

AGORA



Belmont Abbey College
Vol. XXX Spring 1996

AGORA

"Birthplace of democracy,
the Agora dozes at the foot of the Acropolis.
Athenians thronged here to discuss,
harangue, litigate, philosophize."

Volume XXX Spring 1996

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Cover

Photograph by Marshall Jones, taken in 1995 from the Belmont Abbey Cemetery of the cement cross which he calls the "Skew Christ."

Standing to the Wind

Holly Grimes

Emotionally challenged

I stand.

Fighting the ordinary

I stand.

Striving to be

I stand.

Winds from all sides

I stand.

My soul to the rain

I stand.

Facing my self-pity

I stand.

Scared in hiding

I stand.

Disgusted by my thoughts

I stand.

Depressions surrounding me

I stand.

Taking reality with my fist

I stand.

Watching time fly

I stand.

Comprehending the universe

I stand.

Feeling a gravity of emotion

I stand.

Holding people's tears in my hands

I stand.

Loving, living, giving

I stand.

a cold

Meredith Thomas

I wish I could breathe
the air barely comes
my chest rises and falls
erratically-frantically
the shortness hurts
I'm drowning without air
such pressure on my chest
I wish I could breathe

this pen

Meredith Thomas

seeing
tattered images
of
my heart
through
my mind's eye,
i listen
to
frequent sounds
of
lonely howls
that
echo through
my

skull, desperate
for
someone, anyone
to
feel for
me
the passion
i feel for
this
pen.

Someday

Pam Newton

Someday I know you will come here.
In my waking moments
between dreams and brushing my teeth,
I will hear the rustle of your feet among
leaves in autumn,
or halt at the smell of you mingling with
lilacs and honeysuckle.

You will appear like the frost on flower
petals beneath a pale moon sky,
or burn beneath my feet when the earth is parched
and craves relief from the careless August sun.

You will howl at night against a quiet sky
a wolf in the tangled edge of the forest,

or appear in the street during afternoon traffic
deranged and ragged and familiar

while I turn circles inside myself
and peer into your face as if into a box
of churning, thrashing history.

The sight of you will be another story
burning beneath my skin,
a story among so many
seeking escape from untidy
endings.

A Message From Marilyn

A. Sidney Smith

Lilacs bloom in Connecticut in early summer;
They push forth in early spring in North Carolina.
Our transplanted lilacs worked three years before
They forced their lavender blossoms.
Not an easy feat for their stems to produce
These tiny blossoms in the heat of the South.

This specific scent, I told my daughter, Marilyn, I truly
Hope to find in Heaven -- or just maybe
I might not want to go.
We laugh.
She tells me if she gets there first, she will let me know.
I told her fat chance of that happening.

We indulged ourselves in this scent.

She told me she will find a way to get
Her message to me.

Engulfed in her physical misery of itchy, watery eyes,
She continued to insist on
Sharing this moment with me.

She enjoyed these lilacs as much as I. It is
Not just the now that we experience -- it is also
Her fifteen years we shared in Connecticut.

Now, a month into Autumn the same year, I'm
Searching for rosebuds to put in the vase next to
Marilyn's picture,
Something I do often since she was killed a few months
God decided He needed her now more than we did.
It hurts.

To the right of the pink rose bush, while searching for
the yellow one,
I see small bunches of starry-crossed lavender lilac
Petals that had pushed through their supposedly
Napping stems.
Immediately taking in the wonder of their scent, I
thanked Marilyn.
Her message -- another natural feat of Nature.

This Autumn in the South, where lilacs hardly ever
Bloom at all -- mine are.
Looking up as I greedily continue to indulge in the
Scent of these small lavender blossoms;
An essence of Heaven, I gratefully whisper,
"Thank you, my Marilyn, thank you."

Spotlight

Michael Wade

He always sat in the same chair. Middle row, middle desk. The center of the room. It was that way in every class. His last name put him there. He always noticed that. He didn't really mind until recently. Every time he was called on, he felt every head, every eye turn and look at him. But they didn't look at him, they looked at the show of him being put in the spotlight. The center of the room, the center of attention, the center of the show. He hated it.

But he hadn't been called on today. He was just sitting there. He felt like crying. Crying out to the world. But he knew no one would notice because he hadn't been called on. They wouldn't look at him because they would be forced to notice his pain. A pain that wouldn't be found in a textbook. People fear what does not fit into their textbook world.

He wanted out of this two bit life. He wanted to get away from the faceless people around him. What he would do to sit under the big oak tree in his grandfather's backyard. To let the pain flow out of his heart in buckets of tears. Let it form a puddle below him. He could look into that puddle, that sea of his life, and watch his pain swim away.

But what ever happened to that tree? He then remembered that some faceless men had cut it down soon after his grandfather died. It hurt. He felt the pain of the tree as it hit the ground. But they didn't notice his pain then either because he hadn't been called on.

He looked around, then looked up at the teacher. He wanted, he needed relief for this tension inside him.

He raised his hand. The teacher called on him. He felt tension as all the faceless people around him turned their beady little eyes towards him. He didn't really know any of them. He knew all of them, but yet he didn't.

"But they'll notice now," he screamed silently to himself.

All the faces, all their hollow eyes were staring towards the center of the room, staring at him. He was going to scream, going to yell at

them for all that he had been put through. He sat up in his chair and balled his fists, ready to fight the world.

But yet he couldn't tell them what was wrong, he couldn't even really tell himself. He knew there was something wrong but didn't really know what.

So, there he was, sitting in the center of the room with everyone and their dear Aunt Sally staring at him. Staring through him, waiting for him to talk. Since he didn't know what was really wrong and what to say, what to do, he asked to go to the bathroom.

Talking with Grandpa

Matt Memrick

One worthwhile smile
Two interested eyes
Three distinguished dimples
Four individual fingers on one wrinkled hand
Five comfortable sitting positions
Six puzzling questions answered by
Seven precise answers
Eight minutes before the weather is mentioned again
Nine tales of aberration told with stern teaching
Ten years of remembering memories vague to fulfilling
Only one lost train of thought and the ashes are scattered

Take Mine Too!

Linda Pellerin

In the corner,
a forlorn pair
of crumpled pantyhose
caught my eye
as I entered
the ladies restroom.

They were expensive,
clean and white
and at first
looked as though
they were there for no reason.

But I suddenly
had empathy for the woman who
could endure the
constraints for not
one minute longer.

She must have
been desperate to
have yanked the
hose from her
body with no
regard for propriety.

Having rid herself
from the tight,
confining, man-made
cultural custom, she

took her protest
a step further.

By discarding her
hose in the
corner and walking
away, she silently
conveyed her opinion
of antiquated convention.

Every woman felt
the exhilaration of
this woman's freedom
just by gazing
upon the crumpled
hose in the corner.

Dreamride

Caroline Broodno

Last night I closed my eyes and saw you there.
Warmly you called my name and reached for my hand.
Without hesitation I gave you my hand and let you lead
me.

Where were we to go?

Out of my window and onto the ledge we stood.
The cold wind was blowing but I was not chilled.
It was time for me to throw open my heart of dreams.
You let me dream.

With a soft leap off the ledge, you led me to the clouds.
Gently you sang your heavenly lullaby of love.
You dismissed my pain and set my soul to the music of
the doves.
Through your peacefulness my mind was sobered.

In the presence of your warmth my worries retired.
I soared with you into the heavens and my dreams were
set free.
I was free and peaceful and calm.
I was yours.

"Oh, Father, do not let this end," I pleaded.
You smiled and put your hand on my cheek.
"Trust in yourself, and this will never end," you softly
whispered.
Silently I nodded, I understood.

You once again reached for my hand and we took flight.
We lightly skimmed the soft clouds as we sailed
through the heavens.
"Your freedom, my child, is up to you."
I listened to those words. I knew what they meant.

We reached the same ledge from which we first took
flight.
In a moment of desperation I cried, for I did not want
you to leave me.
You held my hands tight in yours and pressed them to
your heart.

"Remember, daughter, only you can set your dreams free.

I have given you the gift, and it is yours forever.
Do not let anyone try to take it from you."

Gently you kissed my forehead and you were gone.

Renewal

Linda Pellerin

The pain and bitterness
still cling to his memory
which stealthily creeps
into my consciousness,
just when I'm confident
he can't hurt me
any longer.

How long must I endure
the humiliation
of knowing he hurt me
because I let him steal
away my essence in the
name of what I thought
was love for him?

When will I learn that
love does not mean
the sacrifice of body and soul
or the draining of self-esteem
and confidence, but instead

is a mutual respect for
the thoughts and dreams of others?

I must take the stench of his memory
and flush it from my spirit
as if cleansing a putrid, festering wound.
I will then wrap my tortured emotions
within the pure, white comfort
of the knowledge
that I may start anew.

Garden Song

John Murphy

The mysterious is the fairer sex
I speak of those composed of X and X
No misunderstanding, I don't deride
But let me to you my qualm confide
They claim that we are the coarser being
That we stumble through life never seeing
And that we in feeling are not adept
This is the fault which I cannot accept
For don't they know we prize them above all
Can't they see the romance in man's fall
They say that we on them have cast the blame
That our motive is to cause them shame
I suggest that this was never the desire
But that for their love the Fire seem'd not dire

Time

John Murphy

In suspended youth I live,
as the promise was to give.
The understanding always known
the years stolen, they're sown.

In disbelief I accept,
in acceptance so time slept.
Younger than I do grow old,
since their spirit cheaply sold.

When is the time owed spent,
when is the clock no longer lent.
As a last grains interrupted fall,
so the duration a silent call.

With the boundaries of youth bent,
let me warn you of the rent:
Pain, oh pain, is the price to pay,
yet you know throes not a single day.

Only in riddle have you crept,
only in rhyme do you accept.
In existence you wither away,
as you live your settled day.

And in your stillness you grow old,
never to accept a debt so bold.

Transfixion

John Murphy

I dared to glimpse into the other side
Where up is down and down is all around
A place where pious men fail to abide
A place where screams are the echo of sound
And with constant effort I hide the glance
For the horror within does always pound
It seeks to escape if given the chance
Its nature is opposed to being bound
So to the world I perform a poised dance
While I twirl in a terror-trance

a-poe-uhm-2-show-em-innzuh-may-zull-day-zull-ways

Brendan O'Donnell

... and then in this funny mumbled whisper he goes:

i just lost what it was that i had that kept me from losing everything i had
and now i haven't what i didn't have when i had what wouldn't let me lose what it was
that i had.

I don't want what it is that i have now.

I want what it was that i had lost (the thing that wouldn't let me lose
everything that i had).

What it was that i had (as in what i don't have now) (as well as what it is that i want
now) is understanding.

What it is that I have,

that i don't want, that was also what i didn't have, when i had what it was that
kept me from losing what i just lost, is, confusion.

In Virginia

Meredith Thomas

In Virginia I felt free.
We crossed the state line
and I was liberated.
I sang outloud
as we watched the world
below
through the gap.
The prodigal daughter
that I was,
I felt free in Virginia.
At the parsonage house,
I felt safe.
God watched us
as we traveled.
Light snow sprinkled
the sloping hills
and I loved it.
The chilled air
bit at my fingers
but I loved it.
The tiny houses and
tiny towns made me smile.
In Virginia I felt free.
Standing at the edge
of the world
where such a fancy gap
rose,
I felt free.
In Virginia I felt free.

with wine and snow

Mary Ellen Weir, RSM

with wine and snow
cuddled against the chimney roof
gathering a twilight glow

and hearing, now,
the scrape of my pen--
taking me to long ago

(and there is) some poet like me, on a night
like this:
wintry cold and barren brown

and how she feels, as I do now,
the wet thicket--

that dear, remembering entrance

Woman Is Sacred

Michael Lillard

Language may debase her,
a fist may bruise her,
a stare may undress her,
etiquette may restrain her,
glass ceilings may limit her,
a marriage may trap her,
and pregnancy may deform her,

She walks beside me.
She grows inside me.
She has the sharpest tongue
and focused gaze
to ever impale me.
All rational dreams are
channelled through her.
I am only a silly creature in her
majestic presence.

November

Jonathan Axtell

I stepped over the brook
And in some way it reminded me of what we once had
Of how we once were
Of where we once stood in the dimensions of our lives.
It was not long ago
When I felt your breath in my hair
When your heart was intertwined with mine
When our minds and dreams flowed together
In graceful synchronicity.
I remember how we laughed and counted stars
In the cold November evenings.
How we marveled at the concept of the infinite
And did not sense the finite in ourselves.

Poetry

Russell Fowler

Its fire must rise like the smoke toward the center,
yet it must rain down upon the dusty corners
of the earth. It must hobble on dry sticks made
of words yet soar beyond mortal conception.
When the little people struggle and shout,
it must not laugh, yet, too, it must not listen.
Every once and again, it gets it right,
all the rough sides planned, all the obnoxious
contradictions suddenly civil and sane.
The seekers found, the fakers healed,
we laugh aloud with the dead,
astonished that all we didn't know
was only what we hadn't said.

To Brad

Megan Permakoff

Do you see me?
I see you but do you
See what lies beneath
The material
It's not the cereal
You're not what you eat
You're what you meet
What you think
What you feel is what's real

To know is to go
With the flow of your soul
Do you ever stroll
Or wander or ponder
On what lies within
Through the roaring seas
The humming of bees
The Trees
The Beauty
Do you care
Do you stare
Do you tare
At the thought
Of what could be there
Think of a thought of your own
For the thought
They sought
Cannot be bought
You are you
Not him or her or it or us
But do not fuss
For when you believe
You will receive
And feel relieved
Then is when
I send my pen
And you can too
But not
Until you
See you!

This Side of the Bar

(For Jean Moore, after Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar")

Camille Hopkins

If I could,
I would thrash the seawater
to obscure the call,
hold back the unwelcome pilot
that steered you past the current.
You, who understood stories, crafted them
with the concentration
of a glass blower -- how could you
not answer the clear call
on shore, in the clatter
of glass and steel?

There was no farewell when you embarked,
only quiet. What you showed us
was not quiet: coketowns and mass production,
monkeys and migration.
Change can cover us too fast, you said,
but we didn't want to hear that.
You taught us about unflinching tides.

Now your words have fallen fathoms.
Now we throw away our nets,
hoping to retrieve them,
but catch the yellow burn of salt in everything.

Orion

Camille Hopkins

There is his scabbard, there his belt.
see how the stars look equidistant,
compass-measured. The star on the end
isn't a star but a cluster of them.
Sure enough, when you look again,
there's more than one.

That one is a white star, that a blue.
Orion is most visible in winter,
today upright, tomorrow sideways,
always pointing in four directions with its even,
patient, equidistant stars. I saw a TV show last night
that named them one by one. The horizontal row.
The vertical row.

There is the father, there the child,
looking wide-eyed upward
from the darkest part of the yard.
They leave Orion with his belt, his scabbard,
because hunters beneath the sky --
more today-sideways than tomorrow-upright --
are still looking and pointing, even
and equidistant, far away
and full of fire.

Ashbrook's Angel
(In memory of Jill and Jamie Bias)

Meredith Thomas

You left our arms,
Child of God, and fell
into the hands of danger.
We weep for your loss
and pray for your soul.
You will never know love
or hear your own child's cry.
Your life was taken in a sudden breath.
Though we heard your cries,
we could not save you.
But you grow stronger
and sprout golden wings
to guard other children
from the dangers that stole you
from our arms,
a guardian angel to protect us.
You wrap us in those warm wings
and fight off evil.
Holding us close to your heart,
you whisper, "I'm here."

Leavetaking

Pam Newton

My last memory is of you
leaning against a screen door
among small evidences
of domesticity.

The unruly backdrop of green trees
swayed as if they could not decide
which way to move.

Your face was highlighted by the sun,
red and vivid as tulips in Spring.
Your lungs heaved against the heat
as if you had walked many miles.
Your shoe was untied
laces barely visible
between the floor and the weight of you.

You paused only long enough to close your eyes
as if the sight of your life was far too familiar to bear.
Then from behind you I heard you say,
"I cannot be still"
and you went away.

Good Friday

Michael Lillard

Riding up the escalator
I was embracing Kelly 'til she could hardly breathe
until the foul, death smell wafted down
and watered our eyes.

Above us stood the elderly man with
patchy blond hair jetting out in clumps
from underneath his baseball cap.
An Easter-egg dyeing kit
hung from his weathered right hand.
His baggy blue parachute pants
were damp and yellow with drying urine
sticking to the back of his thighs.

"Oh, that's so sad!" Kelly moaned.
Our happy holiday melody
was drowned out by a bluesy cry...

and miles away
the Romans drove nails through Jesus' wrists.

Rejoice

Russell Fowler

though this time and place were not intended,
life but a tattered garment worn
out of fashion, rejoice. The
accumulated dismay of a thousand
years has not prevailed, condemned
to graveyards and the Savings and Loan,
a sad figure fit only for pageant and noise.
See how the small things go on
and rejoice. Ages hence they will wonder
at our titanic consternations, our
big dim faces, and lament unprecedented
downfalls of their own. Surrounding
these recurrent conflagrations, arching
away in infinite directions is the thing
itself. Regard its placid and unremarkable
persistence, its patient attendance upon
your least significant moments, for
every good thing you ever did has not been lost,
so rejoice. Even when we wish it would
finally end, it takes mercy on us, and won't.

The Light of Maybe

Holly Grimes

it isn't sunlight
nor candle light
it is something
deep, deep down
inside of me
maybe my heart
maybe
heaven and hell
fighting for me
my possession
at least someone is.
it aches and i pine
for solitude
for sanctitude
for a smile within
from within.
seasons change
inside of me
because my eyes
don't see what
really happens
outside, around me.
i float back and forth
to places no one
no one may ever see
slowly it
a desperate it
sucks the soul
from my very being

is that why
it smells of death?
is that what
i mean by empty?
quietly the door
shuts, shuts
wisdom and loss
are hand in hand
in my depths.
i learn as
no one else can
because no one
will truly
understand.
the light slowly
withdraws-
from me.
but the darkness,
while painful,
is comforting.

Groom

Pam Newton

With slippery palms clutching my purse,
I felt the sight of you trace a warm,
rapid path to my stomach,
cozy and full and content.

I watched your mother watching you,
watched her looking for me
with a sympathetic mask
partly worn in anticipation of
finding what she did not wish to see.

You stood at the altar filled with
expectation, swaying slightly as
music announced the arrival of
your bride.

A wave of synchronized bodies motioned
toward her, a confident cat purring,
her eyes playing with the crowd,
mischievous, commanding attention,
commanding loyalty.

At the reception, your Aunt Rachel
comforted me with a slight smile.

Today, I heard of your divorce as I traversed the
familiar sidewalks of hometown, noticing
the same faces in the market as were there when I left.
I wondered if your happiness was a happiness
made like hard-won fortunes,
the result of valiant battles to have, to conquer,
needing to bleed not from the battle itself
but from the prize in times of peace.

Revenge

Michael Lillard

skinned alive at the brink of dawn
an effigy is made from the remains
panels of flesh stitched back together
hollow stare remains on the face
four limbs are tied and stretched
bound to the corners of a giant wood-frame
flogged with mallets, abused by curses
savage enemies pound the body like a drum
a drone resonates from within the body's cavity
filling the void where a soul once lived

Angel & The Snake

Michael Lillard

The plastic angel -
a Christmas-sale item;
\$0.49 at Woolworth's

The rubber serpent -
picked up off the asphalt
of a Wal-Mart parking lot

Two servants watched over Eden;
One was blessed
and
one was cursed

Woolly Wally the Wild Dwarf

Evangeline Johnston

Walter C. Goebel is a small businessman; he is a small man who runs a small business. He is no industrial giant, but his efforts have always been adequate to provide for his family of seven. He is a pygmy who carries himself like a tribal chief, holding his head up high, lips pursed, his nose in the air -- the same posture he assumes when comparing his height to his wife's and insisting she's not an inch taller -- her nose is an inch longer -- and if she can stick it in the air to make herself taller, he can do his that way, too.

Goebel makes quite an appearance with his ever-present coveralls, some sort of hat, and accessories that include a sandwich, chips, and a "diet dope." Dopes are his business.

"I drive a dopewagon," he'll say when people ask him his living.

"A dopewagon?!" They always exclaim, looking him up and down and wondering if this short, rotund man could possibly be up to something illegal.

The round man explains, "You know, dopes! Coke, Pepsi, Sundrop. My wife makes sandwiches and I deliver them. She has her route of convenience stores and other places. I drive my route around to the machine shops, brick masons,...." His lips purse again, and he looks around importantly rubbing his sizable belly as if it contained something precious, as a pregnant woman might do.

Then again, Goebel's belly is full of things precious to him: tangy ranch chips, barbecue corn chips, jalapeno'n'cheddar crackers, and a complete line of major manufacturers' diet colas. He thinks he's fooling people, but his family knows he's eating things he isn't supposed to while on a sugar- and salt-restricted diet. Goebel also thinks he fools the waitress at the fish camp when he tells her "I can't eat that much. Just bring me a salad. Mama'll have the all-you-can-eat whole flounder... and bring an extra plate with that, will ya?"

One person Goebel doesn't fool about his eating habits is his doctor; but then Goebel loves going to see the doctor for any reason, like when his blood pressure shoots up with no explanation. It could not possibly have been all that junk food he consumed, now could it?

"Oh, no, no, no, doctor. I only eat what I'm allowed. That is, what I'm allowed to have after Mary and the boys pick the stove

clean!" Then, in irony, the portly patient rubs his belly and laughs, head lolling about on his jowls, "Heh heh heh heh heh!"

The "boys" are actually the four girls of the family. Steve doesn't count because he left home before any of the girls, thereby missing out on the adventures in which the "boys" participated -- adventures such as hanging on for dear life to the car door handle as Goebel flies around mountain curves at 65 miles an hour. Other exciting excursions include driving (in a camper older than all the ages of the "boys" added together) to the beach on Friday, staying overnight at the campground for two nights, and coming home Sunday, bodies covered with mosquito bites and God-knows-what-else from the community showers at the campsite. How about the times the family has been enticed, by promise of a steak supper, into making the rounds of all the car lots in and out of town for hours on end?

Goebel loves cars. He loves looking at them; he loves tinkering with them; he loves driving them. It is a mystery then, why he drives cars the way he does, endangering chrome and fender (not to mention life and limb) going speeds heretofore unknown to man, cursing any poor devil who gets in his way ("Hot Tomato!"), and racing with the teenagers dragging Franklin: "You think that raggedy old Dodge can outrun my Lincoln?! (light turns green and Goebel throws it in gear) Hah hah hah! Think again!" (Screeeeeeech!). One shudders to think how Goebel drives on the highway if this is how he drives in town.

Small wonder, then, that the "boys" have come up with a nickname for the dwarf who lives at their house. An outstanding character deserves an outstanding name: Waldorf Cecil Goebel, or Wally, for short. The origin of W.C. Goebel's alias is pretty simple: One daughter, when questioned what she would tell her friends if asked what the W.C. in her father's signature stood for, responded, "Waldorf Cecil. That's the wildest thing I can think of."

"Wild Dwarf?!!" exclaimed her sister, who misunderstood, thus adding a second alias, which was later combined with the first for the full and proper title of "Woolly Wally, the Wild Dwarf."

Wally wears his name with pride. It is a name his daughters have given him; and even if they cannot be boys, he welcomes any chance at affinity with them. A nickname binds one person with another; it is a sign that one is well-liked and thought of affectionately. To Wally, a nickname is an assurance that a short, round man in a world of tall, slender people is not necessarily a square peg.

The Final Goodbye

Melodie Land

"I can't stop. I have to have another drink. I'm sorry"

"I'm sorry." The words, I knew, were true, and yet the utter despair I felt upon hearing them will never leave my memory. The night was dark and forbidding, which certainly matched the somber words being spoken. In front of me uttering these words stood my husband of six years, and yet although he should have been familiar, the words he spoke brought only strangeness. This strangeness was not born out of a lack of actually knowing this person, but out of a feeling of helplessness and despair despite the knowledge. "I'm going out now," he said. "I won't be home for a while. I'm sorry." As he turned and walked out the bedroom door that August night, he turned his back on so much more than a room. In effect, he turned his back on his entire life. Everything ceased to exist for him except alcohol, the great controller and destroyer of lives.

Strangely, when I think back to that horrible night, I can never remember exactly what I said. Did I put up some sort of incontrovertible argument that he failed to listen to? Did I beg and plead with him not to walk out that door to choose me over the bottle? I don't really remember. In some ways not recalling is harder. I would like to think I said some very profound things, that I empathized with him mightily in his affliction. Perhaps I did or said something worthwhile, but I don't think I'll ever fully recall that night. My pain is too great and my heart too small to absorb the truth.

I hear my husband sometimes in my dreams. He comes into the room, back into the past, but this time he tells a different tale. He says, "I'm going to stop drinking forever. I love you far too much to risk losing you. I can stop, and I will." As he tells me this he smiles the way only he can, and I believe him with every fiber of my being. I know for certain we will pass this test.

I wake up from these dreams sadder but wiser. Life is not like most dreams, it is far more precious and revealing. Dreams reveal only secret hopes and wishes from an unconscious mind, while life allows those dreams to bear fruit and come to fulfillment. The precious gift of life is many dreams lived out over a period of time. I am sad though, too, when I wake up. My dream, in this case, has a much more preferable ending. My husband and I go off into the sunset to live happily forever after. There will be no more problems in our future. Such are the hopes of dreams.

Two years have now passed, and I have a new life, different, but fulfilling. God has given me a second chance to walk down another path. He has also given me the strength and the courage to write my own ending to that terrible night two years ago, and to finally say goodbye.

It is time now to say that goodbye. I picture myself and my husband in a room, both wanting to say the many things that are in our hearts. I summon up my courage and I speak the imaginings of dreams and the frailties of life. "I will always love you, and I will always want the best for you, but I have my own life to live. I have a purpose to accomplish in this world, a commission to fulfill. I hope we will remember the good times over the sad ones, the love we felt for each other and not the bitterness of endings and disappointments. I hope with all of my heart that one day we will both find that peace that passes all understanding."

"Goodbye, my husband, lover, and friend. I shall miss you. I'm sorry."

The Love We Will Never Know

Holly Grimes

Take me into your arms
grasp tightly as you walk
bring me into your world

A world of love and laughter
the place where stars always shine
we can stand together there

The milky way and fairy tales
the places myths thrive in existence
these all dwell deeply in your eyes

I wish for your heart
and for you to take mine
caressing it gently like a child

Strong prejudices set aside
we may sit beside one another
in your world made of light and love

Life

Dennis Narduzzi

as babies we eat, sleep, desire attention,
we explore, we see another world post nally,
we go through Piaget's stages and each at his or her
own speed,
we start school discovering our knowledge and pet
peeves,
we see our first love finding out jocks need only apply.

the global marketplace, our new world,
we climb the ladder falling off at times,
fixed in a niche we believe we will be happy,
the boss goes through syncophants like kleenex,
we beat our heads wanting the gold and to rule

where is God and prayer?
we seek others that fade away,
we then become addicts of some relief -- drugs, alcohol,
or even sex,
finally we try God's love but maybe it's too late!

we change jobs and feel low and sad,
we cling to off and on flings,
we develop ulcers and stock up on antacids, the "fix!"
we ponder suicide wondering **WHY!!**
are we hurting ourselves and others?

Life is precious yet at times precarious. Love conquers all if we
allow others to love us and underneath it all we do matter or else
God would not exist and where would we be then???

Ode to my cosmic love nugget

Brendan O'Donnell

I la-love you, my lovely and loving ca-cosmic nugget of
love.

A million plus some more times one hundred
eighty-three.

Smiling ever onward for I'm in ever glee,
to have received you from a cosmic entity.

If I ever went a week without my toiletries,
or if my fridge held nothing but some ketchup and some
cheese

yes you would still god bless me with every single
sneeze.

I remember camping out and staying up all night.
When we said we loved us everything felt just alright.
You wanted me to stay awake, but when my eyes did
close
you quickly woke me, woke me good, with a punch
upside my nose.

When I look into your eyes I shiver, quake, and
quimble.

Be a needle and I'll sow you like a crazy stitching
criminal.

I'll sow you all night and day, while I sing this nugget
hymnal.

I shall sow, sow on and on, even if I lose my thimble.

Exploitation

Linda Pellerin

As I look out the window and see the beautiful, fall day with its clear, azure sky and magnificent colored trees, I keep replaying in my mind the events that have led to my being here. Sitting in a tiny airless room outside the courtroom waiting for the verdict, I keep going over the past year. What could I have done differently? I feel rage that they would even suspect me. After all I'm the reporter that was first on the scene. I'm the one who got the first interview with the hysterical father. I'm the one, through my reports, who got the entire nation out looking for the little girl. But when it was all over, it was me they arrested. Me whom they charged with murder. ABC's Peter Jennings said the other night that I'm the first reporter ever charged in connection with a story they were covering. It's so unfair. I feel as helpless as the little one I'm accused of murdering. I've worked as a broadcast journalist for over 10 years. I'm a veteran at this. How could they think I killed an innocent child? What motive could I possibly have to destroy the life of a precious baby? My name and picture have been plastered all over the front pages of the tabloids and on TVs all over the nation for the past year while I've awaited trial. They're going for the death penalty which means I could be dead in a few years and I haven't even celebrated my 35th birthday yet.

For the past year I've been in isolation because the other prisoners have threatened to kill me. My only companions have been books, my radio, and my computer. If it wasn't for the modem, I would have been cut off entirely from the rest of the world. As it is, some journalists from around the nation are supporting me, especially my best friend Donna. We started out in radio together and even though we've always worked for opposing stations, we've remained friends throughout the years. The station has backed me from the beginning and has paid all the bills, but that doesn't make up for the fact that I've been held prisoner for a crime that for the life of me I can't convince them I didn't commit.

It all started with a simple wager with my co-worker and former lover, Frank. I can still remember clearly that day in October. It was very much like today with the sun shining brightly and the air cool and crisp. It started out like any other day as I

readied myself at 4:00 a.m. for my job as News Director and the morning news anchor at WIVK Radio in Knoxville, TN. The only difference was that I had not been to sleep yet, having been out covering a story. I remember thinking, *"You can do this. You don't need any sleep. You're still working off adrenalin."* I always used the 15-minute drive in the dark to collect my thoughts for the day and try to get myself organized for what might lie ahead. Of course, when you're in the news business, you really never know what to expect because things tend to change from minute to minute. This particular morning I remember thinking about the night before and the story I stumbled upon. I was exhausted due to lack of sleep, but exhilarated because it was a breaking story which hadn't been resolved yet.

When I arrived at the station, I immediately went to the wire machine to see what was happening and what direction the news of the morning would be taking. Just as I thought, the Associated Press had updates on the story I'd been working on and I headed for the phone to call my buddy Rich Jordan with the FBI office in Knoxville. Rich didn't answer with his usually gravelly 4:00 a.m. voice, so I knew he had been up all night too, although I hadn't seen him at the scene in Anderson County.

"Rich, it's Cindy. I hate to bother you so early, but you know I need the latest on this abduction." I decided to drop the pleasantries since we were both pressed for time.

"No problem, Cin. I've been waiting for your call. As a matter of fact, I figure you probably know more than we do at this point. I saw some of the feeds you gave to the networks. Were you the only reporter on the scene?"

I chuckled a little, "Only for the first 15 minutes, then it seems like the whole world was there. I got lucky. I had to do a speech up in Lake City last night and was on my way back home when I heard it on the scanner. I was close by, so I swung over to see what was happening and the rest is history." I reached over and hit the button on the tape recorder. "Listen, the tape is rolling so if you could give me an update, whenever you're ready."

Rich began in that resonant, radio voice of his, "FBI agents are still searching this morning for a little girl who was allegedly abducted last night in Anderson County. Her father, Christian Evans, claims he left her alone in his 1990, blue, Honda Civic while he ran into a convenience store for some milk. The child has been identified as three-year-old Michele of Lake City,

TN. Her 26-year-old father said when he came out of the store, the car and Michele were gone. He did not see anyone, or hear the car drive away"

"That's it? Still no leads?" I was hoping he had more than this..

"Rich continued, "No, nothing new yet. There's no sign of the car or the child."

"What about the father? Do you think he's clean?" I was aware that there would be some people out there who would automatically suspect the father, and that's the way I wanted to pursue the story

"So far, his story checks out and you know, I kind of feel sorry for him. He appears to be genuinely devastated by all this." I turned off the recorder and thanked Rich who promised to keep me posted, and I hung up the phone.

By then my co-host, former lover, and nemesis, Frank, was in and we got together to discuss who would cover the story from here on. Crime was Frank's thing and I agreed he should be lead reporter on this one even though I was the one who broke the story. We had been having some problems lately and I thought if I gave him a good, juicy story like this, things might get better

When I hired on at this station, it was Frank and me in the morning, doing the news together. The News Director, Henry, broadcast the afternoon news. This went on for quite a while, but Frank and I decided Henry was incompetent and we conspired to get rid of him. By this time, we were sleeping together and it was sort of fun coming up with ways to discredit poor Henry while lying there in bed. After about six months, Henry was out the door and the General Manager, Jake, called me into his office and offered me the job as News Director. I had experience from other stations and jumped at the chance thinking Frank would be glad for me. He wasn't. As a matter of fact, he was furious. He never considered they would offer the job to me. He always thought it would be him. Anyway, that ended the relationship and since then, he's been a little difficult to deal with.

I never know when I can count on him. He is a brilliant journalist but doesn't always apply himself. There was this time I assigned him to cover an execution. When they execute someone in the state of Tennessee, they put him in the electric chair, or "Old Sparky" as it's called, located at Brushy Mountain State Prison just outside of Oak Ridge. We had journalists from all over and one guy from Nashville wanted to use our studios to send his feeds to

his station. I told him he could. Meanwhile, Frank, was supposed to be out getting interviews with protesters. There are always protesters at executions and they are always quite vocal and ready and willing to talk. But in an effort to discredit me in front of the Nashville reporter, Frank came back with no tape, while the guy from Nashville returned with dozens of actualities. I had to swallow my pride and beg some tape from the "music city" guy for our newscasts.

Then there was the time when we got word that some third-graders from a school in Clinton dropped a bottle with a note in it into the ocean. About for months later the bottle was found by a boy in Ireland. The story made the wires and the papers and Frank decided he was going to try to get an interview with the Irish boy. It took him three days, but he did it. Of course, the boy had such a brogue that nobody could understand what he said. Not an award-winning effort when you consider our medium is radio. We're still laughing about that one.

These are just two examples of how inconsistent Frank could be. I'm still trying to figure him out. I can't understand why he would be compelled to try to reach Ireland for three days to get an interview with a boy whose accent is so thick no one can understand him. And yet, when faced with a crowd of execution protestors, he failed to get the interviews other reporters got with ease. I came to the conclusion that he was just trying to aggravate me.

At any rate, even though I got the scoop on this particular story Frank was the best to cover it and we both agreed, for a change. Besides, I would be more effective working the phones from the studio and handling newscasts and feeds to other stations. And it was an excellent opportunity for me to get exposure on the national networks.

We anticipated the morning being really busy and it was. Stations from all over were calling, wanting live feed and actualities. Plus there was all the tape that I had from the night before that had to be edited and produced. Needless to say, our newscasts were filled with the story. After the newscasts were finished, Frank and I sat down for a cup of coffee before he headed to Lake City.

"So what do you think really happened?" He asked me as part of the game we always played during breaking stories. We liked to see if we could predict the scenarios and motives of the crimes.

"Well, I think there's a problem with the father. I'm not real comfortable with the whole setup. The convenience store clerk says he didn't see him drive up, and neither of them saw the car drive away. The father is definitely behind this one. Mark my words." I was smug in my conviction.

Frank laughed and shook his head. "I think you're way out of line this time. I think the father is telling the truth. Why would he lie?"

"I don't know," I sometimes got lost looking into his dark brown eyes. "I just have a feeling about this one."

"OK," he said, "Then you know the rules. Put it in writing." This was part of the game. Whenever one of us had a theory about a news story, we would write it down and then compare what we wrote to the actual outcome of the story as it was revealed. Sometimes we would have to wait for the trial, but other times the information was more readily available.

"You've got a deal," I made a mental note to write up my theory that night. Frank took off for Lake City and I cleaned up the newsroom, turned everything over to the afternoon anchor and headed home. I was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow, shortly after I arrived home, even though it was only 2:00 in the afternoon. But true to my word, later that evening I sat down at my computer and outlined the whole scenario as I saw it.

The next day I presented my theory, in writing, to Frank before he headed out to Lake City. He read it, laughed, and told me I was way off base, but he'd keep it for future verification. I followed the story for the rest of the day and didn't give my theory another thought.

Now here's where things began to get crazy. The third morning after the disappearance of the little girl, there was still nothing new in the story. By now there was a national manhunt going on with the mother and father plastered all over the television, pleading tearfully for the return of their child. Frank and I had just finished doing our last newscast for the morning and we were leaving the newsroom. Standing just outside were two I recognized as being FBI agents from their tacky cheap gray suits and their striped blue and black ties. I remember wishing the state would give them more money to buy decent clothes. They were just standing there looking as official as the Secret Service covering a visit of the president. I smiled at them, "Can I help you with something?" I asked, just to be polite.

"Yes ma'am. Are you Cindy Johnson?" Agent number one was big and burly and reminded me of my uncle Dan who was a lumberjack in Vermont. He had big, square shoulders and his rough hands were large and knotty like smoked hams.

"Yes, I'm Cindy. Is there a problem?" I started to get a little concerned at this point. Why did the FBI want to talk with me?

"Ma'am, if you could please come with us quietly. There are some questions we'd like to ask you." This was agent number

"Yes ma'am. Are you Cindy Johnson?" Agent number one was big and burly and reminded me of my uncle Dan who was a lumberjack in Vermont. He had big, square shoulders and his rough hands were large and knotty like smoked hams.

two who looked a lot like Frank with his dark hair and narrow torso. I could tell he was one of those agents who took pride in keeping fit because even the cheap suit looked good on him.

"Sure, no problem. Can you tell me what this is about? Is the American Cancer Society doing their fund-raiser again where people are arrested and then bailed out of jail?" I gave a little laugh, but the agents weren't smiling. I looked over at Frank and could tell he was quite concerned because he had that little wrinkle between his eyebrows.

Mr. Lumberjack grabbed my arm and escorted me down the hallway out the door, and into a waiting car. I looked over my shoulder just before I got into the car and shouted to Frank, "Call Paul and have him meet me at FBI headquarters." I was driven to the FBI office where Rich Jordan was waiting for me. By this time I was really concerned and quite confused as to why they wanted to talk to me. I was relieved to see Rich and hoped he could clear up the matter. Paul, the station attorney, was still nowhere to be found.

"Rich, thank God. What the hell is going on here anyway?" I chided at him like a bull after a red flag. He looked uncomfortable, but tried to calm me.

"This is just routine, Cin. There's nothing to worry about. We just have a few questions to ask you about the night the Evans' child was abducted." Because he was such a good friend, just having Rich there had a calming effect on me and I settled down and let them lead me to an interrogation room.

I was uncomfortable immediately. The room was small, poorly lit and smelled as if the dead smoke of one million cigarettes had been lingering there for centuries. I settled in as best I could and waited for them to make the first move.

"Cin," Rich began, "Frank gave me your theory yesterday when we were both in Lake City working on the Evan's case."

"So?" I looked at him and waited for an answer all the time thinking of a hundred ways in which to get even with Frank. I knew he was still upset over the News Director thing, but this was ridiculous.

"So," Rich continued in his calm, deliberate way, "there

are some things about your theory that are so similar to the case that it's uncanny and we want to go over them with you."

"Like what?" By now I was getting this knot in the pit of my stomach. I have to tell you, ever since becoming a journalist, I've had this fear of being at the wrong place at the wrong time, getting accused of doing something I didn't do, and getting put in jail for it. This was beginning to look like a familiar and all too real nightmare.

"Well," Rich continued, "Let's go over your theory." He reached for a folder and opened it up, pausing while he read. "You say here you think the father, for whatever perverse reasons, didn't want the child anymore and devised a plan to drive the car into a nearby lake with the child inside," He looked up at me, waiting for a response. I nodded.

He continued reading, "According to you, the lake would hide the car indefinitely and no one would be the wiser. You even go as far as to name the Norris Lake, and a particular section on the lake that is quite near to the convenience store." Again I nodded. "You say the father drove the car to the lake, pushed the car into the lake with the little girl strapped in her car seat, and then ran to the convenience store. You say here that he tried to act natural, purchased a gallon of milk, talked to the store clerk and then proceeded outside. Once outside, he screamed and when the convenience store clerk ran out to see what was the matter he claimed that his car had been stolen with his daughter still inside," He paused again and looked at me.

"So far, that's pretty much my theory." I responded to his questioning look.

"You say the clerk then placed a call to 911, you heard it on your scanner and pulled up a couple of minutes later to cover the story and the rest is history."

"Again, that's right." I began to squirm in my seat by this time because I could see where all this was going.

Rich went back to the script, "You go on to say you think the motive was probably that the father was having marital problems and thought his daughter was getting in the way. Is that the only motive you could come up with?"

I shrugged and looked at him squarely, "It was at the time. I figure the father probably has a history of depression or mental illness. Why don't you check him out instead of me?" By now I was getting really angry. After all, what had I done?

Rich slapped my report down on the table making me

jump about a foot off my chair. When I looked up at him, his face was pale and grim. I felt like a little girl who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. All I could think of was that by writing up my theory I may have hurt his case in some way. Boy, was I wrong on that one.

"We've found the girl, Cin." Rich looked as if he were going to cry.

"I take it the news is not good." You don't have to be a mind-reader to figure that one out.

"No, it isn't. She's dead. We found her at the bottom of Norris Lake in the car described by her father. She was strapped in her car seat and she never had a chance." A lonely tear began to slowly trickle from his right eye and he reached quickly to brush it away. Rich always did have a soft spot for children and had two of his own.

"Oh, no." I can't begin to describe what was going through my mind at this point. I felt bad for the child, naturally; but I was also wondering what this all meant for me. The sense of dread was weighing on me heavily. "You certainly don't think I had anything to do with it, do you? I didn't even know the family. Why would I do something like this?"

Rich shook his head like a sad puppy, "Your theory said the car would be in the lake, and it was because of your theory that we looked there. How do you explain knowing exactly where the car would be right down to the specific area?"

"I can't explain it. It was just a lucky guess. I got out a map, determined where the convenience store was and what area would be closest, and picked that one. Besides you know how many cars are accidently driven into the lake in that area. We've been after the state for years to put up guard rails, but they never have." As I said the words, the seemed to ring hollow even to me. All I could think of was that I was starting to sound guilty.

"There's more," Rich continued, "We are all wondering why you were the first reporter on the scene. That seems kind of funny."

"I had to speak in Lake city that night at a dinner remember? I told you that the morning after it happened. I was on my way home when I heard the call go out over the scanner. I was near the convenience store, so I drove over and covered the story. You know I'm not one to pass up a good story when I hear it." I couldn't believe I was having to defend myself to Rich. We had enjoyed a close working relationship for years.

"I don't think that's the way it happened." Rich was beginning to frighten me now. "We believe you came upon the child alone in the car. We believe you took the car to the Lake and just let it roll in while you watched, knowing that the baby would be killed. We believe you then walked back to the convenience store and pretended to just arrive on the scene in time to cover the story." Rich seemed to be convinced he was right.

"Why would I do something like that?" I realized now I was pleading for my very life. If I wasn't careful, I'd be sitting in "Old Sparky" myself.

"For the notoriety," Rich looked sad and disgusted. "You wanted to be famous and this was a great way to get your face on TV. There's probably some sicko out there interested in movie rights and a book. Frank told me how power-hungry you are." Rich got up and walked out the door, leaving me to wallow in my terror.

Well, I continued to profess my innocence, but they didn't buy my story. You see there were 30 minutes I couldn't account for. It was during the time I was driving from my speaking engagement to the time I arrived at the convenience store. They kept me at FBI headquarters in Knoxville all that day and finally charged me with one count of kidnapping and one count of murder that night. The whole country was shocked when they made the announcement.

Normally I would have been out there with the rest of the media, but this time I was confined to a small holding room at the FBI office. There were news crews from just about everywhere. Many of the journalists had been colleagues of mine who I had given live feeds to during the first couple of days of the story. We were comrades and now they were all turning against me.

I cannot describe the desolation I felt during those first few days. Paul did what he could to get me released on bond, but to no avail. They feared for my safety. My friend, Donna, had to go to my house and take my dog home with her. She cleaned out my refrigerator and closed up the house the best she could. I kept thinking my poor puppy thought I had abandoned her. I never got a chance to get things settled.

As much help as Donna was, she did do a special feature for her radio station about what it was like to have a friend in my situation.

My parents are supporting me now, but in the beginning they got caught up in all the media hoopla and went on national television. They told the whole Today Show audience that they raised me as best they could and didn't have a clue as to where they went wrong. My father called me a rebel. A rebel! Just because I wouldn't go to law school when I got out of high school, opting instead to attend Columbia University to get my degree in journalism. My father went on to tell the whole country how disappointed

he was in me. It should have really hurt, but to tell you the truth, I didn't expect much else from him.

I never could please my father, not even when I was a child. Every time I got a B in school, he admonished me for not getting an A. Told me I wasn't applying myself. When I won awards in journalism, he said it wasn't my talent, I was just lucky. Every time I brought home a special friend to meet him, he would tell me I didn't deserve him.

Things have changed now because we've had the time to sit and resolve our differences. He finally told me he never forgave me for not being a boy. I only wish he had told me this a long time ago. Maybe things would be different now.

So there I was in prison in solitary confinement for my own safety. One day blended into another and the boredom was unbearable. They finally gave me a radio so I could listen to the local talk shows, who were of course talking about my case. After a while I couldn't listen anymore. There was so much hatred out there toward me and there was no way I could defend myself. I felt like one of the victims in the Salem witch hunts. No matter what I said, it was turned around and used against me.

I was able to receive visitors and Frank began to be a regular I think he only came around because he felt guilty for handing over my theory to Rich and planting the seed of distrust. That, and the fact that Jake made him News Director one week after my incarceration. His resentment toward me seemed to have faded into remorse and guilt over my circumstance, but I welcomed his company and companionship. I would never admit it to him, but I still cared a great deal about him. It meant a lot to me to know that he believed in me. He admitted to me that he had given Rich the theory in hopes of getting me in trouble, but he didn't anticipate the extent of it. He just wanted to aggravate me a little. I didn't care what his motives were anymore. It was just nice to know I had a friend.

Donna visited with me often too. She brought me pictures of my dog and she also obtained law books so I could better understand what was happening to me. We had many long discussions about how I was going to get out of this situation.

The General Manager of the station, Jake, gave me the best attorneys money could buy. Fortunately for me, they were also friends of mine. Paul and his partner, Peter, worked long and hard trying to discredit the people who put me here. Unfortunately for me, my theory

theory, written with such care, was the one determining factor in keeping me in prison. I tried to convince Paul and Peter that if I were guilty I wouldn't have written the theory at all. It would have been like rubbing the authorities' noses in it. My attorneys were on my side, but it didn't seem like anyone else was.

Christian Evans, the father of the slain girl, has really benefited from the sympathy of the entire nation. I'm the person everyone wants to rot in hell. He's the one everyone feels sorry for. He's the one who went on Good Morning America right after the funeral, sobbing and questioning how I could kill his baby like that when I didn't even know them.

The funeral didn't help matters any either, with the tiny, white casket and the balloons, flowers, and teddy bears sent from people from around the country.

I was right about another thing, too. Evans was having marital problems with his wife and he was being treated by a psychiatrist for depression long before the little girl was murdered. When I brought that up to the FBI agents, they just brushed it aside. What did they care? They had their collar and they weren't in the mood to dig any deeper.

After spending almost a year in jail, there's been the preliminary hearing and trial to deal with. The whole thing has been a travesty. I keep thinking someone will finally come to their senses and see that I'm not the evil person they think I am. Everything they have is so circumstantial that I can't believe they are wasting the taxpayers' money by bringing the case to trial. There are no witnesses, and my finger prints are not on the car. There is no evidence!

It took them over a month to find a judge that I didn't know because I've worked with so many of them covering the crime beat in the early days. I was also instrumental in petitioning Congress to allow cameras into the courtroom. How ironic that I'm the one the cameras are scrutinizing now. Some of those very same judges have gone on to serve in the state legislature. Many of them don't claim to know me because they're afraid they won't get re-elected. I feel like a leper and can't help but wonder what life will be like after the trial, whether I'm found guilty or innocent.

The jury had to be pooled from six counties and they've been sequestered, so many of their families are angry with me over that too. For the past week, I've been sitting in the courtroom trying to look innocent. I've tried to appear to be myself, full of confidence and pride, but it isn't easy when so many are against me. Many of my fellow journalists took the stand on my behalf. I can't tell you how much I appreciated that. It was like drowning in the ocean and having someone throw you a life jacket. Frank even testified to explain why I wrote the theory. How it was just an idea I came up with. A supposition based on the evidence I knew was at hand. All the while the courtroom cameras I fought so hard for were turned on me, recording every expression, every movement.

At least the trial was a break from my prison cell, which in a strange way has become home to me. My days in prison have stretched endlessly from one to the other. Taking my freedom away has been like sucking the very breath out of me with a straw. The pressure has been slow and steady, building like a festering wound until I'm weak from the strain.

I've always prided myself on being a likeable person. People just naturally turned to me in times of trouble. I could sit on a park bench next to someone and know their entire history within 30 minutes. Now no one wants to listen to me. I think that's what hurts the most. I can feel the anger toward me from just about the whole nation. If it weren't for Frank, Donna, and my parents, I think I would go crazy.

That pretty much describes what it's been like up until this point. All I have to do now is be patient and wait for the jury to decide my fate. The little room I'm in seems to be getting smaller and smaller, shrinking from what is in reality a very small room to what seems to me like a tiny withering box. There's a large clock on the wall above the table where I sit. Each minute drags by at a snail's pace and the hands appear to never move.

Thank God there's a window so I can at least see the sun, the trees with their kaleidoscope of colors, and the emerald green grass. The window sill has been painted over and over again as evidenced by the chips in various places. Depending on how deep the chip is, the color changes. In one place its dark green, in another its beige, and still another shows a pale yellow. I can just imagine what the beige, peeling, stained, papered walls of this room could tell me if they could talk. All the prisoners who have had to wait here to find out what turn their lives would take have probably had the same thoughts as I have. My palms are sweaty and there's a squeamish feeling in the pit of my stomach as if I were going out on a first date.

The jury has been out for four hours and still no word. The guard posted outside pokes her head in to see if I'm hungry. I nod and accept the roast beef sandwich and coffee she offers me. I take the first bite of the dry sandwich, but begin to gag and end up spitting it out in a napkin. The coffee tastes good though and I encircle the cup with my hands to give me something to hang onto, like a lifeline.

The door creaks open and Paul smiles as he enters.

"It's time," he says kindly as he grabs my arm just near the elbow and leads me to the courtroom. I'm trying to stay calm, and I keep taking deep breaths. No matter what, I've decided they aren't going to beat me. I won't embarrass myself in front of them. I will take whatever comes with my head held high. I smooth the skirt of my black suit before entering the courtroom. I can feel everyone's eyes upon me; but I don't acknowledge them.

The chair scrapes the floor as I sit down at the table. Paul is right beside me in his comforting navy blue suit. I run my shaking hand along the smooth

ago.

surface of the polished mahogany table in an effort to calm my nerves.

Finally, I turn to see who is in the courtroom and I'm amazed at the mass of humanity packed within the stately walls. I spot Frank and give him a little smile. Donna is there too, smiling encouragement. I've promised her an exclusive interview no matter what and I can see the dollar signs in her eyes.

My parents are also there. My mother fiddles nervously with a shredded tissue and my father keeps removing his glasses and polishing them before returning them to rest lightly on the bridge of his opulent nose. I'm so glad I got the chance to set things right with them. If only it could have happened sooner I give them a little wave and turn around again as the judge enters the room.

I stand tall and straight as he seats himself, then return to my seat along with everyone else. As the jury, eight men and four women, files in one by one, I search their faces for some sign of how they voted. There is none. The judge turns to the Foreman and asks, "Do you have a verdict?" I grab Paul's hand and hang on for dear life. My breathing is quick and shallow. I feel faint.

The Foreman stands and pronounces, "Yes, your Honor, we do."

The judge turns to me, "Will the defendant please rise."

I summon all the courage I have in me and let go of Paul's hand as I push myself to a standing position on shaky legs. I keep thinking to myself, *Tall and straight. Be proud.* I gaze steadily at the Foreman as he passes a tiny piece of paper to the bailiff who takes it to the judge. I think to myself, *Breathe. It's almost over. Try to keep calm.*

The judge opens the piece of paper and I see his shoulders drop. he looks at me and says in a steady voice, "Cynthia Johnson, for two counts of first degree murder in the death of three-year-old Michele Evans, the state of Tennessee finds you the defendant," the pause here is an eternity in my mind, "not guilty"

I stand there stunned as the courtroom erupts into chaotic noise as if I'd just won an Academy Award. From the corner of my eye I see reporters scrambling for the door so they can jockey for position for the upcoming interviews. Paul is hugging me and I'm having trouble finding my parents through the tears welled up in my eyes. I'm laughing and crying at the same time. My faith in the criminal justice system has been restored. The next thing I know Frank, Donna, and my parents are there hugging me all at

once. Paul has turned toward the prosecuting attorneys and is shaking their hands. The judge is banging on his gavel trying to get the courtroom in order. I turn toward the jury smiling and thank them for my freedom. When the judge finally gets the courtroom settled down, he turns to me with a look of relief on his face. "Cindy, I'm sure you've been waiting a long time to hear these words. You are free to go." With that said, the courtroom goes wild again. I can't believe I'm free.

Outside, flanked by my parents, Frank, Donna, and Paul, I field questions from my colleagues. The questions are coming so fast and furious that I can't keep track of who is asking them.

"Cindy, what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, that's an easy one," I replied. "I'm gonna stand here, feel the warm sun on my face, let the gentle breeze flow through my hair and take a deep breath of freedom. And then I'm gonna thank the Lord for being alive."

"Cindy, what do you think is going to happen next with the Evans murder?"

"Well, I know one thing is for sure. I have some ideas about the case, but I'm not going to write them down." I laughed, giving Frank a little nudge as his face turned red. When he saw me laughing though, he laughed too.

"Cindy, what's in store for you in the future?"

"I've had a year to think about this. First and foremost, I'm prepared to file suit against the state of Tennessee, the FBI, the local authorities, and the District Attorney's office for false arrest, defamation of character and mental abuse. I'll be asking for damages in the range of \$10 to \$20 million. Also, I hope to finish the book I've been writing, now that there's an outcome; an some film producers have talked to me about a screen play of my ordeal.

Before the trial I was contacted by some of the talk show hosts, but I wanted to wait until after the trial, one way or the other. But mostly, I just want to relax and try to get my life back in order."

"You're suing the state? What makes you think you have a case?"

"I've used my time wisely in prison. I know the law now better than most attorneys. I'll win this fight." I was feeling cocky and besides, no one could stop me now.

"What about your old job? Are you going to try and get it back?"

"No," looking at Frank, "that job belongs to Frank now. I don't think money will be a problem for me, so he can have the job. I have other plans for my time."

Frank gave me a funny look as Paul stepped in and guided me toward a waiting car. It felt so good to be able to do whatever I wanted to do without guards watching me. Frank volunteered to go to the jail to pick up my computer and books, and then he was off on his mission of mercy. It was

It was hard to believe I wouldn't have to return there ever again.

I know life will be different for me now. Because of my experience I will never be the same, but I am confident I can overcome my bad memories of jail and the trial. I really came much too close to getting the electric chair. I never thought it would go that far; after all, there really was no evidence.

Now if I could just get out of my head the sound of that little girl screaming for her father as I stood there and watched the car gently overturning as it slowly descended into the still, black water of Norris Lake.

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Submissions

The *Agora* is published by students every spring at Belmont Abbey College. Submissions of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and pen-and-ink are accepted between October and February, with notification in April. Copies of the magazine will be mailed to those accepted.

Please remove your name and address from your submissions and include, rather, a cover sheet listing your name, address, telephone number, and a brief biographical profile along with the names of your submissions (or, if untitled, the opening line of the work or a description of the subject). This will help us in our selection process, which involves reading "anonymous" submissions and voting on them as a group.

To submit work or ask for more details, write to:

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