not want to take the attention away from him by making a fool of myself being so emotional and incapable of speaking. Lord knows, I would have sounded like a fool with loud high pitch words and gasping staccato breaths in between.

By that time there were only four of us left to see him. I walked down the long and eerie hall to his room with three of my cousins. I saw only what was expected, and yet still I was breathless. His entire chest was a deep purple, from rib to rib, from the process of CPR. He had various vines going through the veins of his arms and legs and tubes through his nostrils. His mouth was hanging wide-open, bone dry, and his eyes were half shut. It was obvious that he could not see with his eyes because he did not seem to be looking at anything in particular. All the while, his random jerky body movements gave us the idea that he could feel people around him and hear their voices. When he heard voices, his jaw moved up and down like he was trying to talk. His nurse asked the four of us if there were any more relatives who needed to see him. After we said no, she asked us to leave. At that moment, Grandpa's body started to shake and convulse as if he did not want us to leave. I had to hold my face tight to keep my composure.



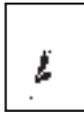
He stayed in the intensive care unit for four more days. My dad had made the executive decision to have only Grandpa's children visit, and they could keep their families informed. The hospital was not used to such a big family as ours and advised us to keep the numbers down. On the fourth day, my father called me to let me know that Grandpa was going to be moved to the fourth floor. He told me that it would be all right to visit.

I decided to bring Grandpa some fresh flowers from my own garden to help brighten his room. He loved to grow plants. He had an extensive vegetable garden that was meticulously well kept, even in his ripe old age. He had about eight fruit trees scattered around his seven-acre yard that all of us cousins loved to pick. I knew that if I brought something I grew he would be proud of the influence he had on me. While I drove to the hospital, I was nervous that the humidity from my car would make the flowers wilt and ruin them. I set them in the cup holder so they could stand upright. When I got to the parking lot, I formed them into a pretty cascade. I was careful not to shake them too much, or lose any water.

I entered the hospital and walked down a more cheerful hall with a cluster of vibrant daisies neatly arranged in a beer bottle. I could hear loud voices and laughter. When I came to room 444, there I saw my grandfather, sitting perfectly straight up, and engaging in conversation. He noticed me standing in the hall and called for me by name. His eyes were bright and perky. His skin was no longer pale, but a rich olive, Italian tone. There was no sign of near-death experience in him. He was even making a few jokes. He giggled when I presented the beer-bottled flowers.

Two years ago, when he was eighty-nine, he told me he was going to live to be 125 years old. I am beginning to believe that he will do just that. Lying in room 444, he lit the room with his witty charm. He never let the conversations die. He asked us questions about our goings-on, and told us stories of when he was younger. Everyone in the room, even the nurses, sat there attentively listening to him reminisce.

I could tell from the gleam in his eyes that he remembered the stories as if they happened yesterday. He told us about his adventure of coming to the United States from Italy. He was an eager and excited fifteen years old,



meeting his mother who had already lived here. He had to go to school to learn English. He told us he was required to start in the first grade. He laughed as he explained that he could not fit in the desks made for six year olds, and had to sit at the teacher's desk. He did not care that he was nine years older than the other students in the class. He was determined to learn so he could work and make a living. Nothing was going to stop him from doing what he wanted to do. He was not going to let language be a barrier. He eventually started his own successful business as a local tailor with his own shop. My heart gleamed right along with his face as he continued with the stories.

I came out of the hospital with an extra bounce in my step. My heart leaped with inspiration by his example of living life. I started thinking about all the things I complain about, like being rushed, or aching bones. I thought about things that bring me down, like rainy days. I thought about the things I lose, how much money I do not make, what makes me angry, what makes me sad. And then I thought about how Grandpa lives his life. He is an amazing 91 years old and loves to live. He loves life so much that he fought a grueling battle with the angel of death and came out the victor.

The next day I was out in my garden again. I had nothing to plant; just stood in admiration. I noticed a flower hanging low. The petals were dry and curly. Seeds were falling from the center. But the foliage was still green, so I left it alone. The two flowers I cut days before were still on the ground, camouflaged in the grass. I thought about putting them in the trash, but instead, I put them in a compost pile, where they could be mixed into the soil again.



My Dedication

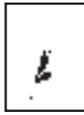
I had spent three weeks in November of 2003 working on a statue dedicated to a boy who had battled AIDS since the day he was born. I used all the time I could to create a work of art that didn't just show his fight with the disease, but his faith that God will protect and carry him through his life.

I stand proudly next to my creation after many long, stressful days and nights of molding plaster into stone and paper into flesh. Honestly, I was happy to be finished with such a complicated and stressful project. I was tired and dirty, as if I had gotten into a mud fight with the Three Stooges.

I spent days researching and nights building. Sometimes I would be angry and frustrated. At other times I would be excited and ready to go. Most of the time I would sit and in my mind I would watch my statue being built. I would add and subtract, build and rebuild until I saw what I had imagined all along.

My hands became sandpaper after endless hours of plaster wrestling. Dust saturated the air and my basement floor turned into a chalkboard. One deep breath would turn my lungs into rock. It was a Plaster of Paris paradise.

When I am painting I feel like I am four years old again, learning to paint for the first time. I got paint all over the floor, and me, but the best way to make art is to dive in to the pool of paint and pull out the best creation,



even if it does mean getting very dirty. Besides, a little paint on my clothes isn't the end of the world. There are more important things to worry about that may be the end of the world, for some people.

At last my piece was finished and like God I rested a day to marvel at my creation. This statue was to resemble the great stone statues of mighty kings and great gods of the past with a powerful profile and a commanding stand. It was a marble guard of a helpless, frail baby who was dying. This guard would stand forever to carry and protect this child through a life of uncertainty.

Was my statue like the great works of the old masters? To me it was, and perhaps also to the boy the statue was carrying in its arms. Sure the marble looked like runny paint and the powerful profile was a little lopsided, but I knew I had made my first meaningful piece. I did not do this for a grade or to please others. I did it for the boy who spent every day of his life wishing he were normal.

But like stone, his faith to live will crumble from time to time when he is faced with the doubt that he will win. I have not seen my artwork for almost a year and I may never see it again. I wonder if this boy survived, and if he did, what would he say to my creation? Perhaps he would want it to stand forever, even after the war was over, so all AIDS survivors will remember how solid their faith was to live.



Sam Stops for a Drink

The shards of glass stuck into Sam's hands as he scrambled back onto his feet. Through the murky haze of the bar, he could barely make out the silhouette of the flannel-covered primate making his way back from the area with the pool tables. Only a few times in his life had Sam thought he was about to die. This was a new addition to that catalogue.

It had started innocently enough. On the final leg of his nighttime journey home from the model railroad enthusiasts' convention, Sam had pulled into the parking lot of the skuzzy little roadside establishment, his black Lincoln sedan standing out amongst what was half Harleys and half pickup trucks. He expected the crowd inside the bar to reflect this biker/redneck division.

The air in the bar hung in a thick haze, the smell of stale cigarette smoke dominating. Stevie Ray Vaughn jammed on the jukebox. A wiry little man with a mustache and glasses, Sam didn't draw much attention upon his entrance. His black jeans and leather jacket put him closer in appearance to the biker crowd, but he'd never owned a Harley. As he stepped up to the bar, a big guy in flannel and with far fewer than the standard allotment of teeth looked up from the leather-skinned girl he'd been sloppily kissing since before Sam had walked in. The guy looked at Sam and sneered.

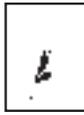
"Look at the runt in the sissy leather jacket," Sam heard him murmur to the girl, who smirked and took a drag on her cigarette.

Sam ignored them and waited for the bartender to come by.

"Probably one of them commies," the ape in flannel slobbered. The girl cackled.

Sam smiled slyly. "Better be careful there," he heard himself saying without looking over. "If I were you, I'd get blood work done before I even looked at her."

In two seconds, the ape was at Sam's side, towering over him. Sam looked up as if the guy had come to take his drink order. "What did you say?" the guy growled.



“Nothing,” came Sam’s nonchalant, almost serene response.

“Is that so?” the big guy snarled.

“Certainly,” Sam nodded, the neon lights above the bar catching in his glasses. “It isn’t every day that you see a brother and sister showing so much affection.”

Two seconds later, the attention of the entire bar had been grabbed by the sight of a big guy in flannel kicking the crap out of a little guy in leather, Stevie Ray Vaughn bouncing along in accompaniment to the blows. Barstools and shot glasses fell to the floor in the struggle, the glasses shattering in the process. A right hook to the jaw sent Sam down to the floor to join them.

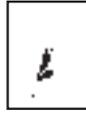
After a few moments of lying dazed on the ground, Sam wondered why the Neanderthal hadn’t stomped his skull in. That’s when he saw the guy returning from the pool tables wielding a cue like a bat. Barely able to get to his feet, Sam dove across the floor just as the big guy took his first swing. He missed. As Sam again clawed his way to his feet, he found that he’d landed in a particularly smoky end of the bar, of which he could make out only leather vests, tattooed arms, and whiskey bottles.

As the figure of the flannel man loomed toward him, he thought quickly and shouted out more for the people around him than for the lug, “You can’t say that! We Harley owners do too have balls!”

A hostile “Huh?” ran through the group immediately surrounding Sam, and he knew from the horrified look on the flannel ape’s face that this was serious.

A moment later, the big ape was covered in a sea of brawling bikers, all intent on taking one of his limbs or some other appendage home as a souvenir. Sam, figuring he wasn’t all that thirsty, strolled to the door and stepped out into the night air. He smiled and thought about his wife and two kids.





The Journey

The airport is crowded with frazzled travelers rushing to find their gates. As I stand in line at the security checkpoint, I dream about sleeping in the comfort of my own bed tonight.

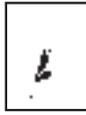
“Ma’am, please remove your shoes,” brings me back from my daydreams.

“Ma’am is this your bag? May I look inside please?” Oh, of course. My body is going through the motions but my mind is elsewhere. I am enchanted with the other travelers around me—hundreds of people from all over the country, even the world. I wonder what their stories are. Where is home for the man who speaks no English and doesn’t understand what the security guard is saying to him or the young girl carrying an obviously beloved teddy bear, struggling to keep up with her mother?

As I watch these strangers around me, I think about my own home. I see the stack of shoes piled up by the back door and today’s mail and homework scattered across the kitchen table. In my mind’s eye I scan the room, noting the dirty dishes in the sink and the floor that needs to be swept.

The chaos of a busy, active family is not unlike the chaos of this airport that I stand in. Everyone is quickly rushing, anticipating the journey ahead. Where will life take my family? Doubtless we will all go in different directions—the girls to their adult lives and their own families and Doug and I to quieter, less eventful days. I realize as I think of home that our *house* is only the vehicle that we rush in and out of on our journey. Our *home* is the intertwining of our lives as we love each other, support each other, and create the hub of safety that is there when we experience life’s delays, cancellations or even losses—far more important than luggage.

“Ma’am, are these seats taken?” Once again I am snapped back to the reality of the hard airport chair beneath me. As I smile at the stranger beside me, I think to myself, I can’t wait to get home!



Giddy: a Midrash

“God is on your side.” The voice came, cool and abrupt.

“Yeah, right.”

“No, I mean it.”

“If God is on our side, then why –” He broke off and swept his arm indignantly at the windowless winepress, the chaff everywhere: in heaps, his clothing, his hair, the air. Gideon coughed, then continued, “Why has all this happened to us, so we shrink and hide from our foes?” His flail thumped in emphasis and Gideon stared angrily at the stranger, not quite meeting his eyes.

“Giddy.”

“Don’t call me that!” Resentment overcame the youth’s caution before this well-spoken visitor. Then he demanded, “How did you know?”

“I have a message for you.”

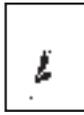
Somehow the stranger seemed even more impressive, and the boy felt small as he replied, “Oh? What?” His voice cracked, his face flushed.

The messenger smiled very slightly. “God has a job for you. You’re the one to save the people, to rout the enemy. Then you won’t have to hide here.” His sweeping hand seemed to convey an entirely different aspect.

“Me!” The voice didn’t crack: it was totally treble. “I don’t do battles. You can’t make me. I’m too young: my family’s too small. . .”

This time their eyes caught and held. “That doesn’t matter, God will be with you.” Gideon gulped; his head and eyes swam.

Eventually the messenger left.



Stars circled; seasons came and went. Rains filled up rivers that emptied into seas. Lambs gamboled, eagles soared. Olives sprang up, spread their branches, and the oil from their fruits gave light and life. People went about their lives in combined clarity and confusion. At the right time the messenger was sent with a further communication.



On another day a young girl was home (as women so often were in those days) mending and thinking. It was a worthwhile occupation and not unpleasant. Someone had to keep the threads together. Besides, she liked to think: her heart was full of thoughtfulness.

“Cheers, Mary! God is with you.”

Since she had been admiring God’s goodness, Mary was not overly afraid but looked up wide-eyed wondering why the stranger had come. The sky seemed swiftly clearer somehow, as if the echoes of his words had shaken obscurity away from the entire area. The air tasted sweet as that in the hill country near her cousin Beth’s home.

“God wants you to have his son.”

“Excuse me? How?” She inhaled sharply. “I haven’t slept with anyone.” Her hands stirred then stilled.

“God will send you his Spirit. You’ll call the baby God-Saves after his Father.”

Mary considered the idea thoroughly: she knew this would not, could not be as simple as it sounded. She could hear the quickening wind outside; a breeze floated in and caressed her warm face. Her resolve grew quietly. “Yes,” she said finally, drawing a very deep breath. “Yes.” Suddenly trembling, she steadied herself against the wall.

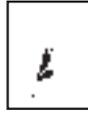
She felt a little giddy.



Brotherhood

The Brotherhood started back in 1982. The separation of only a year stood between the four of us. What more could a guy ask for, three brothers who push, punched, and pounded me whenever they wanted to. What do you expect when you're the youngest? Regardless of what they did to me, they were still my brothers—brothers, who may have teased me but were always there to protect me. Before you knew it, we were all grown up and looking after one another. I couldn't have picked a better bunch of guys to have as brothers—brothers who have been there in the worst and best of times.

Imagine having three best friends by your side before you were even born. Four ornery boys were growing up experiencing all the different obstacles life had to offer. A separation between my parents brought all four of us together like a gathering at Sunday church. Our friendship and trust for one another grew closer and strong. We were like four links brought together to make a chain, a very tight chain, a chain that will never be broken. I look at our picture and realize how lucky I have been to have them as brothers and role models who I turned to for answers and guidance. I could trust these guys to tell a secret to and know it was not going any farther than the four walls. I am amazed to see how fast we have all grown up. Many memories have been made and many laughs have been laughed. We are all starting to form our own individual lives by choosing different roads to go down. Three have moved away from the nest. Two have said "I do," one has a baby on the way. We may not see each other every day but when we do, we make the best of it. I look forward to seeing my brothers. A warm, comfortable, happy feeling runs through my blood when they're around. We know how much each of us means to one another and there is nothing one of us wouldn't do to make each other's world a better place. I have come to realize these are the guys I will grow old with and I wouldn't have it any other way.



Pandora

Like a B-movie babe basement-bond
Pandora just had to open that box,
ominous music swelling in thunderous chords
no doubt lightning flashing too

 strobe one: hand to cover

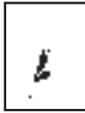
 strobe two: lid upraised

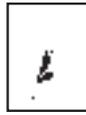
 strobe three: aghast and shaken

 strobe four: stricken, dazed

while skittering shadows flit about
eldritch and malign

 But hope hovers near.





Unexplainable Protection

Yeah, this class is totally boring. It is a tedious hour and twenty-five minutes long. My teacher is really off-the-wall. She wears strange outfits with loud colors that are formed into wacky patterns. She is different all right. When she lectures to the class, I never understand what she is trying to explain because she uses words I don't know. She has that annoying nasal voice, too, that drags every word together. It is a chore to listen to her. When the pitch of her voice rises, I usually just look around the classroom and stare at her weird posters of abstract art with people walking on stairs that are upside-down, or fuzzy paintings that have 3-D images hidden inside them. I can never see the 3-D images, even if I cross my eyes. Then when I cross my eyes, I get a headache. I don't get those pictures, so I have decided to write in my journal, instead of staring at the posters.

She just put in a video about child psychology. That is what kind of class this is: psychology. The video is about children reacting to danger or things that may harm them. It is talking about why children might avoid things that are harmful to them. The commentator guy is saying that sometimes children refuse to eat certain foods like peas, because they may have an allergy to them, even though they don't know it. He even says parents should not make their kids eat anything that they don't want to. He's a genius; where was he when I was four? He is talking about other stuff that kids avoid, without explanation, like swimming in water. He says that, although it is unexplainable, children are using their instincts to avoid danger or harm. He calls it "unexplainable protection." It reminds me of when I was a little girl. I can remember a specific time when I was near danger, and I had "unexplainable protection." There was a presence around me that protected me. I'm not talking about a refusal to eat peas. It wasn't my parents or any adults who protected me either. I couldn't see it; I couldn't hear it, but I could certainly feel it.

I was four, sitting in the back seat of my aunt's 74 Chevy Nova. We were on our way to a park that I had never been before. It was the first time I had ever been to the state of Florida. To the right of me was my older sister. To the left of me was her friend. They were babbling about what they were going to do first once we got to the park. Of course, I was not allowed in the conversation. I was just sitting there chomping on my green Hubba Bubba bubble gum. It was a big moment for me when I slid my tongue between my lips and forced out air. I blew a bubble, but no one saw it.

"Amy! Amy! I blew a bubble!"



“No you didn’t Buffy, you can’t blow bubbles,” she condescended. Everyone called me Buffy. The adults thought it was cute that I couldn’t pronounce my real name. I would say *Ewizabuff*, instead of Elizabeth, so then Buffy caught on.

My aunt tried to defend me, “Let’s see Buffy, do it again.”

“Ok! Ya ready,” I anticipated. I took a deep breath, like it was my last, and did the whole procedure. I showed them, I made a bubble the size of a peanut. It looked like a green wart that belonged on the end of a witch’s nose. Everyone was impressed and I was allowed into the conversations. The inclusion didn’t last long, though.

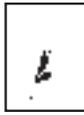
Once we got to the park, my aunt went over the rules thoroughly with her fists firmly planted on her hips. No teasing, no messing in puddles, and no touching bugs or animals were emphasized.

“Stay out of trouble!” she warned. She was only seventeen but she still intimidated us like she was a grown-up.

The older girls split and I was left on my own. I didn’t care too much. The twisty slide looked so fun and I was glad I didn’t have to take turns with anyone. One slide, in particular, was especially inviting. There at the end of the slide was a large, grainy puddle of brown water. I envisioned myself racing down and hitting the puddle so hard that the brown water would splash my knees. I could hardly wait.

I climbed the ladder with pride. Every two or three steps I would look behind my shoulder and feel the butterflies culminating in my stomach. I reached the top of the tower and slowly sat down. I noticed there was a bar above my head so I grabbed on to it. I swung to and fro and gained great momentum. I did that for about thirty seconds; I wanted the ride to be perfect. I released and went faster than I imagined. My eyes were glued to the puddle. As I got right to the edge of the slide, my speed picked up even more and ascended me. I floated into the air and right over the puddle. It felt like a pair of hands lightly pressed on my back to give me an extra boost. I bounced on the ground about a half a foot away from the puddle.

I dusted my knees and pressed my lips together. I marched back to the ladder, alternating my arms back and forth exaggeratingly, and climbed, without looking over



my shoulder this time. As I sat at the top of the tower, I glared at the puddle with tiny almond eyes. I grabbed that bar and swung, and swung harder, and swung faster. I was going to do it. Swoosh! There I went, and there I floated over the puddle. I felt the hands again. I stood up fast ready to yell at whoever held me in the air. I twirled to the right and no one was there. I twisted to the left and no one was there. In fact, the only people that were at the park at 8:00 A.M. were the older girls, my aunt and I.

“Aunt Gina,” I whined. “Will you watch me go down the slide?”

“I can see you from here,” she said sitting at the picnic table.

“Uh, no. Come with me. Someone keeps pushing me when I go down the slide.”

“Pushing you?” she said as she giggled. “But nobody is here but us.” She saw my eyes droop and my bottom lip swell, so she followed me to the slide.

“Ok you stand right here at the end,” I demanded. I climbed the ladder once more. I swung from the bar and released. Once again, I floated right over the puddle.

“Did you see! Did you see them push me?” I didn’t dare tell her that my intentions were to jump into the puddle. She would not want me to do that.

“Buffy, nobody is, wait a minute. Don’t move!” I froze in place just like I was playing freeze tag. She looked closely at the puddle. I had no idea what she was doing. I grew tired of standing in place and took a step.

“No! I said, don’t move!” She stared at the puddle trying to figure out what caused ripples in the water. My eyebrows squeezed together in wonderment, but before I could make a thought she threw a stone into the puddle. Nothing happened, so she picked up a bigger stone and tossed it in. Suddenly, a long, slimy snake jolted out of the puddle and scurried through the grass. She grabbed my arm and made me run with her in the other direction.

“You could have hurt yourself missy. There was a snake in that puddle,” she reprimanded. “You’re lucky you didn’t land in that puddle, you coulda got bit!” My eyes peeled back in astonishment. I swallowed a gulp so big my throat made a thud noise.



“Mleck!” I said by over emphasizing with my tongue. “A snake?” I paused, “But did you see them push me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking bout Buffy,” my aunt huffed while wiping the sweat off her forehead. “No one is here,” she clarified. I just stood there blinking my eyes with a blank look.

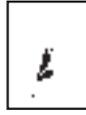
“Hmhf,” she sighed. “Let’s go find your sister and her friend.” We went to where my sister and her friend were playing and sat on a bench. After a few minutes of watching them, my aunt got us back in the Nova and chauffeured us back to her place.

For the whole ride I was left out of the conversations, but all I could think about was the icky snake that could have bit me.

I never knew how I floated over the puddle, or why I didn’t land in it. It was just a presence that I could not explain. But I swear I felt the hands on my back. I could feel every finger tip. It was a little bit like the children in the video. Somehow, I was able to avoid danger. It was “unexplainable protection.”

“Uhm, Ms. Elizabeth Harbor are you watching the video?”

“Yes ma’am.” There’s the voice again. I better stop writing now. Mrs. Schnozzle is getting suspicious of me. However, I notice that she is writing in a notebook too. Maybe it is her own journal, and she is telling of her childhood memories. Who knows, maybe she’s not so weird after all.



The Special Dance

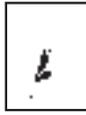
The little girl of two, with bouncing brown curls, dances with her Dad.
Little faltering feet fit on top of those strong, guiding shoes.
Stepping to the music, one two three, one two three.
What a special dance!

Years later, she's in her Dad's arms trying to match his steps.
The dress makes her look so grown up; where did the years go?
Skirt and crinoline swirl and swing in the breeze.
What a special dance!

Polkas play and couples merrily move to the beat of the music.
We breathlessly circle. The crowd becomes a blur of color.
We laugh. We sweat. We glide across the floor.
What a special dance!

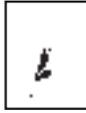
That was then, this is now. The years have taken their toll.
There has been family to raise, illness to overcome.
His feet now shuffle. Mine run in circles.
What a special dance!

In the kitchen we stand in each other's arms dancing in place.
Memories of those earlier days pass through our minds.
We recall the joy and delight of those steps and spins.
What a special dance!



My Name

My name sets me apart from everyone else in the world. When my family tree is shaken, my apple is the only one that falls to the soft, green grass below. My name does not follow in the footsteps of my father. My name will be kept in my generation and my generation only. A name identifies me from three other brothers that came before me. The identity was given to me to shape my own individual personality. Hollow is what my name stands for—hollow like an empty tree that sits with no life within, no place to grow, and no place to spread its limbs. How could hollow represent a name with so much heart, desire, passion, courage and love inside? When people hear my name, hollow is not what they see nor feel. They see a proud and happy man who lives life, who is thankful for the wonderful gifts he has been given. Hollow is only a word, a word that has no true meaning to who I am.



Birthday Thoughts

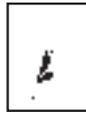
Another year older and wiser they say...
So, when does one grow up?
There are days I just want to run away
Past endless fields, toward a setting sun
Until someone calls and my heart listens.

Another year older and wiser they say...
So when is one safe from pain?
There are days when tears won't stop
When life is just too much to bear
Until someone calls and my heart listens.

Another year older and wiser they say...
So when do one's dreams come true?
There are days when the ruts are deep
And progress is impeded or denied
Until someone calls and my heart listens.

Another year older and wiser they say...
So when is contentment found?
These are days that glow with golden warmth
And love wraps me in her embrace.
You call my name and my heart replies.





Not For Sale

The daylight was beginning to fade in the west as we hurried to complete the baling. It was the last time we would be hitched to the bale maker. By this time tomorrow someone else would be dropping the pin in the hitch of their truck as they prepared to take it away, after paying the clerk the winning ransom of the auction ticket. The machine clicked with precision as the cubes of alfalfa spit out the shoot onto the old wooden flatbed wagon. Armed with a hay hook in my hand I waited patiently for the birth of yet another tightly squeezed bundle to make its way back to me as I tried to focus my thoughts on the load being stacked behind me. It was much less painful than seeing the face of the man on the tractor. This man was my father. He hadn't said much for the last week or so leading up to what he knew was coming—the sale. The date on the flyers read Monday 6:00 p.m. that was tomorrow.

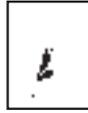
The loss of his father some three months earlier was devastating to this man. Since the age of five when he sat on the seat of the Farmall with his dad they were a team. He was the only son there to carry on, not only the family name, but also the family business. Talk about loyalty, and the trait could not be better defined than what he sacrificed for his father. Opportunities came and went over the years, but none were strong enough to break his bond with his dad. Maybe a better word to describe his decisions would be Love. Now with his career choice, not everything was negative, but what he was facing now was anything but positive.

Now only a couple of hours of daylight remained as we finished plucking the last stem of hay off the pasture, leaving it with a crew cut surface. This field that once held rows of corn and beans would now have rows of machinery lined up on it. The task of getting all the equipment in place reminded me of when I was much younger playing with my toy tractors. Unfortunately, the way dad stood back and watched us was not the way he did in our living room from his chair, with a look of pride for my interest in our family farm life. When these pieces were removed they were not going under my bed, they were going down the road, never to be greased or used by him again. At one point during the chaos of getting everything in order, I needed to ask the old man where he wanted his combine put. I couldn't find him anywhere. So I went into the granary, where I found him sitting on a pile of ear corn with a half shelled cob in his hand. As I walked through the crib and got close enough to hear him stuttering the words: "I'm sorry, Dad, what did I do wrong, what did I do wrong?" I stood back and remembered the last words of the dying old man. "It's yours now son, it's a good piece of dirt, take care of it." My thoughts of that moment burst. When my dad saw me, he



began to sob out loud: “I’m sorry Buck, I lost it, I lost it all.” He pulled his cap over his face and wept uncontrollably. His dog was wrapped around his feet, whining and licking at his face trying to comfort his best friend, something I didn’t know how to do. I didn’t know to comfort him, and he was more than my best friend, he was my Dad. I stepped down out of the crib and left him to be alone. Yes, once again I walked away; it was getting dark.

Now with all the machinery in its proper place for bidding, the only pieces of equipment that needed parked were the two tractors. I walked over to the machine shed and opened the doors unveiling the red iron Farmalls, one being dad’s, and the other granddad’s. As I crawled up over the fender to start the 706 diesel which was dad’s pride and joy, I heard a yell. “What are you doing, get down. I’ll get it, you start his up.” I was relieved to hear some authority coming out of his mouth. The sound of pride rang throughout the shed as it had done each time in the past. He pulled a Swisher Sweet cigar out of the toolbox, rolled it around in his mouth, and took his place in the seat. Like a pilot getting in the cockpit of his F-14, he positioned himself. The engine growled and took off with a roar. He checked the gauges, and found the gear he wanted. By now I had the other tractor running and waited for his signal. No words were needed, I knew when I got the nod, we were rollin’. For the first time in days I saw a man who looked proud and in control and I didn’t know whether to smile with happiness, or shout with inspiration. As he began to creep out of the shed, I followed him to the field, as did he with his father. We never got out of first gear; dad was savoring his final ride on his iron horse, as I was bringing up the rear. The glow on the end of my cigarette did not compare to the fiery tip of his cigar. I can only hope that if I ever have to face such a day as he had, that this little boy will be compared to this big man in front of me. The barnyard echoed as I shouted, “Give’m Hell Dad, I’m right behind you.” When we reached the field I pulled up next to him and after clearing the throat on our machines, we simultaneously shut them down. We sat there for a few minutes looking over the field as we always did at the end of the day. He gave me the nod and stepped down from the 706 for the last time. He walked over to the nose of the tractor and tore off the nameplate and handed it to me. “There you go Buck that’ll make a damn nice ash tray.” He gave me that old grin, one I hadn’t seen in a long time. “You know what, let’em sell the whole damn place off, it’s just dirt.” I reached out and hugged him and said, “They can’t bid on the memories, and they aren’t for sale.” Then I spoke the words that he had said to his dad many a time after the chores were done. “Come on old man, let’s get us a cup of coffee. Where’s your dog?”



Angel of Mercy

Angel of mercy, be with me through the night,

Guide me and help me through this life.

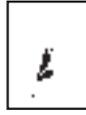
Angel of mercy, your beauty will shine,

Your God's vast image I will always find.

Angel of mercy, carry me away,

So I can see the holiness of God's pure face.





Friendly Counsel

John Askin had a flair for the culinary arts, which made the policy of no cooking in the rooms particularly unbearable. Fortunately, policy was usually more of a suggestion, so every couple of weeks, John would climb a ladder, disable his room's smoke detector, throw open the windows, and seal the base of his door with a wet towel. He would then do up some breaded chicken or whatever magic he felt like working on the portable George Foreman grill he kept tucked away in the back of his closet.

On Thursday night, John had his window open, but he had not planned on doing any cooking. It was the week after spring break, and the weather was simply too refreshing to keep the window closed. The various posters, charts, and photos on John's wall fluttered lightly in the cool, mid-March breeze.

As John sat at his computer, typing his end of a conversation with his brother on Instant Messenger, he felt a presence behind him. He blinked, sent his message, and swiveled around in his chair. Meredith O'Connor, a girl on his floor stood standing in his doorway, leaning against the doorframe, her head cocked to one side.

"Oh, hey Mair," John smiled and nodded. "S'up?"

Meredith returned the smile halfheartedly. "Hey," she closed her eyes, leaned her head backward, and took a deep, stress-laden breath. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure." John swiveled back around and typed to his brother that he'd have to sign off for a few minutes. Swinging back again, he saw that Meredith had stepped into the room, her body seeming to hang on a hook from fatigue. The ceiling light reflected in John's wire-rimmed glasses as he looked her up and down. She motioned to the couch next to the doorway.

"Mind if I sit down?" she mumbled.



John nodded hurriedly and extended a hand. “No, please do.”

Meredith replied by lowering herself down into the ratty, sunken piece of furniture and planting an elbow on the arm nearest the doorway. She was a strongly built girl of twenty with plain features and sandy brown hair pulled back from her face. She wore sweats over her trim, but here-and-there imposing figure. John tried not to stare. John himself was stocky, but tall, with short blonde hair. He wore a white collared top with one of his nicer pairs of jeans. As Meredith made herself comfortable, John coasted forward on his chair, leaned in, and threaded his fingers together.

“So, what’s the matter?”

Meredith wasn’t looking at him but at one of the photos that adorned his wall. A modest four by five amidst a jungle of a wall collage, it was a miracle she had even picked it out.

“I remember that night,” she laughed, her face growing sly. “Man, I got so wasted. I spent the whole next day puking.”

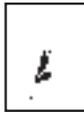
John glanced sideways. He knew the photo well; it was from the last fall’s homecoming dance and featured Meredith grinning and dancing provocatively in the foreground with the captain of the football team while John stood near the side of the shot, his face half cut off. One of the other girls on the floor had given it to him. The wall space immediately around it featured a *National Geographic* poster, a snapshot of his brother, a Saint Jude prayer card, and a sticker bearing the name of his high school – Roncalli. John half-smiled as he looked back to Meredith.

“Yeah, you were pretty gone when I drove you back here that night,” he noted. “I was wondering if you were gonna make it.”

“Oh, I always make it,” Meredith smirked, her gaze moving back in his direction. Her look went vacant.

“So – uh – was there something you wanted to talk about, Mair?” he hated to bring up a potentially unpleasant topic, but he just couldn’t ignore the fact that she was in his room.

Meredith snapped out of it and proceeded to look peeved. “Oh,” she rolled her eyes, and her mouth hung open for a second, “I’m just really going through it with relationships right now.”



“How so?”

“Well,” she paused and grinned, her eyes still near the ceiling, “you remember that guy I was talking about, the one I wanted to try to get something going with?”

John smiled. “You mean the one who made you feel like *just one of the guys*?” His smile gave way to a nod. “Yeah, I remember him. What’s goin’ on?”

Meredith sighed. “Well, the other day I said to him, ‘Hey, it’s been really great getting to know you. I’m glad we’re friends,’ you know, just friends, and he hasn’t said a thing back to me since, not a thing. And we’re talking two or three days! I think I scared him off!”

“Huh. That’s too bad,” John lied. “he hasn’t said a word?”

“No!” Meredith sounded somewhere between distressed and outraged. “He hasn’t called me. He hasn’t answered my e-mails. Nothing! It really sucks.” John blinked behind his glasses. “So – uh – you gonna keep pursuing him, or do you have some other options in mind?”

A wry smirk slid across Meredith’s face. “There is one guy. My roommate’s tryin’ to set me up with her boyfriend’s best friend. It’s weird though.” She grinned for a second. “I mean, I don’t really know the guy, and it’s like they’re expecting us to hook up; they’re just waiting and watching us...”

“Like two specimens in a bottle?” John tried.

Meredith nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. I feel like we’re some science experiment!”

John leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. “Well, do you think it has a chance – love in a petri dish and all that?”

“Heh,” Meredith laughed. “I don’t know. He’s probably an ass, if they’re actually trying to set him up with me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” John smiled, “at least not the second part.”

Meredith missed the joke. “I dunno,” she sighed, her eyes trailing toward the large



Snow Feathers

Feathers as white as the snow softly flutter in the wind.

Two cranes on a snowy pine stand on their ballerina limbs,

Their prints make soft indentations where they had once stood.

The pine is laced with layers of sparkling crystalline frost,

Adding a touch of elegance to the crisp day.

Each branch and twig is frosted over as if fairies tiptoed

With icy slippers carefully, to make sure a spot wasn't missed.

The powdery soft snow shudders off the branches,

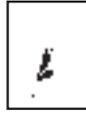
Just like the feathers on the cranes as they preen.

Their wings flutter softer than the snowflakes that fall upon them

As they lift into the air and glide on wings as white as snow.

Where the lines between nature and these frost-covered angels converge

Is hard to tell. They disappear into the flurries that had once formed them.



Spring Cleaning for the Soul

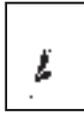
I just kept my head turned to the left. Every muscle of my body was tight. Despite all the pain and fear I was feeling, in the eye of the storm I was still. That was all I could do for myself; lay still. Not one sound came from my mouth, but a long screeching whimper wanted to escape. My head was throbbing from taking a blow to my left ear, and hot tears ran slowly from the edges of my eyes to my chin. My mind was like jelly, but my body was stiff. My elbows were numb from being pinned to the floor. But, I was just still, waiting in agony for the moment to pass, and it did.

During the winter months, I felt as drab and dreary as the weather suggested. I was in a constant state of confusion. I never felt good about the decisions I made when I was alone with my boyfriend. I was ashamed that I might never stick up for myself or get myself out of the difficult situations. I didn't know why either. All I had to do was speak up. All I had to do was walk away. I did not have to put up with the way he treated me. For some reason, walking away wasn't easy to do and I didn't know why. Everyday I woke up saying to myself I'm gonna speak up, I won't let it happen.

I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. Everything to me felt heavy. My eyes drooped; my shoulders were round; my chin hung low. As I passed other kids in the hall, I could feel them stare and whisper. It drove me nuts, too, because I couldn't hear out of my left ear. I couldn't make out what they were saying, and I was too ashamed to look at their faces. I didn't trust anyone for any reason. Hell, I couldn't even trust myself.

I lost touch with most of my friends, except Gabby and Hope. They were the only two people I felt I could trust. They always stayed by my side. They were always sincere to me, although I still worried that they would turn on me. I worried, not because of the way they acted or treated me, but because I expected everyone to turn on me. Hope asked me at least once a day why I had been so quiet during the winter months. I just told her I didn't know. I didn't want to bother her with my boyfriend problems.

Gabby was continuously in everyone else's business, and she wasn't afraid to share news with others. So, of course, I never opened up to her too much. Even though she gossiped all the time, she had a special ability to read how other people felt without them saying anything. Every once in a while she would tell me she knew why I had been so quiet. My cheeks would burn with humiliation when she predicted the cause



of my withdrawal. She wouldn't dwell on the subject though, for my benefit. She'd just say sharply, "You need to dump the bastard."

She had a confidence about her that I envied. She never put up with anyone's crap. She rarely dated boys for any length of time, and made clear that it was her decision not to. She didn't need everyone's approval, like I did. That's what drew people to her; everyone loved her. Just like every other girl in the school, I wanted to be just like her. After a crummy and disappointing weekend in late March, I decided I was going to take her advice about my boyfriend seriously. It was only a matter of time.

On the last day of April, I staggered into my English class. I sat in the back row, close to the teacher's desk. I liked my English teacher, Miss Chirkup; she was young and easy to relate to. She had wide, round eyes that never judged anyone or anything. Her cheeks were soft and full and buried her age. Her make-up was always perfectly placed, never smeared or uneven. All the boys swooned over her and competed for attention.

I found it hard that day to give her all of my attention. She asked me to come see her at the end of class. My stomach jittered with nerves wondering what I had done wrong. When the bell rang, I slowly crept to her desk.

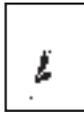
"April, I noticed that you have been looking blue lately. Is everything OK?" she asked politely.

"Oh, I'm OK," I whimpered.

"Well, you look a little stressed out, is there something bothering you?"

My eyes dropped to the floor. I wanted to tell her everything but my voice was paralyzed. If I told her the truth, she would think I was irresponsible. I knew she thought of me as one of the "good students" and I didn't want to ruin it.

"Oh, it's just, well, y-ya know when sometimes you wanna stick up for yourself but you don't, and you really regret it?" I stammered as she nodded her head. "I guess I just wish I could stick up for myself sometimes."



“It sounds like you carry some excess baggage of worry and stress. But that’s OK, I’ve had that before. Sometimes you just gotta get in there clean it out, and get rid of it. It’s like spring-cleaning for your soul. Hang in there, I believe in you.”

“Thanks Miss Chirkup, you always know what to say.” She had the best way of saying things. It was not because she was an English teacher, but because she sincerely cared about her students.

“Hey April!” Gabby said when she caught me in the hall. “Here, this note is from Daisy Blume. She told me to give it to you. Hope you don’t mind I read it already.”

“Uh, give me that,” I snickered back. Daisy was a nice girl, but she was one of those people I had lost touch with. Actually, we were pretty close friends before I started dating my boyfriend. I spent so much time with him that she stopped calling me, assuming that I wouldn’t be free. She was always fun to hang out with, and I often wanted to give her a call, but after I lost touch with her, I hesitated contacting her because I was afraid she would think I was lame. One month had gone by without contacting her, then two months. After being out of touch with someone for three months, it is a risk to call out of the blue. It was a sort of unwritten rule that three months was just too long. The note, however, was very relieving. She took the risk and broke the rule, just for me.

Hey April!

What’s up? I just wanted to write you a note to tell you I am still alive. I know we don’t get together much anymore but I do miss hanging out with you. We used to have some pretty wild times! Remember when we tee-peed Mr. Kirk’s house during homecoming. We stuck so many plastic forks in his lawn that we tripped on them! Wasn’t that so funny when I stumbled down the driveway! I am surprised we didn’t get caught.

It’s been so long since we’ve gotten together. Now it’s spring and school is out in a few weeks. Let’s make sure we do something before summer, just you and me. Have you picked out your prom dress yet? I’m getting mine from the Vicky Secret catalog. It’s strapless and light purple, full-length. I hope that it will be warm on prom night. By the way, I am having people over to my lake cottage for after prom, you should come, everybody will be there.



Well I just wanted to keep in touch. Give me a call OK!

Ciao!

Daisy

Juniors Rule!!!

By the time I finished reading the note, my shoulders lifted a little. I felt a warm, soothing circle around my chest, which, ironically, made my eyes misty. Maybe I wasn't so lame, like I thought. I couldn't believe she took the time to reach out to me after I hadn't seen much of her in the last few months. I even got a few butterflies tied up in my stomach after I read the note.

I wanted to approach her to let her know I appreciated her note. I walked towards her locker and saw her standing there fumbling with her books. She always wore cheerful, cutesy outfits. That day, she wore a black and white striped French sailor shirt that had a wide collar. She had a fresh flower tucked behind her ear fastened with a bobby pin. It was her signature to wear real flowers in her long, wavy brown hair. When she looked up she saw me walk towards her and gave me a welcoming smile.

"Listen, thanks a lot Daisy for the note," I said as I gradually began to speak faster and faster. "I really appreciate it, and I want you to know that I am really sorry for not calling you or writing you, I never meant to blow you off, it's just that..."

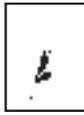
"Stop, stop," she interrupted. "You don't have to apologize. It happens, I'm not mad or anything." I was so glad she let me off the hook. "So do you think you can come up to the lake after the prom?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied unconvincingly.

"What?"

"I'd love to come, it's just..."

"It's just your stupid boyfriend," she snapped. She could see from the wide-eyed look I



gave that I was shocked she said that. “Look April, I’m sorry but everybody thinks he a jerk. He starts fights with everybody and their brother and he treats you like dirt.” I knew she was right about him, but I didn’t know how to tell him I was going to do something after prom without him. Then she told me what to say as if she heard my thought. “Just tell him that your parents are giving you a 12:00 curfew and then sneak up to the lake with Hope. That’s when she’s going to come.” I really liked the plan; I just had to follow through with it.

Spring came with an extra kick that year. It was to be the end of looking up to people, at least that’s what we thought. By May 25th, we would officially be seniors and rule the school. Since prom was two weeks away, everyone was fussing about one thing or another. The girls fussed about finding the most original dress and the guys fussed about getting dates. I didn’t care about having the most original dress. I had a plan, and I only cared about following through with it. I was nervous, because chances were, I wouldn’t follow through. I knew that my phone was going to ring that night at 8:00, as it always did, and I was going to carry out the plan.

While I was waiting for him to call, I flipped through the unfinished scrapbook I made of myself. I always tried to include cherished photos of people and events that were special to me. As I flipped, I came across a photo I did not exactly cherish. It was a picture of my boyfriend and me, before we were “boyfriend and girlfriend.” I took the photo out of the book and just stared at it. I remember that day very well. We were both thirteen. It was the Sunday before the last week of school. He came to my house to hang out. The day was a little cloudy, but we were just happy it was warm enough to wear shorts. It had rained the night before so the air was thick and humid. The humidity and temperature mixed made me roll up my shorts for a little extra air. My hair was frizzy and out of control that day, so I pulled it back tightly into a ponytail. He was wearing loose clothes in boyish colors; mostly brown and olive green swirled in camouflage. He advertised the number 81 on his tee shirt like he was some great athlete. There was a coolness about him, even back then, that was a little too frigid. His hair was deliberately careless. Instead of smiling, he smirked. He never used impressive speech. Nothing seemed important to him, including me.

My older sister took the picture. She was in college, and thought that we were cute. I did not understand how two “just-friends” could be cute. She made us sit closer together for the pose. I was on point with my shoulders raised high and my back



perfectly straight. He was slouched and propped his arm on the ledge of the porch swing, and gave the camera his smirk. When my sister said to smile, I gave a hurried, mouthy smile. I remember my stomach quivered with nerves sitting next to him because I was uneasy. I was just as nervous then, as I was waiting for him to call so I could carry out the plan.

8:00 came and there was no ring. 8:05 and no ring. By 8:15, I was extremely anxious. I continued to flip through the photo album. I came to a particularly cherished photo. Gabby had taken the shot of Daisy, Hope, and me. It was the first day of spring break, that same year when we were thirteen. We had gone to south Padre Island with Gabby's family. The three of us were standing with our backs to the ocean. Daisy was covering her eyes, Hope was holding her ears, and I was covering my mouth. We all had made a pact that we would see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. For us, boys were "evil," and we were not going to let them affect us or break us up. As I looked at the goofy picture, I realized that I was the one who broke the pact.

At 8:22 the phone rang, louder than I had ever heard a phone ring before. It made me jump underneath the covers of my bed. I knew who it was, but I answered the phone as if I had no clue.

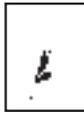
"Hello" I said, like I was cheerful and unaffected.

"Is April there?" he said with that same monotonous tone that I had become so sick of. We did the usual greetings and how's-the-weather kind of chit-chat that we always did for the first five or ten minutes of our phone conversation.

"Well I'm glad you called because I made the decision." I said this as tough as I could, and all the while my hands shook.

"What decision?" he said. I couldn't tell if he was playing dumb or if he really forgot. I resented having to explain.

With a sigh I said, "You told me to think things over before I made any rash decisions. Well, I made my decision."



“Oh, you mean what we talked about the other night,” sigh, “well what is your decision?” After that statement, I knew he was playing dumb; he probably thought I was going to forget the whole thing. Well I didn’t forget, and I didn’t need to think it over either.

“I, I think we should break-up.” It felt really good to say that with conviction. After I said that, he had given me a few lines of bull. I was so proud of myself that I couldn’t hear another word he was saying. As he continued with some put-downs, I started noticing things about myself that I had never noticed before. I looked into the mirror of my bed and saw the lines of my lips were a pretty shade of pink. My eyes were as golden as my hair. There were four freckles on my nose that were spaced perfectly symmetric. The more I looked into the mirror of the headboard with the phone still to my ear, the less I was turned off by the reflection I saw. I thought maybe, just maybe, I could admire myself like I admired Gabby. I hung up the phone without saying a word.

The next day, I picked up Gabby and Hope on my way to school. We were all dressed in jeans and pastel tops. My friend Gabby was galloping to the door of the front seat. She always had to sit in the front seat.

“So you did it,” she said.

I simple replied, “yep.”

“Well it’s about time April,” she said with excitement. She could tell by the look on my face that there was nothing else for us to say about the whole thing. It was all over. She could see that I was proud of myself. Her face showed me the same.

“Hey you guys, did you know that Daisy Blume is having an after prom party at her lake cottage?” “Did you want to go?” I asked excitedly with a smile.

Hope and Gabby looked at each other with both eyebrows raised. Gabby slowly looked back at me.

“Yeah, April, Hope and I were planning on going around midnight. Does this mean you’re going to prom stag with us?”



“I think I can do that, yeah!” I said with sheer confidence. At that moment, the three of us knew we had reconnected. Although we never mentioned it, our pact was once again bonded.

“Ok, so did you hear that Daisy is just short of being salutatorian by one tenth of a point? Isn’t that a bunch of bull, I mean if I was her I’d say something to the principal. We could have two salutatorians; besides, I don’t think Stanley Wright deserves it as much as she does. He doesn’t do near as much community service as she does,” Gabby gossiped.

We all burst out laughing. For the rest of the way to school, we laughed and talked about silly things. The three of us girls walked up to the school like we were in charge. Some people even stepped out of our way. That day, as I walked down the halls, I noticed the stares and whispers. But this time, I realized that people weren’t necessarily staring at me. I looked at their faces and could tell that they weren’t whispering about me, in fact, they weren’t whispering at all. I lifted my chin, straightened my shoulders and continued walking.

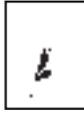
Later that day I cleaned out my locker to get ready for the end of the year. I mostly threw away old notes. I tossed the ones I never wanted to read again, and kept the ones I cherished. As I was cleaning, Mrs. Chirkup walked by. She stopped suddenly as if she saw something new.

“April,” she called, “you look different today.” I just smiled and asked her what was different. “Your face is glowing, your eyes look brighter. Have you been doing something different?” I looked away from her for a second to collect a thought.

“Well, I just got some spring cleaning done that I’ve needed to do for a long time.”

“Huh, it looks like it worked like magic,” she said as she patted me on the shoulder and walked away. It did work like magic. Most of the magic had to do with the fact that I had finally articulated, physically and plainly for all to see.

Everyone in the school had heard about the break up. It didn’t take long for news to travel through my school, or even the town for that matter. There were several people that day that asked me about the break up. I had no shame telling anyone that I got rid



of the excess baggage. Everyone knew I finally stood up to “The Jerk,” and that was all I was concerned with. I carried out the plan, and I could trust myself again. I was much lighter and could feel my feet float about the ground. It was as if a new “me” was born. It was a beautiful spring day and my slate was wiped clean.

“ ”

