

The Metropolitan



Metropolitan Color Photograph Derek Kordash

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2007

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by Students
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“Power is no sufficient evidence of truth.”

Samuel Johnson

The Metropolitan 2007

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects Metro writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://commhum.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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Printed in Omaha, Nebraska by Barnhart Press
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2007 Writing Awards

For her essay “New Year’s Day,” Angel Dewaele is the winner of The Metropolitan 2007 Prize for Student Writing, a 12-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Daniel Otto, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for his poem “How to Make a Soup Sandwich.” The second runner-up, Tara Novak, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her essay “Sun in the Sandhills.”

New Year’s Day *Angel Dewaele*

What am I going to do? What is it doing here? What am I going to do?

I couldn’t move. My feet refused my commands (turn around, get out, leave). I had just gotten home and come into the kitchen to check my messages, and now my panic filled the room. A half-full bottle of warm, honey-colored liquid had my complete attention. It screamed at me to pick it up. I had no choice but to stay. I belonged to it.

Damn. I love whiskey. Damn.

Why is it even here, in my own apartment? Shit. I had somehow managed to avoid booze for the last six months. Okay, maybe I had cruised the cold medicine aisle for Nyquil even though I didn’t have a cough, stuffy head or fever to treat, but, still, I hadn’t taken a drink since summer. Oh, that’s right. Chuck’s brother, Brent, is in town for the holidays. They like to have a few drinks and get a little loopy when they get together. This must be the leftover booze from last night. Leftover booze. That’s funny.

I grabbed the bottle from the top of the fridge just to shut it up. The weight of the whiskey bottle felt good in my hand. It felt right, like home. Like I could breathe again.

The kitchen faded around me: the new linoleum marred by an errant Fourth of July sparkler lit inside last year, the stained glass piece that Jodi made hanging in the window, glowing blue with the midmorning sun, the photo of Brent donning a sleazy pencil-thin mustache he grew specially for his graduation on the refrigerator. Images from my non-using life raced through my mind: my friends, my girlfriend, my nieces, my cats. I saw everything I value, everything I love. Everything that is me. I instinctively knew I would lose my life, piece by piece, if I took even one drink.

I unscrewed the cap.

The aroma broke free and stung my senses. I salivated. No glass for me. I had spent a night a few summers before teaching myself to drink whiskey straight from the bottle without so

much as a wince. Hey, a girl's gotta have goals. I earned this badge of a badass, and I wasn't going to puss out now. I raised the bottle to my mouth.

I remembered humiliation after humiliation: vomiting, ditching friends, waking next to "what's your name again?" getting pulled over, wrecking my car, "coming to" under a tree in the park. A lot can happen to a girl when she is a blackout drunk. Christ. The problem with blackouts is that they don't black out enough.

Damn. Damn. Damn. I don't want that. I hated that. My life was miserable. All of the time. Except, that is, for the first half hour of drinking. That was really the only time I felt like I could live in my own skin. One half of one hour. Thirty minutes of bliss. It came after I got the booze and before I lost any control of what I was saying, what I was doing, who I was doing.

But whiskey (beer, tequila) tastes so good. And promises so much. It promises to give me relief, peace, calm. It promises to give me confidence, self-esteem. It promises me the ability to interact with people without wanting to disappear. It promises me that I will belong somewhere. It promises to rewrite my past and give me the future of backyard barbecues, a loving family, a successful career. And that I will become 5'8", blonde and skinny, attractive.

It lies.

I'm not one to hold grudges, though. I absolutely believe in giving second (third, twentieth, sixty-seventh) chances.

This time will be different. This time I will be able to handle it.

I am such a sucker.

I think of putting my tongue just inside the bottle opening. Just touching my tongue to the rim, just getting a taste. I won't take a real drink. I just want to have some contact, any contact.

Standing in my kitchen, whiskey bottle in hand, I had an awareness of how pitiful this is, how completely ridiculous sticking my tongue in a bottle would look to anyone watching this little drama. Normal people don't stick their tongues in liquor bottles. Normal people don't *want* to stick their tongues in liquor bottles. I am pretty sure of that. Don't recall seeing

Chuck's mother or father (or brother or sister or brother-in-law or Chuck for that matter) playing tongue tug-of-war with the Merlot at Christmas. And while his family grooves to its own song of dysfunction (whose doesn't?) they are pretty darn normal, pencil-thin mustaches and all. Family, church, work and school. Upstanding Midwestern citizens. Not an arrest among them.

I think I might be having a problem here.

I walked the three steps from the refrigerator to the table in my small kitchen and placed the bottle on the vintage chrome and laminate table top. Four gray fleur-de-lis reached, one from each corner, toward the center of the table, breaking the landscape of the gray and yellow speckling.

Shaking my hands, I tried to lose the sensation of the whiskey bottle from my grip. I reached for the phone, checking my messages, a forgotten task from my to-do list. I dialed Patty's number. I knew Patty was in AA, and I figured she might have an idea of how I could not drink this whiskey right now. *Hey, Patty, got a coupla questions for ya. When is the best time to plant tulip bulbs, what's the first step in retiling the shower, and, say, you got any tips on how I might not have to take a drink of this here whiskey?*

I wanted some sort of tip, a helpful hint. I needed a Heloise of Hooch. *Try hiding the liquor from yourself. Put it in the linen closet behind the extra cotton balls and the guest towels.* Or this one, sent in by a reader in Ohio: *I turn the television and/or radio up REALLY loud, disturb the neighbors to drown out the demands of the booze, and in a manic fit, alphabetize the M & M's.* Or, how about this: *Go shopping, get something to eat, start smoking, have sex. Gamble. Punch a wall. Or cut. How about cutting? That'll take the edge off.*

It would never occur to me to throw the alcohol away. That would be wasteful.

"Hey, Patty, whatcha doin'?" I tried to sound chill.

"Hi honey! Happy New Year!" Oh yeah. I forgot. "Just setting up my new TV. Alex is trying to figure out the remote. What are you doing?"

"Um, I'm having a problem."

"What's up, sweetie?" Her tone was light and cheery. Ugh.

“Um, I came home and was minding my own business and then all of the sudden I saw some whiskey and now I want to drink it but I can’t and I don’t know how to not drink it when it’s right here and I don’t know what to do.” Breathe.

“Listen, why don’t I come over?” I cringed at the thought of her coming over.

“Um, oh..kayyy.” I didn’t want to be rude.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.” Shit. I didn’t want this to be a big deal or anything. Jeez.

I paced my living room, ineffectively tidying (pick up, put down. pick up, put down) random clutter, trying to keep busy until Patty arrived. I was both relieved that she was coming to help and disappointed. Now I probably wouldn’t drink since she was coming over. What was I thinking asking for help? Nuts.

“So where is it?” She was at the door. Man, she got here fast. She looked like she had been having brunch at the country club or had just come from a refreshing massage or playing tennis. Not a care in the world. Bitch.

“In the kitchen.”

“Go get it.”

“You want the whiskey?” Uh-oh, is she falling off the wagon? I don’t know about these AA types handling booze. I hesitated.

“Go get it.” Dang. Bossy. I walked to the kitchen as Patty sat down on my loveseat, the arms of the sofa shredded by my two cats.

I gave Patty the bottle. She put it next to her purse on the floor. I sat next to her on the loveseat.

“Patty, you can’t take that. It’s not mine.”

“Whose is it?” The bottle remained by her purse.

“Chuck’s.” Listen, lady, hand it back.

“He can have it back. All he has to do is call me and I’ll bring it to him.” Well, that’s ridiculous. How am I going to explain that? *Yeah, Chuck, uh, listen. I know you had a bottle of whiskey here at the apartment, but I spazzed out and couldn’t handle being around it so Patty came over and I had to give it to her. No, really, it’s not embarrassing at all.* Real smooth, Angel. French silk pie. Shit.

“So what’s the problem?” She was so nonchalant. Wasn’t the world caving in?

“I want to drink that whiskey.”

“So, go ahead.”

I wasn’t expecting that. Hmm. Maybe these alcoholics weren’t so bad after all. “But I can’t.” If I could, I would and we wouldn’t be sitting here now would we?

“Why not?”

How to put this? “Well, horrible things happen when I drink.” I tried to be specific and clear. I sounded like a kindergarten teacher breaking down, step by step, how the caterpillar turns into a butterfly. *First, the caterpillar eats and eats and eats. Then he spins a cocoon. A chrysalis is formed. Can you say chrysalis, kids? Kevin, stop picking your nose.* “I can’t help it. I will drink, get drunk, go to a bar, get drunker, probably vomit, most likely black out, and then you can pretty much guarantee I will make out with a stranger. Kari will then break up with me, and I’ll end up alone and drunk and in an alley somewhere. I really don’t want that.” Man, that seems grim.

Maybe I am being too hard on myself. Maybe I am being an alarmist. The sky may not be falling, Chicken Little. I switched tactics and attempted to negotiate. “Do you think I could drink just a little bit and it would be okay? You know, just one drink? Is that possible? Like maybe things wouldn’t be as bad as before?” There has got to be a way to make this work. I didn’t know how, but maybe Patty would. Who would know better than an alcoholic, someone versed on problem drinking who could plainly see that I did not qualify? I got excited. Yes! This is it. History doesn’t have to repeat itself.

Instead of telling me sure, go ahead, don’t see any reason why not, you probably don’t have a problem, she pulled a book out of her purse. Oh, brother. Here comes her pitch. Sister, I gave at the office.

I refrained from rolling my eyes, assumed a serious expression (furrowed brow, pursed lips) and leaned in, manufacturing interest in what she was about to read. I mean, she did come over and all.

Many who are alcoholics are not going to believe they are in

that class. By every form of self-deception and experimentation they will try to prove themselves exceptions to the rule, therefore, non-alcoholic. Most of us believed if we remained sober for a long stretch, we could thereafter drink normally. Commencing to drink after a period of sobriety, we are in a short time as bad as ever. We have seen the truth demonstrated again and again: "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." We do not like to pronounce any individual as alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly. Try it more than once. It will not take long for you to decide, if you are honest with yourself about it.

Controlled drinking? What the hell is that? I can't do that. I knew I could not abruptly stop once I had started drinking. I started to panic again. What does this mean? Wait. This can't be right. My mind fogged. I don't want to be an alcoholic. I can't be an alcoholic. Shit. Stupid whiskey. Stupid book.

"Patty, I don't want to be an alcoholic." I don't want that to be me.

"Maybe you're not. Go try to drink." Wasn't she listening? Bad things happen when I drink.

"But I can't. I can't start drinking and stop. I can't." This isn't happening. I don't want that book to apply to me. That book is for alcoholics. I don't want to be an alcoholic.

"Honey, why don't you come with me to my Saturday morning ladies' meeting?" Her voice was kind, gentle. "There will be people there you can talk to and maybe ask some questions." A meeting? How is that going to help? I can't drink, and I can't *not* drink, and Patty wants me to go to a meeting? I am so screwed.

"A meeting?" I tried to buy some time to think of an excuse as to why I should not go with her. This was a bad idea, calling her. I am not ready for this. "I..."

"Why don't I pick you up at 9:30?" Boy, she is good. Crafty.

I did not want to go to a 12-step meeting. Not at all interested in communing with strangers about drinking. La la la, touchy feely. Talk about lame. Man. I was stuck. Can't drink without losing my underwear, can't not drink without help. I agreed to go with her. Shit.

How to Make a Soup Sandwich (a list of things I love about Iraq)

Daniel Otto

The smell of camel dung, trash burning, diesel and oil.
Cordite and sulfur that burns your nostrils
From inky, blue clouds that quickly pass away.
The wails and cries on a lousy megaphone
Calling the faithful to prayer
While I wash my hands with dirty water.
Blood spilled on fine, marble tiles, the smell of iodine.
A mother with no face, moans for a baby
She hears crying but cannot see,
Will never again see.
The rhythmic beating of rotor blades,
Metal steeds with heaven or hell on board.
The hollow sound of mortar tubes, tha-thump.
The silence and fear that follows, waiting.
The smell of curry in the market,
Food you'll regret eating and tea that's too sweet.
Haggling with a child over pirated French smut
For greenbacks to feed his family.
Crowded, pockmarked highways.
The Fiats and BMW's, and my sights
Leveled on their windshields.
My child's laughter a world away,
Her first steps unseen.
Explosions and death.
Men at their worst and men at their finest.
The bagpipes.
A roll-call ending in silence.
Mourning, my brothers and sisters
And knowing we will never be better
Than at this moment,
And tears when I hear the bagpipes play
A dirge for the warrior caste.

Sun in the Sandhills

Tara Novak

It was in August of 1987, in the oppressive heat of the Western Nebraska sun, that I fell in love for the first time. It was love complete and blinding, and it knocked me off my feet. Only thing is, I was just seven. Years later, I remembered the incident and had the vocabulary and context to understand what had happened. But then, in the shimmering heat waves of the late summer days, I only knew that the stories that filled my girlish imagination had suddenly, inexplicably, come alive for me.

Other kids went to Disney Land or to Boston or Miami or even Paris for vacation. My family went for one week to Chadron State Park. All five of us sisters and my parents piled into our 1985 silver Toyota van—arms and backpacks loaded with books and dolls, blank paper, crayons and decks of cards for the journey—and away we went. Eight hours and many renditions of “Home on the Range,” “My Favorite Things,” and “White Christmas” later, we arrived at our little cabin in the woods.

The world is crisscrossed with mountains—purple, majestic and remote. There are oceans, deep and cold and bracing. Cities zoom and zip with excitement, vigor and bright lights. Western Nebraska has none of these glamorous beauties to offer. Still, there is no place like Chadron. The wind there whistles through the tops of the white pines, a continuous mad organist playing for no one. The scent of the tall conifer trees mixes with the heady aroma of sweetgrass, with the dry taste of dust kicked up by the hooves of horses and herds of cattle, with the salty earth of the sandhills and the loam and granite and cool lichen of the bluffs. It is the smell of vast potential. It is the smell of thousands of years of human history, undocumented and unrecorded. It is the smell of life.

That first night at Chadron, I stood with my family on the top of Lookout Point. In my towheaded pigtails, clasping tightly my brown bear Honey, I stood on the edge of the cliff, breathing in the sharply carbonized air from the lightning storm crackling haphazardly across the horizon. From that precipice, the entire world made sense.

Eager to explore my new surroundings, the next morning I threw on my sneakers and hollered to my mother as I bolted out the door, “Mom! I’m going down to the Trading Post. Be back for lunch!”

My sisters followed my madcap dash through the underbrush and overgrown trails to the main road. I didn’t know the route, but had very seriously studied a map in the car the day before and was certain I would find the way. My diligence paid off: there was the Trading Post ahead of me. I knew from reading about Chadron State Park before leaving Omaha that the Trading Post was the center of all State Park activities—informational movies about the area, jeep and horse rides through the bluffs, ceramics, games of archery, horseshoes, dominoes. I raced into the building, slowing momentarily to ask a bottle-blond college-aged girl behind a counter if there was anyone working.

“Yeah,” she answered chomping her gum, “Out the side door and in the field...”

I tore out of the building and stopped. There he was. My Mountain Man. I had never seen anyone or anything like him. My little pioneer heart beat faster in its cage. He was tall and wearing handmade animal skin clothing. He had dark, slightly wavy hair and a heavy, full beard. I crossed the browned prairie grass and approached him. He looked down from his height into my painfully sincere eyes. I needed more than anything for this man to be genuine.

“Well, hello. I’m tanning this buffalo hide. Would you like me to show you how?”

That began one of the most magical weeks of my life. My Buffalo Bill told me how he had hunted and killed the buffalo with an arrow, which he had made himself. He taught me about Native American respect for animals, about the idea that the animal had sacrificed its life for the survival of its hunter, and, because of that, the importance of using every part. Together, we scraped out the hide with the bones; I held the wet, coagulated gray mass of bison brains in my hands as he used them to tan the skin. Later that morning, my mother and father arrived, and Bill showed us how to start a fire using nothing but charred cloth

and flint. Over the week, he spent hours with my sisters and me, patiently explaining how to straighten feathers on arrows, how to set up and live in a tipi through the harsh Nebraska winters, how to blaze trails and shoe horses and build proper fires. One night, when it was pouring rain, Buffalo Bill and two other State Park employees sat with my family at the Trading Post, laughing and playing dominoes until long past my bedtime.

Of course, there were moments spent beyond the Trading Post that first August in Chadron. I visited the corrals and fed the horses each day. I bravely tromped off on my own, pretending to discover the land and invent trails. My sisters and I found a family of turtles in the little pond, adopted them for the week, and were righteously shocked when my mother wouldn't let us haul them in the van the whole way back to Omaha.

When my family returned to Chadron the next year, Buffalo Bill was gone. That summer the forest fires ravaged all of Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, and he had gone off to fight the fires. Another man was working in his place. I still went to the Trading Post to learn about the Wild West I loved, but the deep thrill was gone.

I have since wondered where Buffalo Bill eventually wandered after the fires. Two years ago, my parents and sisters decided it would be a brilliant idea to go on an all-family trip to Chadron again. This time, with two vans, two parents, five sisters, three husbands, a niece, a nephew, a guitar, and a violin, it much more resembled a parade or a circus than a vacation. In one stolen moment of silence, my Dad and I went jogging together in the velvet dusk and pine-sweet air. As we passed the Trading Post, I hesitantly brought up the subject to my father...

"Um...Dad...do you remember a guy...he worked at the trading post our first summer here?"

He remembered. How could he have forgotten? We reminisced warmly of that week in 1987. Apparently I was not the only person who had found Buffalo Bill's courage and dedication to his lifestyle appealing and refreshing.

When I talked about how much this Mountain Man had influenced my young imagination and thoughts on life and the environment, how he had made history come alive for me, my

Dad—uncharacteristically—opened up and told a story I had never heard. He talked of a traveling musician passing through the Boy's Home where he lived as a child. When the road-weary man strummed the first chord on his beat-up acoustic guitar, my Dad's world shifted. He knew in that instant that he had to be a guitarist.

Love is a funny thing. Buffalo Bill probably never had any idea how much one little blonde girl adored and idealized him. It doesn't really matter. He offered something passionate and tangible—and glitteringly alive—in direct contrast to the quiet death of my suburban childhood. His existence was exotic, completely off the grid, irrational by all modern standards. There was a romance to it all that resonated through and through my being, and still does to this day.

I only wish I knew his real name.

Colorism

Nicole Upchurch

I was kid when I came back to black
From livin' across the pond to St. Louis.

I did a stint in DC for a couple a months.
That wasn't black yet.

Had no idea
What my real world was back then.
Had all kinds of friends
Black, Puerto Rican, White, Hawaiian.

Couldn't jump double dutch
Didn't know Rockin' Robin
"You talk like a white girl."

Where I had been
Being dark skinned wasn't a bad thing.
Gapped teeth made me different.

When I came back to black
I was ugly.
They called me an Oreo,
Black on the outside,
White on the inside.
They didn't want me as a friend.
Said "she thank she better than us."

The white girls took me in
Never made me feel bad.
I was just a nice kid to them.

I tried comin' back to black,
But they wouldn't let me in
And to think these are the people I call 'us'.

Tolerance and Community

Angel Dewaele

I don't care what they do behind closed doors, but why do they insist on flaunting it? I mean, it's on television, in the movies, out in public. Why can't they just be who they are and keep it quiet? I decided to find out what makes these people tick. What's it like to be pitching (or catching) for that team? I know one personally, so I decided to ask.

Mark met me in a bar downtown. He looked around, nervously scanning the room. He was out of his element. He looked normal enough, though, even kinda hunky. He's a firefighter, and you know how everyone feels about those guys. He could probably pass. I was worried that people might think I was one since I was with him, but it's not like you could really tell just by looking. I chose a table near the entrance, or exit, I suppose, in case this didn't go so well and either of us had to make a quick getaway.

Men and women enjoying after-work camaraderie laughed around us, tables filled with appetizer and drink specials. I had so many questions. When did he first realize it? Is it a phase? Do his parents know? Although it was happy hour, Mark didn't seem happy at all. His jaw was set. He sat with his back straight and kept looking over his shoulder. I offered to buy him a drink, maybe take the edge off. What do they like to drink, anyway? This wasn't going to get any easier as we sat there, so I decided to dive right in. "Mark, just how did you become a heterosexual?"

He looked at me sideways, not knowing what to make of such a question, and answered that he has always been that way. "What kind of answer is that? Are you straight because you have a fear of others of the same sex? Maybe you just haven't found the right guy yet." Mark twisted his face in disgust. Was it the suggestion of having a same sex partner or the fact that I would actually ask him to explain his sexuality?

I continued. "Just what *do* men and women do in bed together? I mean, how can they truly know how to please each other, being so anatomically different? And why do heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into their lifestyle?" Mark rolled

his eyes, not amused. He has a daughter in pre-school, so I thought it appropriate to ask if he considered it safe to expose his kids to heterosexual teachers considering the disproportionate majority of child molesters are straight (Yetman). Oddly, he didn't think it unsafe at all. That's a shame. He really should be more on top of that sort of thing. While we are at it, what about all those "special" rights heterosexuals have, like the right to get married, the right to adopt children, the right to spousal benefits, the right to visit partners in the hospital, rights of survivorship, the right to protection from discrimination in work environments, housing, and public institutions? I mean really. Who do they think they are? All this based on who they sleep with?

Okay, okay, you get the point. Mark and I have been friends for a couple of years, and he knows I'm gay. What he doesn't know, though, is that I get asked these same questions, in earnest, by the straight community without hesitation or a sense of impropriety. He was even amused having these questions posed to him. And while the questions may seem silly to him, as they should, they hurt and anger me. These questions speak volumes about the division we have in our community. I can't feel part of a community that seeks a reason for, not an understanding of, who I am. The implication is that if there is a reason, maybe there is a cure.

Mark doesn't experience this. He is a middle-class, straight, white male. He belongs to his community as a neighbor, a worker, a father, and a husband. No one would ask him to justify his life or try to "cure" him. I work; I own a house. I have had a partner the same length of time that Mark has had a wife. I live in the same city as Mark, but I am denied the benefits of community, from getting married and sharing insurance to holding hands at the zoo without fear for our safety. Mark cannot understand this and tends to minimize and deny my experience. He has no point of reference. He is able to walk into the grocery store, the video store, the bank, holding hands with his wife, and no one blinks an eye. I can't imagine what it must be like to have that level of assimilation. When I hold hands with my partner, it is always with the awareness that we could get

attacked. If we only receive stares and snickers, we are relieved—relieved that we weren't brutalized, that we were *tolerated*. But, to have community, tolerance is not acceptable. The paradox of practicing "tolerance" is that instead of resolving problems that stem from difference, it actually perpetuates intolerance and inequality.

We tolerate things that are unpleasant: the heat, a boring lecture, a headache. These are things we would rather do without, but are unavoidable. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, tolerance means that we are "living together with respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference" ("What is Tolerance?"). I applaud the spirit of this message; however, there is a problem. The word "tolerate" implies an ability to punish and a conscious decision not to. Since the group in power (in this case, the heterosexual community) is encouraged to practice tolerance, they then have the power to *not* tolerate. It's as though they have their hands around our necks and are choosing not to squeeze. We are always aware of the hands, able to crush. We are at their mercy, therefore, unequal. We are *tolerated* because we are different, and we are *unequal* because we are tolerated. Without equality, we cannot have community, but we need differences for our communities to thrive.

Not everyone in a community needs to be the same. Equality is not about homogenization. We can have difference in our communities and not have discrimination. Difference can be productive, as long as those differences are equally regarded. A baker is different from a mechanic, yet both are viable members of the community. We don't judge one as less than the other. We are dependent upon their respective contributions to the community; a community of all mechanics would not be sustainable. A community is interdependent. If we stop only at tolerance of our neighbors, the scales remain unbalanced and we are not maximizing the potential for a strong community. We are actually increasing the potential for discord. If a group is denied their rights, they will fight for them. It is in our best interest to

embrace those different from ourselves, if not for humanitarian reasons, then only for a little peace and quiet.

Since tolerance is contingent upon separation, the alternative to tolerance is engagement. Respect, not tolerance, should be taught in order to close the chasm that divides us. We need to radically accept that our way is not The Only Way and actively approach those who are different from us. Education and experience will lead to equality. With equality, we can have community.

In order to obtain partnership in my community, I will continue to challenge the Marks of the world and remain open about my sexuality until it is no longer an issue. I will continue to educate others. I will demand inclusion and respect until I am able to enjoy the same benefits straight people get for paying the same taxes and living in this country. But the onus does not rest solely on me. It is imperative that those whose “lifestyles” are different from mine also embrace these principles until gays are no longer the shadow members of community.

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Poor Relations

Zedeka Poindexter

Today is the funeral for one of the Strong daughters.

Years ago one moved south and labored though packing houses
and inner cities.

The other stayed near family and provided her children every luxury.

Like the last funeral we

Embrace delicately

Cry silently

Separate from habit.

Maybe it takes being the poor relation to notice this.

We are the folks who put water in the ketchup bottle

Know exactly how many miles are left after the fuel gauge hits
empty

And have been close enough to shit to recognize the look people
toss its direction

In the land of the city cousins

The rules of politeness just don't work the same.

This sister we bury today died at home

Blood sugar out of control

Gangrene in the wound her well-bred babies could not bring
themselves to dress

And we are the poor relations

Who grieve silently enough not to embarrass the city folks

Then leave before the battle royal over property, possessions and
insurance money.

We may be broke as the Ten Commandments

But down here in the sticks

We survive through each other.

When one of us is paid

We all eat.

When one of us is sick

Everyone prays.

When a child is born

We are all there to show them how to carry this tradition on

And when the sister who had nothing but Medicaid and a
mortgage died
It was also at home
With my hand in hers
Telling her whatever world she chose to surrender to
We would say her name with a smile on our lips
Even as the family came through to tell us where she went wrong
And look uncomfortably at the too small house she fought to
keep.
The smell of us that causes you to lift your noses at family
gatherings is the thickness of this family
What keeps us together when your cultured values evaporate in
the face of trouble
You smell the sweat of women who work like men in their
absence
The rot of dying because we care for our sick
The joy of knowing we clean up good, but by hook or crook this
family will make it
My grandmother taught me that
Which one of our family lines are lowly
Something has got ya'll confused
Believing hair care commercials and prime time sitcoms
Lost hold of the knowledge
Fat meat is greasy
Broccoli ain't greens
And family is for more than the free shit when our elders die.
Why is it only the bumpkins know this?
Us poor relations
Small town
Limited education
Pitied
Wrap your clucking tongue around this.
We came from the same people
We aren't poor and perfect
We know weed spots and holding cells
You are not corrupt and cold

Some of you believe in work and family
But there is this status-shaped chasm between us
That only seems to widen every time we gather to pay respect
To the dead but never to each other
Making the poorest relations of all
The two generations of children raised across an abyss of class
and accusations
Who don't know what their family looks like
And have no feeling of solidarity beyond the knowledge we
should all be grieving right now.
These women we buried were sisters
Blood and back up whenever needed
Never separated by more than a phone call
But we . . . don't have each others' numbers
Don't call or know each others' names
Just look at each other across caskets
Remembering the virtues of the family we lost
Forgetting we were all taught better than this.

The Artist

Brooks Utterback

New Mexico had been a state for only fourteen years when my father was born. The 47th territory to join the Union, it was acquired from Mexico in 1912 after centuries of invasions from conquistadors and Native Americans. My father has the blood from all of these warriors. He was born in the mountains near the Rio Grande River in Magdalena, a cold and dusty town. A miner's town, it was a place where a man understood the meaning of hard work. Magdalena today is a barren, untouched land with only tumbleweeds and scrub for nature's landscape, unchanged from centuries past.

This is where my father grew up, along with three brothers and two sisters. My father never knew his birthmother; her life ended five days after his began, consumed by infection and fever. At the age of eighteen, my father left, joined the Merchant Marines, and never looked back. He traveled the world, all the while working as a cook on supply ships.

He later settled in San Francisco and began training as an artist and sign painter. He loved the advertising of the 1940's. The flashing neon signs that beckoned drinkers to bars and diners to cafes drew him in. He learned the art well: calligraphy, Gothic, Old English—all letter styles he could replicate. Enamel paints, camel hair brushes, and turpentine, these tools of the trade filled the garage where I grew up. This combination of odors always takes me back to my father's garage.

He worked alone in the cool, dark shop. After school, my hours were spent sitting on an overturned milk crate, handing him solvent soaked rags or charcoal, and I was always mesmerized by his steady hand. Believe it or not, that garage allowed me into some of the finest shops in the city. Beauty parlors, butcher shops and fine restaurants in San Francisco ordered signs from my dad. Sometimes he let me ride when he delivered and installed his works of commercial art. I met shop owners and chefs. Barkeepers let me sit at their bars and drink ice-cold 7UP, an exotic maraschino cherry added for my delight. A pair of white, patent leather shoes became mine courtesy of

the Golden Goose Shoe Store. Hard candies and Snickers bars were tucked into my pockets. Once, a live rabbit came home as a family pet. I don't know if dad paid for these goods or they were gifts bestowed to a little girl, but I always felt special spending time waiting for my father while he hung his custom-made signs.

Six days a week for thirty years, my father worked in the garage honing his skills. Not satisfied with only painting plywood or paper signs, he took on jobs lettering vans and boats. Delivery trucks would be colorfully painted with whatever the business specialized in. Pre-computer age, it was my job to research his subject out of books and magazines. A seafood delivery van required me to find an old copy of *Field and Stream*. Freshwater or deep sea, colorful flying fish came to life on a panel truck because of my father's trained eye.

Sunday was his day off. Sleeping late, my sister and I often made brunch for my mom and dad. We talked and laughed and caught up on the past week's events. In the afternoon, he read books on chemistry or history, never novels or magazines. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and to this day, he spends hours learning about great artists or inventors.

At the age of sixty-two, my father retired from the sign business. He took up woodcarving, and for extra money, used his old work van as a moving van. He advertised and set his price. If a job came and he needed extra help, again I was his assistant. We hauled for every ethnic group in the city. Everyone befriended him. His Indian red skin and thick black hair allowed him to look Mexican, Vietnamese, or Southeast Asian. Sometimes people didn't have enough cash to pay him in full, so they would give him a television or lamp for payment. He said it made them feel good to help out an old man. I cleaned the empty apartment and hauled their trash. They would feed us tacos or sandwiches, whatever the family was dining on. With my father, it always seemed more like a moving day party than a dirty work day.

My father is now eighty years old. He works in his garage every day, his shop still filled with paints and art supplies. Primitive carved wooden busts of his family and friends line the driveway, our names engraved into the front since our identities

are too vague. His creations are made from discarded wood or metal. Hand-made lighthouses fabricated of brightly painted scrap metal beckon passers-by to stop and look. His daily three-mile walks are like treasure hunts when he discovers unwanted junk inside a construction dumpster.

His whimsical public displays continue to attract urban artists to his shop. Drawn in by the color and movement of his creations, they soon discover this charismatic man holds many secrets to life.

Stone Critics

Hoken Aldrich

They stand on the floor like stone critics
Shifting eyes, anticipation building inside
We look over each spectator, each one
Stares back, waiting for us to make our move

And there's our cue, the stage lights up
Music turns on, our first notes strike
The statues like a sledgehammer of sound
Forcing them to move in one direction or another

We arrange and rearrange this crowd like pieces on a chessboard
Strategically setting each rhythm and rhyme
Let them knock each other over, watch the crumble.
We won't stop until checkmate.

The Battle of River Run

Catherine Burghart

The front seat in a vehicle has long been the choice of those with discerning tastes. It is a throne of luxury nestled high above the economy class. The cushion on the reclining chair with built-in lumbar support is always a bit more plush, the legroom more plentiful, and the cinematic window more than ample to take in the beauty of the landscape rushing by. All the amenities are at your finger tips: access to the personal butler that is the cup holder, climate control at the touch of a button, and, of course most importantly, complete dominion over the radio. It is no wonder that wars were fought amongst my siblings and me over this illustrious status symbol. The Battle of River Run in the summer of 1992 was one such engagement that ended in bloodshed and is forever etched in my memory.

The old farm house we lived in at the time had no air conditioning, and unfortunately that year's heat index was one for the record books. Most of our days were spent in sticky clothes anxiously awaiting Mom's return home from work because we knew that accompanying her would be our salvation. Every evening she would pack us up and take us to be cleansed of the devilish heat in the baptism of the cool swimming hole. On that particular day, it was just my sister Mary and I waiting on the front porch with our ears perked for the sound of gravel being ground by tires. We were already in our swimsuits with towels in hand when we heard that familiar sound and saw a trail of dust left in the wake of Mom's van plowing up the drive.

Mom's "new" van was not so new. It was probably from the late seventies, drenched in shag carpeting from floor to ceiling with a bench seat in the back that folded into a bed. The wheel wells were rusted out, the passenger side door would not close, and the upholstery was dilapidated, but Mom must have thought it was a great deal and tried to fix it up. She bought some Bondo to fill in the holes, rigged a bungee cord to secure the wayward door, and painted the whole thing with some teal swimming pool paint she had picked up at a yard sale. It was a piece of crap, but what did I care? All I knew was that it had a front seat and that I

wanted to be perched there. Unfortunately for me, Mary had her eyes on the same prize, and before I could purse my lips to utter the syllables, she hastily yelled, "Shotgun!"

There are many ways to decide who gets the front seat during a trip in an automobile. Some people use Rock, Paper Scissors; others take turns, but my siblings and I had elected to use "The Shotgun Method." The rules to this competitive game are quite simple. The first person who shouts "shotgun" before a trip and with the vehicle in sight stakes claim to the first class accommodations for that ride. So, in keeping with the rule, I accepted defeat and crawled into the back.

Sitting there, watching my sister indulge in the complimentary vintage Merlot while I was back in coach with mere peanuts, made me realize that this was simply unacceptable, and like Pinky, I began to hatch a plan. To my advantage, I knew my mother's route. Without fail, she would pull off at the small country store along the way and let us pick out something laden with sugar to subdue our shakes while she grabbed something laden with liquor to subdue hers. This would be my golden opportunity because according to the bylaws of Shotgun, as soon as the front seat is vacated, the game starts again, and the throne is up for grabs.

When we got to the store, I wasted no time. I dashed for the freezer, grabbed an ice cream cone, and raced for the exit. Halfway through the door, I turned and in a clear voice shouted, "Shotgun!" However, this did not go over as planned. A heated debate ensued over the validity of applying the move-your-meat, lose-your-seat clause to this instance. Mary made the case that it had only been three miles to the store and that this was hardly a full trip. I stuck to my position that a strict fundamentalist stance needed to be taken in regard to the interpretation of the law, and Mom did not care either way. She had had a long day at work, and this was not how she wanted to spend her evening.

"That is enough! This is ridiculous!" she shrieked in the same tone that any mother adopts when she is about to use her child's full name: "Catherine Claire, you scoot over and share that seat with your sister!"

“But Mom,” I complained with a furrowing brow, “I called it!”

“No you didn’t!” Mary retorted. “There was nothing to call! It’s my seat!”

“I have had it with you two!” Mom said, her eyes now wide and her finger stiffly shaking. “We could have had a lovely evening, but like always you kids have to start bickering over trivial things! We are going home!”

“But Mom,” Mary and I grumbled almost in unison as if we were suddenly deciding to join forces to defeat a common enemy, “We want to go swimming!”

But there were no “buts” about it. Mom had made up her mind, and as soon as we realized that she was not going to budge, we disbanded and became adversaries once again. Now the motivation to fight, however, had changed. It was no longer territorial, but vengeful. The evil-eyed expression mirrored on our faces crystallized our position on the matter—*It is all your fault!*

Mary was the first to retaliate. She climbed in and with a bump of her hip forced me to share the throne. With that, she set the rules for engagement and changed the seat cushion into a tangible expression of who was guilty. The entire way home, elbows were bruising ribs as we fought for a victory that could be measured in inches of foam and faded upholstery. As we turned into the driveway, I knew that I was losing ground. So in a last ditch effort to project the shadow of blame onto Mary, I shoved her hard into the faulty passenger side door, and she disappeared from sight.

“Stop the car!” I immediately screamed. “Mary fell out!”

But before Mom could bring the tires to a standstill, I had my feet on the ground. A thick cloud of dust suffocated my vision, but I could hear her crying, and when she came into sight, I could see why. A long gash extended from right above her elbow to halfway down her forearm, and I could see the bone. Victory was anything but sweet! The ridiculousness of the battle was evident in my ice cream cone’s melting and merging with the dust on our driveway to become nothing more than mud as we waited for the ambulance.

Contributors’ Notes

Hoken Aldrich lives in Omaha, Nebraska. He is currently taking classes in the liberal arts program at Metropolitan Community College.

“The Battle of River Run” is **Catherine Burghart**’s first publication. She is working towards a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts and hopes to eventually receive a master’s degree. Despite the “accident,” Catherine maintains a good relationship with her sister Mary.

Originally from Alaska, **Angel Dewaele** now calls Omaha her home. She is studying math and literature, and she particularly enjoys the technical processes both disciplines require. Angel finds great inspiration from instructors who challenge her, who ask her to reach beyond her current level of understanding and ability. She plans to pursue a career in education and hopes to give her students what she has been given: a greater world view, a desire to dig deeper, and a belief in their potential.

Derek Kordash was born in Omaha and has lived here his entire life. He attended The Creative Center in Omaha for three years and earned an associate’s degree in graphic design. A few years out of college, he decided to further pursue his education in art, so he enrolled at Metropolitan Community College to study more of the illustration side of the graphics field. Photography has always been a passion and frequently practiced hobby of his, and he has recently decided to study it in more depth. He is currently taking classes at Bellevue University as well and will graduate in about two years with a bachelor’s degree in computer graphic design with a concentration in web design.

Tara Novak is a violinist and writer presently residing in Dublin, Ireland. Although originally from Omaha, Nebraska, she relocated to New York City three years ago and has since found herself touring, free-lancing, and calling various places home—usually a bright red suitcase. She is currently writing and developing the text for several Irish albums and artist websites and is copy-editing her first novel. In between tours of the U.S. and Ireland, she has been taking semesters at Berklee College of Music and online at Metropolitan Community College with the view towards propelling her music and writing career forward—and possibly, someday, out of her red suitcase.

Daniel Otto is at Metro pursuing a degree in criminal justice, and he aspires to one day be a helicopter pilot. He is married with two children.

Zedeka Poindexter is a Nebraska native who began her interest in writing by reading autobiographies. Due to this influence, her pieces are often crafted in the first person. Her work has been featured in the University of Colorado's *River Run* and *Slamma Lamma Ding Dong: An Anthology of Nebraska Slam Poets*.

Steven Schmiedeskamp was born in Lincoln and lived there his entire life in the same house. He moved to Omaha a year ago, finished his associate's degree at MCC in studio photography, and is now a part-time photographer at Metro. He is now also attending school full time at UNO and is majoring in fine arts.

Nicole Upchurch is currently a student at Metropolitan Community College and at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She is majoring in sociology, and she plans to graduate with a bachelor's degree in general studies in the Spring of 2010.

Brooks Utterback was born and raised in San Francisco. She moved to Plattsmouth, Nebraska, in 1994 to raise her two daughters. She is very creative and loves to sew. She currently works at a local quilt shop and spends her free time creating quilts.

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Field #4 Color Photograph Steven Schmiedeskamp

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