

# Harbinger

2007



# Harbinger

## 2007

*a person or  
thing*

*that comes before*

*to announce or  
give an indication*

*of what follows*

*Published by the students of Stephens College*

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*Harbinger is a student edited and designed magazine published each spring since 1980.  
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# Acknowledgements

## ***English/Creative Writing Faculty:***

Judith Clark  
Kate Berneking Kogut  
Tina Parke-Sutherland  
Kris Somerville  
Terry Song

*We also extend special thanks to:*

Tina Parke-Sutherland  
Mary Dahm  
Robert Friedman  
Brenda Brown and  
General Printing Service

*whose time and talents were immeasurably  
important to the completion  
of this issue.*

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I would like to welcome you to our 2007 edition of *Harbinger*, the culmination of strong writing and art that truly shows the depth and range of Stephens College women. In this edition, we are proud to present works of art and photography, poetry and prose, as well as an interview with professor and poet Tina Parke-Sutherland.

Memory and imagination, the two main themes we loosely focus on in this edition, possibly arise from the struggle we, as college students, find ourselves in—living in a time of crisis and war. Since it is often hard to write directly about our current situation, we delve into memory for our material. Whether it is a demonstration in Tiananmen Square, a liberation rally, or the constant fear we have when walking alone at night, we call for the need to raise consciousness in our generation; we speak to the politics of understanding and to the politics of fear. Writing about our experiences and visions, we can preserve the personal stories of a people. This, I believe, in itself is a political act.

This year's magazine shows the aptitude and willingness of our writers to look into their lives and develop work that contains meaning and significance. We have pieces that are autobiographical, contrasted with pieces of invention. I hope as you read this year's *Harbinger*, you can identify with these pieces, as they are part of who we are.

I would like to thank this year's staff for their creativity and hard work. We have an excellent product to show for it.

Janeka Ausmus  
*Editor-in-Chief*

## As If Our Memories Were Not Enough

us poets, we stupid enough to  
immortalize our lost loves in ink,  
get them stuck  
in that paper thin reality  
we so used to living in.

Haunting cafes in their honor,  
we recite pieces of them  
to complete strangers,  
like they give a damn,  
just to prove we know how to love  
like our absent mothers or fathers  
never took the time to do.

We dismember those lost,  
claim the parts of their bodies  
we tried to keep,  
like full lips, the tattoo  
above a hip, the perfect fit  
in the crook of an arm.  
We got our ways of holding on  
when they let go.

But all these words don't change  
the fact we naïve enough  
to give them credit for swallowing  
the world we hated  
and delivering it new  
when it's the same damn world.  
They just distracted us  
while we were all  
puppy-dog eyed,  
tongue-tied—  
trippin,  
like we don't have enough poverty  
or deserted revolutions to attend to.

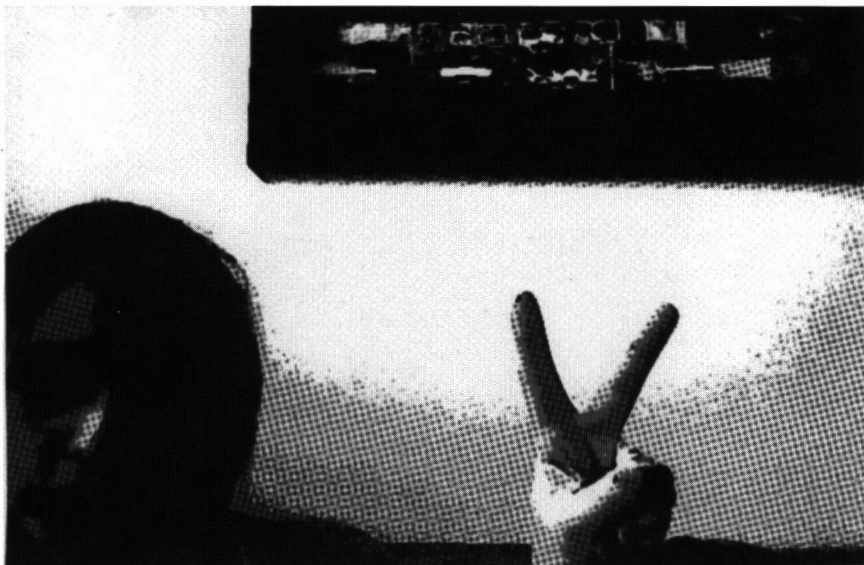


*In Love With You*

## Serafina,

In a perfect world  
you would have been there,  
at the LGBT rally,  
holding my hand when I marched.  
I walked  
by myself  
claiming pride,  
while men and women  
threw glass bottles at us,  
called us "queers."  
I wished they  
could feel  
the intimacy of our touch,  
no different than the way they  
touch their lovers,  
no less sacred.

You would have been there, too,  
at all those poetry readings.  
I sat alone,  
watching the shuffling of bodies  
at the front door,  
wishing that no one would judge us  
if the empty seat beside me  
was occupied by you.



*Peace*

## Plea to the Rioters of My Generation

Tell me you have heard  
of Tiananmen Square.  
Chairman Mao must have known from the drum of defiance  
resounding through the old Palace's plaster walls.  
They came  
from the cracks in alleys,  
rising from the underground,  
rallying in the streets, in the square, a furious swarm  
on bikes, on foot,  
shouting for uprising and reform.

Tell me that  
even though you may have been too young,  
the TV flickered with images of tanks  
and the man who stood before them,  
stood though they were coming  
as the people had come, defiant.  
The rioters were intent  
on demanding economic reformation, educational equality.  
They cried out, "Zou kai! Go away!  
My city is in chaos, because of you."

Tell me when he,  
and others,  
disappeared beneath the force of their government,  
someone said something to you  
other than,  
"Aren't you glad you're an American?"

Tell me you went to bed that night  
with the gravel of Tiananmen Square  
ground into your scalp.  
Tell me it tore into your dreams, trailing  
blood across your pillow sheet,  
dyeing  
the pigmentation of your skin  
and that even now,  
you are unable to wash it out.

## For Her

I imagine my mother is a poet,  
the revolutionary kind,  
spitting rhymes like I will someday  
when I'm all grown up.  
The kind of poet who  
believes in her soul,  
in the value of a story told.  
Reads up on history  
so she can rewrite it.  
Talking about how this world  
should change,  
then changing it.

I imagine her like Wonder Woman,  
Pam Grier style,  
chasing men through back alleys,  
screaming, "Freeze, sucka!"  
like it's in her blood.  
She knows just where to put her fist or boot  
when men get in her way.  
She'd be the kind of woman  
who hates waiting up,  
knows when a man don't stay  
she's too woman.

I imagine she only wears sensible shoes  
cause she's got walking to do,  
knows to only take what she can carry.  
On quiet nights she stays in with books  
and a cup of black tea  
with a little honey.  
Always smells of lavender,  
prefers long baths instead of showers.

I imagine her a constellation,  
spreading herself into oblivion.  
She is the sky.  
Never has her feet on the ground.  
Forever a dreamer.

I imagine my mother's a poet.  
Tells people her baby girl's out there  
writing her heart out.  
And someday  
their poems will meet,  
exchange relief,  
remain no more unnamed,  
be claimed.

### Interview with Tina Parke-Sutherland

For Tina Parke-Sutherland, every experience seems to be an amazing adventure waiting to happen. Having already earned her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Michigan, Tina Parke-Sutherland received a Fulbright Professorship in American Studies at the Finnish University of Tampere in Finland. She has written articles on identity, gender studies, mythology and literary studies for national and international conferences, as well as received numerous awards and honors for both her literary work and her academic scholarship. Her publications include two chapbooks, *Going Home: A Memoir*, and a collection of poems entitled *The Dream Latitudes*. She is presently working on a collaborative screenplay *Under the Sand* with her husband. Since 1991, she has been teaching literature and creative writing at Stephens College, while continuing to write poetry, memoir, and fiction. For the last three years, she has served as Dean of the Liberal Arts Program. Tina Parke-Sutherland has two grown children and spends her conscious hours living with her husband in Columbia, Missouri. She spends her unconscious life wholly in the Arctic, mostly fishing.

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JAMIE DEA: Having read your work, I'm interested in how your cross-cultural experiences have influenced your writing.

TINA PARKE-SUTHERLAND: I wouldn't separate my life from my writing. It would have to be that my cross-cultural experiences which influenced my life have influenced my writing. And it didn't start just in Alaska, but as a kid growing up in a mixed neighborhood. Right away, my experiences with my friends started to shape the way I looked at things. I didn't agree with anything anyone was telling me at home. Then I moved further north to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where there is a lot of difference, a lot of otherness in the community. There were many immigrants, people who were still speaking Finnish, and I could see the layers of other cultures. Then in the late '70's, I went to Alaska for my MFA and ended up staying for ten years, teaching at the University of Alaska's Native Studies program. While living there, my previous experiences with other cultures were intensified. Directly influencing the memoir is, of course, my life with Eskimo people. The experience of getting to know a profoundly different culture that well—as well as anyone can living in a culture not originally their own—and beginning to

understand the different ways of looking at the world made me have something to say that was more than I had had to say in my writing before.

DEA: It offered a different context than before.

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: Yes, and theme as well. The idea that dominates my writing since then is the idea of 'place' as sacred, of land and humankind, as well as non-humankind, as all interwoven. 'Place' is extremely important. I have always felt a deep connection to the non-human world, stronger perhaps than to the human world. It has a strong presence in my writing. Before I went to Alaska, it was unconscious. I hadn't found a conceptual 'home.' I didn't know that there were other people outside of mainstream America, people who had a whole system and a thousand-year-old way of living set around these principles that I had always felt. This was a marvelous reinforcement, and it soothed me and made me feel less alone. Alaska gave me hope that the predominant way of the West, which is to despoil and take profits, wasn't the only way, and that I had something to say about that that was worth listening to.

DEA: Did your time in Finland have a similar effect?

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: Yes, even though contemporary Finnish culture is similar to life in America, at least more so than Eskimo life. The Finns are closer to their deepest roots. I know people whose families have lived in the same place for a thousand years. So I got a sense of their rootedness, of place and belonging. The greatest impact Finland had on me was concerning their political system, which is "welfare capitalist." They have made it possible to have a modern version of justice and ecologically-sound development. These are not just romantic visions of the past or a non-technological version of culture. We could transplant this idea of the sacred relationship between humans and non-humans into a political system. These are ideals my work had always reflected. Living in Alaska and Finland, I could see them in action.

DEA: In reading your work, I've noticed you've interwoven the spiritual aspects of these cultures into your writing, making use of the mythology.

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: Yes. Alaskan and Finnish mythologies are very similar on the deepest level. Sometimes, Christianity gets overlaid like a veneer. But you can see through the veneer pretty easily into the spiritual, which is

## Interview with Tina Parke-Sutherland

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very land-based. And since mine was like that in the beginning, perhaps due to my Norwegian heritage and my unconscious awareness of it, it was wonderful to learn I wasn't the only one thinking and feeling these things.

DEA: It must have been like discovering a community with a similar mindset.

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: Yes, and one that was conscious of it. It was a good feeling, and one that I had never experienced before that. It was great, even though I was still very much the outsider. In the unfinished memoir, *Arctic Circles*, I directly tell the mythological stories that I've heard told and then try to relate them to the events taking place in the memoir. That relation is very much the heart of the memoir. My teaching of mythology at Stephens helped me to grasp how to bring it all together, how to incorporate the richness of it all. Mythology gives me hope: the fact that there are so many different ways to live means that we are not imprisoned. There are better ways to do things, and we can learn these ways. They have been scripted into the mythologies that are the very bones of culture.

DEA: What are some of your other interests?

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: I have lots of writing interests. I write everything except stage plays. I started with poetry first, as lots of people do. I prefer creative non-fiction, especially autobiography, to fiction. I'm presently working on a screenplay. I've done collaborative fiction, some short stories on my own. The next project is a collection of poems called *Letters to Finland* and then a kid's book, about a goat who runs a set of redemptive islands. He's been visiting me in my dreams for the past five years. In the back of my mind, I'm brewing ideas for a novel I'll call *Artificial Snow*. I also have many scholarly interests, and I publish articles that focus mostly on American studies, Mythology and Far North studies, and now Contemporary International Literature.

DEA: What are your other academic interests?

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: Women's studies. My first administrative position at Stephens was Chair of Women's Studies. I'm interested in globalized education and history, in a cultural context. I'm really interested in the therapeutic model that I've brought into my workshops called "Symbolic Modeling," which is the work of therapist David Grove from New Zealand. That might

be a future direction for me. I love to go fishing, and if I could have fished commercially or been a white-water raft guide, I wouldn't have done any of this. (Boisterous Tina laughter) Less stress.

DEA: As a women's college, Stephens puts a lot of emphasis on women's studies and feminism in their classes. Is your own standpoint as a feminist reflected in your work?

PARKE-SUTHERLAND: I am an academic feminist, in that I am interested in women's literature and include women in almost all the work I do. But my interests in culture tend to cut across gender, since I can see how women in one culture are different from those in another. So, instead, let's say, do gender concerns push my writing? I think they don't, although they are certainly present. I have loved being at Stephens, as it has opened up a world of women that otherwise would not have been available to me.



*Lake Superior Storm*

## For Susie, Turning Twenty

Little goddess shining in the sunny fields,  
my swift hero,  
it is a simple fact  
that we have been each other  
:: Cell to Cell Blood to Blood::

Conceived when the green/blue Kenai ran  
hard and flush with spawning reds,  
you nestled in your first bed  
through the birch-gold fall  
as the heat streamed out between the Fairbanks' hills.

Then one deep night you quickened,  
whispering beneath my sleeping heart,  
Beneath icy stars::  
Here I am, your daughter.  
Here. am I.

You kicked, and the snow came.  
You growled, and the ice thickened.  
All the while, my tiny bear, you made  
my womanness, my health, my goodness,  
as I made yours.

Warm inside me, you grew and dove and twisted  
until the hoarfrost melted  
and the hillside willows greened.  
When at last break-up echoed through the Tanana,  
you entered the world outside me,

riding the crest of three huge waves  
into the long Alaskan summer light.  
Wet from cave blood.  
Cub-wise  
Cub-smiling.

In this way twenty years ago  
you proved to me my beariness,

proved that I had swum the darkest river,  
made it to the other shore,  
and found you there.

To me you proved the world's magic.

But you weren't convinced.  
For another year you gestated in my arms,  
at my breast, held on to me as though,  
fresh from eternity, you could still see  
the family madness pool around us

like black poison.

You would not let me put you down,  
would not look into my mother's eyes,  
wise child.  
Not even your young father could hold you.  
Only the dog was safe. And your brother  
:: we four hardly human ::

Sometimes I wish we could go back to bearness.

But now you play with sunlight  
shining, scoring, winning,  
a barracuda among the guppies,  
darting through the clear shallows,  
and together, but apart, we smile

our sharp teeth at the world.

Girl I was  
but was not,  
now you tell a whole new story,  
spool out the mother line  
as though it had never tangled,

never knotted,  
never noosed your mother's

## Tina Parke-Sutherland

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mothers' mothers  
in mad darkness,  
as though I have no rope burns on my neck.

Girl of my own, dear love,  
now you play as though we all are born of light,

And we all are:: born of light.

## Elvis is Alive and Living in Suburbia

I want someone to steal our dog. My wife and I have an overweight St. Bernard, Elvis. He's nine years old and too big for his own good, too big for our lives now. "He just takes up so much space," I tell my wife. She does not seem to hear me, but lately, I have been wondering if she is pretending.

Elvis really belonged to our son. He's ours now because Tim, our only child, was killed two months ago. My wife doesn't want to let Elvis go. After grilling one night, I walked in the backdoor, and before I had a chance to close it, I overheard her telling him, "Go find Tim, Elvis. Go get him for dinner." Elvis scattered out of the kitchen, and I waited until I heard his mammoth paws pound upstairs before I slid the screen door shut behind me, making sure she heard.

She speaks to Elvis like that whenever I am not around. I try to get used to it, but today, at lunch, I come home to surprise her with take-out from Chang's. She isn't in the kitchen, so I look in the living room, the den, then I start upstairs. The door to Tim's room is open and I hear her voice, sweet and questioning, "You know this is Tim's bedroom, don't you? I know. I know you don't know where Tim is."

I see them through the small sliver of open door, like a brief glimpse of what my life has become. My wife is sitting on Tim's bed, rubbing the white space between Elvis' eyes. With every mention of "Tim" his long, brown ears perk up, his big, wet nose searching. I notice Tim's gym clothes crumpled on the floor in front of the closet, the cap of his cologne still sitting next to the bottle, everything just as he left it.

"I miss him too, Elvis. We all miss Tim," she says. Tim, the only word he knows. His ears twitch once more and his dumb, dark eyes widen with excitement, as if Tim were about to walk in any moment. Instead, I burst through the door.

"That's enough, Annie," I say, my voice so loud Elvis jumps from the bed and runs into the guest bedroom. "You are only making it harder for him."

I tell her we should get rid of Elvis now. People let their pets go everyday. I sit down on the bed beside her, still warm from Elvis' heavy body. "Maybe today should be the day."

My wife stares through me to the guitar strap coiled on the floor. We've decided not to take Elvis to the shelter. She says it's a four-letter word; I remind her it's seven, and she looks at me like I'm a murderer. "They'd kill him there," she said once, after the ninth time I asked. They probably would; he is too old and too big to be adopted.

"How about the couple down the street with the little girl? Don't you think they'd like a well-trained dog like Elvis?" I ask. This topic always finds us with a new set of promising owners. Then, just like that, the conversation changes.

"I'm making burgers tonight. Elvis loves those," she says.

I nod.

She stands up and leaves the room. Moments later, Elvis comes out of hiding and follows her downstairs. I leave Chang's orange chicken on the kitchen counter and tell her to help herself, because I have to get back to work. That is a lie. I took a leave of absence from my accounting job when Tim died, but I go in for a few hours everyday, because I don't know what else to do.

I sit at my desk and play with numbers: two months, eight weeks equals fifty-six days of suffering;  $x$  equals the future and  $y$  is how much longer this is going to hurt. I leave that one on a separate piece of paper and move on. Twelve houses on our block, three of which are without pets, one has already politely declined.  $X$  equals two houses left to ask about taking Elvis.

I get home early and, as usual, find my wife standing at the stove; three raw burgers rolled into pink, flat circles sit on a plate beside her. As usual, the table is set for three. I kiss her on the cheek on my way through the kitchen; she kisses the air next to me as I pass.

"After you change, will you walk Elvis?" she calls after me. I don't answer. This happens every evening. I come home, kiss her cheek, change into my sweats, and grab the leash from the backdoor while Elvis paws the linoleum floor in front of me. Then, we set out on our usual walk.

When Tim was alive, I walked Elvis, after he gained too much weight and couldn't fit through the doggy door. Elvis would wake me up with his tongue, like a damp sponge on my cheek, and his hoof-like paw against the mattress. Except for the occasional whimper or grunt, he knows to be quiet until breakfast. These manners are hard to ignore, so I would roll out of bed, and we'd make our way around the block a few times. By the time we'd get home, my wife would be at the stove, and Tim would be at the counter next to her, waiting for breakfast. Elvis would rush to him immediately, licking his face and hands. It was my favorite part of the day.

Maybe that is why my idea to get rid of Elvis began during one of our early morning walks. Two days after Tim was killed, I woke up to Elvis' face resting on the side of the bed. I sat up and threw the covers off my legs. We went about our usual routine. When we got back, the kitchen was dark; my wife was still in bed. The next day was the same thing, except wetter;

a thick fog hung over the neighborhood. As we turned the corner near the park, Elvis began barking at something in the distance. I tugged on the leash. He just kept barking and barking. I squinted into the foggy distance, trying to see what he was seeing, but I couldn't, and he wouldn't stop. So, I bent down, unhooked the leash from his collar, and let him run. I stood there until I couldn't see him anymore. Relieved, I walked home.

I was surprised to see Elvis walking up the driveway two hours later. It was like watching a ghost, except he left brown, plate-sized prints all the way to the backdoor. His coat was wet and his paws were muddy. I sat in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, looking out the window. I realized it was an improbability that someone would steal him because he will always find his way home. So, I devised another plan. This is the scenario:

A stranger stops me on the street. "What a beautiful dog," they say. "Thank you," I say. "His name is Elvis."

The stranger rubs behind Elvis' ears, scratches his immense head, making him pant harder, his large tongue creating puddles on the sidewalk. When they become really smitten with my enormous animal, I turn to them and ask, "Would you like to have him?"

The stranger looks at me with a polite smile, unsure of whether to laugh or call Animal Control. "You can have him, really," I'll say again, so they know I am serious. In which case they will look at me still confused, like it's a joke they are not getting. The slight smile and squinted eyes of confusion will quickly turn to a polite smile, a look of pity, one for me and one for Elvis. They'll continue on their way, making a mental note to avoid this street.

It's been a month and a half since I began trying to pawn Elvis off on strangers. That's two walks a day for six weeks, 112 walks, and who knows how many offers I have made. Still, I imagine one day somebody nodding their head enthusiastically and the two of us exchanging numbers, business, not home, of course. Then, just like that, Elvis will have a new start at life. I'll return home, look at my wife and say, "I don't know what happened. The leash must have broken."

Sadly, though, tonight is a night much like the other forty-two. Elvis and I return home, and my wife is already serving dinner. There is a bowl of salad on the table and fries on each of our plates. She tells me she put Elvis' burger outside on his dish, since it's such a nice night.

"Would you like to sit out there with him?" she asks, spooning broccoli into a bowl.

"I can't find the candles that keep the bugs away," I say. This is a lie. The citronella candles are on the left shelf in the garage, just above the fish-

ing poles. I eat a fry and glance at her, hoping she forgets as well.

"So what do you think?" she asks.

"These are good. A different brand?"

"I mean about eating outside with Elvis."

"Right. Well, the mosquitoes are awful right now. He'll be fine."

"Well, would you at least make sure he is eating? He usually doesn't like to eat alone," she says.

"Elvis is fine," I tell her. I can hear him, using his nose to push the empty plate back and forth, in between grunts and sighs. My wife and I make small talk about the possibility of rain. We are on the topic of a new drainage system when I notice it. Silence. No scratching or panting. I push my chair back from the table and walk slowly to the screen door leading to the back patio. No Elvis. The small square of cement is empty. The gate to the white picket fence is open and still swinging.

"He's gone," I say, surprised at the panic in my voice. More surprised by my movements, as if I had not wanted this all along. I rush back to the kitchen table, where my wife is still sitting, look at her and say again, "He is gone."

She stands so suddenly that she nearly knocks over the wooden chair. Hurrying to the backdoor, she checks again, the patio still empty. "He's gone," she says.

"He'll be back," I say, staring at her reflection in the glass. Her eyes fill with tears.

"But he's never run away before," she says, turning to me. "Something must be wrong."

"I'll go look for him. You should stay here, just in case," I say. I don't know how to go about searching for a dog. Perhaps wander the streets we usually walk down, calling his name, whistling on occasion. When a stranger passes, I can ask them, "Have you seen a large Saint Bernard? He has a big head with a sort of dopey face. He answers to the name Elvis. So, if you see him..." I do this for three hours before returning home, defeated.

When I arrive at the backdoor, I find my wife asleep on the sofa with her favorite green blanket draped over her legs, the cordless phone on her chest. Just how I would find her on nights Tim missed curfew. Waking her up reminds me of those nights. Before walking up the stairs to bed, I make sure all the outdoor lights are still on. Sometime later, we both fall asleep.

In the middle of the night I get up to use the bathroom. Standing in front of the toilet, I unbutton the fly of my cotton pajamas. Looking down at my limp penis lying in my hand, it occurs to me I have become somewhat flaccid as well. I have lost my wife, at least the part of her I married, our son,

and now our dog. The goddamned dog. The thought brings tears to my eyes, and before I know it I am on the floor, the chill of the linoleum on my legs.

I wake up to my wife shaking me.

"I thought you were dead," she says.

"I'm sorry," I tell her, reaching out to her as if she is my safety rope. "I don't want Elvis to be gone." I look at her then, in her big T-shirt and bare feet.

"I know," she says.

We sit there for some time, not speaking. It isn't until the early morning light begins to turn the bathroom a soft blue that we decide to climb into bed. The sheets have turned cold and it takes some time to get comfortable. I am asleep for a few moments when I am awakened to a heavy breathing. I think it is my wife, until I realize it is coming from my nightstand. I open my eyes to Elvis' face. He must have come in through his hole in the backdoor. He isn't whimpering or grunting, just watching me. Waiting until I am ready.

## Taking Men Shopping

i.

I wear shorts.  
Nick requests a dress,  
as if the zipper in back  
might hold us together.  
Because his strong hand on the small  
of my back feels good,  
I change into the barely there  
black one he likes so  
damn much.  
Secretly, I hope,  
as he closes me into the piece of fabric,  
I can be the girl  
he wants.

ii.

The pants Josh finds are blue plaid with pink  
and yellow.  
I find my size on the sale rack.  
We stand side by side  
like two, ridiculous old men  
and laugh.  
We buy them immediately.  
Walking out into the Charleston heat,  
we're convinced we are the most preppy couple  
in South Carolina.

iii.

I tell my dad about a jacket I like,  
the one all the girls at school are wearing.  
It is black and soft,  
but expensive.  
When my mom and I pass it,  
she has me try it on.  
The next day, he hands me a bag  
and says,  
"It's really nothing,"  
but it is something.



*One Way Out*

## Cigarettes

i.  
Beth sat next to me  
at the bar  
in the Berg.

I had never  
smoked one before.

She handed me one  
of her cigarettes  
and told me  
not to tell anyone  
she doesn't inhale.

I didn't inhale either.

ii.  
Someone bought a pack  
from the waitress.  
I think they were Camels.

I only had one,  
but Megan made me  
breathe it into my lungs.

I took three puffs  
of my inhaler  
after I finished it.

iii.  
Dad doesn't smoke anymore.  
I didn't think I would either.

But Tom was crooning on stage  
and most people were smoking,  
not just cigarettes.

I could tell Dad wanted one.  
When he asked if I had any cash,  
I handed him a few bucks.

He got some kid to give him  
a Black & Mild  
or something like that.

He lit up  
and shut his eyes  
as he breathed in deep.  
He looked at me,  
hand outstretched  
with the offering.

I took it.  
One puff.  
And even though  
I didn't breathe it in,  
we smiled at each other.  
Our secret—  
a haze just for us.

## Leaving the Nest

No one made a nest for you.  
No one snuggled you  
when the wind howled outside.  
No one sang you to sleep  
with lullabies.

You never quite fit in,  
ruffling feathers.  
So you had to learn to fly  
on your own,  
sometimes falling,  
but always soaring again.

You flew far  
away from the harshness  
of dead leaves and twigs.

Then you did something  
no one thought was possible.  
You made a nest,  
soft and warm,  
in a tree full of green  
leaves and fragrant blossoms  
for me

and taught me  
to fly higher  
than you.

## Counseling

Over the course of the day, the fence posts turned into scarecrows. My uncle took old flannel shirts and buttoned them haphazardly around the posts, hammered nails into the cuffs, so that the sleeves draped over the rails. With a black marker, he gave their pumpkin heads eyes, but no mouths and no ears. Without legs, they could not jerk up and stumble away. Easy in the ignorance of their creation, these half-men slumped against the fence and surveyed the scene before them.

The land my uncle leased was all scraggy brush before giving way to the bright autumn sky. Every boulder, every brambled shrub was a potential refuge for rattlers. The air was dry, despite the chill that clouded puffs of breath from between the boys' lips. They dug steel-toed boots into the arid dirt, finding a firm stance before reaching, with hands sweating inside their gloves, for the shotgun when it was their turn.

With an ease of having taught plenty of life lessons, my uncle intended to load and lock the gun as many times as it might take. Watching over each boy's shoulder, he helped him line up, warning how the gun would jerk and bruise their shoulders when the chamber emptied. Then he stepped back. From the corner of his mouth, he muttered, "All right then. You want to see what it'd be like to blow a man's head apart, then you just go right on ahead." If they hesitated, he'd turn in that straightforward manner and eye them like they were the voiceless men reclining along the rails. "What? Ain't this what you wanted?"

As the shots rang out, ripe chunks tore off and scattered behind the fence. There was nothing graceful about it, no morbid poetry written into the emptiness left behind. Seeds clung to the swaying orange tendrils, as filaments of thoughts and soul might to a mass of black and clotted hair that was the mangled innards of a brain. One by one, scarecrows turned back into fence posts.

After each shot, my uncle received the gun from shaking hands. "There now," he said at the end, "come and take a look." Alone, he made for the fence.

## He Keeps Sparklers in His Back Pocket

*for Darson*

So far, we've started two fires together.

The first started in a glass  
ashtray. Melting, bubbling  
photos of us in towels  
revealing too much for me  
and for him,  
too much of his stretch marks,  
wide arms, and squishy tummy.  
The flame built and the glass broke,  
one half falling over  
with the sound of a dropped dish.  
My windowsill still wears the burn mark.

The second, a rocket gone haywire  
caught my brother's field on fire  
while we celebrated  
in August.  
He pulled out a bag of fireworks  
to make up for the 4th  
which I spent recovering in sick hall.  
Instead of gawking at bright lights  
exploding to "America,  
the Beautiful," I watched him  
stomp out the yellow grass.  
Smiling, he turned to me  
and pulled a pack of sparklers  
from his back pocket.

## A Lesson on Aging

*for Karen*

We're old.  
We don't shave our toes,  
so my friend  
has a hairy butterfly tattoo  
and a grown daughter  
who teases about it.

I carry Bengay in my purse  
and pictures in my wallet  
of two younger daughters and  
a son, thirteen—  
going on thirty.

Walking in downtown Austin  
on a warm night in March,  
we don't recognize the bands  
on the backs of black t-shirts  
except for one—  
in the window of a retro music shop  
called Golden Oldies.

We're old,  
but she tries sushi  
and loves it.  
We laugh about life,  
get tattoos,  
and I promise  
to try a fried pickle.

## For the Love of Books

She shields the book  
when rain clouds collide  
trees tremble  
and blue-speckled eggs splat  
on the sidewalk.

She shields the book  
when teachers glare  
and the preacher's voice  
cracks like thunder.

From the dusty decay  
of the basement shelves  
and cardboard boxes of  
roadside rubbish  
she rescues the book  
for all the times  
the book  
has rescued her.

## You Have the Right to Remain Silent

It's hovering just around 60 degrees tonight. The moon is full on a plum-colored horizon. I can see it glowing through the thick fronds of palm, their dark green, secret undersides exposed by hidden landscape lighting, nestled in thickets of exotic birds of paradise. The lead singer of UB-40, milking the radio waves, begs not to be left alone. Right now, I'm anything but alone, evident from the steamy haze congealing in the corners of the car's small windows.

A handsome man with dark brown hair and hazy green eyes is making love to my youthful sensibilities. His breath is hot, his lips soft against the lobe of my ear. I can smell his cologne, a masculine, musky scent that reminds me I'm not with a boy. He's dressed in casual blue jeans and a polo top of soft, white cotton. He looks good in these, and he knows it.

I catch occasional glimpses of myself in the rear-view mirror as we twist around in the front bucket seats, trying not to get poked by the gear shift jutting up between them. I'm wearing a white sweater dress and a set of silver and turquoise jewelry mother gave me for my sweet-sixteen.

"Oh, God. You're so beautiful tonight."

I start to answer him, but language fails me. His eager hand is sliding under the hem of my dress. The strangled sound that startles me out of a response is my own voice, something between a guttural moan and a whimper of defeat. I put my hand over his, pressing down to slow his approach. He seizes me more forcefully. Bile rises to the back of my throat, and I start to struggle. The front seat of an orange VW bug is no place to lose my virginity.

When he clutches hard at my hip, I yell, "Stop!"

\*\*\*\*\*

The word takes me back nine years. I'm standing in my aunt's and uncle's kitchen. It hasn't been redecorated since the place was built in the early forties. Lime green cabinets grow out of a black-and-white checkerboard. The floor is cold and dirty under my naked feet. I can feel the gummy residue of spilled pop and grains of malt-o-meal sticking to my toes. I'm seven years old, and a boy twice my age is groping my breast as he tries to pull my shirt off.

"Shut her up!"

His blonde hair hangs down in front of his mean blue eyes. He wears a faded KISS T-shirt and jeans that haven't been washed for a week. He's my cousin's best friend.

"Stop!"

I slap at his hands and claw at his chest, tearing the small hole in his shirt wide open. I'm going to hurt him, and then I'm going to tell. My cousin hisses at me and pushes one of the big kitchen knives against my throat.

"Shut up and be good, Patty-Cake."

It hurts and I start to cry, but I stop fighting back.

"That's a good girl," he crows. "Don't make anymore noise."

My cousin lowers the knife and slices through the collar of my favorite pink Strawberry Shortcake shirt. His friend tears it open. I look at the clock. It's 8:45 in the morning. By 9:15 it's over, and Barbie and I hide under the back porch for the rest of the day. I stuff the ruined shirt behind a loose block in the foundation and talk to her in whispers.

"We can keep a secret," I say, because I'm so ashamed.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Shhh. Shhh.... It's okay, baby."

In the front seat of the orange beetle, he strokes my red curls from my face. His strong hand slides down my cheek to cup my chin and bring my face back to his for a kiss. While his lips are devouring mine, his hand slides lower to stroke my throat above the collar, then just under it. His fingers are softer than the steel blade.

"I'm sorry." I tell my first real boyfriend through sobs, "I'm sorry, I'm just not ready yet."

"That's okay, baby."

He likes to call me "baby." I like it, too. He murmurs nonsense in my ear that sounds reassuring, as I'm wedged slowly against the passenger door. He's soft with me. He treats me as if I am fragile. I like that even more. After a little while, he eases the seat back.

"We'll just rest here for a bit," he promises.

"Okay," I whisper.

I trust him more than any man I have ever been alone with. I like how it feels when he kisses me. I like feeling wanted. I'm not afraid of desire. I'm terrified of sex.

"Maybe when you come back from deployment," I say.

His fingers curl harshly into the soft hair at the nape of my neck. "I was thinking more like later tonight."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea," I stammer, but I don't squirm much this time. Headlights have just swept through the windows above me, and I don't want to cause a scene.

"We've been dating for three weeks already!" He's never been angry with me before. I'm surprised by the tone of his voice, but I'm even more surprised when he rolls over and pins me into the lumpy seat, one of his legs between mine. "You owe me."

"I owe you?" I stutter. I haven't stuttered in at least five years, not since I had speech therapy in junior high school.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm in seventh grade, standing in a cramped cubicle that doubles as both a storage space for old files and the counselor's office. The walls are institutional grey and decorated with a single calendar.

"You owe it to him. Show me."

The woman behind the desk is speaking to me. Her short, tightly-permed curls give her a severe look. Retro horn-rimmed glasses and a starched blue shirt don't help. A tall, good-looking boy with close-cropped, black hair and dark brown eyes is staring at me with his arms crossed over his chest. Smirking, he leans against one wall.

"I just want to go home," I plead with the counselor. "Please, I feel sorta sick."

She lowers her glasses down the bridge of her hook-billed nose and peers at me through eyes as grey as her hair.

"You made a serious accusation. Now, either apologize for blowing something innocent out of proportion, or...." She pauses and looks between us before resuming in a tone of absolute authority. "...show me how he inappropriately touched you."

I feel like I am going to hurl. I don't want to touch myself. I look back at my classmate and see he's still leering at me. I point at his torso instead, "there." Then motioning towards his hips and loins I say, "there and there."

My cheeks feel like a grimy patch of concrete baking in the summer heat, and I choke back bile. The boy laughs and says something about my mother in Spanish. The counselor pretends she doesn't hear a thing, because we're both white and he's not. In our school, the complaint department doesn't operate in this direction.

"You're not giving me any evidence. No proof. He has three."

"Quatro-four," he interrupts.

"He has four witnesses that say he was with them after school."

I feel hot tears on my cheeks before I realize I'm crying. "Please, I want to go home. I'm really sick."



*The Judge*

"You owe him an apology first." She dismisses me with a back-handed wave and crumples up the note from my teacher before throwing it in the waste basket.

"I'm sorry," I choke out before I bolt through the door.

Later, he presses me up against the lockers in the dimly lit hallway. He roughly grips the back of my neck as he whispers, "I'll make you real sorry."

I carry a knife to class with me for the rest of the school year.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I don't owe you anything!" I shove against the man who is trying to make out with me in the orange bug.

"Fine, then get out."

He hisses the words in my ear as I feel the door give, then I'm falling. It's only a short distance to the asphalt, but it feels like I've just been thrown off a cliff. He slams the car door. After a moment, the steamed-up window rolls down, and I think he's going to apologize. Instead, he throws my white high heel at me. It finds its mark, leaving a deep scratch on my cheek.

I take the other one off and get to my feet as he drives away. I stand alone in the dark. When I can no longer see the tail-lights of his car, I limp to the well lit hotel a quarter mile down the bay.

\*\*\*\*\*

It will be another seven years before I am walking alone in the dark again. I am leaving a movie screening at a summer arts festival. On my way to the car, I pass under the watchful eyes of a half dozen security cameras. I wave goodnight to two separate safety patrols. I do not fear the full moon or the tall palm trees, nor do I think about the low landscape lighting hidden under tufts of exotic plants. I will reconsider them later, in an interrogation room that reminds me of the counselor's space.

I walk through an abandoned palazzo near the parking lots and around the large, tiled fountain that has been my favorite since I was a little girl. When I turn the corner of the Aero-Space Museum, I feel the bite of panic before the blade itself. I instantly recognize the sensation of sharp steel against my throat. A pale man wearing black is holding the knife.

"You're not gonna get hurt—if you do exactly what I say, baby."

Something inside me snaps. I will not do what I am told. I spin around with a fist full of car keys. His weapon knicks my flesh and he claws

my breast. I tear flesh from his face and scream loudly into the night. I am swallowed by a primal urge a counselor will later call latent hostility. He drops the blade, and it bounces off the sidewalk with a clang I do not hear. I drive him to the ground. My fingers wrap tightly in his hair, pull up on his head only to better slam the hard shell of his skull into the concrete pavement, until I am the only one left screaming.

The next day, I am treated like a criminal by the men who wear uniforms.

"What were you thinking? You didn't have to take it that far."

"You have the right to remain silent..."

I think I understand them as I watch the grainy tapes in shades of grey and black, failing to recognize myself. I have no words in my own defense, but I feel no guilt or shame. Two days later, the men in uniform apologize. The man they called my victim, they now call my assailant.

"...wanted on murder charges,"

Two other women were raped before their throats were cut.

"...also a suspect in Arizona,"

That young lady was left for dead in a ditch beside the road.

"...get you a cup of coffee, Ma'am? We're real sorry for the misunderstanding."

\*\*\*\*\*

When I get to the hotel on the bay and stumble through the doors to the hotel restaurant and bar, the man standing behind the counter gives me a concerned smile.

"Are you okay, darlin'?"

"I'm fine." It's my answer, even though I'm pretty certain I will never be okay again. On the loud speaker, UB-40's "Red Red Wine" is playing once more. I borrow 35 cents to make a phone call and wait in a booth by myself for my best friend's sister to come get me. The bartender makes me a cherry cola for free. It stays on the table untouched. Outside, an orange Volkswagen Beetle cruises back into the parking lot and laps it twice before driving off.

At sixteen, I think I'm a coward for not running out there to tell him I'm sorry.

Someday, that will change.



*Graffiti Park*

## The Assault on Every Woman

Darkness waits  
outside for me.  
It drags me  
by my hair, whispers  
in my ear, *Don't scream.*  
*Be frightened. It's me—*  
*the one you've seen lurking*  
*behind every tree and blind corner.*

It catches me  
so close to my room,  
pulls me into every dark car  
on every night  
I have to walk alone. Every time  
it gets closer to midnight,  
it drags the knife closer  
to my throat and I ache  
to have a bat in my hands.

*What good will it do?*  
*I am waiting for you*  
*in every empty alley,*  
*every abandoned nature trail,*  
*all those unlit parking lots.*

## Fairytale Mother

She stood in the center of the room  
melting our flesh with her eyes.  
Her nicotine skin gleamed unnaturally.  
Her rotten teeth rattled as she screamed  
at my brother and me, her own Cinderellas.  
"Clean this mess up,"  
her own mess,  
her own destruction.

She huffed and puffed and blew our lives down,  
destroying the shelves Dad made for our games.  
Tattered papers swirled around her like a twister.

"Clean it up! Put it all in the trash!"  
*Cinderella, wash the floor.*

When she "couldn't take us anymore,"  
her shrieks chased us  
trembling down the hall  
to our separate towers.  
A Rapunzel with no golden ladder  
a Jack without a bean stalk,  
we played cards across the hall until  
*Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!*  
The Giant came.  
I hid tight-curling under the bed,  
Pooh Bear my only comfort.  
But silly ol' bear  
couldn't stop the tears.

*Who's that trip-trapping over my bridge!*  
The troll required a price. I could not pay.  
So she grabbed my arms,  
dragged me to the dungeon.

*Spin, spin, spin,*  
but injury did not turn to gold,  
and Rumpelstiltskin stomped her foot in rage.

"Do you want me to leave?"  
Her voice echoed in the stairwell of the Gingerbread house.  
She raised her hand,  
a sharp slap across Hanzel's face,  
and my Gretel cheeks blazed red  
as I pushed the witch back,  
not hiding anymore.

She headed for Kansas,  
took my brother,  
left me in Oz without my ruby slippers.

Mom, I know you now,  
the Beast Beauty will never dance with,  
you, who never loved us.



*The Hat*

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## Ruinas Extraordinario

My interest in Native American history began in the eighth grade. Tales of their cities, larger than any in Europe, filled my thoughts. I imagined the brightly painted temples now bleached by the sun. For the Aztecs, scarlet represented the sacrifice to Huitzipochtli meant to ensure that the sun would rise.

The site of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, is buried beneath churches of gold, melted down by the ethnocentric Spanish, who condemned these "barbarians." The Calaza de los Muertos, the Avenue of the Dead in modern Teotihuacán, bears no resemblance to the ancient world once bathed in primary colors. The avenue is surrounded by pyramids so grand that the Aztecs believed that they were built by gods. A large boulevard, once filled by Aztecs is now packed with tourists and vendors.

During my visit, an overly enthusiastic vendor grabbed my arm and attached a bracelet to my wrist, exclaiming, "Almost free! Almost free!"

"No, gracias, no, gracias. Muy bonita, pero no, gracias!" I said with my limited knowledge of Spanish. I did not know how to say, "I don't want it, get it off of me!" He continued to smile, making me wish I had studied more in Spanish class.

My friend saw my predicament from between colorful woven blankets and obsidian statues and shouted out to me, "I'll get Epp! Hold on!"

My Spanish teacher, Mrs. Eppenuer, or Epp, as those close to her knew her, was more like a mother to us. Epp rushed to my aid, spoke rapidly, ripped off my cheap silver shackle, and thrust it back to the man. Later, he passed me again, carrying an elongated piece of obsidian. I responded quickly this time. "Oh, muy bonito!" I exclaimed, waving my hands to say "no" before rushing away. To my dismay, and the enjoyment of my classmates, I later learned I had responded "Oh, very pretty!" to a large obsidian penis.

~~~~~

There are three hundred and sixty-five steps on the Pyramide del Sol. Built two thousand years ago, the steps are knee-high and narrow so that the climber must step sideways. They were built that way in order to keep anyone from turning his or her back on the gods. Because I am so clumsy, my friends and family believed that I would fall down all those steps.

As I walked up the steps, I could only think of two things: "I really wish I brought some water with me," and "I don't know how people used to

do this every day!" Halfway from the top, my group stopped to rest, and we sat on the structure. I felt the stone beside me in an attempt to picture the hands that had laid it there, or any other hands that had touched it since. I leaned against the warm stones, trying not to look down before reaching the top. I didn't want to spoil the surprise.

I remember Epp told us a story about a mass sacrifice to Huitzi-pochtli. The legend recounts how a river of blood flowed down the pyramid. I wondered if the slender, crumbling stairs I was climbing were once covered by sacrificial blood meant to balance the universe and ensure the sun rose. When I reached the top, I could not help but be eerily amazed that I stood where thousands of people had died.

The top section of the pyramid was not what I had expected. Instead of a flat platform, I discovered uneven ground and protruding rocks that I constantly tripped over. The view was also not what I had anticipated. It was amazing to look down on the sheer size of the monolith I had climbed, covered with insignificant specks of mankind. I felt the structures deserved respect. The *Pyramides del Sol y la Luna* would outlive every person standing on them. Though we were supposed to be serious, one student exclaimed "Wouldn't it be awesome if we let a slinky go from here?" The rest of the class agreed it would be extremely amusing, and another student replied it would be "Kick ass!" if it made it all the way down.

Later, on my walk down the Avenue of the Dead, I tried to envision the original colors of the temples and imagine where the gold and jewels had been set. The statues and figures I had seen in the Museo Nacional de Antropología had been stolen from here. Our tour guide, Yarrima, brought us to a small building, far from the massive mountains we had climbed.

"The color red you see here outlining the walls is the original paint. It has yet to be washed away due to being in an enclosed area and, more recently, because of archeologists attempting to preserve the colors."

On the bus ride home I wrote in my journal, "How could Cortez destroy these people and their beautiful cities? What would the world be like if he had not destroyed their cultures?" I had a long time to think on the ride back to Mexico City, a city crushing another beneath it.

~~~~~

The Mayans were mathematical and astronomical geniuses. They discovered the concept of zero and used a turtle shell to represent it. At Chichén Itzá, they built a pyramid which, during the equinoxes, depicted the shadow of a snake crawling down the side.

When we were standing between many buildings, Yarrima turned to us and smiled. "If you heard that the other groups were clapping, there is a very good reason. I'm sure you all have been told about the stunning Quetzal bird. The feathers were often used as headdresses. Here, in this space, something mystical happens when you clap all together."

So my group clapped, only once, and heard an echo that did not sound right. When a large group of people stand and clap, the echo sounds like the call of the Quetzal bird. No one knows if the Mayans intentionally constructed the space so it made the sound, or if it happened by accident.

While I was amazed by Teotihuacán and impressed by Chichén Itzá, nothing compared to my experience at Uxmal, another Mayan city. Rain was extremely sacred to the Mayans. It was a new moon the night that we discovered that the Mayans had great and tremendous powers, other than their ability to create amazing tortilla soup. Luis, Yarrima's husband, also a tour guide, explained the two gods: Chac-Mol, who would deliver the sacrificial hearts, which were placed in a bowl that sat on a stomach, to the gods, and Chác the rain god. The humidity was so unbearable that many of us ignored the guide until he suggested chanting to Chác. Riled up by the chant, we grew more excited as dozens of lizards scampered through the largest ball court of the Mayans.

Later we went to a hotel nearby before heading back to Uxmal for a light show that described a Mayan legend. We could still see the temple in the distance where we chanted to Chác. A menacing rain cloud loomed over the temple, though the rainy season was not supposed to begin for a few more weeks.

Soon, it began to rain. It was as if the galaxy had created a waterfall above Uxmal, and gravity slammed the water into the ground for hours. The water was already up to the curb when we reached the city, and we were not sure if they would cancel the light show. We were the only group who still desired to see it, rain or no rain. We waited an hour before an old man arrived. We traveled up slick sea-green rocks, which guided the rainwater as if it were a river. Waiting for the light show to begin, we sat in metal folding chairs on top of an ancient temple.

I began to hear the pounding drums and chants mixed with the thunder. The intense lightning in the sky blended with the soft colors being directed at the temple across from us. All the while, the chanting of "Chác! Chác!" slid under the thunder. Appropriately the legend dramatized the ending of a drought.

A sense of power radiated through my body. I was drenched in rain, tangled by wind, and astounded by the light of nature, and the sounds of

chanting and rumblings. The mixture of nature and culture made me realize why the Mayans respected the earth so much. The sheer omnipotence and beauty of that night will never leave my memory. To sit on something so mysterious and ancient and know that my experience was distinctive made the entire journey worthwhile. I will always desire that feeling of disorientation and awe that the unification of history and the present gives me.



*Assisi Rain*

## Carp of the Long Corridor

Entwined like lace threadwork,  
the red-columned corridors caressed the edge of Kunming Lake  
on which the Summer Palace sat,  
a serene lotus flower floating north of Beijing.  
Even after they had been asked not to,  
the tourists flashed their cameras  
attempting to capture  
the crumbling murals of monkey-faced gods  
of this oriental Sistine Chapel.

A foreign visitor, I brought favors  
to distribute among the last remaining residents.  
The sun-burnt carp were hungry,  
gobbling up the bits of bread I bought  
with the last of my yaun.  
Had no one fed them since the empress  
and her concubine sisters packed up their silks  
and left for Tientsin?

In the courtyard outside the concubine's quarters,  
my tour guide deliberately banged her jade bracelet  
on the brass shoulder of a Fu dog.  
She said, "When I was little,  
my grandmother put this on my wrist.  
Now, it will not come off.  
It will not break,  
and I have never been sick."

I devour the details of this  
and the tiny stitchings of phoenixes  
on musty pillows and gauze curtains,  
the elongated scratches on water basins  
where the British used swords to scrape off the gold,  
the dragon-backed chairs now destitute,  
and red roofs, red doors, a red portrait hanging on the wall.  
I gathered it all up and gobbled it down.  
Like the frantic hordes of fish, I am still hungry,  
eager to have these vacant halls come alive with their history,  
to have them fill the vast emptiness,

the many rooms my own culture,  
left unattended inside me.

## One Song at a Time

You told me of our people's creation story:

two sisters,

who rose up from the ground,

spread seeds over the land,

the source of tobacco and corn.

Singing the world into life,

one song at a time,

the sisters created mothers,

and children,

*even grandmothers*, you said

on hot days when we tended the garden

full of warm tomatoes and fresh lettuce.

Between soft dirt and yielding

sky, you told me

of our feminine beginnings,

of nature's protector, Mother Earth.

*She is among us*, you testified,

*in the dirt and sky, wind and tree.*

You explained that we still worship her

even if others think we are crazy.

When I asked again, why,

you said

*Mother Earth never closes her ears*

*to the voices of our people.*



*Lean on Me*

## The Soft Woman

i.

The first memory of my mother:  
I am sick and she lies with me in my daybed,  
the one with heart-shaped cutouts.  
She presses me into her chest,  
into the soft curves of her breasts  
to deaden the pain in my head.  
For a moment,  
when skin touches skin,  
I sink into her and know  
more connects us  
than a cord cut,  
and I am safe.

ii.

I lie on the curves of my Granny's hips  
while her unsteady hand  
strokes my hair.  
I snuggle closer to her body,  
relaxing in her scent.

iii.

You hate the little belly that appears  
underneath your shirt,  
you think it doesn't look right on your frame.  
When I tell you there's something soft  
and beautiful there,  
you frown and turn away.

iv.

What happened to the soft woman?  
I want to know.  
I want to know she's there,  
that her curves are as ample as ever,  
that her breast holds more than the heart of a worked-to-death woman.  
A woman who can smile  
while society tells her she's too much  
because she knows she will always be enough.  
I need to know she's still there,

## Katherine Thomas

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awe-inspiring and terrible,  
working the world in her own way,  
so when I touch her,  
I know I am really touching God.

## Muse

I want sleep.  
One dreamless night of empty, dark hours.  
A mind free of you.  
I rise from the bed,  
where satin sheets still caress  
the naked limbs of my first lover,  
because your siren call  
rings too loudly in my blood.

You stir inside my skin.  
I force my eyes closed,  
drive you from my sight,  
cover ears  
and howl protest.  
The echo comes back  
twisted,  
rattling down the hall where  
too many doors have been opened.

Others called you by names  
more tender than you deserve,  
in languages more beautiful  
than any  
I have learned.

I am driven, not inspired,  
to crawl to the page—  
pen you out,  
buying time  
in the arms of my other lover,  
the one that demands  
so much less  
of the truth  
I have come to fear.

## Only Half a Poet

Sometime when I was not looking, my left hand found a pair of scissors and hid them in its sleeve. The more difficult part must have been finding chalk and drawing the dotted lines down my forehead, over my lips and onward. You would think I would have noticed the white powder flakes on the inside of my cuff and the cold metal of the scissors against my wrist. However, my left hand was so beguiling that I remained unaware until I heard the hasty snip-snip-snipping sound the pair made as they cut from top to bottom. Then the half of myself, led by that traitorous mole-less left hand, blemished only by its own grand intentions, stood up and walked out of the room. Disappointed and dissatisfied, I watched that half of me leave. Yet, I wasn't overly surprised, not after the months my left hand had quietly spent pacing, poking questions into all the wrong holes. It hunched me over in soulful discomfort, till I had half a bulge on my back. Neither side bothered to wave goodbye: the left hand wrapped itself around the door knob; the right frantically continued typing.

To confess to others that I wanted to be a writer was an embarrassment. My first reaction was always self-deprecation. Even as the words left my mouth, I imagined the slightly-veiled disappointment in other eyes. Maybe they thought I had the potential to be something else, something they considered more successful, useful. Usually, writers aren't considered to be either of these. And, though everyone said I showed talent, I always had the feeling they never meant for me to pursue it any further than an entertaining pastime. If I had showed any real promise with anything else, I might have agreed with them. Even though I felt the need to defend my decision to become a writer, I agreed with everyone else's opinion that writing was a foolhardy and thankless career; I might very well turn out to be a failure at my one ability. This same fear was evident in the gentle words of encouragement that I have received over the years, from teachers, parents and friends. As each one shook my hand and wished me well, their disapproval seeped into my pores and swished about just under the skin, like poison, adding to the nervousness of confessing my dreams. The doubts and unfulfilled expectations of the world traveled through my veins and took refuge in my left hand.

These fears found shelter in the hand that could not write, could not type. It hammered half-heartedly at the keyboard, reminding me always that the life of a writer isn't like that of a doctor or architect or engineer. Our purposes are not the same; writers' voices have to carry across boundaries built by society, culture, and time. Our labors reconstruct memory, teach

morals, resurrect history, and engender in readers both the best and worst of human emotions. Though unseen and often unheard, we stitch society together and, when necessary, rip it apart. A writer's value lies in something other than monetary worth and celebrity status. Yet, we still have to look all those critical well-wishers in the eye and stand our ground.

The right half of me, the side that understands this, stayed to type. As I was growing up, my mother taught me about the pleasure of reading. I read *Number the Stars* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* without grasping the historical circumstances, but consciously aware that these authors held a power over me, to make me feel as the characters felt, to struggle and grow along with them. This younger version of myself ear-marked pages in books that shouted out over the din of people demanding to know what I wanted to be when I grew up. In response to their constant babble, I began stringing poems together on the page, like pearl necklaces, all the while knowing I was expected to be something, to be something else.

"How marvelous to be a writer, how romantic," they said, "how you have the talent for it. Just remember to leave all this daydreaming behind when it's time to start planning, time to pack up, move out, and amount to something." My right hand kept writing. It would not yield, remembering the power words can have, and the weight they carry when burdened with characters, causes, conflicts. It resisted the critiques, recognizing the need to represent, to react. After all, it had turned too many pages, read Nye and Borges and far too much of Gabriel Garcia Marquez to ever willingly be silent or isolated.

Even as I struggled for reconciliation between my choices and others' expectations, I thought there must have been other writers who had felt the same. They must have kept writing down their thoughts, even as their books were banned or burned in an attempt to hush the emotions and questions their words had awakened. Despite the fact that women had long been writing elaborate narrative letters before her, Elizabeth Cary is considered one of the first women writers. Ancient myths were kept alive because a monk somewhere cross-stitched Christ into Beowulf's salutations, so centuries-old lore would not be lost. Tennyson was told to give up his grief over Hallam; John Wilmot writhed in the disapproving glares of his peers, till appreciation was given like a pardon at his death. How loudly did the words of bell hooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Luis J. Rodriguez have to shout so as to be heard? How long before Zora Neale Hurston's stories carried the weight of their contemporaries? The critics of the world want writers, writers who fit into their pockets, who conform to their ideas of what needs to be heard. They want us to write and be published in the time it takes to get up

in the morning, but please, do so after having made the coffee. Like Sylvia Plath, we have only those few precious hours before the children wake to write everything that our hearts would bleed out through the pen. And, if we have created a room of one's own, if we closet ourselves away to work and ignore all other responsibilities, then we have gone mad, like Charlotte in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

It is not enough to write and write well. To receive any type of acclaim outside of the literary world, a writer's work must be bold, brilliant, and concrete. Appreciation for the different genres has fallen away and been replaced with the idea that writing about reality is the only 'good' writing. Writers strive against this categorization, yet stereotypes persist. If we write romance, we are scoffed at; science fiction and we are childish; social critique and we are revolutionaries; westerns and we are nostalgic; poetry and we are dreamers, self-absorbed, and subjective. So, each writer in turn has to learn not to let the lack of approval become parasites that infest, tear down pride, trample over talent, and take control of limbs and fingers so that they start to grasp in other directions. We do not have to explain why we are writers or poets, why we become people who can arm words.

My left hand considers itself a realist. It reads the written word and wonders how intangible sounds snatched out of the air and pasted onto a page could ever inspire change. It wonders how weapons can be forged without the context of steel, having only paper teeth to bite with. Along my shelves, poetry books are joined by accounts of history and ethnography. The social sciences strap their theories around my mind. They boldly venture out from the pages; and, having been paralyzed by doubts, ever fearful of writer's block, my left hand is carried away with them. Occasionally, it returns, offering up its discoveries so that the right hand can make something of the haphazard world. The pages fill with details of the struggle for cultural identity and critiques of social constructs. My left hand laughs at the right, judges the work, perhaps too harshly, leaves for days on end while refusing to call for fear of starting another fight between them. Attempting to make a second go of it, my hands will shake on accord before retiring to their individual sides of my body, pretending to get along. The right makes compromises, the left makes demands, and quietly they disapprove of each other.

This tear of uncertainty within me is rent by what a writer is and what a writer is expected to be, by what I want to become and what others would have me achieve. I take comfort in the fact that few writers find themselves to be whole. Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "I shall subsist in Borges, not in myself...and yet I recognize myself less in his books...I don't even

know which one of the two of us is writing this page." I find myself wondering if I must cut off one of my hands and separate myself to be a writer. Or, should I bind the two with bandages and force myself to be whole? What thread could I possibly use to sew my halves back together, when I know that any strings could be used to direct the left hand, to hide again the scissors, to conceal that bit of chalk? Sometimes, I wonder if it is my right hand, desperate to be accepted or to be inspired that is helping to slip the scissors inside the sleeve. Sometimes, I willingly look the other way.

# CContributors' NNotes

**Janeke Ausmus**—Janeke is a junior Creative Writing major from Centra-  
lia, Missouri, and this year's Editor-in-Chief of *Harbinger* literary magazine.  
She has published poems in *The Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Poetalk*, and  
*Northern Stars*, among others. She is interested in Women and Gender Stud-  
ies as well as Native American Studies.

**Kim Bennett**—Kim is a junior Creative Writing major from Sedalia, Mis-  
souri. She is a part of the Wood Hall program, a member of Sigma Tau Delta,  
and an associate poetry editor for *Harbinger*. She enjoys reading the Roman-  
tic and Transcendentalist poets and historical fiction and writing to create  
passion within others. Most of her spare time at home is filled with playing  
videogames and board games with her family and spending time at the local  
coffee house.

**Jessica Church**—Jessica is a Creative Writing and Graphic Design major  
in her freshmen year. She hails from Waterloo, Illinois and thanks her par-  
ents and her teacher, Mrs. Huebner, for encouraging her artistic aspirations.

**Jamie L. Dea**—Jamie is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, Mortar Board, and  
a Creative Writing major. Her future plans include a publishing internship  
before attending graduate school to earn her Masters in Social and Cultural  
Anthropology. In her senior year, Jamie divides her time between her stud-  
ies, traveling overseas, and working with local volunteer programs. Cursed  
with incurable curiosity, Jamie enjoys reading everything from philosophy  
to political science, history, sociology, and more. Math remains the bane of  
her existence.

**Bethany Dean**—Bethany is a senior, majoring in Liberal Arts studies from  
Dallas, Texas. Since high school, she has written in numerous genres, in-  
cluding fiction, poetry, and journalism, and has won several UIL awards and  
a Dallas Stars Journalism contest.

**Ashley Kay Emmert**—Ashley is a graduating senior from the BFA Cre-  
ative Writing program. She hails from the small town of Panama, Oklahoma  
and has become involved in swimming, Wood Hall, and Mortar Board. In  
her senior year, she is president of Sigma Tau Delta. Her writing stems from  
studying the human experience. The greatest support she has ever received  
has been from her English and creative writing teachers from elementary to

college. Ashley would like to extend special thanks to her father, Chuck Emert, and her writing professors for their support of her personal and writing development.

**Karen Heywood**—Karen is a senior Creative Writing major, senior class president, and a member of Mortar Board and Sigma Tau Delta. Her poetry and critical essays were accepted for presentation at the annual Sigma Tau Delta National Conference in 2006 and 2007. She is Co-Vice President/Membership Chair of the Missouri Writers' Guild, as well as a former president of the Columbia Chapter of the Missouri Writers' Guild, and is a featured author in *Bylines 2007 Writer's Desk Calendar*. Karen lives in Sturgeon, Missouri where she juggles her time between family, school, and her love of books.

**Krysten Hill**—Krysten is a junior from Kansas City, Missouri majoring in Creative Writing. She is a Sigma Tau Delta member and has presented her work at the national conference. She is a two-time poetry slam winner at the Cherry Street Artisan and enjoys writing poetry in any spare time that she can claim for herself.

**Lindsey King**—Lindsey is a second-year Theatre major. She is a stage manager at the college's Macklanburg Playhouse, and serves as the production stage manager for the student-run Warehouse Theatre. In the future, she hopes to continue her new hobby in photography.

**Patricia Jones**—Patricia is a senior graduating Magna Cum Laude in May with a BFA in Creative Writing. An active member of Sigma Tau Delta and a Pushcart Prize Nominee, she has been published recently in *Common Ties*, *Lighthouse Poetry*, and *Breath and Shadow*. She will continue her education at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the fall as a graduate student in Composition and Rhetoric.

**Tina Parke-Sutherland**—With an M.F.A. from the University of Alaska, a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, and a Fulbright Professorship in American Studies at the Finnish University of Tampere, Tina Parke-Sutherland lives in Columbia, Missouri, teaching literature and creative writing to young women at Stephens College, where she also serves as Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences. She writes poetry, memoir, and fiction.

**Katherine Thomas**—Katherine is working toward her Creative Writing and Broadcasting majors. A junior, she is an RA of Hillcrest and partici-

## Contributors' Notes

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pates throughout campus in many events. Currently, she is the producer of two radio segments on KWWC, *The Kickback* and *Literary Lunch*. Once she graduates, Katherine hopes to travel before attending graduate school. Her fantasies include wanting to be a surgeon, starting a revolution, and maybe owning a ranch in Texas or Montana.

**Alexis Weber**—Alexis is a senior Creative Writing major and a member of Sigma Tau Delta. Her story "Elvis is Alive and Living in Suburbia" is modeled after "Please Remain Calm," a short story by A. M. Holms in her collection *Things You Should Know*.

*Janeka Ausmus*

*Kim Bennett*

*Jessica Church*

*Jamie L. Dea*

*Bethany Dean*

*Ashley Kay Emmert*

*Karen Heywood*

*Krysten Hill*

*Lindsey King*

*Patricia Jones*

*Tina Parke-Sutherland*

*Katherine Thomas*

*Alexis Weber*