



The Torch

2004

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In the Grip of Grace
Digital Photograph 8" x 10"

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Madeleine L'Engle defines the artist as "a servant who is willing to be a birth-giver." Our ideas are embedded in our minds by a source beyond ourselves, and it is our duty to nurture them until they grow into what they are meant to be. The idea becomes a word, a note, or a chisel mark, and through the artist's committed love for the act of creating, it becomes greater than what we thought we were capable of: it becomes Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Beethoven's Ninth, and Michelangelo's *Pietà*. What is required is the artist's obedience to the idea, a willingness to sacrifice in order to skillfully give it flesh. With the creation, we can offer the reader a beautiful phrase, the listener a perfect blending of voices, and the viewer an image that in one moment communicates volumes. Here are the results of our efforts. Read and look; listen for the struggle and joy that accompany the making of art—the birth-giving.

Rebecca Phillips
Editor

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Bios

Christy Risch, junior English major, hopes that her words are pleasing to others and that she will be able to survive her final year at Union under the scrutinizing minds of the English department. **Erin Hetzel** is a senior English major who has an unhealthy obsession with gel pens. According to junior art major **Nathan Evans**.... Senior **Tommy Williams** was converted to the English department from the clutches of computer science. **Becca Phillips**, senior art major, is moving to Italy in September. **Jon Blair**, international photographer of mystery, flew in from India to shoot pics of the Art Department. **Drew Porter**, senior graphics major, would rather be making furniture. **Ryan Schunemann** joined the army and is currently playing Macbeth in some play...we forget the name of it. **Mariann Martin**, junior English and history major, likes to walk porch railings. **Beth Pierce**, sophomore art major, is difficult to get ahold of, but not if you know where to look. **Amber Bostwick**, senior English major, will never understand sentence diagramming because it is wicked and evil. **Cindy Keegan** has candy, and we love her for it. We think that **Tyler Malone**, senior DMS major, should consider taking up the saxophone. I just figured out how to spell **Andrew Terhune's** last name. Art major **Rob Alsobrook** is mixing the chemicals to make clay as I ask him for his bio. **Kevin Vailes** eats poems for breakfast. **David Clark** loves every minute of it.



Illinois Barn Tyler Malone Photograph 4" x 6"

The Beginning

Kevin Vailes

In the beginning were my
eyes, ears, and hands,
and with them I knew all
that there was in the world, the look
of irises against our white fence, the
sound of the wind, the texture of a kiss.

In the beginning I knew
my father loved me above all others, as he
taught me to throw a curveball, two
fingers tight against the seam
always remembering to snap
the wrist when I throw it.

In the beginning the world was unchanged
by time, agelessly young and strong.
Changes do not happen
in the beginning but only at the end
will the changes find you, surprising
and sudden in their actions.

In the beginning I knew more
than I know, simple images
and joys lost to time and living.
I forgot so much that I
wish I knew now, here
at the beginning of the end.

Twilight

Erin Hetzel

Standing underneath
the vast tapestry of twilight,
I drink in the stillness and warmth—
the vibrant orange and red fervor
of sun setting, the wiry fingers
of trees stretching to touch the grandeur,
stark black against
the kaleidoscopic spectrum of color.
A gentle breeze captures strands of my hair,
a caress and a whisper borne on change,
and in the deepening night I wonder,
what isn't beautiful?

Touch Mariann Martin

The winter sun lights the grass, each blade
still straight and sharp enough to cut, but dead
and brown along the stone path. They walk, fingers
woven—which are hers?—his calloused palm presses against
palm, and one jagged fingernail scratches soft skin. Last
night, he traced the bumps of her vertebrae through a maroon shirt,
silky soft, sliding fingers into the hollow of her back, as they
danced to Mozart and Bach. Forgetting
where his fist bruised the smooth skin, above the V
of her collarbone, leaving a red stain, like the last
light edging the horizon on a cold day.
The next morning the bruise
spread into veins of color, Chagall's
Maries au Village but darker blue, almost black. Now,
today, it has faded into a smudge of dirty yellow, hidden
under the turtleneck he gave her—soft wool
and crimson red, the color he loves against her brown hair—
as they walk together, fingers twined,
the first white tulip a slash on pine bark.



at the beginning of the end.

Ex Nihilo Cynthia Keegan Clay 22" x 22"

Life on the Farm

for Roger Sullivan

Andrew Terhune

Keep your eye on
the butterfly
and no one else,

he says.

And he numbered them
one
through
eight.

Nearby,
past the yellow barns
and pastel fields
of
motley,
spotted
horses,
whispers flutter,
it took Picasso
a lifetime
to paint like a child.

Forbidden Fruit

Tommy Williams

I cut an apple.
The steel blade shone
slicing through its green skin
to the grainy white underneath.
Some juice found a creekbed
in a wrinkle of my palm.
I started in the valley where I jerked out
the stem. No longer
would it hang, or have the chance.
I tried, but I could not make the knife
cut straight between
the four smooth bumps on the bottom.
When I divided it, the two hemispheres
disagreed with each other.
Still I had done it;
it would grow no more.

such strange things in life

Christy Risch

coming into the room
everyone gathered around her
bed in the cold
hospital that smelled of disease.
death papered the walls.
breaking through the crowd
just to see her last
breath but missing it.

these are such strange things in life:
needing to use the bathroom
the moment your mother dies.

Eternal Robert Alsobrook Steel 3' x 3' x 8'



Paper Houses *Mariann Martin*

Twenty years ago, Uncle Ross boarded up my grandfather's old house. He drove his black Chevy truck with a missing hubcap down to the local Ace Hardware in Jonesboro one Saturday morning and bought a load of two-by-fours, two pounds of twentypenny nails, and a blue and silver Eastwing hammer. Three hammers hung in the barn behind the house, all good hammers with slightly worn claws and beaten heads. But boarding up his parents' house was not like pounding in a nail to hang a painting of Christ on the cross in the living room or knocking out a dent in the tin he used to cover the old well house. He needed a new hammer, new nails, and new boards.

Young Bob Richards helped him load the lumber, heaving the soft pine boards onto the rust patterned bed of the truck. "Building something?" he asked casually.

Ross glared at him, his gray eyes darkening like clouds threatening rain. "When I was a young-un, I was taught to shut up unless I was spoke to." He spat the words out distinctly, measuring them for intensity and volume. Hunching into his faded blue denim jacket, Bob hastily threw the last two-by-fours onto the truck and retreated back into the store.

Uncle Ross drove home in the still fall air that so many people called Indian summer, those strangely lovely days hovering between the muggy heat of summer and the dreary gray days of a Southern winter. The first leaves were just beginning to glint orange and yellow on the bluffs above the Buffalo River that morning as he pulled in the packed dirt driveway leading to the house where he grew up, just a few hundred feet from his own brick house across the field lane. The porch wrapped around the side of the house, protecting the front door and throwing shadows across the windows that opened into the living room. Ross still remembered the last time he had helped his father reshingle the roof. It had been long after he was married and living in his own house. But his dad had still yelled at him to carry the shingles more carefully and to lay them in straighter rows across the roof. Uncle Ross never protested as he relaid the lines, but he felt that peculiar prickle of rage at the back of his neck, a carefully contained hatred.

The windows glinted in the morning light, many of them half opened, and the tautly stretched screen door squeaked softly as Uncle Ross opened it, a mere murmur of protest against the crash of his boots on the rough oak floors. He began slamming the windows down onto the sills, drawing in the storm shutters and sliding the bolts into their catches. Some of them refused to slip in, corroded from years of disuse, and Uncle Ross shoved them with the palm of his weathered hand. The bolts barely budged, cutting into his flesh and leaving a red welt like a stinging lash across a slave's bare back.

"Damned stupid windows," he muttered under his breath, and grabbing a green ashtray from the coffee

table, he swung at the bolts. Two of them slid in, but the last one refused to move. At the third blow, the ashtray shattered, its glass shards scattering under the windows and glistening a dark green in the dimness, small bits lying on the brown easy chair by the kitchen door.

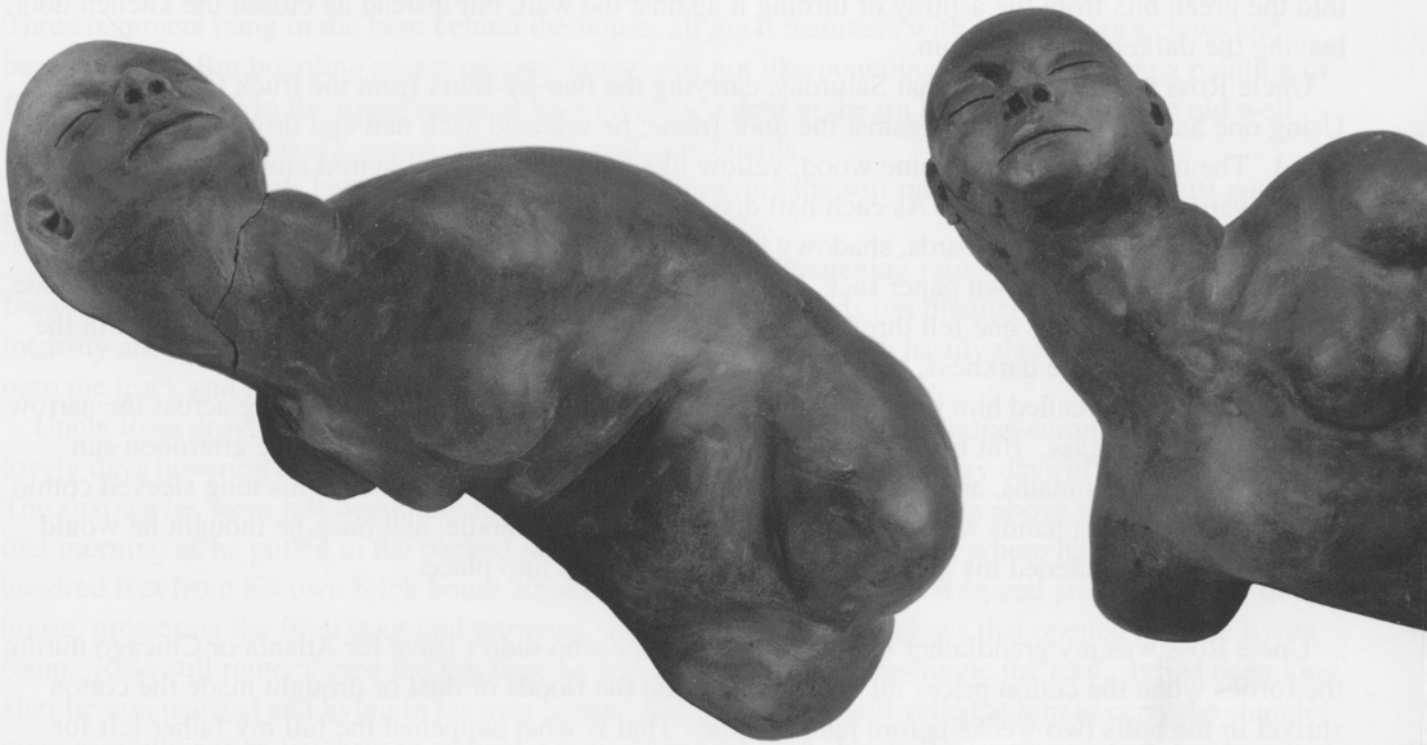
“Damned ash tray.” This time Uncle Ross swore loudly and angrily. He pulled the window shutter in the best he could, but the bolt kept it from latching, and the thin shaft of light flashed on the broken shards and shone on a family picture hanging on the wall. Uncle Ross considered smashing the photograph into the green bits from the ashtray or turning it against the wall, but instead he closed the kitchen door, leaving the darkened living room.

Uncle Ross worked steadily that Saturday, carrying the two-by-fours from the truck to the porch. Using one hand to steady them against the door frame, he selected each nail and drove it deep into the wood. The nails bit easily into pine wood, yellow like the shadowed goldenrod along the fencerow twenty yards behind the house. As each nail disappeared into the wood, the hammer etched dents in the smooth surface of the pine boards, shadowy half moons of rage. Sometimes he dropped the nails as he pulled them out of the brown paper sack, but if they slipped into the grass, the shiny glint always made them easy to find. Once one fell through a crack on the porch, and even though he could see it in the dust, half hidden in the darkness, he had to leave it there.

At noon, his wife called him in for lunch, the smells of chicken and cornbread easing across the narrow strip of ditch and grass. But he just shook his head and kept pounding in nails. The afternoon sun slanted over the mountains, and sweat dripped from his leathery face and soaked his long sleeved cotton shirt. Sometimes his hands would slip on the smooth hammer handle, and once he thought he would drop it, but he retightened his grip and hoisted another board into place.

Uncle Ross was my grandfather's favorite son, the one who didn't leave for Atlanta or Chicago during the forties when the cotton prices hit rock bottom, and the floods or dust or drought made the cotton shrivel in the bolls two weeks before harvest time. That is what happened the fall my father left for Atlanta. He was tired of working in the cotton and tobacco fields and sick of never having enough money. He found a job as a night watchman in a factory while he went to school. Two years later when he graduated, he began working as a schoolteacher; at almost the same time he married my mother.

Before I was born, when my parents were still living in an apartment at the edge of the ghetto, my father's parents died, one after the other. They had been old and tired of living, worn out by the struggle of raising five children and enduring the years of drought and crop failure. My father had gone back for each of the funerals, and when he came home after the last one, he held my mother and told her he never wanted to go back to Jonesboro.





Waking Rebecca Phillips Clay 8" x 8" x 20" Each

My grandparents left the farm to Uncle Ross, but no one was surprised, and my father was not upset. Ross had stayed in Jonesboro and cared for his parents before they died. He was the obedient eldest son, and it was only right that he got the farm. My father wrote him soon after the funeral and asked if he could have a few things from the house as keepsakes for his children. He especially mentioned his worn baseball glove, a family picture, and the kitchen stool. Uncle Ross never answered, and he never sent the things. Several months later, an old family friend told my father about Uncle Ross boarding up the house with every piece of furniture, the family pictures, and all the dishes still inside.

I grew up hearing that story again and again, just the fragments and bits my father told me while I sat in his lap, and he played with my long blonde hair. But my childhood imagination recreated the story in my mind until I knew exactly how Uncle Ross looked as he pounded the nails: hooked nose, thinning black hair blowing in the wind while a murky stream of tobacco dribbled off his chin, and long fingers that gnarled and twisted into claws as they clutched the boards. Sometimes those fingers pursued me in my dreams, and I awoke, screaming in the dimness of my bedroom lit only by passing car lights and dancing shadows on the wall.

Years later, as a teenager, I no longer feared Uncle Ross, and his gnarled, grasping claws in my dreams evolved into the more frightening monsters from the movies I watched with my friends on Friday nights. But I still thought about him at odd times; sometimes when my chalk screeched on the blackboard in Ms. Channing's literature class or when I watched my father pound nails in a tree house for my younger brother, I wondered why he did it.

The summer before I left for Mississippi State University, Uncle Ross had a stroke. He was standing in the kitchen, his wife said, pouring milk into his morning cereal when he slid to the floor, his eyes wild and panicky. The milk dripped onto the kitchen floor, white pooling in the depression where the refrigerator stood and a small stream running under the cabinets. Paramedics took Uncle Ross to the Jonesboro hospital, and for two days he lay on the green hospital bed, staring blankly at the wall-papered border of wild roses that edged the room. Then he slowly started moving and talking, but everyone knew he would never go back home again.

Uncle Ross's wife called my father after the first week, frantic with worry because she had no idea how to do the paperwork to transfer Uncle Ross to a nursing home or how she would pay for it. I watched my father's face as he talked on the phone; a slight frown of worry about Uncle Ross, but an even greater look of annoyance at the necessity of a trip to Jonesboro.

Since I was tired of waiting in-between the world of high school and college, unsure whether I was child or adult, and curious to see the world my father grew up in, I asked him if I could go along to

Jonesboro. We drove up on a sweltering day when the heat waves made the asphalt look like it was rolling under the cars, moving them like boats in high tide. Georgia spread out on either side of Interstate 20, acres and acres of soybeans, and cotton, and grass, flat and boring fields that edged out to meet the horizon. My father slept a good deal of the day, his head pillowed against the window and his soft breathing becoming more rasping when he didn't move for a long time. I drove with the silence enveloping me and the creased gray leather of the steering wheel imprinting my smooth hands.

The horizon had already wiped out the sun when I pulled off the first exit in Jonesboro and woke my father. Sliding back the driver's seat so he could ease into the space that I had adjusted to fit my small body, he headed for the north edge of town, choosing roads hesitantly at first, then with more confidence as he slipped into a world he left thirty years before. I watched the shadows play across the brick and vinyl sided houses, homes to the laughing children that skated on the sidewalks and looked both ways before darting across the street. Our home with its sunny yellow kitchen walls and my mother laying napkins and silverware on the linen tablecloth seemed far away, but I could hear the faint echo of my little brother's voice in the children across the street. The murky air coming in through my rolled down window smelled faintly of dry sage grass and lavender kudzu flowers; I wondered where my father was taking us.

We pulled into the packed red dirt driveway with a strip of grass growing in the center, and my father slowly climbed out of the car, never taking his eyes off the house in front of us. The shadowy dusk almost obscured the east porch and front door with its weathered gray-brown two-by-fours and rusted nails. Silently we walked through the waving grass that brushed our knees, past the tangle of honeysuckle, poison ivy, and trumpet vines clinging to the edge of the porch, around to the back side of the house. One part of the oak shingled roof had collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in the loft where my father and his brothers had slept. Bits of broken boards scattered in the sage grass that choked out the iris bed under my grandparents' bedroom window. Further around the back, someone had ripped off half the boards nailed across the kitchen window and smashed in the bottom window pane. My father lifted me up until I could see into the window, and I leaned inside, bracing my body against the glass fragments, careful not to cut myself on the jagged edges that still remained. Directly below the window, a pile of dishes cluttered the kitchen table—two plates from my grandmother's white and blue china set and a small glass pitcher. I wriggled my body until I could just reach the pitcher, and I handed it out the window to my father. After he lowered me back down to the ground, I carried the pitcher out to the car, but my father stood beside the broken window for a long time, the last light from the long gone sun casting his shadow on the wooden siding, a tall, distorted figure.

The next morning, we drove over to the Tri-County Senior Home to see Uncle Ross. The tan brick building with bars across the windows sprawled out at the edge of town, a chain-link fence around the grass in the front lawn, and acrid fumes and smoke from the paper mill next door tainting the air as we walked in the doors that only swung one way—into the building. A pungent mix of sweat and air freshener and urine and dried flowers saturated the halls. The lobby was filled with withered old men and women, their birdlike claws grasping the rails of their wheelchairs, lined up like blackbirds on a branch before they all fly south for the winter. One old lady picked at the stained webbing that held her frail body in the chair, unaware that her lime green robe had slipped off one shoulder, exposing the parchment thin skin that stretched over a jutting shoulder blade and lay like crumbled tissue in the hollow of her throat. The man beside her clapped his hands and happily crooned, “Come here, baby,” while a thin strand of saliva traced a silver streak down his chin.

The nurse who led us down the hall to Uncle Ross’s room smiled pleasantly, and her white scrubs looked freshly ironed. She opened the door to room 37 and pointed to someone behind the floral curtain. An old man, shrunken under the hospital-issued sheet, lay on his side with his feet pulled up, curled like a fallen oak leaf on the front porch steps. Torn strips of white cloth held his grasping, broken-nailed hands and pinioned his fragile wrists against the rails of the hospital bed to prevent him from tearing out the feeding tube that snaked across the pillow and kept him from closing his mouth completely. His eyes were half shut, the veined lids purple in the light slanting through the miniblinds, and the white-stubbled beard on his chin blurring the outlines of his face.

My father and I stood beside the bed as he contorted his body feebly in an attempt to slip away from the straps and the rails and the sheets. His lips moved, straining to talk around the tube in his mouth that garbled all his words. “The house, the house is falling apart.” The spidery voice held a note of desperation and fear. “Need to fix it again. The shingles...” The words blended into an unintelligible murmur until he whispered clearly, “I loved him, too.”

My father took both of the shaking, paper-dry hands and held them gently in his own strong fingers. I walked to the window, where I watched a yellow poplar leaf skitter across the dying grass in the empty lot across the street, and thought about leaving home.



Second Thoughts Beth Pierce Photograph 4" x 6"

Swallowing Stones *David Clark*

There is an amount of pleasure attached to fevers in our blood.
It lies in the sink, noiselessly, with the towel that a girl takes
and soaks and folds, and puts across her forehead. The yellow pleasure

of a cold cloth wetting her eyelids is a pleasure that undoes
her down to the fever-hot backs of her knees. The course a long, brittle-
legged insect walks as he climbs down the ladder of her vertebrae, to bury

himself like a sin of the heart, under the flares of her hips. It is true—
the fever gradually heats the rag, the way her mother's oven might
warm, until the aspirin takes effect. Finally, it will be the echo of that soft

pleasure, when she wakes, that drives her back to soak the thin
cloth in the sink again and again.

I once had a key chain that was also a compass.

One summer night after clandestine swimming in the country club's private
pool, when we had gone back to someone's house to watch a thriller, I bit
into it with my teeth, in nervousness, cracking the plastic casing

like a pecan. Some of the grayish liquid leaked into my mouth, heavy
like ink or blood, but thin as the invisible skin that separates a drop of water
from a drop of sky. I hurried to spit it out in the toilet—our wet things still

dripping in the sink—and I thought the word "Mercury", washed out
my mouth, and spit again until I was dry as a polished stone.

By the light of the TV I went back to my seat on the couch beside Kelsey

Vermillion. I sat for a moment touching her smooth, bare leg, so barely with my own it was only the hairs touching. And as good as this made me feel, I couldn't finish the movie for thinking "Mercury" again and again. All this on a night

of clouds, and I drove home so honestly frightened for my health that I felt lockjaw tighten the sockets of my teeth. I thought maybe I should drive straight to the hospital. I snapped my mouth open, and held it like that. Only much later,

years later, was there pleasure in the way I told this story, my brush with poison, and the other one—when I thought I had meningitis—to a young lady who shared a class with me in college, whose skirt fell three silky inches

above her knee. It was the pleasure of having that girl laugh with her eyes for me. "That's so cute," she said. "You are charming." Would you believe I have been hugged for that story? And later kissed and kissed, in part

for the cuteness of that story?

There is another pleasure opposite the moist towel for a fever: that of coming in doors from the snow with the secret

knowledge of a heavy cold rolling down a boy's throat on his Adam's Apple. A stone. At the sink he will pull off his gloves with his mouth and run hot water over his hands. Then he will begin to feel a prickling that is his

hands being raised from the dead. He will enjoy this feeling, and through it, begin to anticipate missing school for being ill. He will have the toothsome pleasure of reading a day and another day, in bed without obligations. Is the sound

a poem makes, the sound of a burlap sack that holds your hurts, being cut open and then emptied over the bed where another person sleeps? Certainly, it has been in the quiet of a sick bed, with the poems of others, that I have found all my pains selfish.



In Repair Ryan Schunemann Clay 39" - 68" in Height

Midnight Snack Tommy Williams

The man relieving himself on the crumbling cinders
pretends not to notice me. A blunt trembles
between his dark lips. I wonder if he'll rob me.
I never would have thought it if here
were anywhere other than here, now. It's fifteen after
and only this store sells taters—yes, taters—
four for a dollar or thirty-three cents apiece.
Booths with long red benches and chipped
pressed-wood line the wall by the windows,
around the corner from the man
painting the peeling bricks.
Wrinkled faces and backs covered
by Members Only jackets are scattered
along the benches with the pierced ears
and navel rings, waiting.

The parking lot
is seven cars long in front
and four on the right,
and every one is filled.
Half a dozen bodies busy the place, and I
must wait for my dinner: two Debbie cakes
and a bottle of water. Tonight, I may buy a chicken
snack—a wing, a breast, a biscuit, two taters.
It's Friday, and I've been to the bank.
You know, the one inside the grocery
where you can buy a hot plate lunch
for a buck fifty.

I know I fit somewhere in this mess,
with these bodies, these people, but
I'm a lost and forgotten puzzle piece, never found
but always remembered when
the picture's almost finished
and one puff of smoke
from the brick chimney is missing.

Glass People Amber Bostwick

When you are not beautiful, you are invisible. You possess a power reminiscent of magic and superheroes: that of imperceptibility.

Walk into a restaurant with a friend generally acknowledged to be attractive. Open the door and feel the grainy floor under your shoes. Smell the rushing gust of fajitas and cigarette smoke that settles into a tangible gray miasma before your eyes, crawling on your skin. You know upon reaching home you'll have to throw your clothes directly into the washer because they will smell of smoke and a thousand dialogues that cling to the fibers. Wanting those words gone, you may even consider burning the clothes just to free yourself of memory.

Sounds of muted conversations, the clink of silverware and the tinkling of water glasses being refilled reach your ears as you and your friend walk by the people sitting on benches to the left and right, all waiting to be seated in the golden light of a table. Children in corduroys and little boots crawl over the laps of their parents, impatient to escape the boredom of waiting. Parents and guys sitting with their girlfriends will openly stare as your friend leads the way to the hostess to ask for a table. You will pretend that those mothers, fathers, and couples are looking at both of you. Your friend will pretend not to notice.

The hostess will take you to a table for two, which is still being cleaned. You brush off the stray crumbs that fell onto your seat while the server was wiping the table and simultaneously gawking at your friend. Sit down and rub your finger in the caulking between the colorful table tiles while you wait for the menus. A drifting smell of spicy meat wafts over from a waiter carrying a plate laden with beans and burritos to a man sitting diagonally from you. Your friend is talking and you are not listening, but it's okay because half the time an answer is not expected. The man is alone; he reads a magazine while he forks his meal into his mouth, and you wonder if you should feel badly that he came to dinner by himself.

You stare across the table at Cate. For just short of a year you have been seduced by a fad: a shining person who bustles into the private Christian lives of a select few at school before bustling out again, quickly as she came. Cate makes you all believe that she is an intensely smart but delicately tortured soul; maybe she is. It has been awhile since you've seen her. She grins at you and leans forward, clasping her hands together under the table. You see her in pieces of movement and color. Her golden hair is darker at the roots and swings down to her jaw line. The mass of gold always moves as if wind is blowing it, swept and draping.

Waiting for the server, you ask Cate why she hurt you so badly. Stretching a sad smile across her lips, she tells you she's sorry and that she loves you. Cate thinks this will placate you as it used to, that giving you the silver cross her boyfriend hated to see her wear somehow absolved her behavior. You still find yourself entranced because when Cate talks, she speaks in secrets. She makes you believe that whatever she tells you has never been uttered to anyone else on earth and that your ear is the blessed one. A glow surrounds her smile, and the only reality that keeps her tied to humanity is the scattering of acne on her face.

Then Cate is gone, her radiance still filling the empty chair. You don't know any better yet. It is your first encounter with such an enchantingly beautiful human.

“Beauty too close will ruin your life.”

—Charles Wright

You stare across the table at Michael. He is wearing a black sweater that looks good against his blue eyes and long dark hair. The waitress struts over and takes the pencil from behind her ear, “What can I get you to drink?” She watches Michael.

Each of you is fiddling, you with your straw wrapper and he with his glass of soda. You wrinkle up your wrapper and put it in the middle of the table. Michael stretches his straw over the wrinkled wrapper and releases a few droplets until it uncoils its kinks like a worm.

You look at each other and smile. He flips his hair back and you stare silently at the pathetic squishy mess that used to be the straw wrapper; the enjoyment had only lasted a few seconds.

"You know I have to go, right? I mean, I'll be happier there."

You're tired of arguing with him. Michael adjusts his life as if it was peopled with paper dolls, and you've grown weary of trying to pry the scissors away.

"Okay, Michael."

How can you know better than to forgive him? The last glimpse of your lesson is his swinging shiny hair, and you still have not fully learned.

You have seen beauty so close that you had to turn away from its ugliness. Add insult to invisibility.

You stare across the table at Charlotte. Her bracelets jingle against each other, twinkles of color glinting on the tan skin of her arm as she deftly moves her water glass from her left to her right and daintily squeezes lemon into the crystal liquid. She taps her meticulously manicured nails against the menu while she scans and decides what she wants. You came in knowing what you wanted.

"I'll have the pico de gallo, please." Perfect Spanish and an impeccable white smile at the waitress. Charlotte doesn't look at you; her hands delicately fluff her short brown curls.

"Charlotte, is there something wrong?"

"No." She is lying. Charlotte is transparent like a new mother who cannot hide her fear and disgust at someone's kind request to hold her infant.

You are in this friendship because you fear you will crumble if Charlotte does not like you. You are also in this friendship because she thinks she is your mother. Charlotte is the kind of person for whom everything dovetails; when she really does have children she will never let them leave the house without their teeth brushed. Charlotte is in charge; you just hop along and hope she will notice you.

"Charlotte, something is wrong. What is it?"

She flicks her eyes. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure I want to tell you." Another lie; she is bursting to tell you.

"Well," she exhales. "I can't stand your attitude. You're hateful and cynical. You say you want people to like you, but then you mock them, and I can't stand it. You invalidate everything I say." Charlotte's voice is thick with obligation; her eyes are focused somewhere behind your head. "I don't think you'll ever make any friends the way you are." She is fidgeting with her fork, and you are in silent shock. Charlotte asks if you have anything to say.

"No."

Charlotte feels it is her duty to save humanity from your realism because she does not understand it herself. However, you still don't know any better than to be deceived; you are in your co-dependent phase. The joy of beauty does not register as something potentially harmful, but you have just received a deep wound. Evidence to the contrary.

It seems that beauty negates Jesus and becomes his blood; it covers a multitude of sins and has the ability, as Charlotte Bronte says, to "purchase indemnity for every fault."

Dinner is finished. You leave a twenty, stand up, and march aimlessly into the winding confusion of tables. Place each hand in an individual pane of glass and push the doors open to the rush of chilly winter air that makes you wish you had worn a coat. Someone bumps into you on his way into the restaurant and apologizes, "I'm so sorry, I didn't see you."



Untitled Nathan Evans Oil on Canvas 4' x 4'

Off Highway A1A

Christy Risch

Those shores—the expanse of
white or beige sand marred
by footprints, continually erased
and made new. Little treasures
hiding up near the bluff. (I gathered
them as a child and still do.)
There is a picture of me
on Pensacola Beach—I was
three. A pink jacket around
my torso and a white toboggan
with a pink pompom on my head.
My mother squats, holding me from
behind where the sun sets, casting its
rays in a cascade of orange
and pink. You would think the
sand was snow except for the
Gulf washing up behind us.

It's March today when I'm visiting
the Atlantic side of the peninsula.
The air is warm enough to walk
around with only a bikini as long as
the sun is out. I stroll up along the bluff
where the grass is green, looking for
those sea treasures. (God makes them
after the sun sets and lets the tide
bring them on shore during the nights.)
Most yellowish and small, newly
created and without flaw. Some
old, broken by many nights
thrust against the water and the sand.
The first one I find, a conch shell,
out in plain view. Its crests broken
only at the very tips, and grooves
sloping the sides on the reddish-brown
and beige of the spiral twist. I
snatch it up and hold it
to my ear, hearing the
ocean that was inside it
the night before.

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