wooden teeth

-Seza Bali
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Table of Contents

Art

Silence – Seza Bali
Self-Portrait – Meghan Shea
Composition 4 – Ross Smirnoff
Edinburgh – Seza Bali
Puddle of Grace – Farah Sattar
Self-Portrait – Anne Ketterer
Self-Portrait – Bridget Sankiewicz
Composition 1 – Ross Smirnoff

Poetry

Wristwatch Ghazal – Chelsea Jennings
Hospice – Laura Hoffman
American Formalism – Sam Goldblatt
Some Kind of Past Time – Laura Hoffman
Passed – Erin Gamble
In the Museum – Magali Armillas-Tiseyra

Prose and Short Fiction

The Pickup – Magali Armillas-Tiseyra
Jiffy Mart – Chelsea Jennings
"Man Writing Story..." – Dave Backer
Dead, Drunk and Dysfunctional in Dixie – Caroline Cobb

Cover
5
6
9
13
19
22
24
4
7
12
16
17
25
8
10
14
18
Wristwatch Ghazal

Mortality's handcuffs: the weight of a wristwatch.
He didn't have time for lunch, so he ate his wristwatch.

Tomorrow is blank on the face of every clock.
Gather up your goodbye voice, your dozen plates, your wristwatch.

Last year hangs like the smoke skeleton
of a bottle rocket. Still nothing will satiate my wristwatch.

Daylight savings, different time zones, a dead battery.
Eventually, time deviates from your wristwatch.

The smooth spin, the ellipsis—do you see,
Sidereal, why a planet cannot relate to a wristwatch?

-Chelsea Jennings
Hospice

Sharp indigo angles
infect your room
like worms
creeping up
on you at night,
ruining dreams by crawling
through sunken eyes.

Your fall last night
left a ripe grape bruise
on your forehead.
malignant cells of spiders
beg to escape entrapment
while piled blankets
cocoon you from
dangerous floors.

All that is left of you
is a carcass of thin silver hair
and a sharp needle piercing your arm
to make the pain stop.

-Laura Hoffman
The Pickup

Sally dug the rounded edge of her left thumbnail into the taut leather of the steering wheel; even after she removed her thumb, the indentation remained for a few minutes. Outside, the ragged, scarred landscape soared by. The hills of upstate New York, carved out of the earth by the gradual recession of the glaciers, rose and fell complacently. Despite the car’s heating system, which whirred and sputtered louder than the radio, a sliver of cold seeped in, around, the driver’s side window. It was early still and the drizzly fields that lined the gray highway shimmered, silver, underneath a layer of morning frost. There hadn’t been snow yet this year, although it was already the end of November, and people were talking about a possible drought in the spring.

He hadn’t told her what time he was coming; it was David who had given Sally the flight information and the arrival time. Michael had said little the last time they talked, mentioning only the date, the 26th, offhandedly. The road curved and fell; Sally held her breath, eating the pressure of her foot on the gas as the Volvo crested the hill. Beneath her the tendrils of the city of Syracuse spread out into the surrounding valley. Changing her mind, Sally pressed down on the gas, feeling the Volvo’s visceral growl as it shifted and sped up, catching, almost ricocheting off, the curve at the bottom of the hill.

Sally scrambled down the concrete staircase of the airport’s parking lot, her legs stiff from the long drive. She knew Michael would hate it if she were late. Large crystals of salt crunched beneath her shoes as she crossed the street, slipping slightly before climbing the curb on the other side. Clogs were not winter shoes, she knew, but still, she was given to the indulgence. Her wooden soles echoed in the tile and glass terminal. Sally laughed quietly as she climbed the lazy escalator; Michael would laugh too – he maintained that you could tell the class of a place by listening to what sound people’s shoes made on the floor. The Syracuse airport was filled with the squeals of rubber soles on tile. Michael, Sally knew, would be wearing good shoes, leather shoes, shoes that made a fine-pitched click-click every time they touched the floor.

Sally checked the arrivals monitor; American Airlines flight 446 from Kennedy was on time, but she, Sally, was early. She brought a cup of tea and sat down in the dusty Au Bon Pain; the place was empty and hushed. Across the small arrivals hall, five guards stood awkwardly by the security gate. One of them, a woman, absentmindedly slapped her hand scanner against the palm of her left hand. Sally checked her watch, 9:45 – fifteen minutes. She finished her tea. The woman stopped slapping the scanner and sat down. Sally waited, clenching and unclenching her sweaty hands. Michael hadn’t flown up in almost two years; he said he couldn’t stand the twenty-seaters, or the whole of upstate New York, Sally could come down and visit him.

People started trickling through the security gate – the 10 a.m. from Kennedy had arrived. First, a group of tired Chinese students came through the gate, then a young couple dressed in matching blue ski jackets, then Michael. Sally stood up and walked over.

Beneath the brim of his black felt hat Michael’s wrinkled cheeks glowed pink. As Sally hugged him she inhaled the smell of pipe tobacco, the slight scent of mothballs in his cashmere scarf and the lemons in his cologne. Michael waited, quiet, while Sally held him. Even after a long while, his cheek still felt cold and clammy against Sally’s moist neck; she picked up his suitcase and began the walk back to her car.

-Magali Armillas-Tiseyra

-Seza Bali
Jiffy Mart

"Do you always get shit-faced while you do the laundry?"

"Excuse me!"

Francis Jean Mason leaned her bathtub-finger-wrinkled face into his personal space and screamed, "DO YOU ALWAYS GET SHIT-FACED WHEN—?"

"When do I do the laundry, yeah, yeah, yeah, I heard you."

"Well?"

Eric glanced behind him at the sea of powdered donuts and beef jerky and then over the Jiffy Mart counter at Francis Jean's mauve terrycloth sweatshirt.

"Well what?"

"Well, you walked over here from the Sudz Laundromat across the street, and now you want me to ring up a six-pack of Bud Light. I just want to know if you usually get intoxicated while washing your garments in the machines."

"A six-pack and some crackers. You don't seem to care whether or not I always eat crackers at Sudz."

"I don't care a bit."

"Well then ring me up."

"Don't get snotty with me, young man. I'll need to see some identification first."

He snapped his Indiana driver's license on the counter emphatically.

"Eric Turner."

"That's me."

"Tell me, Eric, does doing your laundry frequently involve alcohol-induced stupors?"

"Not usually, but thanks for your concern."

"It's not concern, really, it's curiosity. The Jiffy Mart is pretty boring unless there are kids trying to steal cigarettes."

"You know, they wouldn't steal them if you kept them behind the counter like every other store in town."

"Sure, but then I wouldn't get to scan the kids with my gun."

"Do what?"

"Scan them with my UPC gun."

"Like, point the barcode-thingy at them?"

"Yeah, I have the kids convinced it's a laser gun."

"Can I get my ID back, lady?"

She slid it towards him.

"Can I get my beer and crackers?" he added.

"Can I get my $9.43?"

"Can I get my change?"

"Can I get a cracker?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because right now my laundry is probably sitting in the dryer getting ruined."

"So you're going to eat all those crackers by yourself then?"

"Maybe, I don't know. Go ahead and take a cracker, just give me the rest of them, and the beer, and I don't even need a bag and keep the 57 cents. I really need to fold my T-shirts before they get weird."

"I don't really want a cracker."

"Well good, because I don't really want to give you one."

"Well good, because I don't want one anyway."

"You already mentioned that."

"Take your crackers and go."

"I will."

"You better, or I'll call the cops on you."

"On me? For trying to buy a six-pack and a single box of Ritz crackers from the goddamn Jiffy Mart? Are you out of your mind?"

"Come on, I'm just trying to make a little conversation. You should lighten up."

"Fine, what do you want to talk about?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does! Because if you want to talk about Phil Collins or something lame like that then I don't want to stick around. My grandma fuckin worships Phil Collins."

"Honey, I'm not your grandma. And Phil Collins makes me sick either way."

"Oh, maybe we can talk about that. Eric propped his arms on the counter and sighed.

"Fine with me," Francis Jean said.

"Well, there isn't really much to say. I mean, he's a horrible musician."

"Actually, I don't think he's such a bad musician, it's just that he doesn't have a lot of taste in clothing. Have you ever seen Elton John wearing that red raincoat suit of his?"

"I thought we were talking about Phil Collins."

"We were. Now we're talking about Elton John's red raincoat monstrosity of a suit that he wears."

"I've never seen it. But it doesn't sound too bad. You have to be adventurous to be a musician. My band will probably never make it, because we sound a lot like the Sex Pistols. Like everyone else."

"Sure, but people won't resent you the way they resent Elton John, because even if your music is bad, you at least look sensible."

"You seem to be the only one who resents Elton John's plastic suit."

"Not necessarily."

"At any rate, I'll still be resented because my music sounds the same as everyone else. Think of how much everyone hates Hootie and the Blowfish for making the same song again and again."

"I don't hate them. I've never even heard of them."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Eric, you need to lighten up."

"And you need to give me my crackers."

The door clambered open and a hooded sweatshirt shaped like a 12-year-old boy walked through it. As the sweatshirt lumbered around the cigarette rack, Eric reached across the counter and gripped the handle of the UPC gun. He whispered to Francis Jean, "I'll take care of the kid, you go check my laundry. First dryer on the left wall."

Francis Jean shuffled her Easy Spirit gym shoes towards Sudz, clutching the box of crackers.

-Chelsea Jennings
American Formalism

some old lady
stitched a stripe
to show new york
a star to show new
jersey a well dressed
man played the sound
of a railroad on
a piano a lonely
neighborhood
invented a religion
in a dark wood some
boys created a country
like they were dreaming
up a novel and
when indians look
for consolation in
pollock's paint-splattered
canvases they might
shudder to find
their grandfathers'
pipe dreams paralleled as
washington, jefferson,
and adams
turn prairies
into stars and
rivers into
stripes

-Sam Goldblatt
"Man writing story with ears plugged about painter who only hears in color"
Black Ink, 2002

Ready, here we go. It's gotta be a she. Sit down. She splatters paint everywhere, yeah everywhere. On glass, like Pollock, like a crazy woman. She bows down to the ground during a thunder storm way off in the distance in purple gobs and bubbles way off. The paint splatters and she screams so the glass shakes and her throat gives out while the splatters pour out of her mind and her brain and those evil evil transmitters, but are they evil? They don't have to be evil it should be what your were made like, how you came, could she do this if she weren't like this, if the doctors weren't there and the people weren't there shimming around her with no idea what they were talking about? Could you live that way? Right, of course, her little girl inside does and cries all night and mommmy comes and is just as confused while the night time stars pour out like the specks of cheap paint on her canvas, on her glass, on her floor. You shouldn't be worried, she shouldn't be worried, neither of us can hear. She's on her knees and you're on the chair and she's screaming her claws off the chalkboard and you're sitting here typing with those evil things in your ears, Evil? Do they have to be evil? Could you live any other way? It could be just the way you came, do you want to go to work and live the way they do and dream dreamless nights and see nothing when you wake and think nothing when those waves travel through the air and hit you? They hit her too, but you're trying to block them off when she just lets them hit, when she just lets them hit. She splatters paint everywhere and all she can see is her mind and those swirling eclipses of moons and slow milky pools of water like when our pushed through it on a lake, Everywhere. She's gotta be beautiful just like Audrey. Yeah, she's just like Audrey. She's got this curly hair and a sexy thoughtless type of attitude that's premeditated and guys will stop in their tracks, be derided from their very conversations to keep their eyes on her for just one more moment so that maybe when you, they, go to bed at night they can have an image to fuel, some coal black hair, some tortured artist going to buy paint that they can have an ugly affair with in the bathroom of the supplies shop. "Do you like this blue?"

"Yeah, I know, like I've known you for years..." That's all it takes and you're, they're, doing her from behind, not the real behind, but like in porn with a small wave back and forth back and forth and back and forth with dim red lights making your, their, skin that crazy yellow hue.

She walks in though, and she walks out, she doesn't say a word because the guy at the register knows her, knows her that well, and she buys her brushes and bottles and tubes and with nods completes the only transaction besides that of the diner she goes to for every meal. The greasy spoon where her early work hangs, were the gallery owners first put their hands to their mouths when getting lunch on the way back to the city. And Artie, like the paint store guy, knows her well enough to give her a easier salad and chocolate milkshake. Yeah, just like that diner at home. She'll go in, nod just like she's buying paint and Artie will know, like those waitresses who you dream asking you what you're writing. They don't know you're regulars but Artie knows her, she gets the same thing every time and doesn't have to say anything. Because she can't. You can. You do. You fill the air with waves and you think these sounds mean so much, don't you, so much that a veil just sounds like a hummmmm a hummmmm like it sounds right now like it sounds right now just a buzz with a tone, a pitch. With just your voice rumbling in your throat. The mind can't make sense of the silence; it needs to explain it so it hears something that's not there.

Well she hears it all. She knows the silence, her minds makes sense of it. She splatters paint everywhere, you can see it on the walls of the diner, yeah, yeah she painted them a mural one day and they all watched. Yeah. They all watched her do it because no one ever knew how or why she could produce such screams, such photographs from nothing. Artie wrote her a note and what did she do? She closed her eyes, opened them right into his, right through his, and nodded yes. The next day she came with her tool box, its a red tool box, a little rusty thing with shelves that pop out like that congressional's make up artist's box. Red and crazy all over. Yeah, she just comes in and dips a wash towel into a creamy white and throws it against the wall and she hums a sung song like this one you're hearing right now, like this you're hearing right now. She opens her mouth for the first time and all the regulars are just dumb-founded because they know the sounds she's making; they remember when they held their ears and heard themselves speak or shout so to ignore pains, to let them go by unheard and unfelt, because it's better that way, right? They hear that and look at their hands like they don't know how she's doing it because there's a fork in their left and knife in their right and she's throwing dishwater against a wall.

She dips her hand into a darker brown and swirls in fist into the pearl and it's her milkshake waiting for her under the silver box with fifteen writing behind the counter. Artie smiles, big smile. There's a crowd all around and they know who she is, they've seen her on Fox evening news and read little articles here and there about her shows and fancy looking sophisticateds with gouters and New York City smiles with her under their arm. They know. But they can't believe what they're seeing, what their hearing, what their not. The deconstruction, what's getting in her way? Nothing is getting in her way. It's the absolute breakdown of a mind and the composition of its reconstruction upon a wall that used to have phone numbers and Fuck You've written on it.

That's just like this, just like you know right? There's no one around you though. There's no wall. It's ok, probably some day...but why you ask? Why do you need a circle of people around you who know you from articles and smiles and nods? Why? She would still compose. She did it when she was, when you were, nine, yeah, and when no one was watching her, you, and she would scream like that into the painted echoes, like you hear now, when no one in the world could listen in the woods. In the woods by a lake where she, you, used to camp with your friends from school. There's a hammock there she, you, would crawl into and sing that choked song. Write her a note, write her a note like Artie, she'll hear you. Scratch it like she would.

Would you still do this if no one was around? Would you still throw your mind and colored words onto paper and save it so you could look at it later and just say, "Wow, this is me. This was me, but yeah, this is me." Would you? Write her a note, yeah. Then, she splatters words onto it below the neat script in return with a charred. She pushes it first of you before you can read it she takes your head in her hands, they're your hands, and she stuffs her, your, fingers in your ears and sings into your eyes. You know what that napkin says, you know what that napkin says. You know what she's, you're, saying, I can't hear her. "Yes. Yes I would."

-Dave Backer
Some Kind of Pastime

you lived the life of diamonds
you spat tobacco
and drank barley
you took her home
you hit too well
you felt fire in your thighs
when rounding the bases
baseball branded your fame
and smoked your name
in lights, at night
to a crowd, for a game

she loved men in uniform
she giggled
and parted perfect, red lips
she soon learned
she choked up, fought back tears
or what you did to her
she should hope you burn
though she lived with dirt
and was walked upon
she grows tall in summertime
and will always be green and strong.

-Laura Hoffman

Paused

Off topic (the intellectual fishbowls of jazz),
and "monkey" becomes a dirty,
steady inner hiccup.

On the jazz bus I
heard no "clean word" but
They were a "small something" who
murdered the jazz with paperclips.

The bus woman, she showed
at the Bank her school
and self on paper, but
no you-are-approved stamp
thumped her jazzed skin.

Brilliant chords
some sort of thematic cups
you, jazz become—
Pause on paper.

I who hear and
jazz that say
on school, paper,
inked stamps:

Dirty, stagnant water.
But without Jazz—

-Erin Gamble
Dead, Drunk & Dysfunctional in Dixie

The tragedy wasn’t that my grandfather was dying. The tragedy was that my mother was still hung over when she got to his bedside. She’d been drinking steadily for at least three hours when my uncle called from the hospital saying she should catch the next plane to Mississippi if she wanted to see their father before he died. For the past couple of months his liver had been suffering the effects of seventy-two years of scotch and it looked as though he’d soon be giving in to its demands. My brother booked tickets for our mother and me over the phone that night as she threw up the combination of bloody marmalade and saltines she’d been putting into her stomach over the course of the evening. He had joined the Peace Corps and was spending his last night before departure for the Ukraine making extra-stong mixed drinks for my mother and himself. I was teaching overly intelligent but athletically impaired children how to canoë and play basketball at a summer camp at the time and so wasn’t there to help with the vomit, though I could still smell it when I got home the next morning. I had driven most of the night and was prepared for my mother’s usual tirade about her family’s overly-dramatic, antebellum ways, but I didn’t expect to find her passed out on the bathroom floor amidst a pile of vomit-stained towels. The whole house reeked of tomato juice, vodka and bile. It was too absurd not to laugh.

The Peace Corps doesn’t take kindly to trans-Atlantic cancellations, so my brother wound up at the desolate backwoods of the former Soviet Union as planned an hour before my mother and I boarded a stuffy morning flight for Memphis where my uncle was to pick us up and drive us the two hours to the defunct family cotton plantation in Sardis, Mississippi. Even when he knew he was dying, my grandfather wouldn’t leave his hometown to go to a better hospital. The West family had been in Sardis, dilapidated hole that it was, “since before the War for Southern Independence,” he’d crowed, and he intended to die “within ten miles” of his forebears. Only in the West family was that kind of loyalty to one’s hometown maintained well into the 21st century. Everyone else who’d been born in Sardis had come to see it for the dead-end that it was and fled as fast as they could. My mother had nearly been disowned for quitting her job at her cousin's insurance agency, marrying a man with the last name Sherman and moving to the unheated suburbs of Chicago at the age of 23. Not only had she defected to the North, but she’d taken on the surname of the man who'd single-handedly destroyed half of the south by fire. Her family was holding a grudge against her for giving birth to little Yankee children. Staggering to the hospital chapel to console her mother while looking a little green and wearing big, tortoise shell sunglasses to hide her blood-shot eyes didn’t improve their opinions of her. She tried to pass the redness off as part of the mourning, but no one was fooled. The old man had died shortly after our plane took off, which was best for everyone involved, as the stench of liquor and tic tacs emanating from my mother would certainly have been too great a strain on his failing body.

It was probably a blessing that my father was away on a business trip and could only fly in a few hours before the funeral since my grandmother still refused to use his name, referring to him instead as “your husband,” or “your father,” but I was bitten at being left alone in the 24-hour a day job of making sure my mother didn’t do anything to get us permanently excommunicated from the southern faction for the two previous days. She’d shown up hung over, booked a room in a motel two towns down the highway rather than staying in her old room, and then insisted to me that there was absolutely no way she was going to buy a black dress for the funeral when she’d brought her perfectly good baby blue pants suit with the lime green trim. And to be fair, it did look nice on her. She could always pull off those almost ostensibly bright outfits that would’ve made anyone else look like an overly zealous real estate agent, but pants were unacceptable let alone baby blue ones with lime green trim at the pockets and cuffs.

"If you were planning all along to sabotage our whole appearance with that outfit, why didn’t we just stay home and save ourselves the airfare?" I asked. I wasn’t in the mood to cause trouble with the homesteaders and had chosen a conservative black sheath dress with the least wooly cardigan I could extract from my northerner’s wardrobe. God forbid me expose my bare shoulders to the August heat in a time of lamentation.

"Because if I hadn’t come at all the family would have a legitimate reason to disown me. Now if they say anything, it will just come off as pettiness when they should be mournful. It’s a win-win situation. I get to see the horror on my mother’s face and she can’t say a word." She wrinkled her nose and inspected the palm of her hand for traces of southern dirt that might have rubbed off the cheap motel-room vanity she had used to steady herself while leaning into the mirror to apply her signature frosted pink lipstick. She didn’t dislike her mother, exactly. She just took great pleasure in antagonizing people over ultimately inconsequential things like funeral attire.

-Anne Ketterer
As we got into the car we'd borrowed from some relative I'd never even heard of to go to the funeral home, I could only hope that she'd spill the free styrofoam cup of coffee she'd gotten in the motel lobby on herself and have to dash into a department store on the way to the funeral. No store along the 15 mile stretch of highway between the motel and the funeral home would have anything as outrageous as her current ensemble. Of course there was no such luck for me, and when we met my father in the funeral home parking lot, my mother was just as technicolor and stain-free as before. My father's face was showing the dread of the imminent disdainsful he would receive from every member of my mother's family. Apparently he was too busy trying to think of ways not to offend them to realize that my mother was doing her best impression of a box of crayons and would distract all attention from his only slightly irritating Yankee presence.

We received our fair share of snide looks, but no one was so audacious as to say anything other than "Your poor grandmother," or "It must be so hard for you all," at the funeral itself. We sang the last chorus of "Amazing Grace" and I silently screamed my thanks to God that we'd survived as we slowly filed out of the funeral home to the parking lot. It wasn't until we headed onto the highway, turning the opposite direction from our hotel, that I realized my mother intended to go to the pre-crematory family gathering at her parents' house as well.

I didn't even know how to begin what would certainly be a little attempt at dissuading her from what seemed to be a terribly sadistic endeavor. As the powers that she had already proven themselves to tormentors by failing to deliver the mechanical malfunction that would've grounded our plane in Chicago, I knew better than to hope for a miracle. I couldn't summon the energy for a last ditch plea to my mother for mercy on myself and her suffering family members, so I silently resolved to guard the liquor cabinet with my life in hopes that keeping my mother sober would temper any fiancée down to a minimum. I briefly considered aiding her in consuming enough to pass out, but was afraid of an even more garish repeat of the scene of which I'd witnessed the horrific enough aftermath.

Things actually went fairly well for the first hour or so, in that we weren't screamed at or forcibly removed from the premises. My liquor cabinet post conveniently provided a clean view of the dining room and most of the living room and since my mother refused to enter the glass enclosed sun porch, citing a flea-infestation and overpowering odor of urine courtesy of her father's pair of hunting dogs, I figured I could stay there as long as necessary to keep an eye on the situation. My father had never been sure whether to make an attempt at winning my grandmother's approval or simply avoid her and had wavered between the two since marrying my mother, alternately bombarding her with copious compliments on her decorating and cooking, neither of which she'd actually done herself, and maintaining an uncomfortable but relieving silence following the obligatory hellos and how are yous. Given the mourning and counseling of this particular occasion, he had elected to utter a few respects regarding the father-in-law of whom he had been nothing less than terrified and promptly join me in my secluded corner. He seemed less interested in watching the carriage than I was, but was happy to sit unmoved and silently sip the brandy I'd allowed him to sneak.

I was about to resign my post, convinced that if we'd made it that far we were sure to escape unscathed when I glanced up from the 25 year-old crow's feet I'd found to see my mother actually initiating a conversation with her sister-in-law Teresa Marie. Teresa Marie wasn't a blood relative to my grandparents, not that anyone could tell from the way they spoke of her. She had replaced my mother in my grandfather's eyes, quickly usurping the role of eldest daughter left empty by my parents' marriage. I despised her, though she'd never done anything to directly affect me. For a while I thought it was her bouffant hairstyle or the fact that she dressed her three daughters in matching dresses (black floral with grey ribbons for the funerals), but at the moment, it was sufficiently loathsome that she had stowed herself across a chaise lounge in a swoon of bereavement, like any good Southern woman would, and was being fawned over by my other equally irritating aunts.

My mother never could resist a prime opportunity to provoke her dim-witted sister-in-law into a fit of good Southern drama. Teresa Marie knew enough of my mother to understand that anything coming out of her mouth was sure to be vexing, but my mother was much too clever to resort to anything blatant enough for Teresa Marie to see through and so the duft woman was repeatedly traumatized for my mother's amusement. I knew I should intervene, fake a seizure or cry out that Grant's army was closing in, but some twisted part of myself, no doubt inherited from my mother, told me that this could well be the most entertaining part of our entire trip.

I eased up next to the chaise on the edge of which my mother had now perched herself and pretended to examine some photos of my grandfather's prized hunting mongrels.

"You know," my mother cooed in a voice so sickly sweet I could practically feel the gooey syrup oozing over the room, "The happiest memories I have of our family are from the day you and Roy got married. It was so wonderful to have everyone together." Teresa Marie loved nothing more than to hear people talk about her wedding, a true Southern affair with white wicker furniture, magnolia bouquet and horse-drawn carriage for her magnificent arrival. My mother had spent the entire day whispering remarks regarding the maid of honor's resemblance to a twinkle, father of the bride's career as a truck driver, and the like into my five-year-old ears. Bringing up what Teresa Marie considered the crowning moment of her life was a sure indication of an insult of enormous proportions to come in the all-too-near future. My mother always lulled her prey into a false sense of security before attacking.

"It's a shame you won't be able to make it to Christmas this year. I had so hoped to have the whole family together again." My mother was putting on her most sympathetic voice. She and I both knew that if anyone would be absent from the family yiuletide festivities, it would be the Shermans (we'd only been making about one family gathering per five years for as long as I could remember), but Teresa Marie was panicked.

"What? Of course we'll be here for Christmas. We only live down the road. Why wouldn't we be here?"

"Oh, I thought Roy had told you. Mae has decided that she can't bear Christmas here without Lyle." My mother always used her parents' first names. "Cousin Mary Love's offered to have us all to her and Gene's house in Mobile, and with what your terrible allergies and their cats, I knew you wouldn't be able to bear it. I would offer to have everyone up to Chicago, but its just so far, and with the kind of winter we're expecting, I don't think anyone would be able to make it." Teresa Marie's self-appointed role as director of West family Christmas was the only thing she emphasized more than her sensitivity to eat dander. Whether it was a legitimate allergy or something Teresa Marie had invested didn't matter. She'd built it up to such proportions that to go back on it now would constitute an admission of exaggeration too unbearable to come. My mother had chosen her weapons well.

"Mary Love knows I'm allergic! How could she! And Mother's agreed!" Teresa Marie was on the verge of the conniption to end all conniptions. "Roy, Roy, have you heard this? Its terrible!" Teresa Marie was frantically waving her husband over to her. Roy was obsessive-compulsive and couldn't bear to have people in his house, moving all his photos and magazines ever so slightly as they picked them up. It would never do for Christmas to be at their house. Mary Love's was the only option that didn't involve cramming 27 people into a double-wide trailer.

I thought we were definitely done for, sure to be sent away and told never to return for causing such a racket in the wake of the family patriarchy's death. Of course Roy had no idea what his wife was jabbering on about in such a state since my mother had fabricated the whole idea only minutes before. He weakly attempted to calm the now hysterical Teresa Marie, telling her he'd "get to the bottom of it" and was sure that it was all "just a big misunderstanding." It was a misunderstanding all right, a misunderstanding of just how devious my mother could be when she wanted to. If Teresa Marie had thought about it for a nanosecond, she'd have realized that my grandmother never would have suggested anything so absurd as relocating Christmas on account of her husband's death. She was tougher than a junkyard dog and was as unphased by her husband's death as my mother was, though she didn't flaunt it.

Teresa Marie grabbed a passing kid and sent him to retrieve Mary Love. I slipped around the corner into the dining room and nabbed the little snout-nose before he could complete his task, side-tracking him with the tray of lemon chess bars on the mourner's smorgasbord. Mary Love's involvement would only complicate the matter. After what I deemed an appropriate amount of time, I walked back to the scene. Mary Love, I announced, was busy breast-feeding, and had said that she was "terribly sorry, but there just weren't any other options. Grandma Mae couldn't be expected to host so soon after Lyle's death." The flash in my mother's eyes revealed her excitement that I'd finally joined her in the manipulation of the family's antics for the sake of amusement. Though she was obviously surprised by my comportism, she didn't lose her composure for a second.

When I was a girl, Lyle drowned a litter of unwanted kittens in the pond. I'm sure Mary Love's tabbies wouldn't struggle much. They're so old and scrappy anyway. We wouldn't even have to tramp out to the pond. We could just use the bathtub and then have the whole house steam-cleaned. You'd never know there had been cats there at all." My mother's dry sarcasm was beyond Teresa Marie who was horrified at the thought and added projectile tears to her agitated blubbing. Aunts, uncles and cousins of various sizes and intelligence levels began to crowd around the upset woman, all apparently of the opinion that Teresa Marie, as her father-in-law's
favorite, was feeling the pangs of his death more than anyone else. Her crying had brought her near hyperventilation and prevented her from explaining the real cause of her distress so the aunts patted her and said "there there, dear" while the uncles looked uncomfortable with the frivolous emotion and the cousins giggled. Teresa Marie's performance had drawn so many spectators that even the widowed matron herself marched in to see what it was that had drawn a bigger crowd than the Grand Ole Opry.

"Teresa Marie, you stop that this instant," she shrilly commanded, placing herself directly in front of her target.

Teresa Marie could no longer contain herself and throwing her arms around her mother-in-law's knees like a child cried out, "Oh Mother, please, please don't make us go somewhere else for Christmas! I'll plan everything! You won't have to lift a finger and we'll have so much fun and hymns-singing and food and present-opening you won't even notice Daddy's gone!"

My grandmother was quite taken aback. Having raised her own children never to so much ridiculous amounts of emotion, she was at first too shocked by Teresa Marie's state to notice that it was a day four and a half months in the future that had gotten her there rather than the recent death of the head of the family.

"Christmas? Don't be silly, child. Why would I do such a thing?"

Teresa Marie was so relieved that she couldn't even explain why she'd thought such an atrocity could be committed against her. She blubbered her profuse thanks to my grandmother as the old woman strode off down the hallway. The crowd began to disperse, the entertainment of Teresa Marie's histrionics having ended.

I wasn't sure whether we'd gotten away with our little orchestration or not. My mother seemed content with her mischief and quietly removed herself to another part of the house. I returned to the liquor cabinet to find my father, brandy in hand, glancing over the crossword I'd left, completely unaware of the drama that had been enacted in the next room. The tragedy which had sent Teresa Marie into spasms of crying, wailing, and strained breathing seemed to have passed completely out of her little bird-brained head quickly. Within five minutes of the loss of her audience she was stuffing her face with devil's eggs while telling another crazy aunt about the smoking she was planning for her daughters' fall piano recital dresses. Blissfully returned to her position as high mistress of Christmas, she was too giddy even to prolong her mourning for her poor deceased father-in-law.

My mother had disappeared, but I was no longer worried about her behavior. I knew she'd had her fun, and wouldn't bother trying to stir up anything else. I went back to my attempts at the antique crossword and waited for her return. Sure enough, she sidled up next to me a few minutes later looking bored and ready for a drink. It was getting to be that time of day.

"I told Mae we have to get you back to your job and get our tickets pushed up to the 10:30 flight tonight."

My mother and I both knew, and Mae probably would've realized too, if she cared, that the poor little nerds at the camp couldn't have done fine without me all summer and certainly didn't need me back anytime soon, but we were all more comfortable with the lie. I nudged my father, nodded toward the door, and the three of us proceeded out, my mother loudly bidding farewell to the house at large as she walked, smiling sweetly at Teresa Marie as she announced that she simply couldn't wait to see everyone again at Christmas, when circumstances would be so much more pleasant.

We had six hours before our flight, plenty of time to hang around the motel before driving back to Memphis in the car my father had rented, but my mother waltzed in, picked up her bag, which she had kept packed throughout our stay, and headed straight back to the car.

"I'm not staying here for three hours when there's a perfectly good airport bar waiting for me in Memphis," she said, putting her bag in the trunk and motioning to me to bring mine out. "Well, come on. Don't think I won't leave you here with the loonies."

On the drive to Memphis my mother raved in her abuse of Teresa Marie, replaying the entire encounter, complete with moans and anguish looks. I watched the kudzu draped trees fall away from the road as we neared the airport knowing there was no way we'd be back for Christmas.

-Caroline Cobb
In the Museum

The first time, we took a trip to Nagasaki; as our train shot through the hills we caught fogged glimpses of the emerald countryside.

In the museum, I stood behind two old women who wept in front of a lump of melted glass into which a human hand had been seared at impact.

Staring at the powdered ghosts – bones in bubbled glass – I noticed the women were very small.

It rained, as we left the museum, and my sister bought a see-through plastic umbrella. We held hands underneath it as we walked, our stork-like legs speckled and itching with raindrops.

In Peace Park we shivered amidst the colorful strings of paper cranes, wilting in the rain. Our guide explained that we were at the place of impact, and left us standing, while she waited in the car.

The next year, we took the bullet train to Hiroshima, ears popping as we lazily watched our reflections in the blackened windows.

I remember the final exhibit: real radiation sickness tumor tissue suspended in three glass jars, backlit in blue, on a solitary shelf in a large white room, alone, except for the guest book.

-Magali Armillas-Tiseyra
Contributors’ Notes

Magali Armillas-Tiseyra is currently accepting suggestions for an alternate, more pronounceable, last name.

Dave Backer likes writing backwordsdrowckab gnitirw sekil rekoAm evaD.

Seza Bali loves photography and hopes that in 10 years she will be living in London and making a lot of money from this beautiful art.

Caroline Cobb: I’m a senior with no specific background and no specific future. Someday I hope to extract myself from my thought-encrusted room and do everything.

Erin Gamble is a junior from town, state. She loves to (verb). She thoroughly enjoys the invigorating taste of hot sauce, as well as the words “thoroughly” and “invigorating”. When she grows up she wants to be an astronaut.

Sam Goldblatt is a Dramatic Literature major and music minor. Most (68%) GW Students write 0-4 poems when they party.

Laura Hoffman is a junior from Milford, CT, majoring in Public Health. Despite anything you may have read here today, she still greatly enjoys baseball and, contrary to any vicious rumor that may be circulating, she does not like certain teams solely because of the colors of their uniform.

Chelsea Jennings is jumping on Jesse’s jazz bus and moving somewhere colder for the winter.

A painting by Anne Ketterer can be found on page 19.

Meghan Shea’s self-portrait can be found on page 5.

Ross Smirnoff’s paintings can be found on pages 6 and 24.

Born and raised in Bangladesh, Farah Sattar is probably the only girl from her country who is not a Computer Science, Business or Pre-med major. She is an Art major, and this publication will play a critical role in freeing her from the “auntes” back home constantly asking if she is planning on going to Harvard Law after graduation.

Bridget Stankiewicz’s photography can be found on page 22.