

# COLLAGE



FALL 98

# Collage

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MTSU's Journal for the Creative  
Arts

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Fall 1998

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# The sun-eaters

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B.W. Carter

The sun-eaters

stride out into the world  
defying gray clouds stretched low & bruised  
across a dim far offing like

fingers, raising bronzed fists against  
the fickle will of Gaea. Staunch silhouettes cut

against a line of cardboard Charleston  
sky, they march through verdant swathes of yaupon

& bayberry to a place the sea  
regards—some skipping—while tangerine  
stripes a tossed & frothing

horizon. Spreading blankets (an occasional white

flash of smile; Bermuda cocktails reclined on  
a shingle of terra cotta earth-rug), the

sun-eaters salute the retreat of sullen  
dawn. Too, the christening of yet

another bright & sumptuous meal.





# Untitled

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Steve Purinton

# from The Farm Project

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Steve Purinton



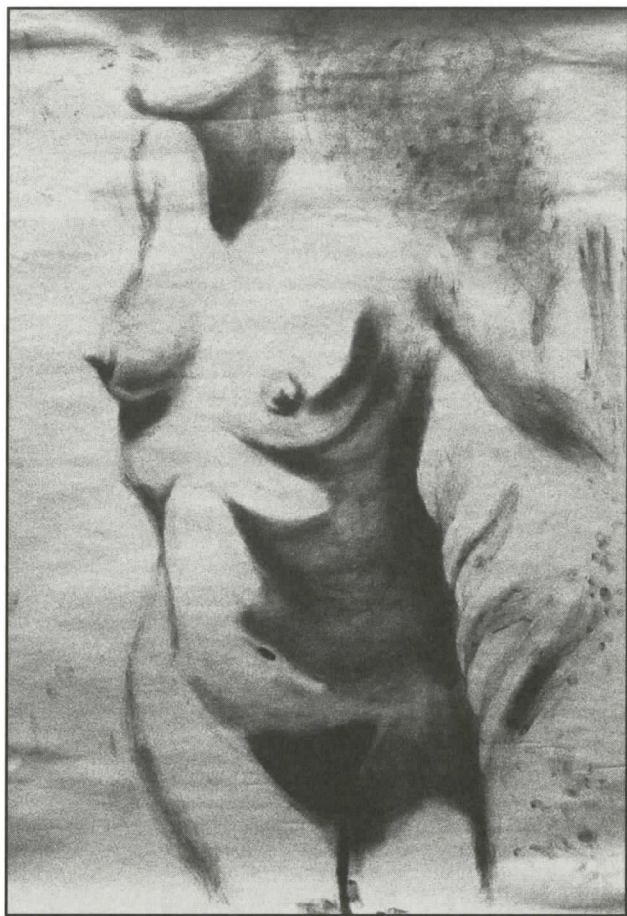
# Untitled

To look up from below  
    there is dirt  
small beetles, large stones, worms of all shapes and sizes  
    and flowers, only the tangled root ends.  
To look up from below,  
    I see the world inside out.

Regina Belt

# Untitled

David Dubois



# Badu

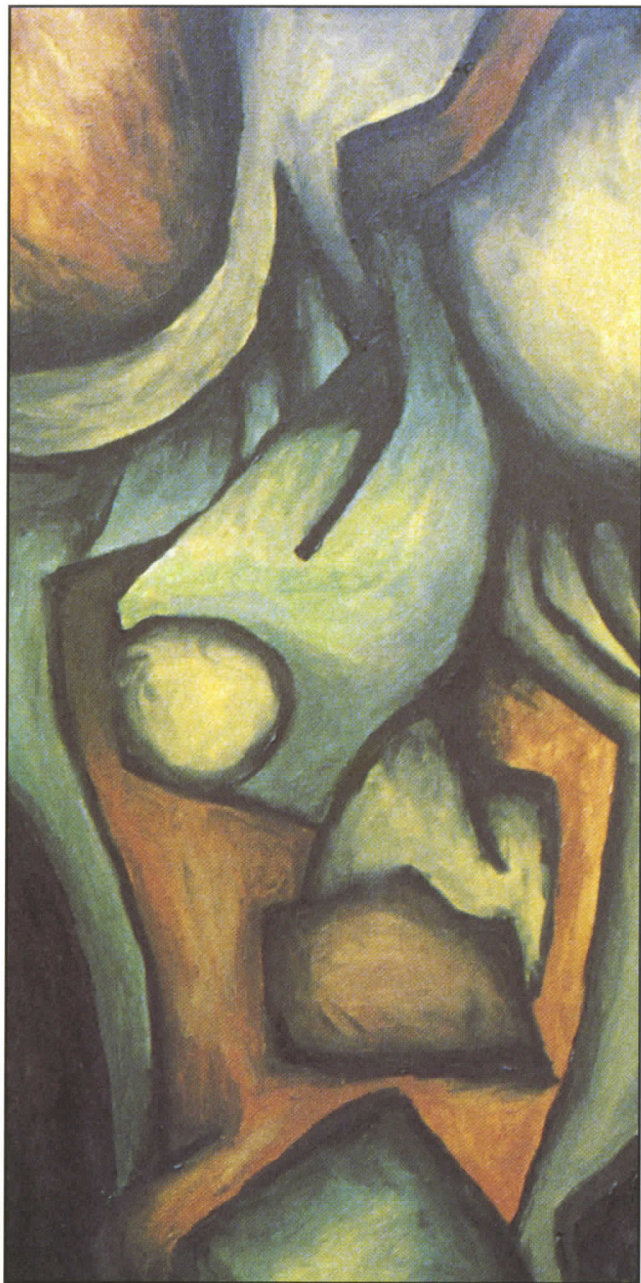
Edwin McSwine





Untitled

Jeremy Cowart



## scene 13

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JOSH COCHRAN

we are a frozen image from the movies,  
small smoky college town room.  
a half empty bottle of whiskey, we share,  
two cokes & a long slow joint. a train mourns  
in the distance.

the music is strong & low. he stares out past  
the window, beyond the rain is. someone else  
has tasted what he thinks is only his. maybe they are  
tasting it now. he says "all i can taste is smoke—"  
he pours himself another shot, & leans back in the chair.

i think he will go with the music for now.  
he has told me that music is to be created,  
it is incomplete as an experience without the act of creation.  
constantly observing the notes.

he told me they are distant and cold now,  
even when he feels that electricity in his nervous system.  
it is an observation of an emotion, always. this sadness  
is a distant biological command, an understanding of how  
the sine waves came to be tones, came to be chords, came  
to be impulses in him & it is a fantastic explanation for him.

i am not him. i like the music itself.  
either he will learn, or that bottle of whiskey  
will become his only companion  
& this frozen image will become his life.

# St. Petersburg Man, 1995

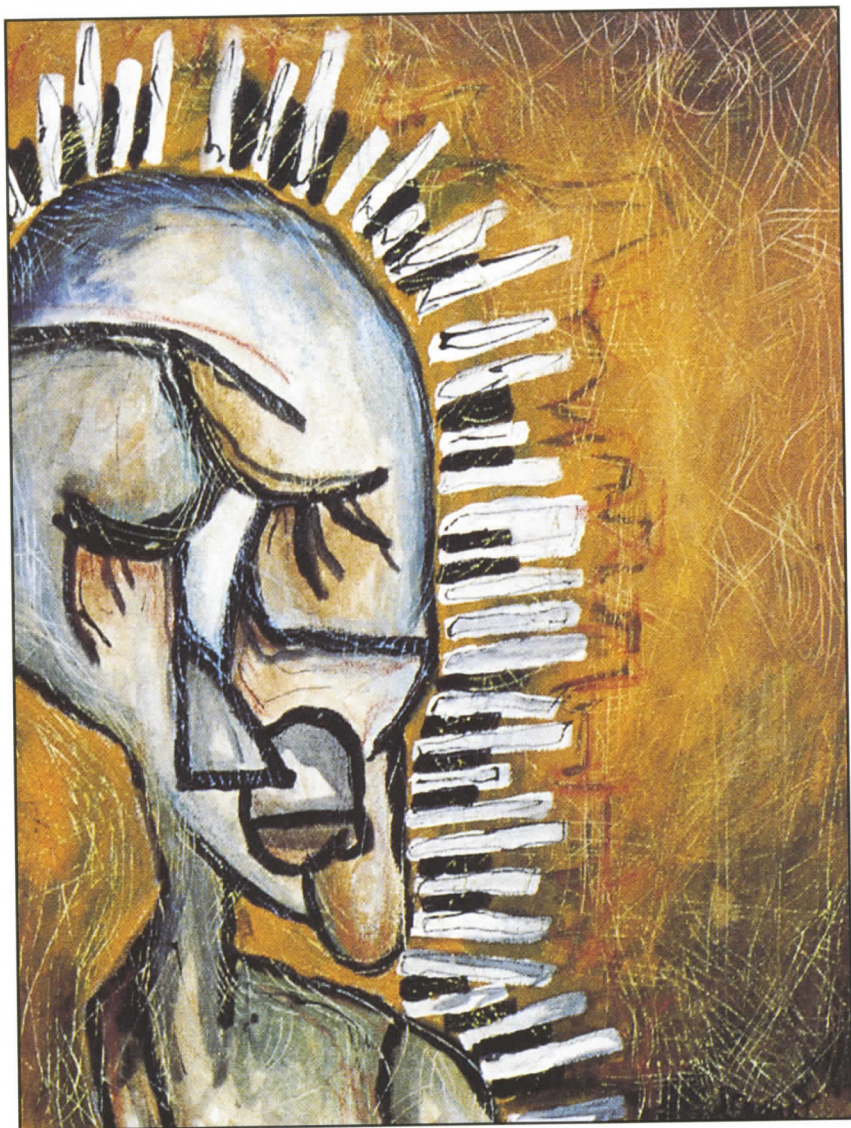


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Austin Fitzpatrick



# Wading in Songs



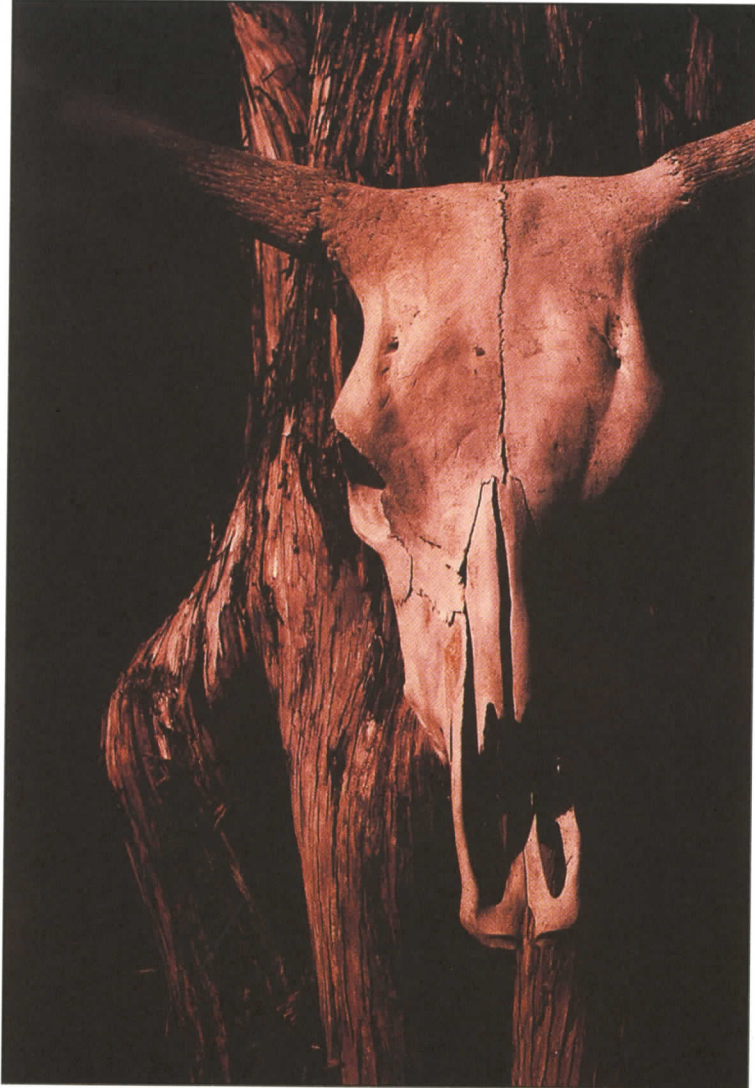
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Jeremy Cowart

# Ghost Ranch

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Steve Purinton





# Silhouette

Ben Parks



I saw the old slipper  
Down by the highway's shoulder  
Ragged & Dirty  
With a film of Dust  
A bit of gravel in its foot.  
Sitting alone  
Watching the people drive past.

Leather & Hard  
Old like a wooden clog  
Stood the Exile  
Among the subjects of dandelions  
Springing from the road's cracks  
And chigger weeds  
Pecking along the white as red archers.

Past the weeds I near  
Lifting the old temple,  
With a few worshipping ants scuttling away,  
Shaking off the idol's dirt  
Beside the permanant mud engravings.  
I read the stitched script  
Though its silence tells me nothing.

I wonder  
Whose foot walked bare without its match  
Or perhaps tossed out a window as trash.  
But the old dirty shoe wouldn't speak  
Not as proud as it stared  
Quietly awaiting  
To be set back in the covering grass.

What did I expect  
To find from the shoe  
Strolling about my way?  
My intrusion seemed unwelcome  
And still stonefast he observed me  
Sick of my groping about its edges,  
Scowling at my presence.

I left the old slipper  
Down by the highway's shoulder  
To watch over the passing cars  
To house the vagrants of the intruding stems;  
And all it honored me with  
Was a cold stare, sitting alone  
Waiting for me to walk past.

## Shoe

---

Michael O'Neal C. II

# Supernatural



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Jeremy Cowart



# Contemplation of cloth and the constitution of self: Oxford Street, ca. 1996

---

B.W. Carter

1.

The student sat alone in his favorite chair listening to the ticking of the clock on the wall. There were other sounds around—Mrs. Crawford's casual titter next door; the dull clink of bottles through drafty rococo paneling—but the ticking of the clock on the wall settled loud and steady in his ears, which buzzed already with warm beer and nicotine. It seemed to the student he was in the chipped and holey belly of a beast with little regard for its own condition, and its heart beat and beat and beat without chiming.

The monotony caused him to think.

He looked at the tapestry which hung over the television, depicting in pastel a motley but fine-groomed coterie of dogs clamoring over a still game of billiards echoed somehow in his head— their raucous banter and the snap of balls breaking muted by thread and the medium and that boring steadfastness of a single dimension. He looked at the tapestry which hung over the heater—an antique gas contraption that sputtered suddenly, began to click and jump intermittently like a nervous muscle—where a darker-birthed group of cats sat playing poker: dealing and betting, merely existing in more somber hues of black tan brown red while attempting with the bred falter-factor of subordination to ignore those sly cast eyes and derision in guttural tones from the opposite wall.

An air of oppression was heavy. Its taste was sour and stale.

The student leaned over, took a sip from his beer and wondered if, when he tipped his head back, he might fall comatose to never wake up, or wake up a stalk of celery with neither knowledge nor nostalgia of what he was, who he should be. The student should be anything, he decided, but comatose. He had been that once, and those stark memories of nothing terrified him even now. It had been a long time; but thoughts of yesterday often ran on a different continuum than thoughts of today, and what was yesterday sometimes seemed so clear, corporeal, painstakingly ominous, that it could be in fact the thoughts of tomorrow in all their mortifying realism. Thoughts of such did not ease his mind.

The student decided (as he was presently in a decisive mood) to write this down: this grim, mourning sense of reflection, and its conse-

quence-realization; regret for not coming about different. He was reaching for his pen when the red-eyed cat in the tapestry over the heater stood, spread its paws, and said in a tone of prevalent dissatisfaction which halted the toss of cards in mid-air:

\*I protest.\*

2.

The student afforded it a small nod, as if to concur on the subject of spiritual deprivation: its gross mockery of color shape caste idea on a more celestial level; perhaps, on the pure necessity of release, even if only through the action of voice, or pen spurred by the boldness of warm beer and nicotine. But the red-eyed cat proclaimed nothing else, merely stood with its paws spread (as if to incite revelation, remonstrance in its fellows, and trepidation in the ill manner of the hostile tapestry with its statuesque refusal to go on).

He forgot to write this down. The beating of the chipped and holey beast's heart became the counter of the universe, which became that single moment of outcry; which became a testament, a liberation, for the feelings on his own scars—the scars he wore meek at first, occasionally shunned or chagrined by that serendipitous brutality of an offhand grimace, or an ignorant sneer and insult because sometimes after he'd reentered the world they would mistake the scars for badly-sculpted salon styles in an inept attempt to be cool (like fashionably shaven skulls sporting jersey numbers, sneaker logos) but never buck-shot burns and scalpel leavings—like badges now, like muses. The world it seemed was unconditioned for anything beyond its perpetual plastic scheme, and so grafted flesh stitch marks on a loose-nerved limp became as judgmental as an ethnic coda the over-abundance of melanin the cant of eyes the simple categorization of species.

Nonetheless.

The student forgot his pen but raised instead his beer: a cerebral revolutionary and that was all. He was no revolutionary. He was only dealing.

The red-eyed cat, however, seemed indifferent to the indifference of its fellows, who merely shook their heads with sidelong impotent threads of coup at the opposite wall while reshuffling their deck and refilling their pot for yet another round of workhouse spades and indiscreet heckling behind their backs; and him in his favorite chair with his upraised beer and mental oratories that moved nothing but his hand to



the small refrigerator beside the heater for yet another cold one. It stood resolute, and in the rigidity of its form, its countenance, the red-eyed cat seemed of something more than thread—of stone, maybe metal, but certainly not flesh. For flesh was still pliable, still yielding beneath chains, and the red-eyed cat had declared with its lone movement emancipation. It would wear no chains.

The student lit a cigarette and toasted the champion on the wall. He wondered, rousing himself to stand at last, if he might ever be likewise free: undaunted—indeed, unconcerned—with those shifting stares and curiously contemptuous murmurs as he limped along within the polyester press of the pharisaic public son intent on judging others in the same witless moment of sanctifying itself and those pious, self-indulgent edicts of its ruling tartuffes. He wondered if (shrugging off his chains of own-loathing and self-doubt) he might someday join the red-eyed cat at its table—his ante to the pot a hint at affirmation: MEEK WAS THE MIEN OF SALVATION, AND THE QUIET VOICE OF HUMILITY AT ONCE HEARKENED AND HEDED, ABOVE ALL, THE BOISTEROUS CALLS OF THE DAMNED.

The student thought, when voiced, that this notion had come to him in the dark—behind closed lids in a bright antiseptic miracle-room—while masked and silent observers bent above with gleaming instruments in hand, and he searched a soundless void for a great white light he supposed he was never destined to find. He remembered the dark, and in the end he remembered voices quiet sobbing the dramatic beeps and moans of messianic metal devices. He did not remember the great white light. The dark was silent and soothing, though, and in the absence of sight he thought he just might have his chance—to walk again a more diffident path.

Thus the student concluded, in those pondering moments as he smoked and sipped then at last wobbled in a halo of beatific revelation towards his bedroom to crash, that the cats seated straight-backed and stoical round their table were in fact, by their equally statuesque refusal to remonstrate the opposing tapestry, not resigned but rather a bit more humble than their protesting fellow. Their fellow, for all its fiery action, had sunk levels; and they, for their indifference, had maintained a measure of modesty while insuring the gradual cessation of their canine opponents who, bored with the knowledge that their ruffian torments fell on deaf ears, would recede back into the anonymity of common fabric. So it seemed to the cerebral revolutionary.

He retreated to his bed while yet another game of eight-ball was drawn.

3.

The clock ticked on, apathetic to the compulsory ways of prophets and fools.

4.

Later, when another sallow sun had risen again above the cardboard world, the student slipped back into the chipped and holey beast's belly on his way to the bathroom. The refrigerator hummed. The heater sputtered. In the night the red-eyed cat had maintained its vigil; its fellows, their nervous ceaseless game.

He cocked an eyebrow at the statesman—who wished apparently to ignore the futility of his address.

\*Do you know\* he said \*that a long time ago another kept a stance such as yours—and he was a great deal more unassuming. I don't think it mattered, though. They can't even find his bones now. He might have thought you ridiculous, in fact, given the chance. He'd say LET THE BLIND STAY BLIND, AND LEAVE THE DEAD ALONE.\*

With that, the student left it to ponder.

But the red-eyed cat (with its arms out head down tacks through its paws) did not seem to notice.

---

Woman  
Reclining



Ben Parks

# Reclining Nude

---

Todd Amacher



I refuse to see a doctor.

If I were well  
(not saying melancholia  
is symptomatic  
of erratic humors,  
or anything so worthy  
of empathy & fresh tulips),

I'm afraid the poetry  
would dry up like the dreams,  
dispel certain grim truths  
plumbed from ruined yesterday:  
a million years of rage  
at fifteen-year-old-girls,  
at karma,  
at another maudlin aeon in stasis.

I refuse to see a doctor,

nonetheless I continue  
(not saying reefer  
is a proper substitute  
for managed health care,  
or anything so worthy  
of empathy & fresh syringes)

writing lyrics  
nobody wants to hear,  
purely as a joke

some call passion.

## the couch (1)

---

B.W. Carter



# sebastian's

Josh Cochran

concentration. staring hard & straining ears to hear music  
that is already too loud for the conversation crowded room.

i am trying to figure it out.  
follow its changes—  
chord, key, tempo, tone.  
the ideas in the words,  
assonance, consonance, dissonance,  
harmony, rhyme, & rhythm.

i am interested in the piano player in particular,  
he is the singer.  
natural,  
flowing,  
confident—

his composure makes me scowl.  
it makes me sore that i am scowling at him,  
as my girlfriend looks over her beer at him,  
when the entire room is looking at him  
& he can take it,  
& i can not.  
it makes me hate him, her, & the room.  
but she is holding my hand.

my heart begins to pound in conflict with itself.  
he is not the conflict, she is not the conflict.  
the intention of a simple festive evening of alcohol & music  
slices me apart, as i slice apart this lame pop music town.

# I Pledge Allegiance

---

Margo Meyers

*By direction of the President...Awarded: Air Medal (Eleventh Oak Leaf Cluster) with "V" Device...Section II. Date Action: 31 January 1967. Theater: Republic of Vietnam. Reason: For heroism while engaged in aerial flight in connection with military operations against a hostile force: Captain Phipps distinguished himself on 31 January 1967, while serving on a flight over the Mekong River, Republic of Vietnam.*

Mrs. Johnson has finished giving her speech to us this morning and I am sent to my desk in the hall for a day. Only this day she has left me with much to think about. She has just told my first grade class about the death of Kim's daddy. Kim's daddy is a soldier in Vietnam—just like my daddy. Today I am glad that Mrs. Johnson has decided that a left handed person should sit in the hall until they can learn to write with their right hand. I am glad that I am left handed so I can be by myself in the hall to think about my daddy. Mom has always told me that daddy works in an office in Vietnam, and that he is safe. I know this is not true; I have seen pictures of the war on television, although Mom doesn't know I have. I know what Vietnam looks like, and I know that there are no office buildings there. I know that daddy fights in the war. Now I am afraid for daddy—more than ever before. Now I know it is possible for him to die in the war; Kim's daddy has died; she and I are the same age.

I have been sitting quietly at my big desk in the hall and trying not to cry about Kim's daddy, about my daddy, about Kim. I swing my legs back and forth without making a sound, for my legs are too short to reach the ground. I hear the squeak of tennis shoes on the tile floor and the click, click of lady shoes. I look up to see Kim and her mom holding hands and walking toward me. They both watch me watch them, and I see that Kim is crying; her mom has red puffy eyes. They walk quickly into the room, passing by without saying anything at all. Kim looks at me as she passes, I smile at her, and she turns away. I start to cry.

It isn't long before her mom leaves, and soon after it is Kim and Mrs. Johnson walking by me as I cry silently in the hallway. Kim is going to the counselor's office today because she won't be quiet in class, and I'm sure Mrs. Johnson has already told Kim that she has "had enough of the tears." She and Kim walk down the same hall that Kim's mother just left by—Kim's tennis shoes squeaking and Mrs. Johnson's lady shoes making their click, click noise. She is holding Kim's hand just as her mom had, only Mrs. Johnson is pulling Kim down the hall, and this time neither of them watch me as I watch them. I want to go, too. My daddy hasn't died, but he could. I guess my tears are okay because I am not in the classroom making noise; I am in the hallway learning how to write. Mrs. Johnson doesn't even ask why I am crying as she click, clicks her way back into the classroom.

Leaving my desk I make my own way to the counselor's office. I walk silently and seemingly unnoticed by the teachers and other students in the hallways. Slipping into the seat inside the counselor's door, I am met by the stares of the gray-haired lump behind the desk. There are no greetings or questions as to why I am there, and I offer no answers, for there are no words to explain how I feel or why I am there. I am grateful she doesn't ask, and it is here I stay throughout the day—never spoken to, never saying a word.

*During the flight the crew noticed two river patrol boats which had been heavily engaged by Viet Cong fire and were attempting to maneuver out of range. Immediately Captain Phipps flew several low passes over the positions directing the gunner to fire on the position. He continued to provide fire support until the river boats were able to disengage from the enemy and then contacted Can Tho radio, requesting gun ship support.*

The familiar click, click of mom's lady shoes are making their way down the hall now, and I feel so relieved. She enters the office, takes my hand, smiles her knowing mommy smile, and we leave as silently as I had come. She says nothing to me during the ride to Kim's house, yet her silence is somehow calming and reassuring. She takes comfort in my silence as well, for she occasionally reaches over and squeezes my hand. At Kim's house she follows the other mom's inside, and I take my place among the row of children seated along the edge of the driveway. We don't talk—just sit silently—watching the younger children play.

*Upon the arrival of the gun ships, Captain Phipps made an additional low pass over the area in order to mark the enemy positions.*

I inch my way along the pavement and move closer to Kim. We are finally side by side, our knees touching, as we sit without legs crossed. I say "I'm sorry." She says nothing. I start to talk about Friday at my house and how we stayed awake late into the night, whispering our secrets under the flashlight lit blanket. She moves away. I still want to be her friend even though she doesn't have a daddy anymore, but she won't let me tell her. I watch her move away, and I don't follow.

*Captain Phipps' actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.*

---



A Sculptor  
Gazing at  
the Naked  
Image of  
Herself in  
the Mirror

---

Christi Underdown

I pretended I was Goddess today  
with a bit of clay and water.  
Play-Doh of immortality  
Wet mud slid through my fingers.  
I made a woman.  
I sculpted the slope of her nose,  
and decorated it  
with small seeds planted right under the skin,  
a spotted field of freckles.  
I thumbed crevices to form the valleys of her  
eyes  
with soft brown wax orbs to fill the abyss,  
that when squeezed cried like grapes.  
I kissed with my caress  
her lips,  
two slices of dried apricot,  
soft and tough.  
From chin to neck to back,  
down the arms to fingers,  
my amazement of beauty grew.  
My hands appropriately smoothed and wrinkled  
the roads and paths of her body,  
gently journeying down the trail between her  
breasts  
to the flat desert of her diaphragm  
and over the hill of her belly, which curved out-  
ward naturally.  
Her ribs were her own and fully intact,  
selfishly shared with no one.  
I looked down then and saw I had created a nat-  
ural altar.  
Legs growing and stretching like a tree's roots,  
to finally meet.  
Where they climaxed  
was a spider-web of brown silk,  
guarding a cave in which was held the beginning  
of time.  
Finished, my art stood before me,  
a work complete.  
I stepped into my bath and took cloth in hand.  
In the mirror I watched  
as the water flowed against my body,  
and my sculpture's face, like a sand drawing  
taken at times by the wind and always by the  
memory,  
washed down the drain.



# a certain lost ideal the prophets call doom

B.W.  
Carter

He is in New York now. He is looking for a certain lost ideal the prophets call doom—a legacy of cabal for which he has searched two decades. He was in Tucson yesterday. He was still in Tennessee a year ago, but a year ago is a million miles away. He never stays too long: awakes in the pale night under a sheen of sweat and closet suspicions, his bag already packed in the corner for just such an inevitability; his coat still dripping asphalt dust from yesterday's Greyhound. He is a lonely man, but impulse is a lonely hunter (the heart merely a clichéd lump of tissue) or so he's always heard. He's heard, too, that that one true incarnation of one's truest desire is ultimately only the whim of fate, fortune; of numbered golf balls in a huge round raffle bowl—perhaps nothing. Nothing so coveted as luck.

In his single-mindedness he has forgotten his name. He likes David. It is unremarkable, as the air he likes to breathe on those he doesn't want around, as features on a man apathetic to everything except his cause. His cause is ruination, or so said this ex-lover dying twisted black with a plague she had given him. The ex-lover succumbed finally somewhere near Philadelphia, but they'll never catch her. The death she carries beneath breasts and sweat is the rarest form of ecstasy. She'll beg them to take her—to taste her—but none can keep her very long. Most perish in the familiar haze of Red Door and plumeria, her cool touch vibrating their unaccustomed shells like an orgasm. (It's irrevocable: that finality of shock at her abrupt departure; fathomless cool absence coating unaccustomed shells like the movie-distant brush of her lips.) \*The death she carries is a most sincere form of suicide.\* So say bitter dead men.

But he has come to find her: this certain lost ideal the prophets call doom. Prophets who at the back of the bar told him when he began this that she could not be found. They whispered from the tinted bottoms of their highballs that doom fell unawares—had a man's soul against her body on the moment he first breathed her name. Doom was a random creature; her game of damnation was chance dream. Men slit their throats for a tease, the prophets said.

\*Name?\*

He looks up at the face behind the glass. Young. A pretty face

that makes him pause. She is holding a roster of tickets. Her eyes are very green. Maybe doom is lingering under the slightly rouged surface of her skin.

\*David.\*

\*Last name, sir?\*

He catches the flicker of her tongue between lips parted in a sudden breathless rush. He is aware of a gasping in his ears—heavy through the glass. He has come so far. So far alone. The girl is merely a phantasm, he tells himself. The prophets say doom comes only to a man ignorant of her approach. He speculates upon looking in corners to see what the shadows hide.

\*Matisse. David Matisse.\*

She shuffles the tickets. After a moment she slides the one with his name on it through the small semicircle cut into the window's base. When he touches the soft pad of her forefinger his eyes flit to hers. They are very green. He has come so far—so far alone. Then she smiles and he knows in the icy lead slickness of his belly that this girl behind the glass is an exquisite example of desire and torment which the yellow prophets at the back of the bar call doom. But he is not prepared to face her now—here. His voice catches when she says politely \*Have a nice day, and thanks for flying, Mr. Matisse.\* He trembles and sighs when she turns away: gently enough for a hurried first meeting such as theirs. A balding man with ketchup on his cuff pushes close—reaches round for his ticket while the green eyes behind the glass laugh and sparkle with a knowledge that she'll never leave a man with his strings intact. Not this one. Fingering her loom on which she spins a fine thread of souls, this one will stay behind her window long after he has succumbed to the plague she passed him in the merest feathery press of a finger. Long after David Matisse has discovered upon hindsight (slouched in a motel room somewhere off Route 11, smoking his last wet cigarette and weeping for that one spent shot at prophecy) the dread sickness with which she'd stricken him. This languishing, incurable sickness with which she's stricken him.

\*Move along, pal.\*

The look between them is broken by the shuffle of boarding traffic. Another moment, and she is a sketchy blur anchored amidst bobbing heads and hurried second guesses.

\*Would you like something to drink?\*

He swam up out of her into the clarity of the cabin. From the corner of his eye, Orlando lit up the clouds sliding along the hull of the



plane like flesh, lit up the hard grim lines resignation had traced along his mouth and brow. New York held doom, surely as Tucson or Murfreesboro. But he could never get his hands round her pale, curved neck; could never share her warm wet arts before fate intervened and he was left with just another shrinking hard-on and that icy lead slickness which told him her plague was spreading. Mary's fever was spreading.

\*Would you like something to drink, sir? Sir?\*

He glanced up. The girl beside him was saying something into his ear: something about ancient ritual of cabal. Her eyes were very green.

\*—you alright?\*

The prophets said doom was a witch's brew—born of sacred talismans like apples and figs the musky pulsing beat between a woman's legs. They said those who drank her breath lingered the longest, coughing up gleaming chunks of lust and regret which coalesced near the heart after but moments of their first sip.

His felt his lungs fill with the want for sex and suicide.

\*Are you alright?\*

 she asked.

\*Yes. Yes, thank you.\* He composed himself, took the Styrofoam cup of water she held out to him, and insisted again that he was merely haggard in appearance and not in health. He had showered in a public station Tuesday; but he hadn't shaved in a week, nor bothered much with the niceties of deodorant or cologne. His search demanded a passion beyond that: She demanded the essence of a man—something a little more than spirit. When he found doom, the color of her hair, the curve of one long thigh, the taste of her wouldn't matter much. She wanted something a little more than spirit, and nothing less than a million blissful dreams of death in her arms. The prophets called her lamia. He only knew his desire would eat him alive. That, or the plague so swiftly gnawing away at his spine that he had at most another day or two before he slipped exhausted to lie twined between her smooth tennis calves. If he found in her time. If not, he'd be discovered next week beneath a mound of mouldering dumpster leavings, found grey and emaciated like the young Muslim in Philadelphia—clawing out eyes he no longer needed—then when she had drunk her fill and tossed him aside like just another RC Cola can on the tufted gravel banks of Route 11.

His hand wavered an inch or tow over his knee when she turned to leave: certain flawless doom flitting away again like a moth between his fingers. The languid sway of her shoulder blades beneath navy cotton sent the same shiver creeping down his back. Every time he took in that last sweet glimpse of her shoulder blades before landing. Every time he

failed to ask her the secret of his destruction—or tentative permission for the ritual of warm wet arts. He could never get his hands around her pale curved neck. Even now, with the raspberry smell of her hair under his nose as she reached over the seat to unsnap a compartment.

His stomach rumbled; his tongue felt slick like the icy leadness in his belly.

\*You have a good day, Mr. Matisse.\*

Raspberry turned salty, humid, as the passenger door opened. She ducked through the captain's curtain, but he never had time to stare into the very green eyes of the blonde girl who stepped out in her place. He was soon lost amidst bobbing heads and hurried second guesses, yet again toyed with and abandoned by a certain lost ideal more wickedly inexplicable than Babylon. He thought of the actress in a movie he'd watched once over the Great Plains: the curve of one long thigh, a supple crease in the lobe of her ear. He thought of Rodeo Drive on a Saturday afternoon. It was Friday, and the wasting ache in his guts made time all that more pointless. But the actress in a movie he'd watched once over Rome caught his attention; abruptly, incited his awareness of her appetites once again. Maybe doom was lingering just under the slightly rouged surface of her skin. He had to know. He had to slide his calloused palms under breasts and sweat—under hair and cooled flesh in search of that rarest form of ecstasy. He had to reassure himself of apples and figs, and the plague could not keep him from crawling. Across life and the most vacant of worlds—over crumbled, unpaved highways littered with bygone paragons and the emptied, tattered bodies of those she moved. Could not keep him from getting his hands round Mary's pale, curved neck.

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He had come so far. For this: so very far alone.

# His Hands Know Things About Her...

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Amanda Baldwin

I.

But she's seen the way he holds  
a cigarette, delicately, flirting  
with smoke. She's watched  
him balance pen and book in  
one hand, has confidence in  
his grip. She's seen him touch  
her shadow when he thought  
she wasn't looking, knows  
the press of fingers on her  
skin. So, yes, she'll trust her  
secrets to those hands.  
It leaves her room to hold  
a few of his.

II.

*Me alive ends at my fingertips.*—  
D.H. Lawrence

Disturbing, this entering  
of locked doors, places formerly  
reserved.

The thought of his fingers  
warming in her secrets  
causes a squirm, almost  
a flinch,

makes her nervous.  
Him alive does not end  
at fingertips  
brushed along her  
insides gathering  
dust.

She hasn't decided  
how much of him  
she will take with her  
when she leaves.



I cherish the time  
lying softly wrapped  
in the quiet comfort  
of solitude

Under the crisp gentleness  
of the morning  
breeze

In the space of tranquility  
Pinkish hues awaken  
the sky

## Sun Rise

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Terri Jones

# Untitled



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Ben Parks

# The Seventh Minute

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Aaron Grayum

My mother is a leopard. My grandfather a whale. Last September Aunt Eve became a goldfish. My wife and I have two kids who used to be squirrels, and they will run around and play in the trees in the yard on Sundays before supper till either Darcy or I call them inside.

My cat has six toes. He doesn't know he's different because nobody's told him he is. I'm sure not telling him. Starting in May we put ice cubes in his water bowl and he will sit staring at them, flipping at the ice with his paw, and in the evening when I get home from the university I can tell if Darcy had put ice in his bowl because it will be sitting off to the side in a puddle of water. Sometimes he drinks the water and sometimes he just stares at it. His name is Nick.

Nick sat on my lap under the umbrella at Alexander's and we watched people walk by in the clear, still sun. I sipped on my lemon tea and looked at my watch. It was nearly 11:30 and he still hadn't arrived. I sat staring at the light reflecting off the silverware, watching it dance and dodge in peculiar motions within the spoon. Nick watched the world swing by.

Nick sits with me at night when I grade papers or when I read in the study. Sometimes it gets late around finals and Darcy will come in to kiss me goodnight, softly tilting her head and saying how sweet Nick and I are together. She's like that. I guess we do work pretty well together. He keeps me focused. We're partners. He was with me one night when I got the first phone call.

It was one a.m.

Seven minutes later the phone clicked. I gripped it tightly while the dial tone filled the room. Nick had stopped purring. I sat there the rest of the night with the phone in my hand. It would not be long before the phone would quit beeping.

I jumped and Nick jumped with me.

"Adam, you didn't even come upstairs last night. You're going to be late."

I rubbed my eyes and leaned up to give her a kiss. "Sorry." I yawned.

"Who was that who called so late?"

I hadn't even realized the phone was still on. I clicked it off. "I don't know who it was. Prank call, I guess." I rubbed Nick a little too hard and he hissed and jumped off my lap.

"I've got coffee ready. You'd better get to work before you get in trouble with Carlyle. Your class isn't going to wait on you again."

"I know." I sat there for a moment and Darcy ruffled my hair.

"Now."

I laughed. "I'm going."

Eighteen hours later the phone rang again. I answered it from bed.

"Hello?"

I heard drums and heavy guitar feedback on the other end.

Nobody answered and I hung up.

It rang again.



I took the phone into the hallway and hissed, "Hello!" It was a statement at that hour, not a question.

"Do you remember me, Mister Tailor? We talked last night, but I can understand if you've got a lot on your mind. Do you have a lot on your mind, Mister Tailor?"

"Tell me who you are."

"Did you pray? I hope you prayed like we talked about. You've got to pray. People say thank you for giving them a rag to wipe their snotty noses up, but they won't thank the Creator of the Universe Almighty for giving them two lungs, a heart, and cable television. Do you think that's right, Mister Tailor? Please tell me you prayed last night."

"I don't know who you are," I said firmly, "but you have no business waking my family up. Who are you with? You're not getting any money and I'm not interested in fighting a cause. You can panhandle outside of the grocery store all you want and I'll stick my hand in your face because it's people like you who call at one in the goddamned morning—"

"MISTER Tailor! What if your mother had heard you talking like that? She'd whip your skinny hide up and down like she did back in Cuyahoga Falls!"

"What? Who are you?" I muttered.

"I know she used to take you to church. She'd dress you up in slacks that drug on the floor and give you a spit bath while your pop drove down Knapp on the way to Route 9. I know how she raised you Mister Tailor, and she'd be upset if she knew how you were taking the Lord's name in vain."

"She's dead!" I hissed.

"You think I don't know that? You think I don't?"

I couldn't speak. There was a long pause.

"Well, my seven minutes are up. Did you know that every seven minutes there's a pause in any good conversation? I'm just doing my part to keep the stats going. You know how the clerks get about that sort of thing. Good night, Mister Tailor."

"Who are you?"

"Good night."

And the phone was dead. This time I remembered to hang it up. The next night I picked the phone up before the first ring ended.

"Quit calling my house!"

"You didn't pray last night, did you? I'm disappointed, Mister Tailor, I really am. You wouldn't be yelling at me if you were praying.

I can tell.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Who would you like me to be?”

“A mime.”

“Sorry.”

“Jesus!” This wasn’t going anywhere.

“Got that one right on the head.”

“What?”

“Jesus.” I heard him say.

“Excuse me?”

“Christ. Jesus Christ.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am Jesus Christ. I never left, you know.”

“You sick bastard.”

“Hmmm...depends on how you look at it, I guess. Now, why can’t I get you to pray? You owe me one, I think. My pop created you and your wife. He made your kids. He made your mom and dad. He recycles. You guys call it reincarnating. Did you know your mom’s a leopard now?

“Shut up.”

“She’s beautiful. Quicker than the eye. She used to be Paco the goldfish till Matt Pinson dropped her down the toilet. She was a mosquito for a day and a snail for a week. Did you know that? She was a fly six years before your grandma was a mom. Swatted by Joel Flanner, a barber in Akron. He’s not around anymore. Last I heard, he’s a pelican down in Gulf Shores.

“You are an idiot.”

“But what do you expect? I only died on a cross for you, Adam. I died for you, and what are you doing about it?”

“You are not Jesus.”

“All I want you to do is pray and instead of doing it, here you are telling me I’m not who I say I am.”

“Jesus wouldn’t call me on the telephone at one in the morning like he’s selling prayers for a nickel. It’s finals week and you’re not letting me get any sleep—”

“Seven minutes, Mister Tailor. Seven minutes a night and all you have to do is pray, and you won’t have to worry about finals again, you won’t have to worry about job security or rainy days or your wife cheating on you ever again.”

“She’s never cheated on me, you sick—”

“It’ll all come full circle, Mister Tailor. It’s a better world on this

side, but there's only one way to get here, and it's a long, complicated road. It's really not a bad deal, though, I promise."

"Leave me alone."

"Time's up. Good night."

The next night the phone did not ring. I waited for it. I held the phone but it did not ring. I fell asleep in the den with Nick curled up in my lap, waiting.

"Adam!" She yelled louder than normal.

"I'm up, I'm up!"

"What's going on, Adam? Why are you holding the phone again?"

I looked down at the phone in my hand. "I was waiting for dad to call last night and I guess I dozed off."

"You were waiting for Harvey?"

"He probably forgot he was going to call. I'll call him tonight, I promise."

I was looking at Nick. Darcy was looking at me.

"Don't forget to pick up the kids today," she said. "I have my presentation."

"I won't forget."

"Well, I'm off to work."

We kissed and I watched her leave. She forgot to kiss Nick good-bye and he made sure I noticed.

My mother is a leopard. She became one when I was little. I like to think of her on a veldt in Africa as she stands sleek in the center, her lashes blinking slowly, the sun shimmering waves of light across her coat. I like to think of her eyes, capturing the landscape with swift, confident brushstrokes, and at the same time scanning for intruders, protecting her children. She is swift like a ballerina, balanced and calm. She waits.

I was not at home when the letter arrived. Darcy took it inside along with the rest. The envelope read TAILOR, but did not specify which. In thinking back, he had probably intended for her to open it.

Dear Mr. Tailor,

May 7



My phone is dead. I'm the Messiah of the entire Christian World and I've still got problems with the phone company. If the cable goes out, Armageddon's going to get here early, but we'll wait and see. Anyway, payphones are infested with diseases, so I thought I'd run a little snail mail your way.

Maybe you don't believe me when I tell you I'm Jesus. Well, Mr. Taylor, you'd better start believing, and you can begin by praying. It's such a little thing, really, but it's all in the little things, isn't it? I give this all to you and you can't say a simple prayer for me. None of that "God is good, God is great" crap. Just a few thank yous, that's it.

Pray for me, Mr. Taylor.

Fight the power.

J.C.

It had been three days since I'd heard from him. I still don't know what kind of religious nut would impersonate Christ by using a telephone with AC/DC playing in the background. I guess now he's moved on to using the postal service. I hope the man doesn't have a gun.

Darcy rattled the letter in front of me when I got home that night, shaking it at me like it was a magical wand that would rid me of my demons, asking for an explanation. The phone calls. A handwritten letter from Jesus.

The life of an English professor?

I read the letter quietly while she watched me. She showed me how the envelope had been addressed.

"I-I didn't know who it was for, Adam. Will you please tell me what's going on?"

"Are the kids upstairs?"

"They're watching Mama's Family in our room."

"Well, here's what I know..." And as I explained about the one a.m. phone calls, I couldn't shake the unmistakable sign that the pattern was changing.

The following morning, a tall man with a dark mustache knocked on the front door as I was reading the Editorial page. I opened the door.

The tall man looked at me without expression. His gloved hand removed a brown envelope from his raincoat pocket. I stared at the raincoat and spoke in a soft, smooth voice.

"You never know when the rains will come. I ready myself at each opportunity, because otherwise I may wake up and find myself



unprepared when the rains do come.” He looked up as he emphasized *unprepared* and gazed into the clear sky, his thumb rubbing the envelope. “Wear your raincoat today, Mister Tailor. Don’t let a beautiful sky fool you.” He handed me the envelope and I took it without saying a word. “I think you know who this is from.”

And the tall man turned and walked to the edge of the yard, and after placing his hand on the mailbox for a moment, made a left onto the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets.

I held the envelope in my hand. Written in tight, even letters, it said MR. TAILOR. I turned it over and tore it open. The letter had been written in the same tight manner as the envelope, but all it said was:

ALEXANDER’S  
11 AM  
BRING NICK.

And for reasons I cannot explain, I picked up the phone and canceled my classes for the day.

We sat outside the diner watching and waiting, and after thirty minutes of this a huge shadow conquered the table, awakening me from an almost trance-like sleep. It was like I could feel the shadow embrace me so that I could not jump up and run away. I turned around. It was the tall man with the dark hair.

“I see you didn’t wear your raincoat today, Mister Tailor.” I suddenly noticed that the sun didn’t seem to be in the sky anymore.

“So it was you all along?”

He sat down at the table. “What, me? No. I’m just a messenger. I apologize for the wait, but I was asked not to meet you here until a very short time ago. You see, he was going to meet you here, I assume that was what was in the envelope. But he had some very important matters to attend to.”

“Important matters! Like what?”

“I-I’m not sure exactly, but he sent me in his place instead.”

“No! He’s been screwing with me for weeks and I want to see his face! Important matters? He makes me cancel class and drag my cat to a restaurant and can’t even give me a reason? I need a reason! Why did he

want me here?"

"To see if you'd come."

I looked at this man in disbelief and somewhere I thought I could hear thunder. "That's it? That's all?"

"He cannot make you do anything, Mister Tailor. You are the victim of your own free will." He looked at Nick. "I'm not sure about the feline, though. Maybe he just wanted to see if you would bring him as well."

That was it. I canceled my 223 classes so that some guy crossed somewhere between Columbo and Frankenstein could make me wait on him and tell me he doesn't even know why I'm here. I stood up with Nick in my arms and started to leave.

"His name is John Covet."

"He's sick!"

"Is he? Or are you sick because you pay attention when he tells you he's Christ?"

"I never believed that!"

"Then why are you here? He's trying to do you a favor," the man said.

"He can do it for someone else."

"He already is."

I stopped.

"He gave up on you, Mister Tailor. He flat gave up."

I waited.

"He's left it up to you now. You've just got to ask yourself, if you could take a few minutes out of a few days out of every week of every year to insure that every minute of the rest of your life means something...why not?"

And at last the tall man walked away shaking his head, and as he turned to face the sidewalk, he paused again, as if hewere in the aisle of a church, facing the crucifix, facing God, and at that point continued his voyage and passed out of my life forever.

That night in bed the television cast a cool glow into the room, and I watched the shadows dance like a tribal ritual on Nick, curled up beside my wife. He puts up with a lot, I guess. I've come home before from insane days and found myself cursing him and throwing things at him because I knew he would always forgive me no matter what I put him through. I started to think about what the man had told me over the phone, about reincarnation, and stared at Nick, wondering who he might

have been in a previous time. I imagined him being a cool millionaire who got waited on hand and foot, because it seems the most natural setting for him.

Weren't Christians supposed to oppose reincarnation? Yet if this man who claimed he was Jesus (but wasn't) had told me about it—who was I to determine exactly what and where heaven was? Why couldn't heaven exist within this cycle of souls wandering in and out of different lives, living life in every way possible, as a track star crossing the finish line, or as a butterfly seconds after metamorphosis. Why couldn't this trial and error among lifetimes be a perfectly wonderful heaven within itself? But the Bible...maybe it's just another chapter on the way to eternity.

I stared at the flickering shapes on the television screen, barely listening to the drone of the CNN anchor. "*The missionaries were executed just after 6 p.m. Eastern Time, and as the President prepares a military response to the government of Haiti, the Secretary of Defense warns...*" I flipped it off with the remote and stared at the screen for a long time. Nick was curled in a ball under Darcy's arm, and both were asleep. I thought about Nick and wondered how many people in the world were born with six toes. I'd look it up sometime. It was getting late. I rolled over to kiss my wife and found myself suddenly reaching for her hand, and as I watched the clock slowly roll past one, I shut my eyes tightly, and for the first time in forty-three years, I began to pray.

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# Our blue jeans are sexy-

Christi  
Underdown

Shirts flung aside,  
Breasts and nipples rubbing together  
like sticks creating a smokeless fire.

Legs, covered in denim,  
entangle themselves,  
dazed and anxious,  
in a crumpled chaos passion.

Buttons click as  
Zippers lick.  
Metal hitting the cloth  
that holds back the rain.  
Storming the gates.  
Greenhouse effect.

Our blue jeans are sexy.  
On our legs,  
On the floor,  
Over the television.  
A poem comes, as my lover cries out.



# Plate Tectonics

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Amanda Baldwin

Her fingers flip through china  
patterns—one, on the left,  
is noticeably heavier and wobbles  
a bit under the weight

of expectation's sediments.  
Layer over layer, like the cake  
she ordered, held  
together by a sticky-sweet paste  
preventing movement by degrees,  
storing up magnitude for the inevitable slip.

I've tried to explain the theories—  
the damage caused by convergence,  
the danger inherent in building  
on a fault.  
She remains unconvinced, stuck  
in the margin for error.

But science is on my side;  
really, they've proven it—  
the only constructive activity  
is divergence.

# St. Petersburg Canal, 1995



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Austin Fitzpatrick

# Editorial Policy:

*Collage* is a biannual literary and visual arts publication of Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. It is produced by students and published for the students, faculty, staff and friends of MTSU. Its purpose is to act as a showcase of the creative talent of MTSU's students, faculty, and alumni. The works represented in *Collage* are selected on the basis of originality, graceful use of language or symbols, clarity of thought and the presence of individual style. Works are reviewed and selected by a student editorial staff. *Collage* reserves the right to make technical corrections. The views expressed in *Collage* belong to the authors and artists and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Collage*, Student Publications, the MTSU student body, faculty, staff or administration.

# New Submission Policy:

We understand that with the responsibility of each new semester, the *Collage* deadline is often the last thing on your mind. In order to accommodate the students, we have changed the submission policy. Beginning now, we will accept submissions at any time during the fall or spring semesters. **However, in order to publish an issue each semester, we must still impose deadlines for particular issues.** The new policy will work on a rotation basis. For Spring 1999, students wishing to be published that semester will still need to submit by no later than February 28. However, submissions received after that date may still be published in the following issue. This allows students more time to prepare submissions, and gives *Collage* a wider variety of submissions to choose from. (Under the new policy, artwork will be available to pick up within one month of its submission date.)

Questions???

Please call 898-5927, visit us at JUB room 308

or write:

*Collage*

Box 42 MTSU

