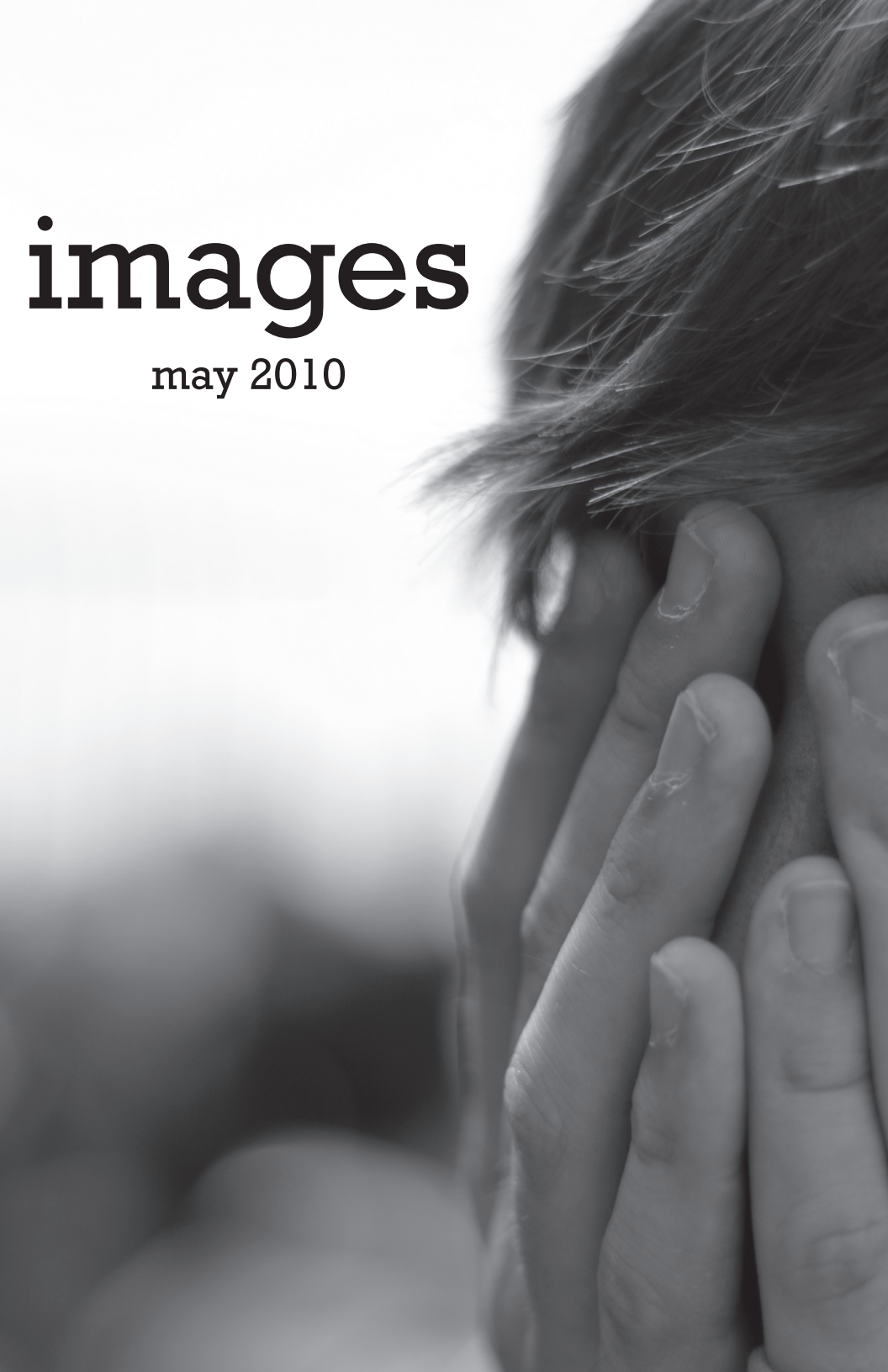


images

may 2010



“There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable.

There is another theory which states that this has already happened.”

-Douglas Adams

acknowledgements

This magazine doesn't 'happen' by itself. It represents the culmination of a great deal of effort by a great number of people.

Thus, thanks are due to the following:

The artists, who supply Images with its material, who generously volunteered to share with the student body the fruits of their creativity.

The editors, for providing watchful eyes.

The moderator, Mr. Talbot, who helped navigate the twists and turns Images took on the road to publication.

The administration. Money is a useful tool, and was very generously invested in Images. The return on that investment lies in

You.

You, reading this magazine. You are the reason that we do this. And that will never change.

Fair wind and good fortune -

-William G. Passannante II, Co-Editor-in-Chief

-Ricky Altieri, Co-Editor-in-Chief

5/2010

from the editors

Hello.

Life is weird and wonderful. It's wonderful because it's weird. People sometimes need to be reminded of that.

In keeping with the above, this issue of Images has narrative non-fiction taking a ride with the usual crowd of poetry, illustration, photography, and fiction.

So get out there. Talk to random people. Shake things up. Leave positive energy in your wake.

People have interesting things to say. They just need someone to tell them to.

Welcome, once again, to the flipside. Only this time it's in plain sight.

As it has been all along.

-William G. Passannante II, Co-Editor-in-Chief

5/2010

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the stranger code

by Anjit Fageria '11

It was rush hour, around five o'clock, meaning the train car was packed. I pushed my way in, through the vines of iPod headphones, past the numerous screens, clutching onto my math notebook for dear life, protecting it from the strangers in the car.

Reaching an empty corner, I waited for the train to start again. At each stop, I stood my ground against the new flood of passengers wordlessly jostling their way in and out of the car, all absorbed in their iPods, PSPs, and cell phones. These people usually annoy me. If you dare, try holding a conversation with a person with an ear bud in one ear, and you will experience the frustration.

As my eyes wandered past the tech users, I noticed a woman, about thirty years-old, looking in my direction – I mean, why was she looking at me? What a weirdo. I looked down at the floor, pretending to admire my own shoes. But the train stopped again, making me lose balance and fly into this woman. I mumbled sorry and pushed myself away, but she used the opportunity to start a conversation.

“These trains always get someone knocked off their feet, ey?”

Now, I usually like to follow a little thing I call the Stranger Code: People in public areas and using public transportation are supposed to keep to themselves unless provoked. Almost everyone who uses the train follows this code, but there are people who have an urge to converse, share their thoughts with others, blah blah blah. Like this woman.

In response, I casually nodded and smiled weakly as if speaking to a mentally challenged patient. I then put on my headphones and turned away from her. At my stop, I leaped off and sprinted through the hallways and up stairways. She would probably remember me as the rude child who listened to his iPod. But, hey, I was just following the Code.

As I passed Wendy's, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, McDonald's, and several other fast food joints on my way home, I started to feel hungry. So, I stopped at Subway Sandwiches and became part of the never ending line of famished customers. Each step forward took me one step closer to my meatball sub, and when the cashier asked if I wanted chips and a drink, I answered in the affirmative.

Picking up a bag of Sunchips and a Coke, I glanced around to find the pint-sized, two-person tables occupied. Wait, what was that? An empty seat? I lunged, only to stumble at the sight of a man at the other end of the table.

The man was black, well-dressed, and in his mid 30s; he, like so many on the train, came from work. Head bowed, I asked, “Um, excuse me sir... um, is this seat taken?”

Absentmindedly he said, “No.”

Assuming that this was a nice man, I put my dinner and my notebook

down on the overloaded table, sat down, and started eating my sandwich.

Suddenly, something unthinkable happened. The business man reached over, grabbed my bag of Sunchips, opened it, and took a chip. My jaw unhinged itself from my skull; the blood was sucked from my face by the vacuum in my head created by this anomaly: someone had broken the Stranger Code. If he had asked me for a chip, I would gladly have given him one; but he took, no, stole my Sunchip – my innocence. But, seeing as I was raised to be a polite young man, I decided to let this man, this stranger, take the chip and hopefully leave me alone.

I kept on munching away at my sandwich, nervously looking up at the man and down at my chips. In an effort to send him a message, I decided to reach over and take one of my chips. This did not deter him, and he yet again reached over to eat another chip. I paused while raising the sandwich to my mouth then and started sweating. My eyebrows furrowed and I bit my lip, wondering how far this man would go. Would he take my money? My soda? My sandwich!?

In my anxiousness, I grabbed yet another chip. He did the same. Me again. Then him. Me. Him. Throughout this entire exchange, our eyes only met once, and in that one second, electricity filled the air. That was when I knew for certain. He knew that he was taking my chips.

Finally, the bag was empty. The man got up, dusted off his suit, and left the restaurant. I sighed in relief that the ordeal was over and grabbed my sandwich wrappings to throw them out. On my way to the trash can, I furtively glanced at each stranger sitting at his or her table and wondered which one of these sandwich aficionados would break the Stranger Code next. When I got back to my table I picked up my backpack from the floor and lifted my notebook from the table.

Only then did I notice that underneath that notebook was my bag of Sunchips.

apology

by Giovanni Bacarella '11

“This is a Bronx-bound, four express train. The next stop is 86th street. Stand clear of the closing doors, please.”

We were all going in the same direction. We were all riding in the same car. There was no coach. There was no first-class. Still, I felt separated from them.

Stepping onto the train, I hummed the melody of a song that blasted from my new earphones. I was dressed formally and wore a scarf and pea coat for warmth.

Directly in front of me, a Mexican man was sprawled out across three seats, half-asleep. He rested his head on a bag of recyclable cans and was wearing ripped shorts and a stained Jets sweatshirt. Something told me he wasn't exactly a Jets fan.

Naturally, I walked towards the opposite end of the car—the end I had subconsciously designated for those who did not use train seats as a bed and cans as a pillow. I spotted an empty seat on the last bench. On my way, I passed two African-American women.

The first could not have been much older than me. She wore a low-cut shirt and held on to a stroller which sheltered a young girl—another child to be brought up by reckless teenagers.

The second was midde-aged. Her hairs were strands of rusted wire. Her eyes were enveloped in red cobwebs. Drug use. No doubt about it.

Despite being warned about judging a book by its cover, I sometimes victimize the people around me with my scrutinizing eye. What can I say? It's a charge most of us can plead guilty to.

I had never seen those people but I knew all about them in a matter of seconds. Their pasts were disregarded. Their identities were based on their outward appearance. They were judged. Judged for the lives they lead—for the lives I had given them.

I sat down and their faces slipped from my mind. I devoted all my attention to the song that was playing on my iPod. Meanwhile, the others were left to listen to the sounds of the train, dragging along the tracks, and to the cries of the baby in the stroller.

Suddenly, I heard the booming voice of the middle-aged woman in the background. I raised the volume on my iPod but could not block out her words.

“About time this weather cooled down. I live in the projects and they put the radiator on sky-high! I coulda fried an egg on that thing last night!” she said to the woman with the stroller.

I raised the volume some more.

“Tell me 'bout it! My sister here has been crying every night for the past week!” she responded.

Sister? Had I heard her correctly? I decreased the volume.

“Oh, boy. I know what the kid feels like. Thanks to the people who control the heating in my building I haven’t gotten a wink of sleep. Look at my eyes! They’re bloodshot, for god’s sake!”

“Aw, honey, if only they knew,” said the other, patting her sister on the head. “If only they knew.”

If only I knew. The baby in the stroller was that woman’s sister—not her daughter. If only I knew. The middle-aged woman was worn down from lack of sleep—not drugs. If only I knew.

What did I know about the two women? Nothing. And yet, I had already thought...

The man with the bag of cans sat up and stretched. He cracked his back, followed by his neck, and turned towards the two women. He stood up and walked over.

“You ladies feel it too? For the past few weeks I’ve been sweating constantly! In my own apartment! Sweating in the middle of winter? It’s unheard of!” he said, as if this had been staged.

It was too much. I had assumed that the man could not speak English and that his home was the ten square feet he had claimed in the train car. I was 0 for 3. I smiled, shook my head, and let out a short laugh.

Feeling the train decelerating, I got up and faced the doors. The man looked up towards me and smiled.

“What about you, joven? How’s the heating where you’re from?” he asked me as he smiled.

“Not too great, not too great,” I said, smiling back as I pulled out my earphones. The doors opened and I waved.

The truth was that I never had to worry about heating. I didn’t feel so different from them anymore, but I had misjudged those three people. The lie was my apology.

As I walked up the subway stairs, I could hear the lyrics of the song I had been listening to as it came to a close:

I hope one day you’ll join us, and the world will live as one...

a d r i f t

by Patrick Molligo '11

The gentle creak of an aged plank of wood woke him. He had only opened his eyelids the slightest bit when he shut them against the bright light beating down on his face. With great difficulty, he rolled and turned his body from the light. Again he drew open his eyelids, this time with greater care. When at last he recovered his vision, he saw plainly that he rested upon the floor of a wooden rowboat.

The vessel was empty. As he turned his head, the intense light again struck his face. The sun sat blazing, high in a cloudless sky. He raised his left arm to shield his face. Why was he sitting alone on a rowboat?

More importantly—who was he?

He wore the typical rugged trousers and the worn, striped shirt of a sailor. But to what crew did he belong? From what ship did he come?

He surveyed the setting. No land, no boats. No sign of life anywhere. The sea made no movements, as if his boat sat on sheet of glass. The silence terrified him.

A twinge of pain rang through his right arm. The sailor let out a terrible cry that only dissipated in the vast openness of the sea around him. Tears trickled down his cheek as he clutched his arm. Minutes passed and the pain finally receded. He released his arm. Wiping the tears from his face, the sailor took a long deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he noticed a pair of oars, each dipped in the water. He grasped one in his left hand. It felt heavy, but he could still move it. The glass around him was disturbed by the ripples from the oar. As the boat began to move, he grasped the second oar. Even with no land in sight, if he could put the boat in motion, then he could relax and try to understand his predicament. But as he wrapped his fingers around the right oar to lift it, his arm gave in and once more a burning pain resonated from wrist to shoulder. Letting out another yelp, he fell back into the hull of the boat and stared at the empty sky.

Then, a small speck, in the corner of his vision. He turned. A small object was spiraling towards his boat from high up. A gull. Flapping its wings emphatically, it hovered briefly next to the sailor before landing on the port side of the rowboat. With its beady eyes it stared at the man who still sat motionless on the floor of the boat.

“Well, I don’t suppose you know just what’s going on,” asked the man with a sad grin.

The bird continued to gaze at him. The man glanced at his right arm, wondering when the pain would start again.

“This damn arm,” he said raising his voice. “It’s not bleeding and I can see plainly that it’s not bruised.” He lifted the mysterious limb and inspected it

as if it were a foreign object. “I wake up here, in this godforsaken boat, my arm feels ready to fall off, and I still haven’t the slightest clue about who I am!”

He was angry now. As his right hand made a tight fist, he noticed that the bird had left.

He had lost his first companion out in that stretch of nothing. But a light breeze from starboard signaled the return of the bird, who was flapping its wings once more, making another soft landing. This time its eyes were fixed on his arm. It hopped into the boat and cocked its small head in bewilderment as it came closer.

“Can you see what’s wrong with it?” he asked with a faint chuckle.

The bird took one more step and, without a moment’s notice, pecked his arm with terrible force. He roared and grasped his arm, but the bird continued to peck until the man was forced to pull his hand away in pain. He wanted to stand—why couldn’t he feel his legs? His entire body was immobilized. He could only scream at the bird. One last peck sent him into blackness.

“Doctor! Doctor, come quick, he’s waking now!”

The ship’s surgeon strode across the creaking floorboards, careful not to bump into the other patients’ bunks. His assistant stood over a feeble looking man in a worn, striped shirt. He held a lantern over the man’s head.

“Thank you, Mr. Hobbs,” the surgeon said to his assistant. “Close that porthole there. We don’t want him catching a chill. It could quickly become pneumonia.”

He turned his attention to the patient.

“Jack,” he said, practically in a whisper. “Jack, how are feeling?”

The man opened his eyes and looked up at the surgeon.

“W-where am I?”

“Jack, you’re below decks on the Indefatigable. A splinter, six inches at least, went through your arm. We had engaged the Papillion of the coast of Cadiz. You’re the only one of your gun crew who survived.”

The man wore a look of astonishment but kept silent. He looked to his right arm and found only a bandaged stub.

“You were knocked out during the entire surgery. We tried to save the arm, Jack. It was simply impossible, though. I’m sorry.”

The surgeon waited for a response. When he received none, he nodded to his assistant who blew out the candle in the lantern.

“Rest up, Jack.”

The two walked away, leaving Jack lying in his hammock. He took one last look at the stub where his arm used to be, then up at the closed porthole. Outside, a gull flew briefly alongside the ship before changing course and disappearing over the horizon. He drifted asleep.

{ u n t i t l e d }

by William DeGouveia '11

Often a misunderstood Being –
Beauty its Presence brought,
We often are misled
By its Radiance so bright.

Its effervescent Color shone,
Oh how they blaze so bright –
Its Rays warm us when we are cold
We marvel at the Sight.

Its Presence is a warming Scene
Oh how its Colors shone
Its view so peaceful and serene –
Its Presence reigns o'er us.

Concealed in its magnificence –
A destructive Nature bound
If left untouched, untamed by man,
Its Beauty is no more.

For in a wild state of being,
We come to this notion —
That this once tranquil sight of beauty,
May erase any nation.

Shimmering as the stars above,
Captivating Beauty so,
To such a Point that some may love.
Yet overlooked is that –

The Power that this Presence bears
May undermine its Beauty,
To such a Point that some forget,
The Bond — the Ties we share.

a dream it seems

by Adam D'Sa '13

I fell asleep and dreamt a dream
It was not real or so it seemed
I awoke, my mind in quite a daze
For I'd dreamt this dream for many days.
I went downstairs for the morning meal
And found my spoon I could not feel
Everything seemed so unreal.
I went back to sleep and dreamt the same dream
It had now progressed or so it seemed.
Again I awoke, rolled out of bed,
looked 'round and found my whole room red.
The days that followed led on far,
Each one becoming more bizarre
I find comfort now only in my sleep
Dreaming the same dream, each time more deep
Is a dream my life or my life a dream?
It's all a dream or so it seems.

waiting for the light

by Travis Guzzardo '12

I HAD FIRST MET John Concord the previous summer, introduced by a good friend of mine in the mercantile business. John, like myself, was a farmer bordering the small town of Windsor, Georgia, where he lived with his brother, Aaron. John was a shy character: he did not leave his farm very often, usually entering town only to buy necessities for the farm or to pick up his sparse mail, and whenever he crossed paths with someone he usually did not stop to talk. Pure chance, perhaps only made possible by fate, bestowed me with the opportunity to talk to him, and we eventually established some form of friendship.

The “fateful incident,” as it came to be called, occurred only a few days before John’s death. The state of the Concord farm was one of disarray: the building was virtually on the verge of collapse. It came as no surprise when news was spread that a fire had consumed the house. It was later discovered that years of wear had severely weakened the kitchen wall. On that very windy day, a piece of the wall was blown in and knocked over a candle on a nearby table; with the antiquity of the house, it was engulfed in flames in a matter of seconds. John was lucky enough to escape; however, the fire claimed the life of his brother, Aaron, whose body was found in the wreckage, scalded by the intensity of the fire. A funeral was held the next day by the people of the town.

After the funeral that day, John departed back to his farm, alone amongst the midst of the wreckage. A group of townspeople offering their condolences travelled to the farm the next day, only to find his body, dead, slumped in a chair inside the barn which had been untouched by the fire. The shocked townspeople brought his body back to the town, where a funeral was arranged the next day. Because I had really the only connection to him, I was invited to give a short eulogy in honor of his life. Honestly, I had very little knowledge of him, and I was unsure of what I could say. But nevertheless, I put together some words to say in his memory.

The next day at the funeral, the people arrived slowly, wearing faces of sheer indifference. I could only imagine what these people were thinking about; at this ceremony honoring John Concord, no one seemed to be upset or worried about what happened to this unfortunate man, someone whose ending no one truly knows for sure...

JOHN CONCORD walked alone quietly down the isolated path leading to his farm. Although it was only about 3 PM, the sky was unnaturally dark. The path was surrounded on both sides by dense, dark forests; and although it was only early fall, the leaves on these trees were completely absent, leaving the bare, deformed branches looking like a maliciously twisted maze. The outermost trees hung over the path like sides of a box, giving an eerie enclosed feeling. A strong,

sharp breeze stung John's face as he walked along this secluded path on a dark and dreary day.

John had walked this path many times before; however, on this particular day, the unsettling scenery daunted him. Often before, he had walked this path with Aaron...

No, I will not think of Aaron!

With that, John picked up his feeble pace and walked swiftly back to the farm.

Once he arrived, the scene of destruction that gave him this crippling grief looked him straight in the eye. The ancient house lay in a pile of black, ashy rubble that would fill even the darkest person with a remorseful pity. He looked to the small, rustic barn to the right of the house.

That's my new home, he thought, I guess it'll do...

The sky got darker with this depressing assumption.

When he opened the tattered door, the skies opened up above him. Rain came pelting down to the ground in a frenzy like gunshots in a war battle. John rushed into the barn and swiftly slammed the door behind him, quickly securing it so that it would not blow open. The ferocious wind could be heard whistling frantically through the small holes in the structure.

The inside of the barn was dark, with the only light coming in through a single window near the rear. By the window was a small table, worn by years of use with part of its side broken off, a small, uncomfortable chair, and a large candle. He walked weakly over to the candle, which stood directly next to the desk, and lit it, creating a large, bright flame. He sat in the chair and looked out the window, into the dark and dreary storm. He listened to the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof and walls.

The bright light of the candle mesmerized John's thoughts. He looked directly into the flame, into its intensity... how bright it was! How forceful it shone! He saw death; he saw destruction... he saw the face of Aaron—the agonizing, pain-filled, breath-deprived face of Aaron—trapped, suffocated, helpless against the force of the flame, unable to escape alone, and he, John, was the only one...

No, I mustn't think of Aaron!

The wind continued to hurl outside the barn; the rain continued to pound the structure around him. Suddenly, a wild white light shone viciously from right outside the window as bright as the sun and its everlasting fire; a second later, a deafening thunder shook the structure like a wartime bomb. A sound so mortifying, so ferocious, so terrifying—so much like the sound of a collapsing house... a house weak from the roar of a bright, blinding fire... rendering any man helpless under its massive wreck... a man who had needed help... a friendly, cherished man who would do anything to help his friends... a man whose devotion was not returned! How great this man had been; how great this man would still turn out to be! Yet the fault of human would not allow him to run free, stuck under the burning beams of a perilous trap.

That man... who was that man? He saw that man as he looked into the

flame... a glowing, mesmerizing, flame; so bright; so warm... so *dreadful*; so destructive; so deadly... scalding rubble everywhere... and Aaron, oh Aaron, in the middle of it all, stuck there

No! He could not think of Aaron!

But who was he kidding? No one but he alone knew *the truth*; and no one was at all suspicious... of course he felt bad for doing it; but after all, it was better that he save himself instead of risking his life even more...

But why this man—this man who was so great? Why was it he who was left under the rubble, suffocating, trapped, yet so full of life? And *he*, John, was the one to be blamed! He destroyed the living man so invigorated, so devoted, so... *prophetic*! Yes, he destroyed someone greater than a normal man—this being was so influential, so powerful; it was so ironic that he could be struck down so easily! And in such a fiendish way!

Sitting over the light of the candle, John's face looked no longer like that of a human; indeed, he looked like a ghoul! His face, pale and twisted by shadows, looked maliciously around the room. His eyes, sharp and sinister, shifted to and fro like a predator searching for its prey. Suddenly, the doors to the barn flew open, and rain poured into the dark barn. He hunted down the doors and slammed them shut, reinforcing them with a bar, locking the barn like it was an animal's cage. He sat back down, unexpectedly tired, and rested his arm on the desk.

His head began to ache—as he sat there motionless, he could no longer avoid looking at the face of Aaron, hovering in the darkness. His eyes began to throb, and his throat became dry. He couldn't feel his feet, and his right hand was becoming warm. His mind began to swirl, like he was being sucked into a ruthless whirlpool. The candle flickered before him, and he broke a sweat on his forehead. He couldn't move his arms; and there was a growing pain in his right hand. His body was trembling as he broke out into a sweating frenzy. He looked frantically around him as his body was frozen in that one spot. Pain welled in his forehead; his heart was pumping with extreme vigor. His hand was throbbing now with an unmatched sting, as if it was being burned... The pain swelled inside him, and it built to such a high that he let out a bloodcurdling scream into the dark air around him, so ghastly that even the bravest of men would cower in fear! John moaned in despair, yearning for an end to the coldblooded torture. His hand was burning with such intensity that he figured it must be on fire!

As all of the pain built to an all-time high, he suddenly felt a wave of fatigue hit him. Then he realized: sleep! Sleep was the one place of refuge—the one place where any man could find relief. And as the fatigue piled on, he would not resist.

He closed his eyes—

HE WAS FOUND the next morning, slumping in his chair by the window overlooking the forest. The people wrapped up his dead body, and they carried him from his desolate barn in a solemn procession back to the town. As the local doctors examined him, they deemed his death to be a peaceful one, with a

passing in his sleep—however, they did find a large burn on the palm of his right hand. Its cause is unknown.

“And now, let us conclude this solemn memorial and live in John’s memory.”

I recessed from the podium and began to walk back to my seat. The people looked as if they had not even paid attention; or, as if they deemed his death to be insignificant, like this was some kind of trial and they were passing judgment...

I STOOD ALONG with the priest and a couple of townspeople in the cemetery where John’s body was to be buried. Most of the people from the funeral had already gone home, too indifferent to John’s memory to bother to see his burial.

The priest stood over the grave, and after saying the final parts of the ceremony, we lowered the casket into the grave and piled the dirt back on top, finally placing the tombstone in the front.

We buried him at sunset on that day. It had been raining for most of the funeral; however, when it was time to leave for the cemetery, the rain stopped, and the skies began to clear. At the exact moment we placed the tombstone on John Concord’s grave, the sky broke out into an unmatched radiance: the sun turned a scarlet red, and it shone brilliantly across the entire landscape. It reflected off of the jagged scattered clouds, giving it a luster that shone with the force and the brilliant color of a fire in the sky. John’s tombstone was unaffected by this phenomenon; but the magnificent sight reflected off the front the tombstone of Aaron, next to whom John was buried, and illuminated it with a matched magnificence.

How masterly fate works its wonders!

at jacob's well

by Christopher Landry '10

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The sun turns in its daily arc as I
Stand fixed at the universe's centre,
Motionless in the endless cycle

And powerless against the beating flame, I stand
Burnt and parched in my own reeking sweat,
Acrid like the silent blaze above me, roaring

That I should be heeded!
Though heedless that I am myself fixed less, even,
Than that sun, one of billions in the slow sidereal progression,

And would be spared
Should I with my cracked lips but ask for shelter – Could I? –
And accept the willing hand offering me cool water.

inspired by 'the train to valhalla'

by Philip Trammell '10



the train to valhalla

by Ricky Altieri '10

The incident had delayed the train only five minutes. It was cold, dark, and windy in the early morning, and a heavy snow was pounding the tracks, which the commuters would assume was the cause of the delay.

The conductor, Matthew Ziska, was still a little rattled. Years had passed since anything unusual had happened, and he had never experienced anything like this. He was reminded of that time, twelve or thirteen years ago, when a cat had hopped onto the train. The orange furball scratched one of the seats, then jumped an old woman and tore up her purse, which spilled out onto the floor. A little kid had come by and taken the cat off the woman, and soon the cat was asleep in the boy's lap. That had been funny, because the woman was fine, but especially because the conductor had picked up an unopened dildo box as he helped the woman gather her things. He sighed. Maybe this would turn out to be funny, too.

Ziska had had trouble sleeping the night before, tossing and turning with nightmares. Even as Ziska saw the man, who was hunched over, toes inward, hands covering his crotch, the conductor's attention had been elsewhere, trying to recall the bad dream—he remembered feeling like a stump. He remembered trying to move, but having no feet, and trying to speak, but having no mouth. Upon focusing again Ziska had processed the developing situation and reacted. The train had been scheduled to stop at that station, so Ziska was able to bring it to a halt quickly, far from the mysterious figure.

He had called in the delay and given a brief description to a squeaky-voiced clerk who didn't give a shit anyway. If you called in a problem with the mechanics of the train or the condition of the tracks, the problem solvers picked up the phone. Otherwise you would get some punk teenager who thought doing his job was below him and that his garage band would make it big before the year was out.

The clerk's nasally whining reminded Ziska of his spoiled eight year old nephew.

"Name." The clerk had squawked. "Train." "Description—short, please." "Get to the point!" his voice had cracked. "Delay Estimate." "Someone will be in touch with you shortly."

Then the clerk hung up. The ass hadn't even said goodbye, not to mention asking why or how. "Someone will get in touch with you shortly" meant no one would be in touch with him for awhile. What they would do, though, was announce the delays on the big speakers installed at every station—the earlier the notification, the fewer complaint calls. "The train to Valhalla is running five minutes behind schedule," the speakers would say, in a deep, delighted tone. Whoever did the voices for the public announcements, Ziska thought, deserved one square in the nose. "And in the mouth too," he said to the

window. He chuckled, until in his reflection he saw his lips curl into an ugly, wrinkled grin. His lips bolted back to their regular position.

Ziska tried to imagine what that clerk had written down—he had seen the ugly yellow forms, and the box allotted for “description” wasn’t much bigger than the one reserved for the official stamp. The clerk would phone a more important clerk who cared less than the first one, and he would tell the story in forty five seconds so he could go back to watching TV and drooling on his desk. And the next clerk would tell his boss the story in thirty seconds, and so on up the line, and then late that evening Ziska would get a call and someone would say, “According to my notes here, something happened on your train this morning.”

The man who had caused the delay was on the train. The backs of the fellow’s hands, covered in bushy gray hair, were sweaty and dirty; Ziska shivered as the memory of gripping them tightly came to mind. They were so gross that Ziska had let go of the man’s wrist and instead grabbed his forearm to yank him up. Dressed in suit and tie, which were rumpled, probably from the fall, the man had a clean shave and a shaved head.

Ziska rubbed his chin. He felt his own balding head, tugging on strands of blackish grey hair. Maybe he should shave his head, too.

Ziska’s longtime partner had retired recently, and the kid who had replaced him was young and a little slow; Ziska would have to handle this one on his own. He missed his wife at times like this. She had always been good with people. Even when she was getting sick, she had told him what he should say to the relatives, which facial expressions to use, which gestures to make. Through all of her pain she had helped him deal with his. But he was alone now.

Ziska considered his appearance in the window. His wife had always talked about “setting the right tone with people,” by looking a certain way, and Ziska hoped he would strike a balance—he wanted the fellow to see an authority figure who could provide help, but also a concerned and sympathetic listener. He grabbed his blue hat and inspected it in the mirror, but decided against it when he spotted the black smudges he had neglected to remove. A few loose strands of hair were sticking up, and he did his best to push them down. He loosened the top button on his shirt, then fixed it, then loosened it again.

Ziska’s thoughts returned to that morning. The snow had tickled his mustache and melted on his lips, and the bitter, frigid wind had whipped his cheeks. The man’s skin was bright red and snot was pouring out of his nose and he had limped, but Ziska couldn’t remember on which foot. He did remember those filthy hands, having to touch them as he helped the man onto the train. “Are you okay?” Ziska had asked. “Are you okay?” he had asked again. Ziska had kept asking that—he could think of nothing else to say. The man had looked at him. Just stared. After a moment he muttered something about being fine, and Ziska didn’t know what else to do. He had just left him there and gone to call it in.

The snow outside was getting heavier, and the wind seemed to

be picking up, too. The morning clouds darkened the buildings to vague ghosts, whose forms drifted past, or perhaps it was the train that drifted past them. Even after many years as a conductor, Ziska still thought the view outside the moving train, especially in bad weather, seemed abstract, almost surreal.

The conductor peered at his watch—6:18. A few minutes before he had to collect the tickets. He rubbed his coffee cup to warm his hands before bringing it slowly to his lips. When he had first started on the job, his morning espresso—and it had to be espresso—had been as important to him as his ticket puncher. But time had dulled his taste buds, and now the type of coffee didn't even matter. He drank it because he couldn't remember the days before he drank it, and because the warm tingling sensation he felt as it trickled down his throat was one of the more exciting parts of his morning.

Years ago, policemen and firemen, and even some soldiers, would take the early train to Valhalla—there were stations for them in the city. He had been glad to serve those commuters. His uniform was uglier than theirs and his rank lower, but he felt as though he were doing his part to help Valhalla's finest. They worked hard at a noble cause, and he could contribute by making sure the train ran smoothly. Back then, he had taken pride in keeping the seats clean, ensuring that the train arrived on time, announcing which stations could be used to transfer to different stops. They had given him a smile, and asked about his wife, and helped him through some of the difficult times. A few of them had even been his friends, but since they had stopped riding the train they had fallen out of touch.

Valhalla was different now. The heroes who had lived there or worked there had cleaned up the neighborhood, and property had become more expensive. The firemen and policemen were at different stations, doing hard work there, too. The commuters now were investment bankers, stock brokers, and executives. Their apparel was not strictly a uniform, but they dressed the same way—black suits, suave ties, thin belts, and shined shoes, and the *Journal* or the *Times* worn like a facemask. Ziska was never so aware of his lowly uniform as he was around the businessmen. It wasn't enough that they drove nicer cars, lived in bigger houses, had pretty young secretaries—they had to look better, too. When they heard Ziska call for tickets they glared at him, as if he were a stray dog whining for food scraps.

Ziska hadn't been happy when his little nephew had dressed up as a businessman on Halloween, and he had seen other tykes wearing suits and ties and flaunting parted hairstyles. The businessmen were the heroes of the day. But what did they do? Ziska knew they worked hard: he could see it in the black bags beneath their eyes. But their efforts seemed to amount to nothing more than toying with numbers on screens and screwing people out of their hard-earned money.

If Ziska had a son, the options for Halloween costumes would be Superman, or Batman, or a fireman. He imagined himself chaperoning and laughing along with the other parents, and telling the kids to say 'please' and 'thank you' when they asked for candy. His son would say 'please' and 'thank

you' without having to be told. He would always be polite with his elders, and he would grow up to be a decent human being. Ziska wondered what his son might've looked like—he had always pictured the boy with his mother's red hair and his own blue eyes, but that didn't make any sense because those were both recessive traits, the doctor had explained.

Ziska remembered the slow, gentle way the doctor had of explaining things—he spoke in circles, which Ziska's wife had told him was a way of softening bad news. But Ziska hated the suspense. When the doctor finally got to the point, which was that Ziska was the reason his wife wasn't getting pregnant, he had been almost relieved that the suspense was gone. It wasn't until later that he had begun to feel that he wasn't a real man anymore, that he had failed the person he loved the most. She had been so gracious about the whole thing. Not once did she bring up adoption, which she knew Ziska didn't want, and she always made an effort to change the topic of conversation when friends or family spoke of their kids. Nor did she speak of the son they'd both wanted. Ziska couldn't help thinking of him, and he knew his wife had continued to dream of the boy with red hair and blue eyes.

The coffee had been sitting and the scent reached Ziska's nostrils. He thought of the man on the train and of the incident earlier that morning. He remembered rubbing his chin, looking out through the snow, and realizing, and feeling his heart tingle and his blood jolting through his fingertips. He remembered thinking about the holiday—the three days of paid vacation conductors were given if they hit someone. He hated himself for thinking it.

A bug crawled on the back of Ziska's hand, and he nearly knocked his coffee over. Ziska curled his right index finger and thumb to form a small circle, and then pushed his left ring finger through the hole, back out, through again. In, out, in, out, rhythmically. A bit of ice on the tracks rattled the train and his thumb and index finger tightened, closing the circle on the tip of his ring finger, which stung a little as he pulled out.

Ziska peered at his watch again. Time to collect the tickets. The man who had fallen onto the tracks was seated at the end of the section of the train Ziska was responsible for. As he began his trip through the aisles, Ziska heard someone complaining about the delay, about the train staff being stupid and lazy. He wished he could see who had been complaining. He wanted a face he could attach his anger to, a target for his dreams of taking revenge and humiliating one of those pricks. Not so that he could do something about it—God knows he would never do anything about it.

The snow was coming down harder, and it seemed to be sticking, which might mean more delays to call in. But Ziska had more pressing concerns. He had brought a bottle of water along for the ride, and he thought he might offer it to the man to put him at ease. Though a joke might work. His wife used to recommend humor to break tension, and this fellow would certainly feel uncomfortable. What if he combined the two? What was a funny joke about water?

But Ziska didn't know many jokes, and he couldn't think of any

about water. He'd finished collecting the tickets, and now he was standing in the handicap section across from the man. A full minute passed in silence, as Ziska studied the man's worn-out black shoes, and then his own worn-out brown ones. He mustered his courage and lifted his eyes. The man was staring at him.

"Would you like some water?" Ziska finally asked.

"Oh, no thank you." The man said. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You look like you could use some water."

"I'm alright."

"Really, you should probably drink something. I mean, a man at your age..." Ziska trailed off, and his eyes lowered as he heard the man sigh.

"I'm just fine."

"Listen, I'm not a doctor, but—"

"If I drink the damn water, will you leave me alone?" The man grabbed the water bottle out of Ziska's hand, yanked off the cap, and jerked his head back as he started to chug the bottle. Ziska stood there for a moment, cemented in the ground. That familiar lump blocked his throat again, as it always did when things were awkward. There was no way to win now, and he wanted nothing more than to punch the man in the nose, or slap his dirty cheeks, or at least curse him off. But Ziska was old now, and old people didn't fight. He started back to the conductor's enclave with his head down, feeling stupid and useless.

The man hadn't fallen, Ziska was sure now. He had jumped. He had pointed his toes inward and covered his crotch because he expected to die. He had wanted to end it. Or at least begin it again somewhere else. And maybe that was why the man was so angry with Ziska; maybe Ziska should have realized, should have allowed the train to keep rumbling, should have done this stranger a final courtesy. He hated himself for imposing, for making the man's choice, as all of his own choices had been made.

The train stopped at Valhalla, a metropolis of moneylines, mergers, and acquisitions. The high platform overlooked much of the city skyline, a barrage of flashing colors. In particular, one billboard for a dance club loomed over the train station, reading, in elegant gold lettering, "Welcome to Paradise." Until at the last moment the commuters turned to the staircase leading to the bottom level, they could be seen almost walking into the sign.

This morning, though, Ziska did not immediately see the sign. He did not peep his head out the window to make sure all of the doors had opened, and that no one had slipped in the snow. Despite his efforts, he couldn't help picturing the fellow hobbling on the platform, hobbling down the stairs, and hobbling to whatever business he had in Valhalla.

Counting a minute to make sure the man had gone, Ziska looked outside into the dark morning. As it fell, the snow was ruining the gloss and flair of the looming billboard, revealing a hastily done paint job and exposing the drab coloration underneath. The snow seemed to be getting worse. He hoped it would come down even harder. Bad weather could cancel things, or at least postpone them. Snow didn't mean the end, but it was at least a reprieve. And the tired, old, angry man needed that—and Ziska did, too.

the tragedy of the maginot line

by William Passannante '10

The following is the response to an assignment given in Dr. Tricamo's Short Story Seminar. The assignment? Write a story in fifty lines.

1. The French did not think that the Great War was very fun.
2. What good is a war if it is not fun?
3. That's like buying a toaster and a pair of sneakers – then putting bread in the sneakers and your foot in the toaster.
4. So impeccably dressed French legislators locked themselves in cafés and yelled stupid things at one another for days.
5. Suddenly – they had it.
6. Just in the nick of time, too.
7. (The only frog legs left were actually just webbed tofu.)
8. An impenetrable line of fortresses, etc. to be built on the Franco-German border, meant to deter a German invasion.
9. The Maginot Line.
10. The General of the French Army went to the Chief Engineer of the French Army to order the construction of the Line.
11. Now, unfortunately for France, the General was French, and the Chief Engineer had a dirty mind.
12. Cultural Note: French people do not actually speak French – they speak English with silly accents.
13. The General had an especially silly accent.
14. So, after his meeting with the General, the Chief Engineer called a meeting of his staff, asking them what they thought the most effective way of building a 'Vaginal Line' would be.
15. 'Call the prostitutes to arms!'
16. And thus the call went out to France.
17. Hundreds of thousands of golden-hearted prostitutes streamed to the border.
18. And the night after the great exodus, something very rare happened.
19. French men had sex with their wives.
*
20. The General woke up to see an army of scantily clad women marching past his house.
21. He was so shocked that he had a heart attack and died where he stood.
*

22. The whores lined up facing Germany.
23. One million, four hundred eighty five thousand women-of-the-night.
24. The Line was judged penetrable, but otherwise impregnable.
25. However, the Line outdid itself.
26. The world judged it to be so fearsome a deterrent that Hitler mobilized, ostensibly in an act of self-defense.
27. Things teetered on the brink of destruction.
28. German tanks rolled to the border.
29. The harlots stood as one and faced down the enemy.
30. It was a stalemate.
31. Both sides were evenly matched, possessing devastating weapons, some cutting-edge, others as old as time itself.
32. The Germans lobbed grenades.
33. The hookers shouted nasty things about the German soldiers' performances in bed the previous night.
34. There were many casualties on both sides.
35. But through thick and thin, the Line held.
36. Until the Tragedy.
37. A French infantryman had somehow convinced himself that, by testing the line, he would be doing France a great service.
38. Alas, he brought about the Line's very destruction!
39. Its honor – besmirched!
40. Its comradeship – evaporated!
41. Its purity – well, already long gone.
42. Whatever.
43. Destroyed by friendly fire!
44. The German army saw the Line waver - then disintegrate, as many a strumpet fled the battle.
45. France's spirits were lifted for a moment when the prostitutes were seen returning – then plunged into the deepest pits of despair when they didn't stop at their respective brothels, but ran onward into the sunset.
46. 'A precious resource, wasted!' went the cry.
47. 'Grab the few we can, to make a ring around the capital!'
48. But it was too little, too late.
49. The Vaginal Line had fallen.
50. And thus the Nazi's took Paris.

With apologies to 1) anyone of French descent reading this and 2) history in general.

Also, good morning!

Interested in having your work featured in the next issue?
Please email all submissions to
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