

1

# DORM-GRADE CHILI

FOR THE  
COLLEGE  
STUDENT'S  
SOUL

OVERCOOKED BEANS, MYSTERY  
MEAT, AND TRUE STORIES ABOUT  
COLLEGE LIFE

As told by the Rhetoric 243 class of Carol Spindel  
Fall 2009

Campus Honors Program  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Podcast Editor: Ian Williams  
Music Editor: Dave Korenchan  
Print and Layout Editor: Tara McGovern

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

NO PLACE LIKE HOME	3
Gwendolyn Wydra	
I JOINED, YOU SHOULD TOO	4
Kay George	
AT LEAST THE BENEFITS ARE GOOD	5
Lauren Onderisin	
“WHAT’S MY NAME AGAIN?”	6
Rose Yang	
THE “OTHER” ME	7
Ian Williams	
TAKE A SEAT	8
Allison Dehnel	
LOOKING FOR NOTHING	9
Elena Stuewe	
THE FAUN OF ALLEN HALL	10
Tara McGovern	
COMPUTING THE FUTURE	11
Dave Korenchan	
OPENING A DOOR	12
Sarah Peters	
HAIR	13
Daniel Cohen	
[FROM THE FILES OF TEAM LEADER MCBUCKET]	14
Gretchen Bromann	
REPEAT	15
Jenna Holland	
SECOND HELPINGS: MORE STORIES BEYOND COLLEGE	16
REVIVAL FEVER	17
Allison Dehnel	
CULTURE AND CUISINE	19
Kay George	
BIGGER AND BETTER	20
Gwendolyn Wydra	
THE CAT LADY	21
Sarah Peters	
AN AWKWARD WALKING EXPERIENCE	22
Daniel Cohen	
INTO XIBALBA	23
Tara McGovern	

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME

By Gwendolyn Wydra

Confused, I compared the two keys in my hands. Yes, I was using the right one – the closet key, rather than the door key. I compared the two beds smashed into the tiny room. Yes, I was standing next to the bed that was not lofted, which my roommate and I had decided would be mine. Why, then, couldn't I get the adjacent closet open? The dull silver lock taunted me from its place on the smooth amber door. I was in the middle of trying to will it open when my roommate came in.

"Can you get your closet open? I don't think my key works," I said as she carried in boxes filled with novels about dragons and pictures of her and her boyfriend at the Renaissance Fair.

"That's my closet," she told me. "The key they gave me opens that one."

"Oh," I said, relieved that the door was locked for some reason other than my own personal failings. "I guess they gave us the wrong keys. Let's switch."

"Ehh. No."

I stared blankly at her. "Why not?"

"I already put my stuff in there." She moved to what should have been my closet and opened it, revealing a winter coat and a vacuum. "I don't feel like moving all that again."

*Are we looking at the same closet?* I wondered. *Is some of her stuff invisible?* "It's not that much stuff," I said hesitantly.

She sighed, annoyed. "Gwen, I'm tired, and I don't want to deal with this right now," she said, locking the closet.

Though I was frustrated, I decided this wasn't the end of the world. So I would have to walk diagonally across the room to the closet next to her desk instead of the one next to my desk, so what? *Besides*, I told myself, *you still have all the space under your bed*. Inside under-bed drawer number one, though, were piles of tapered-leg jeans and kitten-adorned T-shirts that I was pretty sure weren't mine. Panicking, I went to the second drawer, in which I was horrified to find my roommate's original hand-written manuscript of her story about people who morphed into cats and fought dragons. I swiveled on my heels and saw that the space under the lofted bed was equally full, packed with plastic boxes in which I could just make out some socks, also decorated with cats.

"You can't take the drawers under my bed *and* the space under your loft!" I cried.

With the hint of an attitude, she replied, "Sorry, but where was I supposed to put my pants?"

I felt my eyes widen in disbelief. "In the closet. In the closet across from your bed."

"Ehh. Too much work."

Dazed, I unlocked the closet she had assigned to me only to find myself unable to open it all the way. There, at the base of the door, were dark green, curly-toed elf shoes. Mold-colored laces snaked from a mossy green cave onto a bed of suede grass covering the shoes' surface. Like a tree's gnarled root erupting from a flower bed, the emerald footwear rose from the carpet and slowed my unpacking yet again.

I turned again to face my roommate, who, to my horror, was throwing all of my things, including my sneakers, their soles caked with mud and dust and sweat from the dorm staircase, onto my freshly-made bed. "What are you doing?" I asked in bewilderment.

"I need to vacuum, and your stuff's in the way," she said without looking at me.

At a total loss for words, I stood with my fists clenched outside my second-choice closet that wouldn't open and stared at my boxes of clothes with no place to go, blocked by the green roadblocks at my feet. I glared at her as she arranged my shoes on my pillow, and, in a sudden moment of defiance, pelted her ugly green shoes onto the lofted bed.

She looked at me angrily. "Don't touch my stuff!"

I just stared at her. "I needed to get into my closet, and your shoes were in my way."



# At Least the Benefits are Good

By Lauren Onderisin

I was raised on a strict diet of hard work and diligence. No success was easy; no windfall came free. Naturally, I grew up believing that hard work was the way of the world and all its inhabitants.

Cut to my first day on the job as a secretarial assistant at the University of Illinois. I approached the door of my new office ten minutes early with visions of dancing file cabinets just on the other side, ready for me to tackle. However, as I pulled the door handle, the images of parading cabinets vanished. The door was locked. Five, ten, fifteen, and twenty minutes passed as I waited outside the locked door.

Ten minutes after my scheduled arrival time, the door slowly slid open, and my boss appeared. If it's true that people often look like their pets, then my boss must own several parakeets. Slight, with a bright yellow ensemble and teased hair erupting from a single point atop her head, she flitted about the office absentmindedly. After my first two hours of being at work (I use the term sarcastically), I remained unclear of the details of my position. In those two hours I had, however, acquired enough knowledge of the office politics to make me mistrust every other employee in the building.

Before I could dwell too fervidly on the audacity of the latest water-cooler scandal, though, my parakeet supervisor introduced me to my first major project. Since my references had reported to her that I am a hard worker, she told me she expected that I could complete the project in about a week.

Five, ten, fifteen, and twenty minutes passed by in the file room. I had completed my first project, double-checked my work, and watched the second hand rotate the clock for two minutes. Refusing to sit idly any longer, I reported to my boss, hoping for reassignment to my next task.



Instead, the bright parakeet molted into a searing hawk; her beak snapped at me.

If I finish my work this quickly, the rest of the department looks lazy. A single talon pointed menacingly toward me, still red and lacquered.

Do I *want* to make the department look lazy? Her cashmere wingspan shadowed the wall behind her.

I heard the two campus bell towers strike noon, slightly out of sync with one another. My bright parakeet reappeared before me, the hawk's black eyes morphing into nothing but dark mascara by the time the twelfth bell count struck. "It's time for my lunch break. See you tomorrow," she tweeted.



I Joined,  
You Should  
Too

By Kay George

Quad Day. As a freshman, this day can be completely overwhelming. It is the day in which the university's myriad student organizations set up booths on the quad in an attempt to show off what they do and to recruit new members. My freshman year, I had no idea what to expect. After wandering around for over an hour, I had accumulated a bag full of giveaways, everything from pens to magnets to T-shirts. In my friend's attempt to collect every free item, she had signed me up for a variety of organizations (I still get emails from the Knitting Illini and the Harry Potter fan club). But even after all that walking, I hadn't found anything that truly interested me, until I heard a girl, draped in colorful scarves and wearing dangly earrings that reminded me strongly of the gypsy women I had seen in Spain, yell, "Are you interested in volunteering abroad?"

"Well, I've never really thought about it before, but yeah, I guess," I replied, reluctantly adding another flyer to my stack. She beamed back at me, offering up a thin woven bracelet from a pile she explained proudly had come from the children she had worked with in Ecuador. I have to say I was impressed that kids my age were willing to spend their time fundraising and organizing volunteer trips without any outside assistance. They were willing to forgo a well deserved winter break with friends and

family (and even cherished New Year's festivities!), dedicating their time instead to people who, in the beginning anyway, were total strangers. In high school I wasn't exactly a joiner; in fact I hadn't lasted in any club for more than a year, but as she described the application and interview process for trip participants, I found myself hoping they would accept me and eager to prove what I could contribute to the organization.

Little did I know that less than two years later, I would be an executive member of this service organization, International Impact. Last week, I was the one sitting at the booth on quad day recruiting new members, regaling them with stories from my unforgettable trips to Peru and Guatemala, eagerly pointing out pictures on the poster board of my group teaching English in the town's *biblioteca* or of another group helping save turtles in Costa Rica. Truthfully, I tell them, I probably would never have known of this organization's existence if it hadn't been for Quad Day. So even though it's hot, it's crowded, and you may find most of the booths on Quad Day either lame or outright bizarre, it's worth exploring. Students show up to work Quad Day because they are passionate about their organization, and they hope that you will discover a similar passion, for their organization or any other. All you have to do is get out there, get involved, and find out what really matters to you.

# HELLO

## MY NAME IS

### “What's my name again?”

By Rosie Yang

I was born Yang Ruo Xi, hailing from the city of Nanjing in the Jiangsu Province of China. The Yang stood for my family, the Ruo for strength and perseverance, and Xi for hope. For the next five years, four months, and 22 days, I was content and couldn't imagine a different name for myself. That complacency vanished in the middle of the Pacific ocean on a flight from Shanghai to Chicago. All of a sudden, my five-year-old brain had to grasp the concept of first names and last names, not just family names. So, I had become Ruoxi Yang. However, my parents decided to

Americanize the pronunciation and started calling me Rosie. I remember it was my first night in America and I was lounging on my parents' ugly bronze couch when my father shoved a battered Chinese-American dictionary in front of my face.

“Look, can you read that? It's rose, a type of beautiful flower.”

I understood the meaning, but not the significance of what my father was trying to convey to me.

“That's going to be your new name, it's close to Ruoxi. Do you like it?”

I had no say in my name change, but I don't think I really had anything to say. I went along my merry way and enrolled in kindergarten. Up until sophomore year, Rosie and Ruoxi Yang were one and

the same because it was me. That summer, I applied for a work permit at my high school so I could work at the local pool. I had to bring in my social security card, which said Ruoxi Yang. I didn't think it was a big deal and had filled out Rosie Yang, like I had filled out every other form. The secretary who processed the work permit paperwork gave me a funny look and my world shifted. What do you mean I couldn't be two names? The secretary changed my school records to Ruoxi (Rosie) Yang, without consulting me. Again, I don't think I could've offered anything constructive in this interchange and I felt comfortable with Ruoxi (Rosie).

So along I went on my merry way again, until I got to college. Here, there are no modified names. The University of Illinois only recognizes Ruoxi Yang. That's when my name started to bother me. After

eighteen years of being Rosie, who is the university to tell me that I'm not? I am only Ruoxi on paper, but I exist beyond paper. Physically, I am Rosie. I've decided I've had enough of pretending to be Ruoxi and having people mispronounce my name. This year, I have finally taken an active role in naming myself. With the help of the student legal services office, I am going to be Rosie Ruoxi Yang, because Ruoxi is still a small part of me.

# THE “OTHER” ME

By Ian Williams

It seems that in each of our lives there exists a person who annoys the living hell out of us. They might not seem all that annoying to others, but everything they do makes your stomach churn like you'd eaten some bad sweet and sour pork the night before. They may be the

Other Me sits there, eyes wide and mouth spewing forth words faster than a machine gun, is usually talking about a film or television show that he is a fan of, while his unfortunate victim sits in stunned silence, unable to escape. Once I walked in on one such session that pushed my blood pressure to levels usually only seen in retail clerks on the day after Thanksgiving. That night I found Other Me and his victim sitting in front of his computer listening to music. Not just any



most friendly and helpful person around, but to you they become an emotional trip-mine, and each time they speak you imagine tying them to the back of a semi and telling the driver to just keep going till he hits Wyoming. For me that person is a neighbor of mine on my dorm floor, with whom I have the distinct pleasure... well, the coincidence, of sharing a name. For the first two years of my college experience I have lived a few yards away from a bizzaro version of myself, complete with a similar hair style and color, as well as a strange number of common interests, but with the unique ability to elicit a deep, unrelenting rage from the darkest corners of my soul.

I am often asked, “Which one are you again? Are you the one who I always hear singing?”

“What kind of singing?” I respond, already knowing their reply.

“You know, kind of off-pitch pop-rock with mediocre guitar playing to accompany.”

“Oh, no, I’m the one who sings show tunes in the shower” – an answer that usually ends the conversation. One of our other neighbors made a rather apt description of him saying, “He’s enthusiastic, but he just doesn’t know when to stop.” I have often come home to find Other Me and an unfortunate fellow resident locked in conversation.

music, but one of my favorite musicals. And you know who had decided to sing along. This act of musical theatre evangelism hit me hard. Not only did he steal my name, now he stole my music! And that was when I realized exactly why I didn’t like the Other Me. My whole life I had only known a handful of people with my name, and none of them were ever that much like me. On top of that I was an only child, so I had never had to deal with another person being so much like me and having people constantly compare me to him. So when I hit college and was confronted with my doppelganger, I just kind of snapped. It’s like my subconscious immediately decided that I would never like him or anything related to him.

My irrational hatred of him came to a point last spring, when I had to work with him and four other students to plan freshman orientation for our floor. Every week he would come to our meetings with another idea for what we could do, that, no matter how good it may have been, I hated. A floor soccer game? *Please, like international students like soccer.* An ice cream social? *What are we in, fourth grade?* Free pizza for everyone? *Well, that could....damn he got me with that one.*

DORM-GRADE CHILI FOR THE COLLEGE STUDENT’S SOUL

# Take a Seat

By Allison Dehnel

One activity almost always occurs simultaneously with learning, and that is sitting. Few classes on this campus manage to teach students without first providing them chairs. The exceptions offer college students the opportunity to pull a muscle in class by utilizing bowling lanes or the ice arena, but the predominant learning environment at the University of Illinois is the lecture hall. While large lectures are a common part of the university experience, each lecture hall offers its own unique perks and torture devices. After accumulating four years of lecture hall expertise, I consider myself a seasoned sedentary learner and offer this handy review of popular lecture halls for fellow and future students.

## Noyes 100

I have had the pleasure of enduring four courses in this torture chamber of education. In order to seat around three hundred grumpy chemistry students, the architect ingeniously decided to sacrifice leg room, leaving it to students to find creative positions to avoid bruising their knees and going numb in the course of fifty minutes. The front row and aisles are extremely popular for this reason. Unfortunately, all the left-handed desks are situated in the aisles, and are invariably filled by lanky righties. This leaves lefties like me to either adopt a contortionist pose or give up using the little fold-up desks altogether. Despite the discomfort, Noyes 100 offers decent lighting and acoustics, so the only barrier to learning in this room is overcoming your physical suffering. If you have to take a class here, I recommend also taking up Buddhism, or arriving early enough to grab a good seat.

## Library 66

This lecture hall offers a special challenge to new students by being virtually impossible to find. Many students make the mistake of showing up to the library for the first day of class or an exam with five minutes to spare and no previous knowledge of the room's location. A rat race ensues, with stressed students scurrying from one haphazardly taped sign with an arrow to the next. The paper arrows lead students through a labyrinth past false doors and dark corners with exposed pipes, until the relieved students finally stumble upon a modern, comfortable lecture hall hidden in the bowels of the library. More savvy lecture-goers use shortcuts such as the elevator or the outdoor basement entrance. Once you find the lecture room, you can sit back and relax, and soak up a wealth of knowledge from your cushioned chair.

## Foellinger Auditorium

This behemoth room hosts all manner of introductory courses and electives with high student enrollment. Professors have the liberty of pacing the entire stage, and laser pointers are a must to highlight the important information presented on a projector screen



the size of four elephants. The dim lighting of the interior makes it easy to find a cozy spot where you won't draw attention to yourself as you nod off. The decrepit desks are perhaps the worst drawback to attending class here, as they discourage note-taking and thus encourage power-napping.

## Lincoln Hall Theater

Finally, I must take a moment to pay homage to my very first lecture room, the late, great Lincoln Hall Theater. Although indefinite renovation plans have retired this historic theater from its use as a classroom for upwards of six hundred students, it holds a place in the hearts of many who have graced its creaky and occasionally broken seats. Its regal entrance up a flight of ornate marble steps and around the glowing bust of Lincoln belies the crumbling, musty auditorium within. My chief complaint with the room is the awkward spacing of the stairs, which are extremely short and wide. Climbing the stairs after submitting an exam turns into an awkward dance involving a combination of leaps, lunges, and rapid hops. Fortunately, the renovated theater will fit modern accessibility standards. Lincoln's bronze nose is currently sorely neglected from polishing for good luck as students pass his bust in front of the theater. Hopefully Lincoln Hall will reopen soon and allow students to give the nose a good buffing before they take a seat and prepare to learn.

# LOOKING FOR

# NOTHING

By Elena Stuewe



Looking, searching, seeking. Always the same quest, but pursuing a different reward every time.

It is 10:00 p.m. I run my fingers through my tightly curled hair, loosening it into tousled waves. I examine my makeup, add a touch of lip gloss, an extra coat of mascara. Tradition dictates that I must try to appear attractive, but must not appear as if I am trying to be attractive. Although this is a quest of my own undertaking, its rules are not my own.

My closet door opens to reveal a myriad of sequins and jewel tones, bright reds and turquoises. I choose a dashing, elegant violet satin top, although tonight is no grand premiere – this script has been acted out many times before.

After a last spritz of enticing fragrance, I step out into the brisk night air. Wind tugs at my hair and whips about my bare arms. Shouts and laughter float toward me on the chilled breeze. I quicken my pace, check the time. I have an agenda to adhere to. Finally, as I round a corner, bright lights and raucous noises burst through the darkness. It is 11:00pm.

I stride briskly down the line of chatting stilettoed merrymakers and halt at the sight of friendly faces near the front. I smile, wave, and step over the velvet rope.

I flash my ID to the bouncer with practiced ease and saunter over to the bored-looking twenty-something working the cash register. My first test of the evening. I smile, tilt my head, and

make eye contact as I lean towards him and ask how much for cover. He starts slightly, flickers his eyes over me, and shakes his head. “Ah...no. No cover for you.” I smile ingratiatingly and step inside.

The air is warm now, pulsing with music and jostling people. My friends and I snake our way through the crowd to a table overlooking the dance floor. We sit down and begin exchanging clever jokes and tales of quests gone by. I smile and laugh appropriately, all the while keeping my thoughts and eyes on the crowd below us. Finally, I zero in on a target.

I excuse myself to the restroom. As I push through drunken partygoers, I deliberately angle my path to brush past a tall, attractive male, with dark hair and dark eyes. He turns slightly, meeting my glance. I give

him a shy smile and lower my eyes quickly, almost embarrassed – or so it seems. It is midnight.

Half an hour later, the tall, attractive male sidles up to me at our table.

“Hey, how’s it going? Can I get you a drink?” he asks me. We exchange introductions. “I recognized you from class,” he says. Inwardly, I roll my eyes. He’s a business major. I’m a biology major. I have never seen him before in my life.

“Yeah, you do look really familiar,” I say earnestly and touch his arm unnecessarily. He pulls me over to his group of friends to introduce me, mispronouncing my name. The throbbing music filling our ears, we enthusiastically engage in superficial conversation about our activities, hometowns, and musical interests. I pretend to enjoy country music, and lie about being a Cubs fan. I am on autopilot now, the details of the conversation rushing by me like the bustling crowd. Was his name Steve, or was it Brad? Where did he live again? Why am I here?

It is 2:00 a.m. The sharp wind cuts around me. I wrap my arms around myself and tilt my head down as I navigate the silent streets back to my apartment. Alone. Another night, another quest. And the only remaining proof of my endeavor is a ten digit number programmed into my cell phone, titled “Mike from Brothers.”

DORM-GRADE CHILI FOR THE COLLEGE STUDENT’S SOUL



## The Faun of

# Allen Hall

By Tara McGovern

On the first Saturday of the semester, the gorgeous weather drags me outside by my ankles. I perch with my laptop balanced on my knees at the top of a hill overlooking the queerly-shaped retention pond near my dorm. The colors of the trees and sky are exploding with sunlight and the breeze tugs my dress against my legs. Indistinguishable snatches of pop music float across the pond from some event in Illini Grove, overlapping with the soothing splatter of the fountain.

A tall, gangly young man trots out of the trees to my left, carrying a bundle of brightly colored cloth. He's wearing only an earthy brown pair of shorts, his fringe of honey-brown hair bouncing with his swaying gait. I recognize him as Nick, registered hypnotist, president of the Hookah Club, expert in all

things Egyptian, and first-floor Resident Advisor. Nick is somewhat of a celebrity in Allen Hall, embodying the hippie-dementia that makes Allen residents famous. For example, when we discovered last night's torrential downpour, we all rushed outside fully clothed and danced in the rain. Nick took it a step further, stripping down to his shorts and prancing around, improvising tunes on his Egyptian flute.

I watch Nick gambol down the hill and lay down a rich gold-and-crimson cloth, position his luxurious golden hookah, and sit cross-legged beside the pond playing on his flute. The music sways and dips in sync with the brush of the wind past the trees and the quiet rush of the fountain, even blending with the throb from Illini Grove. Suddenly it strikes me that Nick resembles a faun, a goat-legged mythical creature who hypnotizes with flutes and dances in forests.

Nick notices me looking at him and he waves solemnly, offering me a puff on the hookah. I smile awkwardly and shake my head. He repeats the gesture with the flute, and I shake my head again.

The longer I sit here listening to Nick's enchanting music and smelling Nick's delicious hookah, the less I feel like studying. My computer screen is so glossy that I see my reflection more clearly than the faint text beneath. I look like I could be sitting next to Nick, with my exotic chandelier earrings, wispy red scarf, and Middle-East-inspired sundress. I feel like I've fallen into *The Chronicles of Narnia*, not through a wardrobe but through the magic mirror of my computer screen. This laptop is like that lamp post in the deep Narnian woods, the only link between me and the outside world. I could just leave it here, chuck it in the pond, bury it in the bushes, and go sit beside Nick/Mr. Tumnus and be hypnotized by faun flutes and hookah smoke and be queen of Narnia or Egypt or whatever and never come back.

But I won't do that, I know I won't. As tempting and insane and beautiful my imagination is, I will never follow it. That's the line between creativity and insanity, I think; the sane will never let it go, never throw their laptops in the water, never be fully hypnotized. I've only been here a week but that line is becoming thinner and thinner and blurrier and blurrier. I wonder how long I'll last.

# COMPUTING A FUTURE

By Dave Korenchan

There is a strange-looking student sitting outside the entrance to the Grainger Engineering Library. He has shimmering bronze skin, and his brown hair is neatly parted to the right. He wears a white-collared shirt beneath his blue varsity jacket, an Illinois emblem next to the left breast pocket. He has white slacks, tan dress socks, and brown loafers. His legs are crossed, right over left, and he pores over an open book. He sits perfectly still, never turning the page, completely absorbed. On occasion, students pace in front of him and smoke cigarettes, or they sit next to him along the stone side of the building and open a textbook or talk on a cell phone. I wonder where he came from, how long he's been there, what book he could be so engrossed in. I decide to find out.

The library, a massive red-brick building with square windows and a blue roof, towers over the grasses as I stroll across the Bardeen Quad. The statue is there by the library doors, glistening with raindrops, his shiny bronze nose in his book. Glancing around, I take a seat to the statue's left. I tentatively scoot closer and peer over his shoulder to see what he's reading. After a few minutes, I get up and enter the library. I explain to a girl behind the checkout desk that I am curious about the statue outside, and that I am wondering if she knows anything about it.

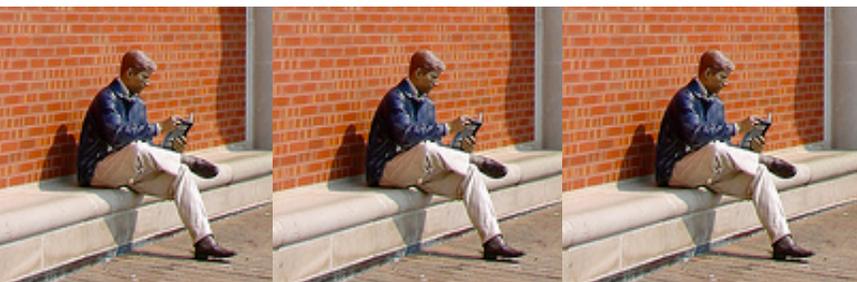
"His name is Kenny," she mumbles. She tilts her head toward the reference desk. "They might know more about him."

With an awkward chuckle, I thank her and walk over to the reference desk. The two receptionists make a quick call on the desk phone, and a lady arrives, introducing herself as the Assistant Engineering Librarian. She explains that the statue's formal name is "Computing a Future," and it was sculpted by John Seward Johnson, Jr. in 1994. The sculpture is cast in wax and overlaid with bronze, and it requires renovation every two years. The book in the statue's hands is a report by the National Research Council in 1992 proposing changes to education to ensure the future viability of computer science and engineering. The library staff endearingly calls him Kenny (after Ken the Barbie doll, the lady informs me), but many of the engineering students give him a different name: Grainger Bob. The lady explains that Kenny has been through a lot; he wore women's lingerie on Valentine's Day, held an umbrella when it rained, and sported an Illinois baseball cap during finals week. She mentions that there is even a Facebook page devoted to



him. I thank her for her time, but before I go, I check out a copy of Kenny's book, a paperback with the words *Computing the Future* in bright red letters on the blue cover.

Resuming my seat next to Kenny, I cross my legs right over left and open my book to the page he is reading. On the left-hand page, a circular diagram depicts computer science and engineering in the center branching out to other disciplines, including art, humanities, business, and medicine. As I consider how important computers are in our daily lives today, I find it funny that the future viability of computer science and engineering was ever in question. I turn and study the pensive figure next to me. When Kenny first took his seat outside of Grainger, he could scarcely imagine the changes a mere decade would bring: an age dominated by laptops and the Internet, the integration of computers into every aspect of modern life. He meditates by the doors, awaiting a future that has already come to pass. And yet he's stuck in time—he should be reading the book from a laptop screen. As I watch Kenny stare eagerly into the open page, I realize that here, as well as on many other college campuses around the world, the future is being shaped by starry-eyed students hard at work, making visions into reality. With a strong sense of pride, I stuff the book into my backpack, say goodbye, and head back across the quad.

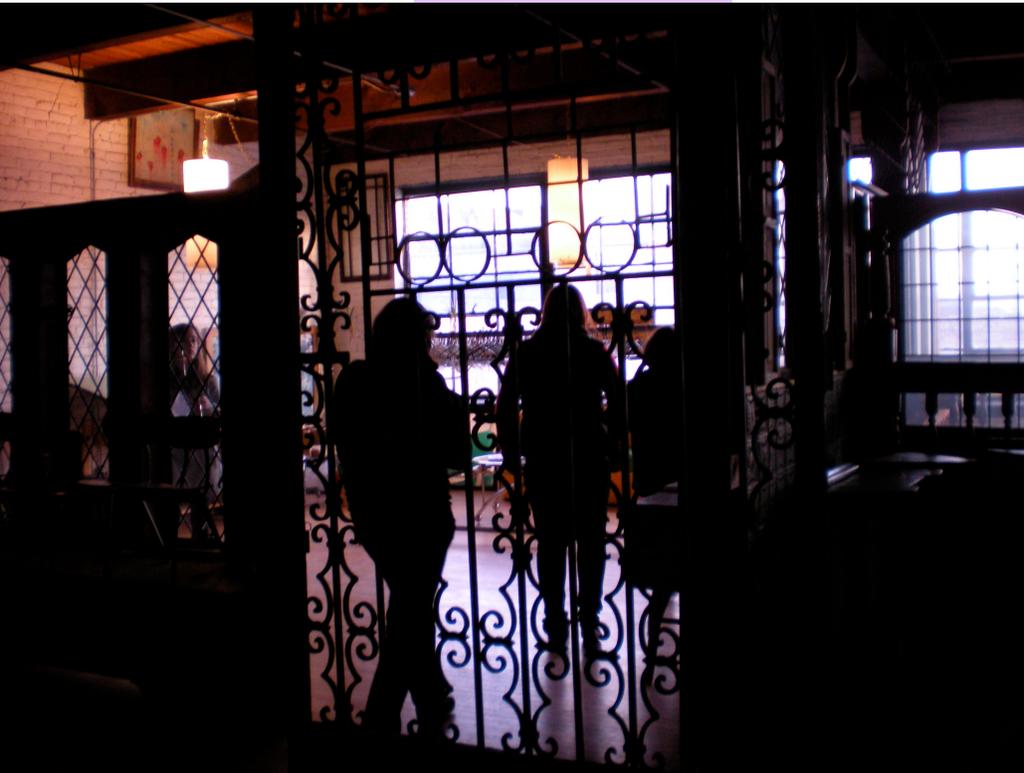


# OPENING A DOOR

By Sarah Peters

“Are you busy?”

When I shook my head, Jim stepped in gingerly, like he was afraid I'd bite him if he crossed the threshold. Awkwardly, he leaned against the sparse dorm room wall. He wore an unmemorable T-shirt and those same khaki shorts that every college boy owns. Jim had a mop of blonde hair



and pale skin that always seemed to be flushed. “I heard you had this open door hour... thought I should stop by.”

I smiled nervously. It was my first year as a resident assistant, and I naively thought that “open door hour” was a good way to build relationships—I mean, get my residents to like me. I put up cute fliers around the floor promising board games and good conversation for anyone who came to my room between nine and ten on Wednesday nights. None of the girls showed up. I hadn't yet learned that it's extremely difficult to get college students to do just about anything, unless of course you offer them free food.

I wasn't really sure why Jim wanted to come visit me. He was in his third year as an RA on my hall's staff; he was the co-worker I knew the least well. Actually, I could only think of one conversation we'd ever had: one of the first days of RA training, I told him about my summer internship in Washington, D.C., and he told me that he'd almost done

an internship in Russia. I thought an American interning in Russia was kind of absurd, but didn't say anything about it. “It fell through,” he said. “My dad thought it was shady.” I laughed.

Anyway, I figured that the awkwardness of the situation at hand was due to the fact that we didn't know each other very well. The list of things I knew about Jim was limited to: 1) he likes video games, and 2) he's a grad student in accounting. We were still at the “What kind of music do you like?” or “Do you have any siblings?” stage of our friendship.

What I thought would be a quick five-minute conversation turned into an hour. We discussed movies and TV shows and books and just whatever else could think to talk about. I learned that he was really into literature and that he enjoyed writing. “Why are you a business major, then?” I asked. “Why not English or something?”

“Well, I figure I can write a book while I spend a few years in a boring job, you know, just to make enough to support myself and... anyone I pick up along the way.”

I laughed hysterically. “That's romance, right there,” he added. Jim's sarcasm, his aloofness, reminded me of myself. We had more in common than I'd thought. Maybe we would be friends after all.

There was a lull in the conversation, and a question I'd really wanted to ask popped into my head. Well, I guess it wasn't really just a question. It was opening a whole can of worms. I knew that one of the RAs from last year, Steven, had committed suicide. I wanted to know the whole story, so I tactlessly blurted out the only thing I knew. “So... Jake came here

after the whole...suicide thing?”

Jake was another RA who had come to take the place of the one who died. I thought that maybe Jake might have some emotional connection to what had happened, so I'd always been too afraid to ask him about it. I thought that Jim, because of his impersonal manner, would be able to give me an objective account. I immediately realized I'd assumed wrong when I saw the pained expression on his face.

“Yes,” he replied. *Shit*. I wanted to hit rewind.

“It was really...hard for us. Steven was my best friend on the staff. I was the one his dad called...I spent a lot of time last year, um...dealing with my...dealing with it.” He looked away. I was sorry I had asked. I was sorry I had referred to his best friend's death as “the suicide thing.” But I was relieved to see Jim let down his guard, to see an emotional human being, if only for a moment.

# Hair

By Daniel Cohen

Pounding feet approached my room as two heated voices continued their argument. I sighed, taking one last look at the blank computer screen in front of me, and turned in time to see them burst through my door. The pair of them made an odd couple. One was short with a chip on his shoulder; the other was tall but perpetually slouching. Both their heads freshly cut, their voices reached a crescendo as they stopped right in front of me.

“Whose hair is longer?” they demanded.

I took a moment to examine the situation. Adam, the short one, seemed ready for a fight. He was breathing heavily and giving me the wide eyes and raised eyebrows that warned of an impending argument. Jordan, the tall slouching one, stayed back, reserved. Each of them paused expectantly, confident that my answer would validate his opinion. I weighed my options, deciding which opponent would be easier to placate.

Unfortunately, my brief hesitation provoked them both into upping the ante. They bent their heads towards me, two warriors being knighted before a king.

“Touch our hair.” No second option was given.

I am not a fan of hair. Don't get me wrong: as long as it stays on people's heads and out of my way, I've got no problem with it. But hair has a sneaky way of intruding onto unwelcome territory, be it my Coldstone ice cream last week or all over the back of my shirt after my most recent haircut.

Usually, I catch hair red-handed and simply ask for new ice cream or change my shirt. This time, however, hair was abandoning stealth and staging a full-out frontal assault on my senses. I nervously looked at the two heads in question.

Jordan's hair was a wavy brown ocean. It had clearly just been cut, but the shortness of the hair did nothing to fix the entangled thickness. I shuddered to think of all the hidden loose strands of hair that surely

must be taking refuge on top of his head, having eluded the common fate of falling to the floor in the barber shop and being swept up by a college kid. Visions flashed before my eyes of my naked, civilized pink hand slipping carelessly into Jordan's hair forest, only to emerge a hairy beast. I forced back down the lump crawling up my throat and turned to weigh Jordan's adversary.

Adam's hair was much less intimidating to look at. Straight, buzz cut, and brown, it almost welcomed my touch. There were no surprises here. I tried to use Adam's head as an escape from the hairy situation.

“Adam's is clearly shorter.” I turned back to my computer, hoping they would both just go away. Of course, this only stirred up a loud commotion of protests. I took a deep breath and turned back to face them, my face a steely mask of determination willing them to leave.

“You have to touch our hair. It's the only way you'll know.”

My resolve weakened. “But, it's clearly--”

“Just touch our hair!”

There was no escape now. Stifling a shudder, I plunged both my pink naked hands into their freshly cut heads of hair. As expected, my left hand completely disappeared into Jordan's hair forest, but it felt oddly comforting, like wearing a woolly mitten. My right hand rested on top of Adam's brittle head, and I noticed that the prickly sensation was oddly pleasant. I began rubbing his head like it was a magic lamp. This ridiculous scene would not be complete without an unassuming visitor to happen across the spectacle. As I raised my eyes to the wide-open doorway, I saw Jordan's girlfriend standing there, her brow creased in puzzled surprise.

“What are you guys doing?” The question hung in the air, an elephant in the room. She looked mildly afraid.

I yanked back my hands, noting with some relief that my left hand remained hairless, and quietly muttered, “Adam's is shorter” before turning back to the computer. Both of them slowly stood, a look of understanding dawning on their faces, and they turned to walk out of the room.



## [from the files of Team Leader McBucket]

By Gretchen Bromann



11:48am: Waffles, Soggy Buns, and I leave Sandellas, with exactly one hour to accomplish our mission.

*Agenda Item A:* to locate item officially known as “cache,” which we believe is being held at the top of the parking garage next to Allen Hall.

*Secret Agenda Item B:* refer to Soggy Buns only as Soggy Buns until he realizes that is the code name Waffles and I have chosen for him.

11:50am: Huddled over Soggy Buns’s iPhone, we examine the target, carefully noting the GPS coordinates, cardinal directions, and distance to the destination. As team leader, I command the unit to “head out.” I hold the phone like a compass as we begin our march. We ruefully regret not having acquired those walkie-talkies we saw at Menards and our inability to army crawl long distances. Soggy Buns hums the James Bond theme song.

11:58am: As we emerge from the shade of a towering white oak and move in the direction of the campus recreation facility, I look down at the coordinates on the iPhone and, momentarily discombobulated, lose our position. We huddle up and re-group; Waffles takes the initiative and by rotating the map a quarter turn, she reorients the unit and sets us back on track. I lose iPhone privileges.

12:01pm: Across the street, the parking garage looms high against the clear blue sky. The wind whips at our hair and tugs at our jackets, and the bright sunlight glares off parked cars that face us like rows of sentries. Through our dark shades, we eye the garage up and down, each of us assessing the entrances, exits, and weak spots of the enemy. We slowly traverse the street, three-abreast.

12:04pm: Before infiltration, we huddle up to review the intel.

*Clue #1:* the GPS coordinates, obtained from the geocaching website. Using the iPhone, Soggy Buns confirms we are headed in the correct direction.

*Clue #2:* the website tells us to “go forth and park.” While there are other parking lots in the area, we feel the cache must be in the parking garage, based on

*Clue #3:* the cache is entitled “The One That Might Give You a Workout.” We believe the cache is located at the top of the garage.

12:08pm: We storm the garage at a sprint. As we bound up the stairs, we take care to yell, “oh, this is such a workout!” and “I feel the burn!” By the time we reach the sixth and final floor, we are no longer sprinting, and we do feel the burn.

12:15pm: We burst onto the rooftop, certain the end of our quest is within grasp. iPhone outstretched, Soggy Buns runs a few feet and then turns in haphazard circles. Waffles and I perform a quick sweep of the mostly barren concrete, noting the two distantly parked lone cars. From this vantage point, campus is a whole different world, a jungle of slated, tar-pitched roofs and small attic windows framed by tufts of colorful treetops and crystal clear skies. In the distance, we can make out the weather vane on the top of the union and the aged Altgeld bell tower. Turning back to our goal, we huddle around Soggy Buns and the GPS, which tells us we are seventy-two feet from the cache. We being to pace, counting our steps aloud, excitement building with each stride. One..two..three...But the iPhone changes its mind, and suddenly we are thirty-six away. Two feet later, we are nine feet away.

12:18pm: We have fanned out. Waffles is sweeping to the north, Soggy Buns to the southwest, and I have taken the east side. We have lost faith in our equipment, since the closest the iPhone gets us is three feet from the cache. We are on our own, trusting our guts and instincts.

12:24pm: What at first seemed such a concrete location—the parking garage—is now a vast and unconquerable beast. After scouring our respective corners, we return, dismayed, to the first corner the GPS indicated. On hands and knees, Soggy Buns looks up a drainage pipe, while Waffles leans over the side, searching for a ledge or hidden crevice. Having no luck, we decide to fan out again.

12:28 pm: Discouraged and empty-handed, we reassess the facts.

*Fact 1:* the parking garage is huge, but without many secure hiding locations. We feel that we should be able to see anything unusual, such as a hidden treasure box.

*Fact 2:* We are not exactly sure what we are looking for. A Tupperware container? Wooden box? Little baggie?

*Fact 3:* the coordinates are only longitude and latitude, without a z-component. We initially ran to the top floor because of the “workout” aspect of the clue, but what if the treasure is on a different floor?

12:29pm: While analyzing the clues, Soggy Buns has a flash of brilliance—“go forth and park” must mean the fourth floor! Enthusiasm for the quest reignited, we race back to the stairwell and down to the fourth floor.

12:35pm: We search up around pipes, between crevices, in sewage drains, and along ledges, but with no luck. Deciding we read too much into the “go forth” clue, we return to the top floor.

12:40pm: Another round of searching turns up no treasure. Disheartened and desperate, we begin to blame previous cache-questers, since they must have moved the box. Next we blame the janitorial staff for throwing it away, and then decide an animal must have taken it. The problem is clearly not within our own elite, three-person unit.

12:43pm: Soggy Buns must leave for work, and Waffles and I have class at one. Hope all but gone, we half-heartedly check every floor on our way down.

12:49pm: Waffles and I are on the ground floor, barely looking. But we have not admitted defeat; before parting ways, we decide to return this weekend, this time more prepared. So if you see two ninjas with walkie-talkies and a tom-tom prowling the parking garage next to Allen Hall, do not be alarmed. We just haven’t given up the quest.



# Repeat

By Jenna Holland

Dear Debtor,

Found you! While I am very impressed with your adventurous spirit and your ability to move across state lines each and every billing period, I would appreciate it if you could please leave a forwarding address next time. I almost didn't find you this month, and I know that you would be heartbroken if you failed to receive this friendly little reminder from your favorite collector.

You may not remember, as it is probable that your years here passed in a haze of drunken frat parties, unfortunate one-night stands, and caffeine highs followed by cafeteria-induced food comas, but you were, in fact, a student at our university. The real reason for your stay on our lovely campus was to attend classes, frequent the library, and gain experience for the real world. Even if you failed to accomplish these things, which is likely given your current employment in the food service industry, we would still like you to pay us for them. In fact, we insist. If you don't pay your outstanding balance, we will continue to stalk you by monitoring your movements, calling you at home, and commandeering your state tax refunds while holding your transcript hostage.

I would also like to inform you that in the time it has taken us to hunt you down, your bill has increased due to late payment charges, collection fees, and as a general penalty for being a delinquent. These additional fees have now doubled your account balance. Unfortunately, most of your infrequent payments up to this point have not even covered these monthly late charges, and your debt continues to compound. If you do not call me by the end of the week, my boss will force me to send you to a collection agency. You will not like this. You will be harassed by a terrifying, anonymous entity that will leave threatening messages on your answering machine and wreak havoc on your credit score. However, if you just send me one little check I promise to be gentle. I look forward to your call.

Have a nice day!

# SECOND HELPINGS



# MORE STORIES BEYOND COLLEGE

# REVIVAL

# Fever

By Allison Dehnel

My first encounter with swing dancing ranks high on the list of most awkward moments in my life. It began with a typically lame weekend night my freshman year, as my friend and I wandered aimlessly through the Illini Union. As we approached the South Lounge, the sound of big band music enticed us. We arrived in the ballroom and discovered people spinning and hopping to the beat of a live swing band. My feet remembered the rhythm of this music from years of tap, and shuffled me onto the dance floor. Caught up in the spirit, I cast off my belongings near the wall and tried to mimic the movements around me.

“Would you like to dance?” Out of nowhere a slightly perspiring man appeared, and extended his hand to me.

“Sure, but I don’t know how.” I sensed that refusing his sweaty hand would have been rude, so I took it and followed him towards the bandstand, looking back to raise my eyebrows at my friend, who laughed and waved. My new partner patiently helped me pick up the basic footwork and turns, and then he decided to get creative.

“Put your hand on my belt while I spin around,” he directed, moving my hand near his belt buckle.

I cast a panicked stare towards my friend near the wall. I don’t even know this guy and he wants me to put my hand where? Mortified, I half-complied with the bizarre request by placing my hand lightly on his waist.

“No, not like that, like this,” he corrected me, once again moving my hand near the danger zone. I turned beet red and flailed slightly, hoping to spur a rescue attempt from my friend on the sidelines. My partner laughed and gave up the move, probably chalking it up to coordination ineptitude on my part.

After the song ended I scurried off to the safety of my friend’s company, bemoaning the fact that she hadn’t seen my distress signal. We huddled up



and agreed upon a subtle red flag gesture for use in future awkward encounters with the opposite sex. Luckily we haven’t thrown up the red flag at any swing dance since the first, and we’ve both attended many dances since then. My first swing dancing experience woke up a part of me that had been dormant since I stopped tap dancing a few years before—I was hooked on swing.

Fortunately, I discovered a group on campus that would satisfy my need to dance, and I enrolled in lessons with the Swing Society at the University of Illinois. Established in 1994, this student-run organization has been a part of the national revival of swing dance since the early days of the mid-nineties movement. They teach several styles of dance that were first popular before World War II, including East Coast Swing, Charleston, and Lindy Hop. They also provide frequent public dances to give members the opportunity to show off their moves and build the following of swing fans. The organization has grown to almost 2,000 participants on the mailing list. Despite the fact that the swing revival has peaked on a national scale, organizations like the Swing Society have taken root on college campuses and in large cities across the country, keeping the dance very much alive.

“You’re kidding me, you swing dance but you’ve never heard of the Squirrel Nut Zippers?”

I shook my head in shame, embarrassed at my apparent lack of swing knowledge.

“Geez, I have to burn you some of their stuff, they’re fantastic,” my friend Charles promised. He explained how this neo-swing band was one of his inspirations for composing a handful of his own swing songs, to be

performed by his own band, once he could find some band mates. He was attempting to convince me to play trumpet. I hesitated to commit because I knew absolutely nothing about new swing music. I loved dancing to the warm, brassy tones of the original big band swing era, like the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Benny Goodman Orchestra, and Louis Armstrong. The only neo-swing music I was familiar with was Brian Setzer's Orchestra, and I wasn't particularly fond of their rougher electric sound. I continued to waver on my commitment to this nonexistent band until Charles pointed out that he had already composed a swing song dedicated to my boyfriend's legendarily atrocious green checkered pants. He felt that I should help immortalize their polyester glory by adding musical interest to his catchy refrain, "God damn, look at those pants." I agreed to play trumpet.

The development of neo-swing music predated the revival of the dance style. Swing music had quietly fallen from popularity starting in the 1950's. During the 1980's, the first hints of swing resurgence began appearing in surprising places, such as the new wave punk scene. Out sprang a new hybrid genre of rockabilly bands, including Brian Setzer's earlier band, the Stray Cats. Brian Setzer's hit "This Cat's on a Hot Tin Roof" and the Cherry Poppin' Daddies' hit "Zoot Suit Riot" brought neo-swing into the mainstream in the 1990's. The atmosphere was set for a reemergence of swing dance.

"You have to come to the workshop this weekend, the guest professional instructors are absolutely amazing," my lindy hop teacher reminded the class. I was incredulous of this advertisement. How could anyone swing better than my instructors? That weekend I found myself gawking at the impressive spectacle of a professional duo in the middle of a jam circle, lindy hopping like Shorty George and Big Bea, straight out of the 1930's. They even threw in a few gravity defying aerials, moves made famous by the great Lindy Hopper Frankie Manning. The Swing Society does not teach aerials due to their inherent risk, but they were a big part of the attraction and excitement of the original Lindy Hop. While I admire people who dare to perform aerial lindy moves, I have never attempted one myself. I've taken the occasional elbow to the face, lost shoes, and fallen on my butt all without ever attempting to leave the ground during a swing dance.

Workshops similar to those organized by the Swing Society were the foundation of the revival of swing dance. The professional instructors in the 1980's and early 1990's were none other than the original swing dance legends themselves, including Frankie Manning. With the guidance of the original swingers, a grass-roots swing revival spread across the country and to parts of Europe. The original swingers have passed their legacy into the hands of this generation, with the free license to make it our own. Dance styles today still largely mimic the classic moves of the past, but modern moves have been incorporated as well. One of

the appealing traits of swing dance is its flexibility to reflect the culture and ideas of different generations and geographical locations. The style of swing dance popularized on the East Coast differs drastically from the style that developed on the West Coast. Modern swingers have learned to synthesize many old dance styles and move fluidly between them during a single song. Unlike rigidly taught ballroom dances, swing dance allows a spontaneity and freedom of expression just like the music that inspired it. For that reason, swing revival fever continues to burn in pockets of the United States and Europe even ten years after the peak of the revival movement.

Today I am able to perform the Belt Loop Turn from my first swing dance without any qualms after learning that it was in fact a completely legitimate move. Even after taking five six-week courses and learning the basics of East Coast, Lindy, and Charleston styles, I still have a lot to learn about swing. My transition from solo to partner dancing was rather bumpy. Swing dancing is all about making connections. I had to learn to connect my body to the music, to loosen up and let the rhythm naturally guide my movements. The difficult part for me was connecting to my partner. I had to learn to respond to subtle shifts in momentum, a slight pressure on the shoulder blade, an exaggerated step back. I often wound up concentrating too hard on one connection and losing touch with the other. My partner twisted one way and I twirled another, wrenching myself out of frame and out of the music. I discovered that I often swing better with my eyes closed. It doesn't matter how fancy or simple the moves are that I bust out on the dance floor, when the connections are all solid, the experience is exhilarating.

I caught the swing bug three years ago, and I doubt I'll recover any time soon.



# CULTURE & CUISINE

By Kay George

My first memory of it is the smell. Aromatic spices like cinnamon drift toward me, tangled with unfamiliar ingredients from boxes and bottles I know are not in my mother's kitchen at home. The writing on these labels is familiar and yet foreign to me, its curved lines undulating in hypnotizing patterns. At this age, I do not appreciate the smell. It reminds me that soon, surrounded by my dad's family, I will grudgingly swallow the sickening, slippery texture of grape leaves. I will bite into the small, neatly folded pies, not knowing whether they will contain meat or spinach or any number of ingredients. My stomach growls, but I do not give in. And then I spot it near the center of the table. The only Lebanese food I will actually eat—the bread. The single common element between this exotic cuisine and the food I eat at home. My grandma always sends us home with bags of it, which we freeze and enjoy for months. To heat it, my parents flip the flat bread deftly over the stovetop flame, until the ice melts off and it grows hot to the touch. Now, to my aunt's horror, I take the bread, and instead of using it to scoop my food, I smear peanut butter all over it. My cousins pile their plates high, using the bread as a sort of shovel. They cover their food in *leban* (unflavored yogurt) and begin to dig. My mother nibbles politely at her helping from the end of the table.

By my junior high years I have become adventurous enough to consume any and all desserts, even Lebanese ones. *Baklava* is my new obsession, an absurdly sweet pastry formed from thin layers of phyllo dough. When my aunt learns of this turnaround, she insists we make it together. The layers grow crisp upon baking, and the pistachios tucked between them



yield an unexpected crunch. We labor an entire afternoon, rolling the layers of dough until they are almost transparent, and then basting them with butter on both sides.

For a while after that I forget about Lebanese food. We don't take trips down to Peoria to see my dad's family as often as we used to, and my aunts find that spaghetti is much easier to prepare than *kibbeh* or *kusa*.

My sophomore year of college, I leave school and go to visit my grandma for the weekend. She excitedly takes me to the newest Lebanese café in town, explaining that it has the Lebanese bread I loved so much as a child. Her friend, who had always baked it for us before, has been in assisted living for years now. We bring home a huge bag, and the next morning she pulls a slice out of the freezer for me. As I move to open the microwave door, I hear the stove click. I smile and walk toward her.

At my grandma's house that day, I don't eat my bread with peanut butter, but with *tabbouleh*, a refreshing mix of chopped parsley, tomato, onion, bulgur, and olive oil. She tells me my aunts used to make it all the time. I try to recall this, but the image is hazy, formed more by my grandma's words than my own remembrance. As a child, I did not make an effort to explore the unfamiliar. Now, teaching and tutoring English language learners, I constantly encounter customs and beliefs with which I am unfamiliar, and I do my best to appreciate and to accommodate them. A person could probably survive off peanut butter alone, but I wouldn't recommend it.



# BIGGER AND BETTER

By Gwendolyn Wydra

“Hide-and-seek is for babies,” my cousin scoffed. “Don’t you want to do something cool?”

I nodded eagerly in response. My eleven-year-old cousin was mature and cool and popular and she went to a big public middle school, while I was just a third-grader in a tiny Catholic grade school. Whatever ideas she had were bound to be better than mine, and they’d make me mature and cool and popular like her.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s play Bigger and Better.”

Bigger and Better involved a mission to carry useless crap to strangers’ houses and ask whoever answered the door to replace it with something larger and more valuable. Something about this game troubled me, and that little voice in the back of my head told me my mom would not think Bigger and Better was bigger and better than Hide-and-Seek.

*Don’t you dare bother the neighbors*, I imagined her saying. And don’t take candy from strangers, do you want to get yourself poisoned?

*But you’ll look like a baby if you say no*, my mind chimed in, and with that I heard myself agreeing.

It started with a napkin and the green-shingled house across the street. Peeling white paint broke off in flecks as I climbed the wooden stairs, until eventually a creaky door with a torn screen and an eight-legged occupant was all that stood between me and greatness.

“Go on, do it.” My cousin stared fiercely at me, her extra three years of life mocking my infantile hesitation to ring the doorbell.

I stuttered incoherently in reply, slightly crumpling our gift, the napkin, between my shaky fingers.

“Eugh. I’ll just do it,” she said, snatching the napkin away from me and jabbing the doorbell confidently.

I held my breath as I waited for the door to open, imagining that just behind it stood a sophisticated adult ready and willing to offer us his or her riches. Instead, a lanky teenager wearing boxer shorts and a stained undershirt stepped onto the porch, looking at us through blurry eyes.

“Hi!” my cousin said brightly, smiling flirtatiously at him. “Do you have anything bigger and better than this napkin?” Her voice was slightly overpowered by her smacking bubble gum.

The boy’s brow furrowed. “Um, what?”

“You get to keep the napkin,” she assured him. “We’ll just take the bigger and better thing.”

The boy paused for a moment but then looked vaguely around the porch. Spying an empty beer bottle, he grabbed it and held it out to us. “Will this work?”

“Oh wow, thanks!” my cousin said, examining the label delightedly, tracing the cursive C-O-O-R-S with her finger. She looked back at our donor and thrust the napkin towards him in acceptance.

We returned to the yard, my cousin hopping and smacking her gum, me dragging my feet and wishing I had something as cool as an empty beer bottle. A squirrel chattered from the tree above, swishing a bushy tail towards me tauntingly. “I’ll do the next one,” I called out to my cousin.

“Yeah, right.” *Smack smack smack*. “You’re a chicken.”

Standing up as straight as I could, I grabbed the beer bottle from her. “Am not.” And with that, we crossed the yard to reach the next house, this one brick and surrounded by a wire fence.

I knocked clumsily on the tall metal door looming in front of me. A small, bouncing dog suddenly appeared in the window, knocking me off the stoop with its intimidating yips and growls.

“Ha ha, baby.” My cousin sneered triumphantly as she worked on the gum, like a cow chewing its cud.

Embarrassed, I climbed back onto the porch just as the door opened. A harassed-looking woman wearing an apron answered, her black hair escaping from her ponytail in wisps.

“Uh, hi,” I began. “Do you have anything bigger and better than this, um, this bottle?”

The woman looked back and forth between my cousin and me, her hands on her hips. “Are you selling Girl Scout cookies?”

“Uh, no. We just need something bigger than this bottle. For a game.”

The woman looked at me through squinted eyes before sighing and throwing up her hands. “How about this?” She reached somewhere behind the door and produced a small tan basket, empty except for one crumpled candy wrapper.

“Wow, thank you,” I said, taking the basket. “You can have the bottle.”

I held it up so she could see her fabulous prize, but with a slight grimace she just waved a flour-covered hand at me and said, “Keep it.”

Amazed by my people skills and obvious prowess in this game, I jumped down from the stoop, this time my cousin the one to drag behind. “You didn’t get to keep the napkin!” I told her triumphantly as I placed my empty bottle in my new basket. And I knew that on that day, armed with the remnants of junk food and booze, I had discovered the secret to maturity and popularity.

# The Cat Lady



By Sarah Peters

I was completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of animals in the room. There had to be at least forty cats, perching on windowsills, climbing mountains of cardboard boxes, brushing against my leg. There were cats with shiny black fur and cats with snowy white fur, cats with stripes and cats with spots, cats with blue eyes and cats with yellow eyes. A nondescript tabby watched me curiously from atop a carpet-covered post. The excitement I'd felt only minutes earlier had subsided, giving way to bewilderment. I sunk to the floor and sat on my knees. The cats swarmed around me, sniffing the outstretched hands that I offered them.

I'd been begging my parents for a cat since my fourth birthday, a few months before. Finally giving in, they'd informed me that we would be going to see a woman referred to only as the "cat lady." The cat lady's house was located at the end of a mile-long, unpaved driveway, and was entirely surrounded by overgrown trees. The house seemed somewhat magical, as though it might disappear once you drove away from it. The cat lady herself was a frumpy, unkempt woman, with wild red hair and huge wire-rimmed glasses. She boasted that she kept at least seventy cats in her home, most of them rescued from overpopulated animal shelters. A man she introduced as her husband followed her, though I noticed that he frequently sighed and rolled his eyes when she talked.

Sitting there on the floor, I felt powerless to make a decision. I had not been aware that so many different kinds of cats existed. Again I glanced around, until my eyes met my mother's; wordlessly, I gravitated towards her. She was sitting in an old, decrepit armchair, a small kitten resting in her lap. As I got closer, I could see that the kitten had a long, beautiful grey and white coat, so unlike any of the others. She had brilliant green eyes, just like my own eyes. She shied away when I reached out to touch her, but eventually allowed me to run my hands through her fur. She was purring.

"I want this one."

"Are you sure?" My mother asked.

"Yes." A stubborn child, I would not be swayed from my final decision. I was sure about her.

I closed my eyes as the cat lady gave my new pet the standard vaccinations with a sinister-looking needle. Attempting to distract me, my mother knelt down to my level and asked, "What should we name her?"

My cousins had recently given me a stuffed black and white kitten they named Oreo. I reasoned that grey and white was close enough to black and white, so I tried to imagine other black and white things that would make attractive names for a pet.

"Soccer Ball!" I exclaimed.

My mother smiled, but it seemed like she was attempting to stifle a giggle. My four-year old brain could not understand her expression. "How about...Nala?" she asked. I understood that she was not really asking for my opinion; the air of finality in her voice told me that the decision had been made. Nala was the name of the feline heroine in *The Lion King*, a movie I'd seen only a few days before. I was irritated that my mother would so unceremoniously gloss over my contribution, but I could not disagree that Nala was an absolutely perfect name.

I was allowed to hold Nala on the ride home. Her pulse raced so quickly that I thought she might be having a heart attack. Her whole body tensed with only a slight acceleration of the car.

The cat struggled against my sticky little hands so violently that I finally had to let go of her. Seconds later she had scaled the backseat, and was curled up beneath the rear windshield. I let her stay there until we were home.

As years went by, I found that the cat provided refuge from the daily demands of elementary school. As a painfully shy only child, constant socializing with other kids could be draining. Nala, however, never expected me to make conversation or play dolls with her. She wouldn't talk down to me, as most of the adults in my life did. I often wondered whether cats would be able to talk once they got to heaven. If this was true, surely an angel-cat would tell the other angel-cats about all the stupid things her owner did when no one else was watching. In any case, it didn't matter much to me. In the presence of Nala I danced, I invented songs, I put a pair of tights on my head and pretended I had really long hair. No matter what I did, she only looked on, sometimes with vague curiosity, sometimes with apathy, but never asking why I acted the way I did. Cats, it seemed, understood the basic need of humans—the need for a comforting presence, not words.

Over time I learned that being a cat lover was not exactly normal. Most people liked dogs. Though it was never made explicit, I discovered that the cat people of the world were shunned, labeled as weirdos, exiled to the outskirts of society. Well, maybe not quite, but being a cat person only increased the alienation I often felt as a result of my social awkwardness. Being an introvert was not cool in the eyes of my peers, either. In a strange way, though, I was filled with a sense of pride at my uniqueness. I didn't really want to be like all of those dog people, anyway.

Though Nala has long since passed away, I often miss my companion. My parents decided that they didn't want to own another pet, but I've promised myself that once I'm on my own, I'll get another cat. Sometimes I fear that one day, once I've grown tired of men and given up on the tediousness of social normalcy, I will retreat to a house deep in the woods and adopt cats. I mean, a lot of cats. I'm truly afraid that someday I will turn into the proverbial crazy cat lady. Then again, I think that just maybe becoming a cat lady wouldn't be all that bad.



# AN AWKWARD WALKING EXPERIENCE

By Daniel Cohen

## NOTE: Not for the Faint of Heart

(Seriously, this is pretty messed up. If you relate to this at all, then you might be as crazy as me)

Walking is something most of us do every day. It doesn't require conscious thought, and it is often overshadowed by more pressing matters, such as how many minutes late you are going to be for your Campus Honors class, or just how good the Beatles song "Can't Buy Me Love" makes you feel while walking across the Quad on a warm sunny day while watching fellow students play Frisbee or lay out on the manicured green grass. In this way, walking is like breathing: you only think about it if there's a serious problem.

I thought about walking five Thursdays ago. I was on my way back from my last class of the week, PS 220 in the Armory. Like a swimmer with burning lungs coming up for air, I was dying to reach the house and drop off my backpack in my room, officially relieving myself of any responsibility for the next 72 hours. My legs pumped towards Freedom.

But of course, there was a problem. Two blocks away from the Armory at 4th and Chalmers, she materialized. From the back I wasn't entirely sure it was her, but as I caught up, the certainty dawned on me like the silhouette of a falling Acme weight crashing down on Wile E. Coyote. My strides slowed to match her pace as I tried to surreptitiously sneak a peak at her face from both sides to confirm her identity. There was no doubt left. It was her. The Odd Acquaintance.

Let me describe for you the characteristics of the Odd Acquaintance. Having attended high school with a graduating class of over 1200 people, and with over two years experience at U of I under my belt, I like to consider myself an expert. The Odd Acquaintance is someone you know by face, name, and Facebook, but by absolutely no other information. You see the OA walking to class; heck, you may even have a class with the OA. Perhaps you run into the OA at a party once a semester or so. But you don't talk to the OA. When you and the OA approach each other in public, a friendly nod and quick smile suffice to satisfy both ends of the relationship. Generally, the OA presents no significant danger to you, and the OA is even useful as a fall back option in case you are ever desperately in need of plans. But G-d help you if you ever find yourself in the precarious position I found myself in: approaching an OA from behind.

She was walking much slower than me, so I would have to pass her. *Why couldn't she walk faster?* This entire situation was her fault! I took a moment to plan my next course of action. I had two options. Option A was a bold move. I would quickly brush past her, not acknowledging her and hoping she didn't recognize me from the two seconds it would take for me to establish position walking in front of her. This would be the

swiftest course of action, and would be easily accomplished if she would just *have a phone call*. After all, then it'd be rude for me to interrupt her and say hi. But she didn't have a phone call. Option A could blow up in my face if she recognized me and interpreted my hastiness as a sign of rudeness. "Dan Cohen totally blew me off today," she would tell her friends. Or even worse, she could say something directly to me, catching me red-handed!

Option B was the more conservative choice. I would say hello as I passed her, maybe tapping her on the shoulder to be sure I got her attention. No, I'd have to do that, otherwise she might not notice and I'd look like a fool. But once I said hi, I would be trapped into a long, awkward conversation for the rest of the walk. After all, it'd be rude for me to simply walk past her after greeting her when we were both going in the same direction. The conversation we'd have would be pointless, filled with the standard "How are you doing? Good and you" time-fillers until we awkwardly realize we have absolutely nothing to say to each other, and still another two blocks to go. No thank you.

One thing was sure: I had to make a decision, fast. I was walking just one pace behind her, and if she chanced to turn around for whatever reason, she'd see me right in her grill. I couldn't help it—she was walking too slowly! Even though I knew I had to make a move, I surprisingly realized the longer I stalled, the better off I was. After all, we were only getting closer to our destinations, which would mean that the conversation in Option B would be shorter and less awkward. Or, she could be nearing a turn, in which case Option A would be easily executed as I would simply continue to walk straight. I was snapped out of my ponderings by the sweet scent of coconut. Her hair! Wow. I was way too close, I had to make a move or pull back.

I stopped. Flat in my tracks. Taking a deep breath, I pulled out my phone to field an imaginary phone call (classic move) and gave her a 10 second head start. "Bye, mom." I put my phone back in my pocket and continued on, walking at a leisurely pace and feeling pretty satisfied with myself for being so smooth. But it was only another 10 seconds before I found myself smelling coconuts again. I cursed the weekend G-ds for taunting me with the scent of paradise while I was stuck in walking Hell. My heart pounding in my chest, I was about to just go for it and plow past her with a breathless "Hey," (call it option A-B) when I saw my salvation. Frat Park. Perfect. I now had two ways to get home, either by taking the sidewalk or cutting through the park. I waited for her to commit, and she continued straight down the sidewalk, so I briskly cut a 45-degree angle through the Frat Park Hypotenuse Short Cut (patent pending). A few short minutes later and I was home, the start of my weekend narrowly saved from an awkward experience with the OA.

To all the slow walkers out there: if you ever turn around to see an OA breathing down your neck, please have some sympathy. Now you know the sort of dire straits you are causing. Hey, at least someone's noticing your shampoo.

# Into Xibalba

By Tara McGovern

Her small brown feet scamper nimbly up the pale chalky steps, still warm from the day's heat. Dry, brittle moonlight turns the white-plastered temple into a ghostly mirage emerging from the green-black jungle. The moon should not be visible tonight, nor should the stone be warm; the sky ought to be obscured with rain clouds, the stairs slippery with moisture. But Chac the Rain God is angry, or so her father the Priest-King says.

The massive reservoir gapes open like the mouth of a dead jaguar at the foot of the temple. As a child, she used to squat at the edge of the reservoir and gaze at its glossy surface, thinking of how there used to be nothing but the cool, dark waters of Xibalba. Her ancestors the gods created the world out of these dark waters, and now Xibalba is the world of the dead. Each rainy season, Chac fills the reservoirs so the people can drink and grow maize during the long dry season. But the dry seasons keep getting longer, and the rainy seasons keep getting drier, choking the maize into dust. The reservoirs have not filled in several years, and now the scant water in the bottom is muddy and almost undrinkable.

At the top of the temple she gazes critically into the darkness of Chac's sanctuary. The chamber reeks of the incense and burnt maize offered to Chac during the ceremonies earlier in the day. On the pale stone beneath her feet is a splattering of dried blood, purple in the moonlight. She squeezes the bandage on her hand where, during the ceremonies, she slashed her palm and offered to Chac the blood of the Priest-King's daughter.

Tonight she has brought a different offering. In her good hand, she clutches a handful of delicate water lily leaves she had gathered and pressed several years ago, when there was enough clean water in the reservoirs for the water lilies to grow. She extends her hand and tosses the petals over the side of the temple. They flutter limpidly down into the muddy bottom of the reservoir like feathers from an injured quetzal. Her father has a precious cloak made out of quetzal feathers, and she imagines it disintegrating into the humid air and melting into the mud.

One petal is still stuck to her sweaty palm. She plucks it off and tosses it at Chac's feet in his dark sanctuary. Her thoughts drift to Xibalba, that watery paradise, where there are no rituals, no bloodletting, and no thirst. Only cool, dark, life-giving water.



NOTHING IN THE WORLD IS AS SOFT AND YIELDING  
AS WATER. YET FOR DISSOLVING THE HARD AND  
INFLEXIBLE, NOTHING CAN SURPASS IT.

LAO TZU, TAO TE CHING

Two hydrogens, one oxygen. A simple, cute molecule, illustrated in science textbooks in Fisher-Price-colored models resembling ping-pong balls. Each year we need to know something new about water. Polar. High specific heat. High surface tension. Cohesive and adhesive. Only substance on Earth that expands when it freezes. The water cycle. A renewable resource. Two-thirds of our bodies. The main ingredient in organic soup, where life first emerged millions of years ago, not unlike the Maya's creation story about Xibalba.

I carry a water bottle with me everywhere I go. Recently, I upgraded to the more environmentally-friendly stainless steel model, but for several years I refilled Ice Mountains and Aquafinas for weeks at a time. I estimate that I consume about 2.5 times the recommended eight-glasses-per-day between my perpetual thirst and the perpetual availability of water in our society. When I enter a building, I automatically locate the restrooms and drinking fountain, knowing I will likely need both before I leave. If I ever leave my water bottle at home, I become unreasonably anxious and uncomfortable. Often, I go through the bother of packing a purse for small errands just so I can inconspicuously take my water bottle. I can't imagine living in a place where water is not unlimited, where it is not available everywhere I go. I'm addicted.

I AM SO LOW IN THIS WORLD OF WET, AND  
BITTER IS MY TEMPERAMENT.

DC TALK, THERE IS A TREASON AT SEA

Archaeologists unearthed the skeleton of this Maya princess in Copán, one of the largest and grandest Maya centers that thrived from AD 250-900. The young woman was identified as elite by her elongated skull, the result of a harmless practice among Maya nobility of wrapping the soft skulls of their newborns between two boards. Despite her high birth, her bones are scarred with anemia from malnutrition. If a high-ranking princess was starving, it is a good indication that the entire population was in the grips of famine.

The mysterious collapse of Classic Maya civilization long before the arrival of Europeans has been the subject of much speculation, and theories range from endemic warfare to alien invasions. Dr. Lisa Lucero, a University of Illinois archaeologist, attributes the collapse of the Maya to climate change and its devastating effects on the Maya's water system. Not a drop of rain falls on the lush green Yucatán jungle from January to May during the yearly dry season, so the large populations were dependent on rain-filled reservoirs. Rulers gained authority by constructing these reservoirs and then demanding labor tribute in exchange for water during the dry season. Elite control of the Maya's most precious resource became equated with divinity, and Maya rulers became divine intercessors responsible for the rain and crops each year.

Disaster struck during the Medieval Warming Period (AD 900-1200), when the world experienced higher-than-normal temperatures and irregular weather patterns. Europe benefited from bumper crops and mild temperatures, sparking the High Middle Ages and eventually the Renaissance. Meanwhile, in the Americas, a devastating series of droughts caused the collapse of civilizations in Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest, Cahokia in southern Illinois, the Chirribaya and Tiwanaku complexes in Peru, and of course the Maya. Unable to grow their staple crop, maize, the people of these societies lost faith in their "divine" rulers and abandoned their cities, complexes, and reservoirs, disappearing into the archaeological record.

LET THE RAIN COME DOWN AND WASH  
AWAY MY TEARS, LET IT FILL MY SOUL AND  
DROWN MY FEARS.

CELINE DION, A NEW DAY HAS COME

While I was growing up, my mother was terrified of water. She didn't know how to swim, and she never let my sister and me anywhere near water without my ex-lifeguard father. During rainstorms, she ran frantically into the basement every five minutes to make sure sewage wasn't bubbling up through the floor.

During the same storms that caused my mother so much anxiety, I snuck out of the house and squatted on the curb, mesmerized by the water pummeling along the gutter towards the drain. I spent hours sloshing around our flooded backyard, pretending the inundated lawn, ditches, and flower beds were miniature rice paddies, rivers, and islands. I named this aquatic empire "Canala." I built little

mud huts with grass roofs along the river banks and made boats out of bark and pine cones. I even pounded stringy lily leaves into papyrus. During the spring thaw "glaciers" receded and filled the waterways of my civilization. During the long rainless weeks of summer, however, the once-soggy trenches cracked open and the grass turned brown and crunchy. Like Chac, I lost interest in my creation.

I didn't know it at the time, but Canala was a fairly accurate model of the relationship between society and water. Throughout time, the capacity of a particular society to adapt to excess or lack of water has determined its survival. Angkor, a magnificent ruined civilization nestled in the Cambodian jungle, had a sophisticated water control system which, like the Maya, helped caused its collapse when rains failed. In Egypt, Pharaohs were held responsible for the successful rise and fall of the Nile, and political unrest between dynasties coordinated with drought and poor floods. The Chinese were tightly bound to the five powerful and unpredictable rivers coursing across the continent, and were periodically devastated by catastrophic floods, resulting in civil war and dynastic changes. Some of the earliest farmers in the world in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) virtually defertilized the Fertile Crescent by over-irrigating their farmland. Irrigation builds up salts in the soil over time until it is impossible for plants to grow. Today, the San Joaquin Valley in California is having the same problem; the salt water table is rising steadily, and soon the heavily irrigated fruit basket will be fruitless.

While today's environmental brouhaha whirls around carbon emissions, fossil fuels, and the greenhouse effect, the most impending crisis is surely water-related. After all, we don't drink oil, we drink water. We can survive without electricity and gasoline—our ancestors did for thousands of years—but we cannot survive without water.

HOW FROM THAT SAPPHIRE FOUNT THE  
CRISPED BROOKS / ROLLING ON ORIENT PEARL  
AND SANDS OF GOLD...RAN NECTAR, VISITING  
EACH PLANT, AND FED / FLOWERS WORTHY OF  
PARADISE

JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST

A little bowl filled with holy water is set into the wall or positioned by the door of every Catholic church. Every time I enter church, I instinctively dip my fingers in the water and cross myself. Forehead, stomach, left shoulder, right shoulder. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I trace little crosses on my hands with what's left on my fingers, not wanting to casually wipe holy water on my pants. Inevitably, I put too much on my forehead, and it dribbles between my eyebrows and down my nose.

Though this ritual is not terribly central to the Catholic belief system, I am strangely obsessive about it. In the hustle to get into the church, I lunge desperately across the crowd and sometimes plow into elderly people or trample small children to avoid missing the water bowl. If I do miss it, my dry sign-of-the-cross seems fake and my fingers itch uncomfortably for the entire Mass.

Rituals involving holy water are the aspects of Catholicism I connect with most strongly. When I was young, I eagerly leaned towards the priest as he flung holy water

onto the congregation, believing that the blessing only worked if I felt a drop on my face or arm. During baptisms, the priest carefully holds the baby over the baptismal font as he pours water over her head. He then holds her up, Lion-King-like, as the choir bursts into a bright *alleluia*. The Easter Vigil is my favorite Mass of the year, when the church is covered floor to rafter with Easter lilies and the fonts are restocked with fresh holy water after being emptied for Good Friday. Adult initiates climb into the bathtub-sized font to be baptized, exchanging grey tunics for shining white ones.

Humans universally associate water with purity, and purity with religion. In Catholicism, baptism cleanses the individual of original sin and gives her a “clean slate.” Cleanliness is a theme central to Hinduism, and Hindus recognize no less than seven holy rivers. The Old Testament and the Jewish Torah specify elaborate rituals for bathing and hand-washing. Water is commonly associated with the afterlife, such as the Maya Xibalba, the Greco-Roman Styx, Norse ship burials, and the Egyptian burial rites.

Often, water lilies carry special significance with regards to water purity and religion. Water lilies are “wimpy” plants, says Dr. Lucero, because they will only grow and flower under particular water conditions. Usually, if water lilies are present, the water is safe to drink. Cross-culturally, water have been symbols for divine royal families responsible for the water supply. Water lilies are well-represented in royal Maya imagery as well as in Hinduism. The ancient symbol of Lower Egypt is a blue water lily, and Chinese and Japanese culture frequently uses a water lily motif.

CAN YOU FIND ME AN ACRE OF LAND  
BETWEEN SEA FOAM AND THE SEA STRAND?  
SCARBOROUGH FAIR, ENGLISH FOLK SONG

I tend to act strangely around bodies of water. As a child I firmly believed in nymphs, and I had silent conversations with every river, stream, or pond I encountered. My mother and I used to visit a nearby creek, where I crept as close as I could to the water without spurring my mother’s wrath. Sometimes she would even let me clamber onto rocks and boulders in search of a way across the creek. On my family’s various National Park vacations, my favorite thing was finding waterfalls and scampering about the surrounding rock formations. Eventually, I found a good place to take my shoes off and put my feet in the water so I could talk to the nymph. I was particularly preoccupied with the music sound of crashing water, and I tried to pick out melodies and sing along with the rhythm of the waterfall or the waves.

Last summer I went backpacking along the shore of Lake Superior. We were done for the day at two or three o’clock in the afternoon, having hiked our mileage and set up camp on a rock beach. For the remaining six hours or so of daylight, I never left the lake’s edge. I balanced on a half-submerged rock, watching frigid waves explode inches below my feet, so mesmerized that I hardly noticed the sun go down.

BUT WHAT IF I’M A MERMAID IN THESE JEANS?  
TORI AMOS, SILENT ALL THESE YEARS

Humans are enslaved to water. A few days without it kills us. A few minutes submerged in it also kills us. A few years of drought or flood determines the rise and fall of civilizations. Recently, water has wreaked havoc on New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and Southeast Asia during the tsunami disaster. Melting polar ice and rising sea levels threaten coastal cities. The Maldives, a country of Pacific islands, is negotiating with mainland countries to permanently evacuate the entire population because their islands will be submerged in less than ten years. One billion people depend on the rapidly disappearing Himalayan glaciers for their water. Persistent droughts in east Africa and the failure of Indian monsoons make farmers more and more desperate. The world’s largest reservoir of fresh water, the Great Lakes tucked quietly away in the American Midwest, may very well become the center of global strife in the dark years to come.

I can’t help but feel some connection to that Maya princess buried under Copán. I’ve wandered among the crusts of my Canalan cities and temples under a dry brittle moon, praying to some higher power for a deluge. I’ve dried flower petals and sprinkled them on the earth, hoping it might mean something. Of course, her stakes were much higher. But at a point, it no longer matters whether it’s a Maya princess, a Cambodian temple dancer, an Egyptian priestess, or an American teenager. Our socioeconomic positions depend on water monopolies. Hers is the reservoir beneath the temple, mine is the Great Lakes; both of use are perched on the edge of our only source of fresh water, on the edge of impending disaster, longing for the peace and stability of Xibalba, where water is never lacking.

