The Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review has been an important part of Tyler student culture for more than forty years. The annual competition encourages student artists and writers to create their best work, and the Review showcases the winning entries and presents them to the College community.

[Link to the Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review website]
Since the first issue of the Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review was published at the end of the first quarter of 1968, this publication has provided an outlet for the creative ideas of John Tyler Community College students.

And, just like the College, the publication has evolved over the years, from a black-and-white copy job to the full-color, polished print piece presented today. But, the purpose of the publication has always remained the same—highlighting the creativity and courage it takes to put pen to paper and create something new.

Painting, drawing, writing and other forms of art are inherently creative, but they are also forms that take hard work and commitment. Submitting work for publication takes all that and then some. Artists and writers open themselves up to rethinking their work, editing and redesigning, not to mention others’ reinterpretation of their work.

This is an exciting challenge for students, and the kind of learning experience John Tyler Community College works hard to create every day. Congratulations to those whose creativity and hard work are honored inside these pages. The results were worth the risk.
first place, art

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second place, art

On The Dock by Joy Santangelo
What are we but trial and experiences, wrapped in opinion? We cling to each other who hold similar thinking, and I’ve been thinking. They say things are not built like they used to be, you know? I wonder if they’ll still say that when you’re grown. You’re too young, my words are stick imprints on sea foam. Your mother and him have so much in common... How long does it take to empty a picture frame? A lot sooner than it takes to get them hanged. Is it a sin to fake something to shake the grip of loneliness? Everyday the sun’s pulled down in an orange fist, and another added to the waiting list. Death is the anchor that anchors us all, an author that offers what could be, once for all. The sky cries into the sea, down mountains into streams. You’re my daughter and I’ll honor what precious time we have left, I won’t write on or write off, or step right off this ship, I won’t inhale a great deal when the air becomes thin, I’m no longer afraid of ash in the wind.
The summer swelter
Was a breeding ground
For dreams

And madness

And reverie

Things lived and played
That covered our eyes
With needled fingers
In the long shadows
Of lingering twilights

and beat their yellowed drums

But
winter
came
and
ground
their
bones
into
a
powdery
paste

that coated everything
in a stark glaze

of what-they-are.
Uncurl me tonight—leave me naked in ribbons of wax,
my salt worshipped skin
a mere hallucinogen in your phantom kingdoms, to be
written down forever

in your pulse scribbled manuscripts;
carry me in your womb ferry,
through the cellular baptism
of thoughts & strides & things which litter, laid out
on the gypsy altars of the mind,
smoked out by a tender candle, evoking the power of light—

I have received special training in bathetic universities,

my umbilical cord feeding me

the powers of my diploma, until finally they spank my bottom
& pronounce me a grown man,
beard freshly trimmed but likened to the smooth
face of the one who has yet to attain rank in age,
still considered youth by the mother

who cried at every step away from the womb ferry, on to
the Labyrinth of Minos
to face the pains of tracking dreams for myself
until it is time to go back home
for the chance to know myself again, the map to where I
came from—

these are the dreams of the son remembering his mother.
third place, art

Mandy & Mindy by Terry Lynn Smith
I don’t know what’s right and what’s real anymore
And I don’t know how I’m meant to feel anymore

I couldn’t move. I was frozen in place while the people around me rushed about as they talked or danced. I could feel people bumping into me, silently cursing me for standing in the way, but I couldn’t help it. I was glued to my spot on the crusty floor of the basement-like ska club while everyone else moved around in quick blurs. I could see mouths moving and I could feel the crappy bass and drum lines through the floor, but all I heard was soft murmurs of everything around me. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t take it anymore, and I had to get out. Now.

Finding the strength I lost fifteen minutes ago, I started pushing through the sea of multi-colored hair, faux vintage fedoras and checkerboard. Fumbling down the rickety steps, I knocked into the chalkboard announcing the bands playing and coming soon. Finally making it to the door, I flung it open and threw myself outside. The cold night air hit my lungs with a smack, as I thought of what to do next. Dark, deserted alleyway to my right with the possibility of being mugged at 3 something a.m., or sidewalk by the street with cars zooming past with the possibility of being mugged at 3 something a.m. to my left? I’m going
left. I ran into the black night, poorly lit shops as my night light. I just wanted to get away.

There’s a fear I keep so deep
knew its name before I could speak

“You have zero reason to be nervous, you know.”

“No, no, I know. I know. But still, look! Look where we are! We’ve been coming here for so long, and now my band gets to play here. It’s incredible,” he exclaimed as he did a little dance. I laughed.

“Look, you’ll be fine. This is home, remember? There’s nothing to worry about. You’ll play, you’ll do great, and then we’ll go get food and head home. Good times,” I smirked.

“I don’t think that you’re really going to want to do that afterwards, though,” he stage whispered.


This place was like a second home. The fact that it looked like a big basement in someone’s house probably contributed to that, but nonetheless. The maroon brick walls, dirty and covered with age and spray paint, the dirty floor that could use a good sweep, faded posters from bands from years past, and the stage. The stage made of bricks, tarp, and two-by-fours that were on clearance. His band had finally gotten a gig here after working hard on the same four songs for years, and I could tell he was nervous. It was adorable, really. I looked around me and saw the usual crowd of black and white, tattoos, and home done rainbow dye jobs, with the occasional high school kids who felt like bad asses for being out past 10 p.m. on a Friday night. They were going to kill.

They came on with their “seen better days” guitars and drums from Target and played four pseudo-punk/ska songs that were about as good as you could imagine. And by “as good as you could imagine,” I do mean bad. Oh, dear. I stood to the side and nodded my head in time to the beat while I laughed at the disorganized mosh pit. They finished, and the audience and I applauded. Then he talked into the microphone.
“Thanks, everybody! This was our first show and we just want to thank everybody, especially my girlfriend over there. She’s been so great and supported us for so long, which is why this is going to suck. Babe? I know that this is a crap time, but we’re kind of over? Yeah. It’s just not working out. I’m sorry. Thanks for coming, guys. We’ll be back next week!” Everyone stared at me as the color in my face died. As they left the stage, everyone went back to his own business.

Bloody lips and cherry wine moonshine in your hair

I shook my head at the memory of earlier. Not paying attention, I tripped on a crack in the sidewalk and went skidding down. My palms hurt on the cold sidewalk. When I caught my breath, I checked my palms for injuries and found nothing aside from them obviously feeling sore. I took a minute to catch my breath again and got back up. I continued to run. I only had a vague idea of where I was going, but I knew that I had to get there. I continued to run through the night, nothing but the occasional cat and druggie my company. It only occurred to me about halfway there that I had forgotten my bag back there, but it was no longer my home, it was the enemy. What was once the picture frame of the majority of my best memories now held my worst.

My legs were on fire. They were begging me to stop and take a break, but I couldn’t. I could see the bridge in sight, and I wasn’t going to stop. The dying lamps suddenly seemed so much brighter as I raced by them. I finally hit the bridge. Literally. I stopped when my stomach and hands hit the railing, and I heaved over it into the river. I slinked back down against it, closing my eyes and trying to breathe again. I saw a dull light behind my eyelids and I opened them. When I realized that it was finally morning, I laughed. I tried to hold it in, but I couldn’t. My stomach hurt again, but this time from laughing. I started crying again as I laughed, a new sheet of tears racing over the dried path.

I had no idea what any of this meant. All I did know was that it was a new morning, and I was willing to take the cliché metaphor it stood for and run with it.
There’s rubble in the streets, rubble in the alleys, mounds of rubble in the markets. You turn a corner and there is a lopsided building barely hanging on. Any second it could topple over onto the road and swallow up another victim. So many buildings fell. Dust and bricks and rocks spilled over, flooding the sidewalks and roads, like when you poke a sunny-side-up egg and the yolk goes everywhere. Some of the buildings crushed parked cars. We passed a four story building that had been pancaked. Four stories packed down, now only ten feet high. We heard that there were still bodies inside.

We were riding in the bed of the truck. Some genius had put in a rack with six seats. I couldn’t sit for long though. The city was exciting and the bumpy ride hurt my ass. The roads had massive cracks and potholes. The truck would lurch back and forth to miss them. Driving on the roads was like riding on a jet ski; it could cure kidney stones. Roudy dodged traffic like it was a game. He leaned back in his seat and never took his eyes off the chaos ahead. When we met him at the airport he had been sleeping with his baseball cap over his eyes and a toothpick hanging from his mouth. He worked as the driver for TNM but didn’t speak English. Actually he didn’t speak much at all.

Some roads look like an old black and white photo taken in the fifties. Then suddenly the next street bursts into an explosion of bright greens, blues, yellows, and oranges. Someone is selling something on every street corner, honest woven baskets or stolen DVDs. The street walls are covered with hundreds of colorful paintings, some of nature, some of naked women. Stuff is happening and the people are alive. They’re all wearing t-shirts that say things they don’t understand. One kid had a shirt that said, “Better be good for Santa,” and a man was wearing one that said “Beauty Queen”! They don’t care. The women squat under tarps stirring big pots of rice and chicken. Others balance baskets full of mangoes and bananas on their heads. At stoplights the kids run up to the cars and offer Coke bottles for only 20 gouds (about 50 cents). The electric wires hang so low over the road that they touch the tops of big delivery
trucks full of Kola Couronne fruit champagne. There was a guy behind a stand selling shoes and sunglasses. He was just hanging back there looking bad with his gold-rimmed shades and wild dreads. When we drove by, he whistled loudly at Brittany. We could hear him from a block away over the market noise.

Dust kicked up with every rolling tire and untied shoe lace. People jumped across streets like they didn’t know doing that could kill them. Cars flew in every direction, all of them with dents and scratches. There were taxi pickup trucks that were called “tap-taps,” painted with crazy colors in strange pictures. We passed one filled with at least fifteen Haitians. They were all crammed in and hanging off the back. Another taxi had a big picture of a man running from a lion painted on it. They don’t even have lions in Haiti.

Excitement for the World Cup filled the streets, even though it was happening on the other side of the world in South Africa. They had painted empty bottles blue, white, green, and yellow and hung them on wires suspended from building to building. Since the Haitian football team sucks, they cheer for Argentina and Brazil. On the walls they had painted murals of Kaká (Brazil) and Messi (Argentina). They really love Messi. He’s the best soccer player in the world.

Speaking of South Africa, Brittany keeps saying this looks exactly like it. I can’t help but believe her. She has her bandana, sunglasses, and headphones on. She looks like she belongs, unlike me. My hair is flying everywhere, getting in my eyes. The sun is blinding. I’m wearing a black shirt. Never wear a black shirt in Haiti. The heat will shrivel you up like a raisin. I keep having to focus on the cooling breeze, like ignoring the sun will do anything.

We ascended up the mountain south of Port-Au-Prince where the damage was less severe. Evan told us that as you move up the mountain you move up in class and down in temperature. We passed the Canadian Embassy and a dead hospital. Eventually we made it to a richer area called Pétionville. They’re constructing
a two story Giant supermarket
Guns are everywhere. Outside every restaurant or shop is a guard operating the death slot-machine. Any minute that guy could just pull the trigger and send another person to the afterlife. Most have shotguns and wear dark sunglasses.

Everywhere we went people watched us. They would drop anything they were doing just to see us go by. Most the children would smile and yell “Hello!” Some adults would wave, and some would give us the finger. Later, when I went out without Brittany, it seemed I got the finger a lot more. But with her it wasn’t too bad. We just listened to a chorus of whistles.

After passing through Pétionville, the real climb started. The mountain grew steeper with every mile. The jungle halted abruptly at the road’s edge, but the trees insisted on leaning over and showing us their radiant yellow and pink flowers. Haitians sat high in the cliffs that overshadowed the roads, calling out. Below there was a huge soccer field where a game was being played. A massive white church sat right next to it. People crowded the edges of the field, watching the excitement. Farther up we passed a small market that sat at the bottom of a small drop off. A man leaned over the road calling out prices for whatever he wanted to sell, maybe a juicy mango or a goat’s leg.

We had to stop for gas at the National. As we were filling up, a tall skinny man with a shotgun approached. He was bald, had a light beard, and his right eye was glossed over. The shotgun was thrown over his shoulder casually. He made some small talk with Roudy all the while glancing at us suspiciously. Roudy gave him the money and pulled out. We traveled Route De Kenscoff farther up the mountain. My ears had been popping for a few miles now, so I had to steal some gum from Brittany. I was surprised at how many churches we had passed, but with Haiti’s Catholic heritage I shouldn’t have been. Most of the churches are simple buildings, especially the ones up on the mountain, but the ones in Pétionville and Port-Au-Prince are much more elaborate. A few have stained glass, a few more used to.
The trees suddenly melted away to show a view I thought only existed in dreams. The valley stretched out below like a morning yawn, unfolding its layers of jungle life and small villages. The green mountains creased in and out and ran marathons down to the bottom where a murky, brown river was frozen in time. From so high up, the rapids seemed unmoving. Clouds began creeping over the western mountains, clashing with the sunset’s rays. Like a canvas covered in abstract design, pink, orange, purple, and a bloody red fought battles like crazed men armed with nothing but themselves. The battle hovered above the tan haze of the city, which sat off in the distance just at the end of the valley. And just beyond was the blue sea, reaching out to the rest of the world.
Looking back, it seems strange how that summer passed, as when you view something in motion from a distance, like an airplane. It seems to be just inching across the sky; you could almost trick your eyes into seeing it as a still object, if you tried. But the reality for the people on the plane is that they’re hurtling through the air at hundreds of miles per hour. I felt the same way that summer, as if I was hurtling toward something, though I don’t think I ever reached it. I had my first panic attack. My mother, all wide eyes and flared nostrils, overreacted and tried to convince me to commit myself to an institution. I resisted, shut myself up in my room for a few weeks and stared into my cat’s eyes the way people do when they can’t stand to look at anything else. My cat was game enough for a little while, but he eventually decided he had more pressing matters to attend to, so I was forced to abandon the privacy of my exile and return to what now seemed like a vast and imposing terrain, the outside world. I got a job at Gather, a little antiques shop situated off a railroad track and run by a kindly middle-aged woman named Gail. No one ever came in, so the job was mostly taking care of Jasper, a Labrador with sad eyes who took shelter among the eighteenth-century rugs. I met you there. I came up one day to check my schedule, and you had cleared out a space in the middle of the store and were dancing to Fleetwood Mac. You look embarrassed when I cleared my throat, and I felt embarrassed for having caused you embarrassment.

“Well there you go again…” you said, red-faced and looking at the floor.

“Uh…ahem…that’s alright,” I replied, instantly realizing that it made no sense in context.

You laughed and the tension seemed to dissipate. You took me by the hand as if we were old friends and showed me a burrow that an animal had dug in the woods behind the store. It was big enough for me to crawl into, but when you dared me to, I refused.

“I’m claustrophobic,” I said.

You gave me a look that I’ve only seen twice more in my life, a look that made your face seem etched into the leaves and sky behind it, and said flatly, “No, you’re not.”
I started spending all my time at Gather even when I wasn’t working. We smoked cigarettes in the shade of the dogwoods out back, taught Jasper how to shake hands, and pretended that the reality we inhabited during our time there existed separately from the reality of everywhere else. Then the summer ended, and you went across the country through miles of people and clouds and deserts to UC Berkeley, where our times of day didn’t even match up. I quit working at Gather and went back to my bedroom vigil for a while, until I grew out of it and enrolled at the local community college. I would see you from time to time, when you would come and visit your parents, but there seemed to be a sort of alchemical imbalance in our new interactions, like we both expected a different person to show up in place of one another. You had changed so much, and I hadn’t changed at all. I made a comment about it, something about being stuck in a recursive loop of coming to the same realizations, making the same decisions, and you looked as though you might cry. I couldn’t tell if it was from pity or something more personal, but I had never felt so distant from you. Eventually you stopped calling me when you were back in town. I didn’t mind so much, nor did I blame you. In retrospect, I think that summer was just a perfect intersection of two consciousnesses moving in separate directions, like a cosmic event, like two celestial bodies inexplicably colliding in the vacuum. We were correct in our pretenses. That reality was indeed completely and utterly separate from the one I now inhabit, the one that most people inhabit every day of their lives. I tried for a little while to get it back, to re-enter it, but it’s as if you and I and that place and Jasper worked some sort of magic together. It’s like trying to solve an equation without the precise combination of variables.
There she stood on the other side of a knock at my front door, face stoic as always, displaying the tiny sparkle of compressed coal that jeweled her left ring finger. I hadn’t seen her in years, ten to be exact. I felt awkward seeing her after so long. I smiled as widely as I could and, in the tradition of squeaky, giggle box girlfriends, congratulated her raucously. What she said next left me dumb struck.

We met eighteen years earlier in my back yard. I was swinging on my brand new aluminum swing set as vigorously as my 5-year-old legs would pump, doing my best not to get my Strawberry Shortcake dress and patent leather shoes dirty. She stood at the edge of her yard watching me with the intensity of a professional golfer. I pretended not to notice.

Her face and hands were dirty, not from neglect but from being born of a generation that was told to go outside and play. Her tiny frame had hand-me-down dungarees with worn-through knees and a dirty white T-shirt with red sleeves hanging from it. Her stringy blonde bangs stuck to her face in the August heat, greasy as though her hair hadn’t been washed in a few days. Her knees bore scabs, a soccer player’s badge of honor. From the looks of things, her father would have preferred a son.

“Hi,” she announced without a smile, a poke more than a greeting. I simply kept swinging.

“I’m Nicolynnthamth,” all one word.

I remained silent.

“Can I thwing?”

Still I did not utter a sound; I only hopped off my swing and approached her. Face to face, nose to nose, we met.

“Hi,” she poked again still without cracking a smile.

“What’s your name?” My question was more an effort to figure out what she had earlier blurted than an interest in what her parents had chosen to call her.

“My name ith Nicolynnthamth. Whath yourth?”

“Becky. How old are you? When’s your birthday?” I needed to know because these things determine your worthiness as a friend when you’re five and a half. Six months can
not only make or break a friendship but it is the most significant factor in friendship hierarchy, followed by whose bike is the best and if you have your own roller skates.

She shrugged her shoulders in response to my birthday inquiry. She didn’t know her birthday. I was appalled. How could something so important go un-memorized? Everyone knows their birthday! I decided to alter my question in hopes of a more accurate response.

“When does your parents have your party with cake and stuff and presents?”

Another shrug. I was clearly going to have to be the leader in this relationship.

Thus began an eight year camaraderie. Nicole Lynn Sames and I were as good as conjoined. Somewhere there are even pictures in which you cannot tell who is who. As twin-like as we were we had virtually nothing in common though she would be the closest thing I ever had to a sibling. It was strange how we just seemed to fit together despite our obvious differences. She was dirty brown; I was pink. She was a tomboy, always dirty and scraped up. I wore dresses to school. Her family was intact; mine was broken. She had two older sisters; I was an only child. She always wanted to be outside on an adventure; I wanted to be inside proving how smart I was. She played soccer; I took ballet. We came from two completely different worlds yet for eight years, two thousand nine hundred and twenty days, we did not let a sunrise pass without each other.

We spent those wondrous years pretending to work in our imaginary McDonald’s, exploring the great mysteries of the woods in front of my house, sailing the open seas of the creek that ran through those woods. We had sleep overs and took turns stomaching things like goulash and meatloaf as dinner guests at each other’s houses. We swam countless summer hours in her back yard pool. We rode our bikes together and went roller skating together; she got her own roller skates first. We were post spanking asylum and bully defense. I was there as she learned to cope with juvenile diabetes. She was there when my dad didn’t
show up for my birthday. We loved each other and we fought each other. We grew up together, always together. There was safety in our friendship.

Our teen years brought about all of the obvious changes and a few I didn’t expect. I was an honor student and she had been held back a year. That division placed us in separate peer groups. I was boy crazed and spent my spare time hanging out with the party crowd. She still rode her bike and spent most of her free time drawing. I had become a teenager her parents wanted to protect her from and a time came when they forbid her to spend any more time with me. Shortly thereafter her family moved away. I wasn’t sure where she went and 1993 lacked Facebook or even Google so finding her would have been practically impossible. My family stayed put. We were still there in the same brick house on the same corner of the same street so when she needed me she knew exactly where to find me.

Once again she stood at my front door, this time displaying an engagement ring, absent a smile. Immediately following my forced congratulatory squeal she uttered the words, “There was an accident, he’s dead.” I had no words. The shock stung my face.

“Niki, what happened!”

With a quivering chin and tears in her eyes she shared with me the horrific details of how fast the car had been going and that the casket had to be closed because his injuries were just so awful, how their wedding plans were almost complete and how heartbroken his mother was. Not knowing exactly what to do I reached for her and held her the same as I had when her childhood heart had been broken. The years of separation had not changed a thing. She knew exactly where she could find the comfort she so desperately needed, comfort I so willingly gave.
Honorable mention, art

Suspicion & Intrigue by Ingrid Quinones Velez
“Old Year—out! New Year—in!”
That’s what my dad always said.

New Year’s Eve, 2008, I’m
lying on the couch in Rob’s new house,
and I’m the only one awake. It’s
1 a.m., one hour into 2009; one hour
since Dick Clark wished us well on
ABC, his speech pitifully impaired by
the stroke.

Jill is asleep beside me, her head
nuzzled against my shoulder, her
auburn hair gracing the side of my
face, smooth as silk. I can smell her
shampoo. I’m betting it has some fancy
name—Tropical Hawaiian Wild Berry,
say. I decide to call it Essence of Jill,
and think that if it’s true that you’ll be
doing next year what you were doing
this year when the ball dropped, that’ll
be fine by me.

Miles the cat hops onto the coffee
table and starts picking at leftovers
from mine and Jill’s sandwiches,
bought at Wal-Mart only hours ago,
yet last year. Strange to think, isn’t it?

The TV’s still on, the volume
turned down low, almost low enough
to make the Cheech and Chong
movie that’s on inaudible. I’m fine
with that, though.

Rob’s asleep on the larger couch,
his foot propped up on the coffee
table next to the unopened six-pack of
Heineken. He’s snoring lightly, and I
grin when I notice the crumpled bag of
ketchup-flavored chips tucked under
his arm. Ambrosia, his wife of six
months, must have already called it a
year and retreated to bed.

Brad, an almost constant guest—
or pest, if you ask Ambrosia—at the
Wade residence, is asleep/passed-out
in the recliner. His last bottle of Guinness is lying overturned beneath the fully-reclined footrest, and Phoebethe Pomeranian is licking up a nightcap from what spilled on the floor.

I yawn and slowly uncurl my numb arm from behind Jill’s head. I have two urgent calls to answer: one from nature, the other from nicotine.

I stand, stretch my back until it pops, and head to the toilet to seek relief. Nature’s call silenced, I turn to nicotine’s. I brought a couple of King Edwards for the occasion, but have yet to light one. They’re in the inner pocket of my jacket, which I grab off the kitchen table on my way out the side door.

Out beneath the covered carport I pull one of the cigars and my Bic lighter out of my jacket and pop a squat on the brick stoop. I fire up the “cancer log” (as my mom would say with disgust) and take a long, rewarding series of puffs.

The smoke from my oral chimney drifts away into a night that is clear, cold, and silent. My eyes wander. The house next door is dark, save for the faint blue glow of a small television in what I assume is a back bedroom. I imagine the form of the home’s elderly occupant tucked snugly under a stack of quilts, snoring lightly while the cat curled up at the end of the bed purrs at roughly the same decibel.

The trailer at the end of the street, by contrast, appears very much alive. There’s a light in every window, interrupted every few seconds by the shadowy forms of people. Frat boys on Christmas break and some random chicks, eighty-percent likely cultivated from the local high school, my mind tells me, filling in the blanks left by my distant view of the party.

And now my ears are telling stories, too. The faint, almost undetectable strands of music I thought I could hear have become the last notes to Meat Loaf’s “I Would Do Anything for Love,” and seconds later that turns into Sean Kingston stuttering his way through one of his obnoxious hit singles.

The cancer log is down to a burnt stump. I put it out in the hard, dry soil of a piece of pottery, its last vegetative resident having died long ago.
I hear a dog yelping somewhere far away to my left, and as I turn my attention toward the sound, my eyes focus on a large square of bright light on the tip-top of the otherwise dark hill across the main road. That glow is from the always-burning interior lights of the big cemetery’s mausoleum.

My mind once again turns the volume of the frat party’s music way down and shifts my thoughts somberly to the Hereafter.

I had believed the morbid fraction of my personality had been reduced to zero years back when I took a job as a helping hand at a local mortuary and decided death wasn’t too neat after all, but my present fixation on the cemetery suggests the opposite.

Solar-powered crucifixes cast eerie glows in the darkness. I can’t help but think of ghosts, and pull the leather jacket tighter around my shoulders.

A cold, biting wind is picking up, and with it come snowflakes. A few flurries at first, but in a few minutes’ time I’m bearing witness to the first snowfall of 2009.

It’s going to be a few months before I’m comfortable with two-thousand-nine rather than eight, and by that time it’ll be nearly half over and Twenty-Ten will be up to bat. It’s a change in the number of the year, and an addition to the number of our individual age. Both numbers add up to one sum. For the age of time itself, who knows what the final tally will be. The sum total for each of us is just as shrouded, though we all know what it equals anyway—solar-powered crucifixes and birthday cards left to be shredded by the blades of a caretaker’s mower.

The snow is really coming down now. The ground is turning white; the road and vehicles, too. Suddenly I wish to touch it; to catch a flake on my tongue; to roll the fresh snow into a ball in my palms.

I stand, as though entranced by hypnosis, and walk to the edge of the carport. I hook an arm around one of the support posts and slowly swing outward, head tilted, eyes closed, tongue out.

I feel a flake touch my tongue. There, then gone, such as time. Just
like a lot of things.

“How does it taste?”

Startled by the voice, I fall into the soft white, arms outstretched, catching myself.

A hand comes into my line of vision. Long, pale fingers, the nails painted gold. This hand looks cold, yet upon taking it I feel warmth. I feel longing. I feel…love?

I look upon the face of the person to which the hand is attached. At that moment—for me, at least—time itself stops.

Tiffany.

Here she stands before me. It’s impossible, yet somehow true.

I’ve never been one to contemplate what I would do if I were to encounter the ghost of a dead loved one; as an agnostic, I would have brushed off any such notion as being so unlikely as to be ridiculous. But I know there are many people out there of a more spiritual persuasion who have thought about just such a thing, and actually, there’s probably more than a handful that have obsessed over the thought.

But I’m here to tell you, as far as my personal experience goes, none of those ideas about what you might say or do if you did in fact come face-to-face with someone you knew in life who “passed on” will mean much to you at that moment.

Looking upon her, I find my body is encased in total numbness. My thoughts at this moment are essentially nonexistent. I am disconnected from my body, witnessing the whole event as though it were a movie.

Her hair, fair blond, is curled—I always loved when she wore it curled—and shoulder length. She’s wearing the strapless turquoise dress she last wore when we went to senior prom.

That was in May of 2005.

It was a warm, humid night, the first flakes of snow still far from mind.

Tiff always wanted us to dance in the snow; thought it would be the most romantic moment we could share. I told her one day we would.

She extends her arms, as though to embrace me.

Words come from my mouth, though I do not consciously intend
them to.

“It’s snowing, Tiff. It’s finally snowing on us.”

Her reply is a smile, a smile that always lit her face up and revealed her dimples, and even now does the same. I find her brown eyes are still like burning embers. I always said those eyes could see right into my soul. Where she comes from now, that might just be true, I think.

I want to ask her how she was able to return to me, but I don’t.

I want to tell her how badly I miss her, how it felt like I died in the accident with her…

She wraps her arms tightly around my neck, pressing the small form of her body against me, nuzzling her face against my shoulder, and my mind ceases to wonder. No more questions come.

As I hug her back, I find my hands are shaking. Her body, once so familiar to my touch, now feels strange. It’s been two years since I last held her, I think, and this, if it’s anything, is strange!

I know she is dead, yet she feels so alive.

I can feel her chest lightly rising and falling against my body. She’s breathing. Do ghosts breathe? My evidence points to yes.

She kisses me and damned if that doesn’t feel real, too. More than feeling real, it feels right, as though the life I had been living for the past two years, the one where the trucker with too many drinks under his belt continued to feel such an obligation to get his cargo of Charmin to Kentucky that he felt it worthy of the life of a young girl named Tiffany Hart, were a bad Lifetime movie.

Our lips part. We stand looking into each other’s eyes for a drawn-out moment, her seemingly as amazed to see me here as I am to see her.

And now we’re at the part where, if this were a Lifetime movie, we would say “I love you” and grab one another up in a passionate embrace as the snow fell in our winter wonderland. The soundtrack would kick in, and the end credits would start rolling…

The snow is falling, and I suppose you could say this is a winter wonderland, if you ignore the white heap that, underneath, is a sedan
parked in the driveway. But now, at
the part where we proclaim our love
for one another and embrace, we do
something very different.

We start to dance.

That’s right; we’re dancing
now…dancing in the snow.

Despite the present backdrop,
it feels like it’s May of ‘05 again.
My ears, prone to playing tricks all
night, roll the volume up on
Spandau Ballet—“True”—and I
will not be at all surprised if I turn
around and see cardboard palm
trees and stuffed parrots from our
Tropical Romance prom theme
setting about in the snow.

Now Tiff does something
strange, given that anything could be
considered strange when the person
that “strange” is describing has just
come back from the dead.

She pauses, lets me go, and blows
a kiss right into the center of my face.
My eyes shut reflexively.

I open them.

She’s gone.

No Tiff. No footprints, either.
I’m standing alone in the snow, and
it’s now that I first became aware of
just how cold I am. I ignore it, zipping
up my leather jacket, and continue to
stand statue-like, freezing.

“Dude…what’re you doing?”

It’s Brad, hanging out the side
door, his Nine Inch Nails hoody pulled
tightly around his chubby features.

“Just…” I numbly shake my
head, “…watching the snow.”

He stares for a second, as though
he’s looking at someone who has just
lost their mind (and I may very well
have), shakes his head, and disappears
back in through the door.

I trudge back beneath the carport
and stomp the snow off my shoes
on the aged concrete. My hands are
starting to look blue, and I barely feel
anything when I brush the light layer
of snow off my shoulders.

I glance back toward mine
and Tiff’s wintry dance floor. There
are no cardboard palm trees. No
stuffed parrots, either. And there’s
definitely no Spandau Ballet.

A shudder runs down my
spine. Most likely it’s the cold wind,
but I swear…it feels just like a
hand caressing my back. Perhaps it
is, my newly-revitalized spiritual
side speculates.

I go through the side door and pause on the rug, bending down to untie my saturated shoes. In the living room, a late-night news broadcast has replaced Cheech and Chong. Rob, undoubtedly awakened by Brad, is discussing a video he saw on YouTube.

Now would be a good time for one of those Heinekens, I decide.
“Of all the things she could’ve done to me, this was the worst!” Those are the first words I heard before I even opened my eyes that morning. It was my father’s voice and before I wondered who he was talking to I wondered what I had done.

My stomach lurched with anxiety as my mind raced back over the events of the day before. I had spent most of the day with my friend Connie from next door. She was two years older than me and always had great ideas for adventures. Since I was the only girl in the neighborhood (besides her three older sisters) I was lucky enough to be included in most of them.

One time Connie had the idea to climb up the enormous rock on the back side of our property. We called it Frog Rock because, well, it looked like a frog. Climbing it was easy. Climbing down was another story. Connie had to climb down and get my dad and he had to climb up and help me climb down step by step. Another time she wanted to go on a hike further into the woods than we had ever been before. We got extremely lost. We were chased by dogs, crossed a river on a fallen tree and when we finally emerged from the woods nine hours later we were two towns away from home. She taught me to tie my shoes, to ice skate, to make forts and skip rocks. She was the best friend I had ever had.

We had wanted to build a secret tree house but we couldn’t find a tree big enough that we could also climb so we ended up starting a triangle tree house just a few feet off the ground with a trap door. We planned to fix it up really cool and hang posters and put in carpeting and curtains. Maybe we would even be allowed to sleep in it once we finished. It felt good to have a secret. I couldn’t wait to get back out there and work on it some more. We had gotten permission to take the scrap wood from our neighbors. All except Mrs. Swann. We had needed another long board and we knew she had lumber out behind her car port. I felt guilty stealing from her. Maybe she had seen us and told my dad. I doubt it- Dad wasn’t friends with any of our neighbors. They were all too straight laced for him.

The next voice I heard was Mark urging my father to keep it down so as
not to wake me. Mark was technically a friend of my parents but he was only 14 years older than me. I had decided when I was only five that when I grew up I was going to marry him. One day I even got the nerve to tell him before running away embarrassed from bearing my soul.

My attention returned to the conversation. I strained to hear more so that I could begin constructing my apology. I could smell coffee in the air. I didn’t like the taste of it, but I loved the smell. My grandparents’ house always smelled like coffee and that was my favorite place in the world. My grandmother always did my hair and made the very best bologna and Miracle Whip sandwiches. I heard the percolator and my dog snoring softly. No more voices now, only an acoustic guitar. Strumming softly and gently and easing the anxiety in my chest. I heard my father’s car start up and roar down the driveway.

I got out of bed and padded to the kitchen in my nightgown. I peered around the corner and saw Mark with his head down, eyes closed, strumming. He must’ve felt me looking at him because he looked up through thick dark rimmed glasses at me. His hair, long to his waist, was loose. I asked him where my father was and he told me that he had gone to see my mother. I tried to not look surprised as I took my favorite Happy Days bowl out of the dish drainer and filled it with milk and cereal and headed for the living room. Well, at least my dad wasn’t talking about me this morning and my secret criminal life was still secret.

My mother had gone on vacation with her friend Irene. She was supposed to be going to Pennsylvania for a week and then coming back. She had never been on a vacation without us before that I knew of. When she was packing I told her that I was afraid that she was never coming back. She told me that she would always come back. But it had been three weeks.

I had heard my father making phone calls asking friends if they had seen her. I heard him call hospitals and describe her. He’d filed a missing persons report. He cried a lot.

One night several months before I woke to yelling and the sound of
something crashing. I stayed in my bed listening. I heard the word ‘divorce.’ I had heard it before and knew what it was although I don’t remember where I learned it. A little while later my mother opened my door and seeing that I was awake sat down on the edge of my bed. She cocked her head to the side and looked at me, but didn’t reach out to touch me. She rarely touched me. Nervously I held my stuffed bear and asked her, “Are you and Daddy getting a divorce?” “No,” she said. “If you DID get a divorce who would get me?” “I would,” she answered. “Who would get the house?” “I would,” she said. I continued to ask about the dogs and cats and furniture until I was satisfied. I felt sad that my dad wouldn’t get anything but it was just a game anyway because they weren’t getting a divorce.

It was a Saturday morning so I took my breakfast into the living room to watch cartoons. I pulled the bean bag chair across the uncarpeted linoleum floor to right in front of the TV and switched it on. It slowly came to life. We had a color TV that my parents had gotten on a tag sale last spring. I turned the knob hard and quick until it landed on ‘8.’ Good- the picture was clear. We didn’t have an automatic antenna like my grandparents had. If the TV didn’t come in one of us would have to stay and watch it while the other went outside and turned the antenna pole with a big pipe wrench until the watcher shouted to stop. If I was alone I would turn it a quarter turn and have to keep running back to see if it was tuned in.

An hour or so later I was watching Road Runner and hoping this would be the day that the Coyote finally caught and ate him when Connie got there. My dad still hadn’t returned and Mark had left without another word shortly after I got up.

Connie sat down on the couch behind me. I call it a couch but it was really someone’s old porch swing set on cinder blocks. It had big ugly green and gold flowers on it. Most of the decorations in the house were homemade. My mother embroidered and my father drew. Jonathan Livingston Seagull hung on one wall of the living room, and renditions of
Moody Blues album covers hung on another. Even at nine years old I was embarrassed by my house. Connie never said anything about it though. I think she knew she would hurt my feelings.

She was what I considered a jock. She had earned the Presidential Physical Fitness Award every year in elementary school and had even won the jump rope competition on field day. I had never earned a Presidential Physical Fitness Award because I couldn’t do the flex arm hang. I dropped like a stone every time. She was the youngest of four girls and she had a beautiful house that smelled like lemons. Her living room was black and red with Spanish Mediterranean style furniture in dark wood and crushed velvet with thick red drapes over the wall sized windows. I liked sitting in the living room while I waited for her and imagine what it would be like to live there with three sisters. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters. Connie’s mother worked but was always home when we were there. She always hugged her girls, and she tended to reach out and touch you when she talked to you. It made me uncomfortable and jealous all at once. I didn’t see her father very much. He worked a lot. With four daughters I guess he had to. My parents were home every night and usually had a house full of friends there to party.

When the commercial came on Connie asked where my dad was. I told her that he went to see my mother. I watched her for any reaction. This was news after all since she knew that my mother was “missing.” She said maybe he went to get her, which is what I was hoping but I didn’t think so. Just by the sound of his voice this morning I knew that it was bad.

I pulled on shorts and a tank top and slipped on sneakers with no socks and without brushing my hair or my teeth headed out to the garage. I grabbed a coffee can full of nails and a hammer. I saw the hand saw and decided not to take that. My rear end took quite a beating the last time I used the hand saw. I tried to saw down a twenty foot pine tree from our back yard for no reason at all other than to see if I could. I got the saw in about an inch before I lost interest. Just enough
to mar the tree. I don’t know what I was thinking. A few weeks after that, my dad was outside playing his guitar looking over the pond that was just beyond the tree. He stopped playing mid strum and strained his eyes to the tree and set off in that direction. I knew I was dead. The worst part wasn’t the spanking, it was the questioning. “Why? Why would you do that?” I had no explanation. Even I didn’t know why I did it. Yeah. Leave the hand saw at home this time.

Connie and I spent the morning nailing the boards up to the fort. It was really taking shape. Looking back now it was a complete eyesore with mix match boards that didn’t fit but to us it was a masterpiece and it was ours. I was holding up an end of a piece of particle board while Connie hammered when I heard my dad’s car. The good thing about having a parent with a crappy car is that pretty much no matter how far away I was I could hear him coming. He drove an Oldsmobile with no muffler and a cracked windshield. If it had an inspection sticker on it, he bought it from someone. I don’t know if my father ever had a legal car my whole life. One time he and my mother were in a VW bug and a wheel came off while going down a hill next to the middle school. The crossing guard was rushing all the kids out of the street as the rogue wheel rolled off ahead of their car. Another time I had a friend with me and our car’s engine just burst into flames. We all got out safely but my friend had to call her parents from a store and they came to pick her up. I don’t think she ever came over to play again.

I told Connie that I had to go and dropped my end of the board and took off as fast as my feet could carry me. I ran down the well beaten path through the woods and emerged in the back corner of our property and then ran down the hill that I sled down in the winter. I ran so fast that my feet could hardly keep up. I opened the door to the glassed in back porch and then into the house looking for my mother. “Please let her be here, please,” I prayed to myself. When I got to the kitchen I stopped in my tracks, breathing heavy, as my heart sank in my chest.
My father stood in the kitchen. His head was down and his shoulders shook as he cried. I walked slowly toward him unsure what to do. My mother wasn’t here. When I got to him he raised his face just enough to meet mine. His eyes were swollen and his face red and blotchy. His voice broke as he said, “She left us. She’s not coming back.” I put my arms around him while he sobbed and in that moment my life changed forever. I never finished the tree house. I stepped out of my shoes and into hers.
In an old photo in the middle of the grouping, two girls sit on two tricycles by a city street, wearing heavy, woolen coats and matching grins. In the months before the move, Emmett had studied picture groupings in decorating books he borrowed from the library. Then he spent the evening hours of several days in the new house working at it with a pencil, level, and stud finder. The pencil gripped between his teeth, he slowly ran the stud finder across, then up, and then down. When the finder beeped and lit consistently, he extracted the pencil and marked the spot for a picture hook.

Of the nine pictures in the group, Emmett favored the old one of Dorothy and her sister on tricycles. “Guess who that is,” he’d grin when guests stopped by. He loved the photo because the girls looked so happy and free.

When Emmett unveiled the bicycle he bought Dorothy for her 65th birthday, she thanked him, willing her racing heart and moist palms not to betray her. Emmett meant well—he always did—and she maintained an appreciative smile, though all she felt was dread. Being active had become so difficult, painful, and frightening. During the move, she found a trophy she won in a tennis tournament long ago. Ancient history. Her knees went first. They had lasted long enough to lug boxes to her daughter’s first apartment before she gave heavy lifting duties solely to Emmett. While he huffed and puffed with bookcases and dresser drawers, she taught her daughter how to choose a good cucumber.

“You want it to be firm, not soft,” she said, gripping and pressing along the length of the vegetable. She paused as the two women shared a look and burst into giggles.

After her knees went her hands, then her neck, her back, and finally her balance. Age was too great an opponent. She fought hard but it was a fight she couldn’t win.

The fat tires on the birthday gift reassured her a little. She channeled memories of her children learning to ride their bikes on the street in front of the old house. The sun set low as her daughter, crying with frustration,
mounted the little two-wheeler over and over again. “Stay up, stay up, stay up,” Dorothy had whispered from the porch, clutching her hands in prayer. Her son caught on quicker; Emmett caught him trying to pry off his training wheels once his big sister could ride. Dorothy hoped to land somewhere in between.

She turned away from Emmett as she straddled the bike. She gripped the handlebars and took a deep breath, and then placed her feet on the pedals and pushed.

“Stay up, stay up, stay up,” she whispered.

The movement was forward but abrupt. She wobbled to the right, then overcorrected and pitched to the left. Pressing the handbrakes, she set her feet on the road, and lurched to a stop as the front tire bumped the curb.

“What’s THAT?” Dorothy gasped. “Well, I’ll be damned. I think that’s a tricycle for adults,” Emmett said.

Dorothy sat quietly in the car. She thought about how, as she had grown older, she had become more like a child. She called her daughter for help with paperwork and remote controls; asked her son for rides when she had to drive at night. She wobbled on a bicycle like her daughter did 30 years ago when Emmett first removed her training wheels.

As they pulled into the parking lot motion on the side of the bike shop caught her eye. A woman throttled around the far corner of the shop, wearing a bright pink helmet, a flower-patterned shirt, gray sweatpants, and a huge smile.

“She’s going to work,” Dorothy gasped. “Well, I’ll be damned. I think that’s a tricycle for adults,” Emmett said.

Dorothy watched the woman fly around the lot, sitting comfortably on a big, wide seat twice the normal size, head held high and steady on three wheels.

“Well, now I’ve seen everything,” she muttered.

She marched into the store and approached the first salesman in sight.

“Show me the tricycle,”
she demanded.

“You’ll have to wait for Kathleen to get off that one,” he chuckled.

By the time they processed the return of the bike, the blue tricycle waited out back. The trike operated with no gears and stopped with one handbrake. Dorothy fastened the helmet and sat on the trike. With confidence, she lifted her feet and looked toward Emmett.

“Look! I can sit here without pedaling and I won’t fall!”

“That’s not really the point,” he said.

She ignored him and turned her gaze forward. She tested the right-side pedal, moving forward, and forward only. She gripped the handbrake for a slow, controlled stop.

She exhaled. “Huh,” she said.

Dorothy pushed her left foot, then her right, and then her left again and then kept going for one full, tentative lap. She completed another, then a third, with each lap faster than the one before it. Her arms relaxed and her hair streamed behind her, like ribbons on handlebars. On the fourth lap, she detected the pain in her legs; not arthritic or destructive, but the beautiful pain of activity, of muscle tension, and of promise. With her mind convinced she could ride, the pain told her body she needed to do it more. This pain made her smile. On her fifth and final lap, Emmett caught the wide grin on her face and thought she looked as happy and free as in the old photo.

She came to a perfect stop at Emmett’s feet. Her cheeks flushed with heat, her breath came in deep gasps.

“It’s a senior citizen tricycle!” she exclaimed.

Emmett hugged her. “Happy Birthday, honey.”
This journal contains the winning student submissions in the 2012 Sherwood Forest Art & Literary Review contest. This annual competition is sponsored by the Office of Student Activities at John Tyler Community College. For additional information, contact Helen McKann at 804-594-1523 or hmckann@jtcc.edu.

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