

BEN.
LD
371
.B6652
A3
v.25
c.2



Agora

VOLUME XXV

AGORA 1991

EDITOR MARY McDONOUGH

MODERATOR LYNN K. VARN

EDITORIAL BOARD MARGARET BROWN

MARY CURRAN

BRENDA FISHER

JIM JOHNSON

REENA KHUBCHANDANI

JOHN RIGGOTT

AGORA IS THE LITERARY PUBLICATION OF BELMONT ABBEY COLLEGE,
PARTIALLY SUPPORTED BY THE ABBEY WRITING CENTER, BELMONT, NORTH
CAROLINA, 28012.

The editors are grateful for the professional advice on printing to Ron Mahannah.

Cover: Julie Sabatino

SPIRIT
(for k.m.m.)

Enter my soul — sacred temple to you.
A lasting shrine — to the one who saved me.
The fabricated morals
the world bound me with
cannot enter here.
Your spirit shines
and drains them.
Inscribed triptych — holds my messages to you.
Forever captured — like the kiss in your locket.

on October 9, 1990
Michael Lilliard

7 THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

The killer cats are all defunct,
All safely endangered, caged, or stuffed,
Curled on the necks of fat rich women
Or warming the toes of fat rich men
(How a leopard of old would lust
To drink that throat and rake that haunch
With a lust for ungainly squirms and screams);
Death in the swaying reeds is dead,
Death in the rustling leaves is dead;
The hairy lance made of sun and shadow
Hisses at no more collarbones.
Look quickly into the wasted mountain,
Over your shoulder, through the spyglass,
Just at the snowline, where nothing lives —
See the quickly receding shoulder. . .
It is gone now. The sun has come out,
And the streaks of sunlight are only sunlight.

But the big gray cat is still alive.
He prowls these miles of rolling plain
And suddenly gouges the shoulderblades
Of upright people walking their walk,
Falling upon them where the trees are fewest.
His bite is death, and his touch is death.
His fang is in his claw, and his ragged stripe snarls,
His stripe that splits the gray pelt down the spine
Like ragged sunlight;
And the stripe, too, is death.
Even the sulphurous scent is deathly
Hanging over his gnarled tracks.
He is the eldest of the great cats,
Sabre-toothed, ridge-backed, plain-marauding.
The cities built along the plain
Are so many fattened flocks to him.
He rakes down power lines and gnaws the mammoth jets like bones,

And the mansion on the hill is dead
Because he slashed it in an instant,
Leopard-skins and all
(The diamonds are still in the body).
No respecter of places he,
The gray shadow with the white voice.
For miles along the tawny plain
He wanders as invisibly
As a stalking lioness in sunburnt grass,

Far above the plain, curling in his fur,
Sometimes you see his eyes in the distance,
Slanting eyes,
Especially at night, when they glow in the dark.
And you know they have spotted you already
By the time you catch them blinking another way.
Those eyes run to the center of the earth
Where they say the molten lava flows. . .
But then the eyelids drop
And leave you blinded in the dark
While a grumble slides past you like the brush of fur,
And the hairs of your neckline stand on end.
The big cat is on the move again.
By night or by day he is equally stealthy.
His eyes glow by night, by day he hides the sun;
And in either case, by the time you see him
(His slanting eyes or raking claw)
Or by the time you hear his killer's gurgle,
You have already been lucky
For now.
A carcass is already moldering
Somewhere along that silent plain
Which, for just an instant,
Had buckled under the white shout of death.

He is the eldest of the great cats.
The lava flowed in oceans over the earth,
Reflecting back his radiant iris,
When he was already murderous and sleek —
But even he could murder nothing
On a plain that only lava walked.
They say he mauled the ruinous ash heaps
Over and over in sterile fury
Until a gash that drew black water
Bled some life out of the mud.
What grand design unleashed the greening of a planet
From the wanton claws of chance?
Now he hunts my family and me,
And my race and species, and all that moves,
And all that stands beneath his tree
(The tree of life, with its star-fruits and galaxy-hives).

As if in reward for his original burst
Of planet-mauling ill-temper.
Keep to your dens, my beloved children!
I should not like to go chasing in mad bereavement,
Heart-impaling javelin in hand,
After him who has no heart
And whose claws are drawn to all that's sharp and straight.

There is no future in hunting the hunter,
In begging God to be part of the slaughter

Rather than find a way to live alone:
One does not pray to God for death
When life was so improbable, in the first place.
Nor should I like to entertain the curious
With an old man's resigned daze.
Saying, "He took my baby. It was God's will.
Inscrutable, inscrutable . . ."
(My hair prematurely gray, like his fur,
Or white, like his voice,
As if I, too, had been touched from heaven
And left part-alive to prophesy).
I covet neither madness nor second sight,
Neither sky-stalking no half-survival,
As the lot of my old age.
So stay at home, my children, and speak lowly,
And straighten your steps more than your spines.
The great cat is on the move again —
As he always is, up and down the continent.
He was there when the atmosphere was poison
(Was, indeed, already murderous and sleek);
And, should we poison these clean water-skies,
His ragged snarl will merely stripe a pelt
Of red instead of gray.
That is all: a color change for a new aeon.
They say he already inhabits planets
Where sulphur dances in the sun
And a man would die instantly of standing.
No doubt, he is well fed throughout the universe,
The eldest leopard of them all.
Make no mistake:
There is no endangered list for the fire-beasts in the star-dust.

So be humble, be not stiff-necked.
Do not walk in the thick forest,
And do not walk the tawny plain.
Give thanks for the mystery
And do not hunt the mystery.
There is enough already.

NEPENTHE

The world's quest for pleasure
creates a cancerous, physical thirst
for life without restriction
from some substance that will cure all.

I regress to the womb,
to escape its call.
Into realms of disillusion,
I watch my achievements fall.

Addiction to false saviors
from this world of calculated
confusion.

Sacrificing our will, our flesh,
for a taste of eternal childhood.

Bottles turn up,
dreams bleed to death.
I run to my bliss,
of clashing, painted leather.

This chemical messiah,
born of lust and insecurity,
leaves one buzzing on false hope
to relive broken dreams.

Vile lust initiates
confusion within.
Wasted mankind demonstrates
lack of integrity.

from July 13, 1989 to November 25, 1990
Michael Lilliard

Hitch-Hiking in Kansas

Standing
On a lonely road in Kansas

I hear the approach
Of a faraway truck
Getting closer
And closer
Til it passes

Thundering by
Cornfields and hair blowing
And watch
As it disappears
In the distance

Peter Lodge

LESSONS

On a bright sunny day he mused
Nothing will ever change; nothing will
Cause a change in the weather.
Everything seemed perfect.

But suddenly, and as
If in rude response
To his thoughts came
Thunder, lightning and rain.
Endless rain it seemed.
Nothing seemed perfect.

Then he began inquiring of himself about
Why it happened to him.
In his search for the answer, he
Concluded that opinions were different from facts.
Everything began to seem real.

Studying on a regular basis,
He noticed how far he had come, and
Yes, he had learned a lesson from his experience.

THE PINE GROVE

It starts at the river.

From the blazing east,
a man walks ashore,
sleeps in mud, stirs
at thunder, turns over
at dawn and watches
the water suck itself
back to darkness. He
learns to eat, then
to kill. It goes that way
until one day something
stronger takes him down.

In later seasons more of them come,
this time from the west, blood
muddied warriors, women and
children. The river is calm and kind.
Fish leap into their feasts, geese
fly over and at sundown
crows call for mercy
from the night's fast wings.

Then they too disperse. The poet
among them is the last to
leave. She sees the empty space, the silent
winds and weather that will come. She
offers endless questions, not fool
enough to know the answers.

David Childers

WE OF THE BALCONY, HE OF THE MARSH

With the movement of egrets
He disturbed our perfect sunset
Picture
Reeds and sawgrass still one minute
Yet to go tidal creeks and wet
Still to move tide water down now
Or does the mud rise?
We all came from one day
Crawled out someplace one afternoon
To get the sun warm
Our frigid darkness
Body moving now through the headhigh
Rustle across the way
Someone coming through the sea oats
Like wind making waves
In seawheat they poke
A clam rake skyward
Dance it up and down to beat a path.
Still we sit vacationers
On the balcony while a
Clam digger in rubbers
White as feathers in a lady's hat
Skin dark as Hershey With Almonds
Chops the fragrant ooze
Slides through the brack
Now
And then raising a white booted
Leg out backwards high
Out of the home of crabs

7

Just like the Bolshoi
He empties his Wellington
Mocks the bird's high ways
Stiff gait reflected selves
Coming below us looking for a cherrystone
Who can help
But notice!
Times don't change much
Who went before this clammer
Lies below stone and tree
Hanging moss in the
Churchyard sang the same low throat
Listening for a chink
Of rake and shell
150 years ago his ancestors clammed
And died never dreamed
The things money can buy
Would one day circle round
The old digs
Like the walls of a seaside Colosseum
Filled with eyes from countless, lidless
Windows with history repeating itself
Through a beer can megaphone
Oh, boy! some one yells from their Mercedes
Ain't we got fun (?)

Alan Hodge

they fell and tumbled down

they fell and tumbled down
they ran somewhere.
words (such things!) have gone away.

I want them back
to hold, to caress on very dark nights
when the moon sends shivers all around
I want to make these whispers to them, in the dark:
 how your life shines in me
 what magic you are to me

sometimes at night
I've found words playing in the stars—
and the stars! ah they love the magic! they love words
long and long they weep their color in sheer,
excited surrender
they burn and burn and burn for words

if only I could catch words now, in just one tumbling sweep
if we could only gently collide, like dandelion puffs
floating in the air

I could be the one who sips afternoon wine,
with a lover, in an outdoor cafe.
I could be the listener who moves forward intensely,
to gather every sound, every meaning, every nuance,
into a trembling, terrible rhythm

or maybe I just need patience, to wait at the table alone,
wordless in the sunlight's dapple

Crossing over

The time the snow
drank me
I knew, in their eyes,
I had gone too far.

Something happened there,
in the glaze. Stars and ice stuttered words
to the air,
tuned by a wind that sang me
half a shot to heaven.

And so the snow drank me—
and I let myself be drunk.

It's not been the same since
I knocked on that familiar door
(that seemed so suddenly a stranger's)
and they said, "You'll make a mess
coming in like that,
so wet and stuttering."

Mary Ellen Weir, RSM

Old Friend

As we hastily patch together
the bits and pieces of our days,
the little engineer reading the
dials, whistling obstacles off
the track, hoping hope in the human
breast springs eternal, way toward
the back of that wheeling self
sits one utterly unconcerned
with our welfare. He prefers
slow motions and uninhabited
lands, the grinding of blue
water against blue rock, movement
more in tune with his setting,
where the noisy momentum of our
lives barely stirs the vast, pale
surfaces. Perhaps at the final
betrayal, he will leap forward
to save us, but we'd rather not
notice him now. When he gets
that still half-smile on his face,
it scares us half to death.

Russell Fowler

WHY I OBJECT TO *SESAME STREET*

People love to complain about commercial television — about the tawdry world of soap operas, the improbable “situations” of utterly predictable and formulaic sitcoms, the hype for sports events which even the demi-gods and goddesses in our athletic pantheon can rarely live up to, and the frequency and absurdity of commercials. Everyone’s a critic. A rationalization for being hooked, for indulging in the lowbrow, is knowing better. It’s fun to go slumming as long as you remind yourself that you know the way out of the ghetto.

Public television, of course, is another matter. Of course, Educational TV is a high water mark in the intellectual life of most American families. Perhaps it’s the only manifestation of intellectual life. If you tell people that you’re going to junk your TV, go cold turkey, because you want to protect your child from the malevolent influences of popular culture, to stanch the effluvia drifting through your living room, the inevitable response is, “Sure, commercial TV is a wasteland, but what about *Sesame Street*?” What about *Sesame Street*.

My formative years were over before the television became standard equipment in most American homes. I was eleven when we got our first set, a black and white Raytheon, which provided anything but pleasant viewing. It was like a science project which never quite worked. While the image on the screen rolled like slot machine cherries, my father and I yelled back and forth as he adjusted the antenna (an all-purpose yagee) from a second story bedroom window.

The only kids program available was *Mr. Moon*. It came on at 4:45 in the afternoon and featured a grown man in tights and a cape with a papier-mache moon on his head. The moon had eyes, a nose, and a smiling mouth frozen in time out of which came a muffled voice with a slight echo. Mr. Moon sounded like someone talking through a closed bathroom door. When he wasn’t addressing all the little boys and girls, he chatted with a mouse named Sparkie. It was a dreadful program, and I had enough sense to think so at the time.

So the first time I saw *Sesame Street* many years later I was not disposed to like it. Big Bird reminds me of Mr. Moon and Kermit was a froggie version of Sparkie. Whatever magic I experienced as a child did not come from television, but from unmediated encounters with reality. The title *Sesame Street*, however, suggests that the program has magic to offer.

The “sesame” of *Sesame Street* presumably comes from the password, “Open, Sesame,” at which the door of the robber’s cave flew open in the tale of “The Forty Thieves” found in the *Arabian Nights*. Hence, the command in a larger sense represents a key to a mystery, or anything that acts like magic in obtaining favor, admission, or recognition. In this sense, the word “sesame” may seem appropriate as part of the program’s title; the alphabet and the words created from the alphabet, which function as organizing principles for the program, are magic, and like the key to a mystery, they bring the child favor, recognition, and admission to the adult world.

Yet this is magic only in the sense that David Copperfield or any stage magician is magic for adults. It is clever and diverting, but it is a performance based on sleight of hand; it is a trick. We are like Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, who, in the absence of a spiritual vision performed ever-increasing sleights of hand because he was incapable of doing anything else.

The second word in the title, "street", which ultimately comes from the Latin, *sternere*, to extend or stretch out, might be appropriate to the program too if it were understood in this sense: namely, that language extends and stretches out the mind and imagination beyond the concrete world of things so that the consciousness of the individual, and especially that of the child, is connected to a vision of the world.

The "street" of *Sesame Street*, however, is a mundane place. It is just that, a street, which exists on the flat, mediated, horizontal plane of television. It comes out of nowhere and it goes nowhere. Such a place negates the possibility of journey, a powerful archetype in human consciousness. Journeys like those of Odysseus, Aeneas, the Israelites out of Egypt, Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*, and the pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales* present an interpretation of the individual's place in the order of the whole of things. The journey also marks the beginning of transformation, Christ on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, Gawain riding in search of the Green Knight, Marlow steaming up the Congo pursuing Mr. Kurtz. The journey — which becomes a path, a way — is the means through which we learn who we are. In the words of T. S. Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

We "know the place for the first time" because we know ourselves for the first time.

Sesame Street, however, is not a place that can engender self-knowledge. It is a place where the procession of images is "accessible, simplistic, concrete, and above all, entertaining" to use Neal Postman's terms from his essay, "Amusing Ourselves to Death." These are images without poetry because they do not present a sense of the connectedness of things. Like the shards of a broken mirror, they capture a child's attention for the moment because the light of the sun is thrown back from the fragments, but they, like the images cast by commercial television as well, do not reflect a coherent picture of self against the backdrop of an intelligible universe.

**ON THE FOURTH DAY
THEY WENT TO WAR**

All day long
the radio recounts
last night's assault
on the land
of Arabian knights
All day long
the radio announces
another strike
as flocks of
high-flying birds
empty their bowels
over pre-selected sites
with preternatural precision
The White House
and the Pentagon
intermittently step
to the mike
and speak
in constipated cadences
their cool efficient faces
never flinching
There is a strange
disturbing quietude
in the offices
and on the streets
and in the stores
whether an undercurrent
of approbation
or ambivalence
or disapproval
is hard to fathom
The peaceniks were
marching in New York
vigiling in the capital
taking to the bridge
in San Francisco
their anthems
& protestations

repeated in snippets
all day long
on wartime radio
And some listeners
for whom alone
the flag unfurls
denigrate the contrarians
and conterritants
And a stray remark
is heard in the hall
that war is an economic windfall
at which Dow Jones
rounds the corner
with dividends in his eyes
& blood on his hands
And all day long
wartime radio crackles
with the dispassionate prose
of generals
and lieutenant colonels
as the birds of prey
continue to dispose
their high tech wastes
over Arab strongholds
confounding those
who prayed for peace
The pope's plea
to the American chief
& the Iraqi
is written in invisible ink
And wartime radio
crackles with conjecture
about the war's length
and its consequences
punctuated by references
to the Baghdad megalomaniac's
declarations of strength
his braggadacio
the more ludicrous
with each western hit
the Apocalypse in eclipse

7 the fundamentalists
frantically searching their bibles
for alternate proof texts
of impending doom
And wartime radio
continues to speculate
past sundown
and into the night
as the body politic
makes sandwiches
and love
to the background static
of some ostensibly
informed frequency
beaming instability
& hostility
pitting Allied might
against Iraqi resolve
with kitchen strategists
& bedroom reservists
thinking all will be solved
by waves of
swift clean bombing —
a corruption of truth,
the first casualty of war

Chris Confield

Written January 17, 1991, the day following the
Allied air attack on Iraqi targets, in retaliation
for the latter's occupation of Kuwait.

Courthouse (II)

Walking,
I am led by
music
of cologne inexpensive.
Brown bass lines
provided in
paneling
plastic and
greenish fluorescent
high notes,
littered children and
wretches
seek alike the
source of this
tune
judicial.

Courthouse (III)

Observing from my
container
fearful, birdlike
I witness intoxicated
Shorty
walking.
Worldliness evident,
stopping.
Intently musing
Wisdom.
Martyr. . .
Dark, huge
stained
corduroy speaks
No—just
Romanticized
urination.

Elizabeth Costales

Requiem in Solitude

I take my craggy seat
among the steeped hills.
Bloodstained, outflung spires
embrace the brilliant host;
their misty, shrugging shoulders
flow into the frigid depths
of an azure chalice.

A solemn, stately hawk,
gliding on silvered wings,
is borne upon the breath
of the twilight's last gasp,
as yet another day is entombed
to await inevitable resurrection.

Jim Johnson

hope in belief

not to fear
not to quake shake and near
death, not to cry.
oh lord for faith unwavering
life unflavored with grey
questioning!
no whys no whatfors no withwhathelps
no desires for answers at all:
you you in spaceuntimed
you you in spaceunmined
you you you whoever whatever wherever you are
planmaker caretaker eternal watchshaker
me in your eyes; belief.

Not necessarily

not necessarily fettered
not chained nor bound nor torn
you push against yourself.

you think yourself trapped
and you are, by your own hand
clenched round your own wrist.

what fortune are you denied?
what pleasure what happenstance
calls you stuck and stung and barred?

are you not given the sum
of life? do you not see?
as the blood pumps through you
in a day out a day seconds in years
you have been gifted.

open open your eyes
unchain unchain your mind.

Michelle Kidd

The Mask

It is October. Death
pulls off its face.

Across red twilight, a lengthening
wind, and the earth spreading out
an old blanket.

With muscular kisses
and starving tongues,
we parry toward a wrestler's embrace. You utter
the truth we cannot escape.

It bangs
loudly, spits out leaves
across the lake's escaping mirror.

David Childers

South Fork Bridge

Something of the truck
that went off the South Fork bridge
remains, going down the
bank somewhere between
three and six in the morning.

Something swerves there,
a windy blast, a dip
in the fabric of steel.

It's a sweet view,
To the north,
curving river, swaying
foilage, the fish killing water running at you
from the factories
pissing up stream.

Let off the gas,
and take your bearings. There's a guy
who drove five thousand miles
without sleeping, a benzedrine
ghost watching you with no eyes.

David Childers

I was standing at the altar of the church when I first realized what had been bothering me. The realization began when Katie started walking down the aisle looking so tiny and pristine surrounded in the billowing layers of white taffeta and lace that was her wedding dress. I was her maid of honor and I had a better view of her than the groom did from where I was standing. The first thing I thought about as she slowly made her way towards us was how unnoticeable her limp had become. It had seemed more prominent all those years we were growing up together. Maybe it was the overwhelming elaborateness of the dress that made it less apparent, I don't know. Maybe it was the fact that we hadn't spent that much time together the last couple of years and I had simply forgotten how she walked. She finally made it up to the altar and the preacher began the ceremony. I spent most of it thinking while looking down at Katie. It has been necessary for me to look down at Katie ever since the year we were both twelve, and seemingly overnight I shot up about six inches taller. Katie is about 5'2" and would have been taller if her leg had been normal. Her left is about three inches shorter than her right, and that is why she has always walked with a limp even though she has all of her left shoes built up with a special heel to minimize it. It isn't such a big deal really, she could do just about everything that I did when we were kids, like ride a bike and stuff like that. She couldn't run very well though, so when we played softball and it was Katie's turn to bat, she would hit the ball and they would let me run the bases for her. They had to do it or it wouldn't have been fair.

Anyway, as I stood there during the ceremony, I kept thinking incredulously,

'She's actually getting married . . . and to a guy that's good-looking.' I was ashamed of the last part of that thought. I wondered if anyone else felt the same way I did. You can't ask people about things like that though. Things weren't supposed to happen this way. Katie wasn't supposed to get married this young, for one thing. I guess most people don't consider the age of 25 to be so terribly young, but I just thought it would take Katie much longer.

Katie is the best friend I have ever had. That is a hard fact for me to accept sometimes. Katie was never very popular in school. Elementary school was especially difficult for her. As if being born with a deformed leg wasn't bad enough she was also born into a family with religious customs that were unusual in our little town. Oh, they were Christians alright, and good ones too, no one ever argued about that, but they were still different. Katie was never allowed to wear pants because she was a girl. She couldn't wear jewelry or cut her hair either. All this made her fair game for those cruel children who seem to feel that they have wasted a good school day if they do not successfully tease some poor kid until he or she is reduced to tears. Katie never whined about it too much though. She cried every once in awhile but most of the time she would just talk to me. I remember one day after school when we were in fourth grade, we were sitting under a tree in my backyard playing cards and Katie looked up at me and said, "I know people have trouble understanding why I don't do certain things, and I don't blame them. It's okay though, because I know what the reasons are and that's all that matters. Do you know what I'm trying to say, Sharon?"

And I replied, "Yeah, I do. Listen, they don't even try to understand. You don't need to explain anything to me or anyone

else. I don't care what you wear, or don't wear, and you can't help the way your leg is."

"Yeah, but Sharon, you are . . . well, you're just different." I felt embarrassed. Smiling slyly I said, "Maybe I am, but you don't need to worry, you'll always have me beat in the "different" department." She indignantly slung her long stringy brown hair over her shoulder and shot me an annoyed look and then we both started to giggle. Later on that night, alone in my room, I thought about that little conversation. I had told her that being different wasn't anything to be concerned about. I wondered if I actually meant it. I knew that I sincerely liked Katie and her differentness didn't bother me personally, but I also wondered how I would handle things if I were suddenly put into her place. There was no way I would ever wear a dress to school every single day and if I couldn't walk like a normal person, I guess I would be a little upset. I never told Katie this, but I thought she was tremendously brave. The weird thing was that she didn't consider herself brave at all, and she wouldn't have understood me if I had told her she was.

Things got better for Katie by the time we reached high school and that was mainly due to me. I guess I could say that I was popular in high school and Katie gained a lot of acceptance from the others simply because she was my friend. I was busy at that time. I was a cheerleader and I was always having to go to a game or a practice of some sort. I was on the tennis team and in the drama club, and I had ballet lessons two nights a week. It was around that time, too, that I suddenly found myself being asked out by a lot of guys. I still had time to hang out with Katie, though. We lived on the same street so we rode to school together and did our homework together at night, and she went with me to my ballet classes from time to time, just to watch. She was fascinated with dancing of all kinds, and she would sit huddled in the corner of

the dance studio and watch us with such admiration in her eyes. I thought it was strange that she was that interested. Sometimes when we were alone she would ask me things like, "How do you do this step or that step and how do you do such and such a turn? I know I can't do it like you do, but I want to try." So I showed her some of the simpler steps and I learned that while Katie never would be able to do ballet, she actually was a good dancer. Sometimes we would listen to records in my room and dance around the floor, and I discovered, much to my amazement, that she had a better sense of rhythm than I did. Katie was usually pretty clumsy, but when she really started to dance all her clumsiness miraculously went away. Our high school held lots of dances, so I started trying to get Katie to go to one. I didn't think her parents would care for her dancing too much, but to my surprise they said it would be okay for her to go, as long as she was with me. Still I had a hard time convincing her.

"I could never dance in public and besides, nobody is going to ask me to a dance anyway," she said.

"You don't have to be asked, dummy, not to an informal school dance," I replied. "Some people come as couples, but most just come in groups. You can go with me and Jennifer Whitfield and Karen."

"Do you mean to tell me that Brian didn't ask you to go with him," she asked.

"Well yes, he did, but see Katie, it's really more fun to go without a date, because that way you can dance with as many guys as you want."

"I don't think anybody would ask me to dance, Sharon, I really don't and if no one did I'd just end up depressed."

"I'm sure you'll get to dance. Freddy is going to be there and Stan too. I know both of them will want to dance with you."

"Big deal, Sharon. I can't imagine anything I'd rather do than dance with Freddy and Stan."

"They're your friends, aren't they?" I said. "You can dance with them without ever having to marry them. And you never know, someone you really like might ask you to dance and then again, maybe that won't happen, but unless you go you'll never find out. Do you have anything better to do Friday night?"

"No."

"Well, you're going then. Be ready by 6:30 and wear something sexy."

"I'll go, but I will not wear anything sexy."

"Okay, but you can borrow something from me if you change your mind."

So she went. She wouldn't let me pick her out anything to wear, but I did do her hair, and she ended up dancing with Freddy, Stan and about three other guys. She didn't meet anyone special, but she learned that going to a dance wasn't nearly as frightening as she had thought it would be. She stuck right by my side for awhile and I thought she was going to have a heart attack the first time I was asked to dance and had to leave her to walk around by herself. I honestly was a little worried about her too, but I believed I was doing the right thing, and now looking back I am sure that it was at that dance in tenth grade that Katie learned she was capable of socializing by herself, because afterwards she didn't lean on me like a crutch quite so heavily. I think that's one of the best things I ever did for Katie, but it would be hard to determine what was the best thing I ever did for her since I did so much. I got her in the Student Government Association. I had been nominated to run for Treasurer, but I just didn't want to and besides that, I honestly didn't have the time, so I nominated Katie for the position. I didn't just do it because she was my friend, I knew that she would make a good Treasurer. She was a great student, the teachers liked her, and she wasn't involved in any extra-curricular activities whatsoever, so I talked her into running

and she beat two other worthy candidates for the spot. I got all of my friends to vote for her, of course. This gave her some much needed recognition amongst her peers, and Katie did some serious climbing up the social ladder in a short time. She never made it to the top, where I was, but she certainly lost that "differentness" that had always been associated with her. At a time when the standard high school outfit was a T-shirt and blue jeans, people gradually ceased to care about the fact that Katie wore a nice dress to school everyday, even to P.E. class, and for the first time in my life I found myself not ashamed of being her friend.

When we were seniors, Katie got her first real boyfriend, Barry. Actually, Barry was the first guy she ever dated. I was really happy for her, but it was kind of a strange thing for me to deal with. I was used to her calling me up all the time and saying things like "I know you've probably got something to do, but if you don't do you want to go shopping with me? We both need to buy so-and-so something for her birthday and..." She suddenly stopped wanting to go anywhere with me. She wanted to be with Barry all the time, and when we did see each other, he was all she would talk about. I thought the whole thing was silly. I mean, I had been out with more guys than I could remember at that point and I hadn't found one that I wanted to spend all my time with, and here goes Katie falling in love with this guy on the first date. Let me tell you that he wasn't anything that special, either. What really shocked me the most was how she seemed to give me the cold shoulder whenever he and I were around her at the same time. I remember one particular occasion when I dropped by Katie's house to tell her something, I don't remember what it was now, but when I walked up to the house I could see them watching TV together on the couch through the screen door. A commercial was

just coming on, and Barry had started tickling Katie in the stomach and she was laughing hysterically and trying to get away from him. I just walked into the house, and when Barry looked up and saw me he yelled, "Oh goody, I'm going to get to tickle Sharon now!" So before I can get of the way, Barry comes flying across the living room and grabs me and starts tickling me just like he had been tickling Katie before. There is nothing that I hate worse in the world than being tickled in the stomach, but I didn't have to worry about it for long because Katie suddenly shouted, "Barry, stop! You better stop that right now!" He stopped abruptly, surprised by her loudness and the anger in her voice. "What's the matter with you?", he asked. She didn't answer him, instead she looked at me and said, "Sharon, come into the kitchen with me a minute." So I followed her into the kitchen, leaving Barry behind with a puzzled expression on his freckled face. As soon as Katie shut the kitchen door behind us, she said, "I can't believe him!"

"Katie, you're really mad aren't you?", I asked her.

She grabbed a napkin off the kitchen table and began twisting it in her hands. After a few seconds she said, "He had no right to start tickling you."

"Katie, he was just goofing off! Don't get me wrong, I didn't particularly enjoy the whole thing myself, but I think you're overreacting a little bit."

"No, he wouldn't have done it if he didn't like you or something."

"Oh please, Katie, you can't really think that."

"I don't know what to think. He just shouldn't have done it," she replied in her soft, meek voice.

I let it drop at that. I told her what I came to tell her and went home, but that incident bothered me for a long time. She was jealous of me, but I knew that already; I just didn't know to what extent. Didn't she

realize that I wouldn't want Barry even if he did like me? I had enough guys to worry with, and besides, after all I had done for her did she really think I would stoop so low as to try and take her boyfriend? I decided to leave Katie and Barry alone, and not speak to her unless she spoke to me first. A few years earlier an incident like this would have only made me feel more sorry for her, but things were different now.

So mine and Katie's relationship grew distant those last few months of high school. About a month before graduation, however, she and Barry broke up and I opened my door late one night to find her crying and wanting to talk to someone. I had known that it would eventually happen, and that when it did she would need me again, but I couldn't tell her that. I did tell her that she was asking for trouble by falling for a guy so quickly. I waited until after she calmed down. She was sitting on my bed, with her arms around a pillow, holding it like a small child with a stuffed animal. She looked so fragile and tiny, that it was hard for me to come straight out and tell her what I felt, but I did. I said, "You just went out with this guy a couple of times, and the next thing I know you're going steady. Things just don't fall into place like that, Katie. You should know better."

"What do you mean I should know better!? Sharon, he was the first guy that ever liked me. It's easy for you not to commit yourself to anything, because you know that if you suddenly decide you don't like a guy, you can just go out and find a replacement for him. I can't be like that. The best thing I can hope for is security, and being with Barry all the time made me feel secure. You wouldn't understand."

She was right. I didn't understand, but I made an effort to and we patched our friendship up.

Next came college. Neither one of us moved away. Katie went to a two-year business school and I went to a nearby

private college. I tried to get Katie to go to the same school I did, because I felt like she was setting her sights too low. With the grades she made in high school, she could've gone to college anywhere she wanted, but no, business school was fine for her. She never was very ambitious. I, on the other hand, was determined to make something of myself, and I didn't see how anyone could settle for a quiet, ordinary existence like Katie. It looked like we were going to lead very different lives and I wished that it didn't have to be that way. I felt sorry for Katie, even though I knew that she had made her own choices and therefore she couldn't blame anyone but herself for what resulted.

As college started and time went by, our lives did indeed go in two opposite directions. Katie took a part-time job at a daycare center and I took a weekend job as a dancer/waitress in a club outside of town. I will never forget the horrified look on Katie's face when I told her about my job. She said, "How can you stand it, dancing in a place like that with all those men looking at you?"

"It's not what you think", I replied. "It's a respectable club, the kind of place doctors and lawyers go to. I don't wear anything skimpy, and the dancing I do isn't vulgar. You know me, I wouldn't have taken the job if they had asked me to do anything sexist like that. Come and watch me some night, I can let you in my dressing room and you can watch from backstage if you want."

She came and watched me dance that following weekend, and while I was changing clothes in my dressing room, we had a conversation that was similar to many others we had when we were much younger; similar, but at the same time different. I had just finished putting on my sequined dress and was starting to put on a gorgeous pair of red high-heeled pumps that matched it when Katie suddenly said, "I wish I could wear high-heels. I can't

because no one has come up with a way to make them for a person with a shorter leg. I guess it sounds silly, but I've always thought I would feel more like a woman if I could wear high-heels."

"Wearing high heels doesn't have anything to do with being a woman," I said. "Actually they're sort of a stupid invention."

"Yeah, I know," Katie replied. "I guess I should be ashamed of myself, feeling bad for not being able to wear high-heels when there are people with handicaps that are much worse than mine. You have to admit they look good though, especially on someone with long legs like you. You have the best legs, it's really ironic that my best friend happens to have the most perfect legs in the world."

"Oh please Katie, that's not true, and as far as high-heels go, I don't understand why we wear them. As a matter of fact they're a hindrance when you're dancing. If I were you I wouldn't worry about it. Everybody always talks about how stylish and neat you are now."

I didn't just say that to make her feel better. I guess that having to wear skirts and dresses all her life had actually been advantageous for Katie, because she had acquired a taste for clothes that was impeccable. She was always the best-dressed person in a group and whenever I needed advice on clothes I went to her. She was right about the shoes too, they did make my legs look better and that was important to me because my legs were my best feature. I got more compliments on them than anything else. I guess I'm pretty enough, but I wouldn't feel nearly as comfortable about my looks if it weren't for my legs. Later that night, I realized that despite what I had said to Katie, I really felt like being able to wear high-heels was a big deal, at least to me, and that just got me to thinking about how terribly brave she must be to deal with having to be different, and I found myself feeling sorry for her again.

The conversation we had that night was the last of its kind between me and Katie. I've never heard her complain about her leg or anything related to it since that night.

Time went on. Katie graduated with honors from her two-year business college and got a job as a legal secretary. I was just starting my junior year and I was thinking about changing my major. I would have given anything at that point to be able to pinpoint some occupation and say, "That's it! That's what I want to do!" All this time I had been thinking that the answer would suddenly pop into my head one day when I least expected it, but now I know that will never happen. I didn't seriously ponder over my situation at the time, because I had other things to distract me.

Things like friends, parties, beach trips and men. Especially men. I dated them all, young, old, divorced, professionals and burns alike. I was having fun. I didn't see Katie much anymore, and looking back I guess I may have purposely avoided her at times. When we did see each other, our conversations were awkward and strained. I attempted to tell her about the things that were going on in my life and I expected her to listen to my stories with fixed attention like she did when we were younger. She used to listen to my tales of my daring exploits with admiration and envy in her eyes, but not now. Now, she merely listened in a polite fashion. I wanted her to wish that she was doing the things I did, and to make her feel sorry for just sitting at home all the time when she wasn't at her stupid job. She didn't seem envious of me at all anymore, in fact, sometimes she acted like she pitied me, even though she never came out and said it. That's why I deliberately stayed away from her. She would be sorry for being so stubborn one day when she was old and alone. She would realize how she had wasted her life. The thing that made me the angriest, that really burned me up inside, was that Katie was actually happy just the way she was.

More time passed, and I finally quit school but not permanently. I planned on going back, and I will someday. I quit because I still didn't have the faintest idea of what I wanted to do with my life. My relationship with my parents had become unbearably tense so I moved into an apartment and got a job that just barely supported me. The thrill of independence made me forget about my problems for awhile. Katie was still living at home and she had just gotten engaged to this guy. He was a lawyer who worked for the same firm she did. She had talked to me about him on several different occasions, but I had never actually met him, because, to be honest, I just wasn't that interested. I finally got to meet him at a party her family threw for them at a convention hall about a month before their wedding date. It was a more pretentious affair than I thought it would be. The food was catered in and there was live music and dancing. Katie introduced me to her fiancé saying, "Wesley, this is Sharon, she's going to be my maid of honor." He was quite attractive and this surprised me. After chatting with him for a few minutes I realized he was also rather intelligent and had a charming personality. I was astounded. I remember thinking that there had to be a catch somewhere because this man could do better than Katie. I couldn't accept the combination. At one particular time during the party when Katie and Wesley had just finished a dance, Katie pulled him over to where I was sitting and said, "Wesley, I want you to dance with Sharon while I go to the little girl's room." As we danced, I thought about how times had changed from the days when Katie had been overcome with jealousy simply because her boyfriend ticked me. It was kind of sad. Then later on that evening she had the nerve to tell me that Wesley knew several nice men I might be interested in meeting. She would talk to him about it if I wanted her to. Imagine, Katie trying to fix me up! I told her I would think about it.

It wasn't until the actual day of Katie's

wedding that it hit me. Everything was perfect, including the weather. As I stood there and watched Katie coming down the aisle, looking like a real woman, surrounded by her loving family and friends, my knees started to shake and my stomach began flipping. This was too much for me to watch, all of a sudden. This whole event was like a freak accident. All along I had thought that Katie would be lucky if she ever got married at all, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would be the one who got married first. Of course, I never would have said these things to anyone. Anyway, that wasn't the real problem. I had turned down a couple offers of marriage in my lifetime. I broke a few hearts too, rumor has it. I had some sincere feelings for those guys, but I couldn't help but think that someday, someone better would come along. Giving up a relationship never was such a big thing, I mean, it was far too easy to get involved in another one. No one is completely irreplaceable and the importance of security has been blown totally out of proportion. Looking at Katie that day made me wonder about this for awhile. She had a good job. I was still dancing on weekends to pick up some extra money, and I was hoping that maybe one night someone would realize how good I was and make me a ridiculous offer at fame and fortune. And then there was Katie's family, they were so proud of her now. At times when we were growing up, it seemed to me that Katie's parents sometimes wished she would just disappear. They loved her, but they tried to keep her hidden. Now, they were more than willing to show off their successful child with this magnificent ceremony. My parents had been proud of me, at one time. "Sharon has so much potential", I remember hearing them exclaim to friends, relatives, and mere acquaintances on countless occasions. So much potential. . . Well, surprise, surprise! Katie

had someone who loved her, just because she was Katie. Katie with her scarred short leg, Katie with her strange little beliefs and values. I never dreamed that she would find happiness unless she underwent some radical changes, unless she became willing to be more like me. Did I really tell her once that being different wasn't important? Yes, I did, more than once, and now I realize that the whole time I was telling her that I was saying something totally opposite with my actions. I was really saying that she had to be like me. Me, with my beautiful legs and my relentless appetite for excitement. She never listened and now she is happy and secure. Security is just another word for dullness, isn't it? I don't know, I've never been secure. Yes, I had a good home, a loving family, but would they have loved me as much if I had been fat and dumpy? Maybe, but I can't say for sure. Would I have been as popular in high school if I had driven a Pinto and joined the chess club? No, I wouldn't have. I'm sure of it. I'm also sure that if I were to change right now, to go back to school and give up the dancing and the apartment and to start getting serious about my life, I would lose out on a lot. I would lose my friends, my image, and most of all, my hope. I would get stuck, stuck fast in the middle of middle-class nowhere, along with the masses of other secure people who have fallen into this neat little trap. I just couldn't do it, I'll follow the narrow road instead. Not the straight and narrow road, you understand. The narrow road I'm going to follow isn't straight at all. It's curvy and unpredictable and in order to travel on it I'm going to have to hide behind things, things like my looks and my friends. I know those things will eventually be gone, but that's just tough, I'll use them, I'm not brave like Katie. How can she stand to be so. . . so real? I don't know, and I don't want to think about it, I just want to see where my legs can take me.

—Stephanie Mitchum

barefoot gardens are the best.
where you strip and run and
shout and no one cares.
if they could see they might.
but they avoid it because it's
too primal. that's what THEY
say, anyway.
CAN'T HAVE THOSE ORGIES AROUND
THESE PARTS!
but what do they have?
silly cocktails. and teas.
blue shirt jobs. and
LET'S LOOKLIKETHEM houses and
hats and underwear.
no, it's better that THEY stay
out. WE are drawn to our
gardens; THEY are appalled.
WE like to dance naked in
the moonlight; clothes define.
gardens produce; cities reduce.
run to the gardens to dance and
sing and wake the sleeping dogs!

Brian K. Hedgepath

For Carpenters

Sooner or later, the carpenters in novels
build coffins, models of indifference
as mother dies within or the whole
damned crew is dragged off to perdition.
On such grand occasions, stolid persistence
may seem bland, perhaps too stupidly true,
though the coffin soon be ready at hand.
And of course, no one ever mentions the
Contractor, lurking impatiently just
out of sight. The house must be raised
against the rain, the barn beams notched
tight and true, the theater ready by
opening night, the boards able to bear
even Shakespeare's hefty retinues.
Those who live require structures,
and those who can build them are few.
So forgive the poor sod if his methodical
haste seems suddenly all wrong when you're
dead. He's always got one more to do.

Russell Fowler

CONTRIBUTORS

- David Childers** is an attorney in Mount Holly, North Carolina. His play based on his poem "The Monster" was recently staged at the Abbey. He is doing a reading of poems at UNC-G this spring. (8, 23)
- Christopher Confield** works for an advertising firm in Charlotte, North Carolina, and teaches creative writing at Gaston College. (16-19)
- Elizabeth Costales, ('88)** jury coordinator for Gaston County, performed with the Abbey Players, and later directed **The Bald Soprano**. (19)
- Russell Fowler**, chair of the English department, and poet of numerous publications, has collected his work in a volume. (12, 32)
- John Harris**, a professor of English at the Abbey, has general interests in epic and myth, and is working on a medieval translation of Virgil. (2-4)
- Brian K. Hedgepath**, a transfer from Liberty University, is a senior English major from Gastonia, North Carolina. (31)
- Alan Hodge** is currently working in the Reference Department at the main branch of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, and writing for *The State* magazine. (9-10)
- Michael Hood** is a professor in the English department and Director of Great Books and Composition at the Abbey, whose publications have appeared in composition journals. (13-14)
- Jim Johnson** is a senior Political Science major from Spartanburg, South Carolina, with plans to attend graduate school in the fall. (20)
- Michelle Kidd ('87)** is working on a second bachelor's degree in literature in Asheville, North Carolina, and plans to teach high school in the fall. (21-22)
- Michael Lilliard** is a sophomore at the Abbey, with particular interests in photography, writing, and art, from Charlotte, North Carolina. (1, 5)
- Peter Lodge**, chair of the Sociology department, is a frequent contributor to sociology journals, and has recently been awarded a grant to author a study on infant mortality in Gaston County. (6)
- Stephanie Mitchum** is a senior English major from Stanley, North Carolina. (24-30)
- C. K. Ntim**, a senior Pre-Med major from Ghana, plans to attend medical or graduate school in the fall. (7)
- Julie Sabatino** is a senior Sociology major from New Jersey, who has done some free-lance art this year which has encouraged her to pursue a career in graphic design. (cover)
- Mary Ellen Weir, R.S.M.**, a Sister of Mercy of Belmont, North Carolina, is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of North Carolina — Greensboro. (11, 12)