MUSE

A collection of works by Calhoun Community College students, faculty, staff and alumni.

2007

CALHOUN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ADAMAFFIRMATIVE ACTION/ EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION
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muse: def.
muse v. To ponder or meditate; to consider or deliberate at length. 2. To wonder. N. (Greek Mythology) Any of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, each of whom presided over a different act of science. 3. In general, the spirit, or power inspiring and watching over poets, musicians, and all artists; a source of inspiration. 4. (Archaic) a poet.

Editorial Committee
Leigh Ann Rhea • Dr. Randy Cross • Bernadette Jones • Beth Thames
Jennifer Moore (student editor) • Jordan Taylor (assistant editor)
Jill Chadwick

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Cover art by Jessica Young
Layout and Design by Beth Butler, Graphic Designer
Printing by Lana Powers, Calhoun Printing Services
Proofreading by Janet Kincherlow-Martin, Director of Public Affairs, Community Relations and Special Events

Foreword:
We’re very proud of this year’s MUSE, partly because of the quality of the submissions and partly because so many hands joined in its creation. Again, we’ve included an SKD (Sigma Kappa Delta) Honors student as editor, Jennifer Moore, whose insights and hard work helped shape this year’s journal. Our Art/Photography faculty supported us by encouraging their students to submit entries. We received submissions from our current students at the Huntsville and Decatur campuses, and some of our entries came from our alumni, staff, and faculty who take time to remember us with their contributions. Our Public Relations Department shared their considerable talents with us through their layout and proofreading skills – especially Beth Butler, Lanita Parker, and Janet Kincherlow-Martin. Thanks to all of you, and please remember that students, faculty, and staff past and present are encouraged to send us poems, essays, short stories, artwork, and photography. This journal is, quite literally, nothing without you.

Enjoy!

Jill Chadwick, Editor

Published by the Department of Language and Literature and Sigma Kappa Delta.
A Promised Country

by Daniel Byford

Easy
on the
eyes and no
disguises. No mask
of white lies etches her
face. No tattooed tears wander
as she laments. The gods jigged her
with lightning, seasons rode her blindfolded
by rain, years strung her out like a puppet. Now
I feel for the door I might knock to the beat of her heart,
which thirsts in her for no more than a simple cup of dreams.
Her faith requires only the grace of red sky at night seeking rest.
And that shaped silence billowing beneath the shadows
in her mind, nothing more than foresail preparing for
a promised country. I know not what comfort
others may take, but the unexplored
body of her thought in repose
thrums inside my unmade
love, a bed of hope
where sleep were
life and waking
only the
end.

April 1, 1748

by Daniel Byford

First body found at Pompeii
stretched full-length clutching
gold coins bone tight.

~Amore de Rachat~

by Amber Harrison

Broken she lays
On deep carpet
Of mossy earth
Afraid of failure
Too battered to raise
Her weary head
Till fingers cupped
Gently scooping under
Lift her
Into golden beams
Streaming through
Lacy treetops
Awakening her soul
And mending
Her shattered wings

“Butterfly”
Photo by Amber Harrison
“Boo”  

*by Daniel Martin*

inspired by Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* –

A Closed Door and Darkened Shutters
Are as comforting as stars in the sky.
The Warmth of a Secluded Room
Exceeds that of the noontime sun.
The happiness of solitude
Is beyond the power of purchase.
And the simplicity of a life apart
Is more reassuring than string or marbles
Or pocket watches nestled in the trunk of a tree.

———

“Winter Time” by Anne Southard

———

**Confusion**  

*by Marty Kellum*

Words assault my ears
The words of the wise
Well - at least the old.

I sit and listen –
Only half-hearted now
I sit and think.

Masters before have described
The ordinary with a grace
That adds the prefix –extra.

To listen to those
Is to withdraw into a world
Where everything is possible.

I imagine it is they – not he –
That caress my mind
With the mundane made majestic.

A Midwestern accent
Breaks my daze as I look
Back up to the podium.

I realize that ordinary is just that
And it takes true genius
To make it otherwise.

Superfluous metaphors bounce
Across the room – over describing
Does not make it interesting.

The devil is in the details
And he pierces my eardrums
With a pitchfork of uselessness.

Finished – the crowd explodes
As I rise from my seat
And make my way to the door.
Entropy

by Margaret J. Vann

I wrote you a poem—
   a love sonnet

We were meteors burning through the atmosphere—
a brief spark flashing across the sky
then gone
   a wish then gone
The sonnet, regular and ordered,
conceals the entropy of our lives
Beneath the cool, ordered words,
memories of passion and desire
Our lives as they touched & sparked
burned with intensity
Unlike those metered lines of rhyme
   pacing across the page to end in couplet,
no couplet we

The Field Sleeper

by Daniel Martin

Your frame is small and squat
   misshapen like a lump of dough.

Your face is freckled and pockmarked,
   patched with sickly, silver fuzz.

Your hair is an unkempt mess,
   Its only fear a strong-toothed comb

Your complexion is a raw scarlet,
   like the face of a drunken man.

As a man, you would be a flawed creation.
   But as a strawberry, you are beautiful.
finding the hidden kitchen

by Margaret J. Vann

men come grinning
stripping away the old to the studs

gone is the wood-tiled ceiling
fabric-covered wires hiss sparks
pink fiber-glass festoons from rafters
ancient gentle dust sifts down
covers plates, books, knickknacks, floors
with quarter-inch residue

gone are the made-on-the-spot pine cabinets
multiple hues of paint emerge:
honey white, egg-shell white, harvest gold, sea foam green, knotty pine

gone is the linoleum
sub floor refuses to release 50-year-old Congoleum
saws scream their delight as they rip into layers of flooring
sawdust mixes with attic dust

four walls partially clad in knotty pine
sub floor covered with sticky tar paper
vent holes open to capture kitten’s cautious probing
ceiling of rafters, wires, and roof decking

the dream has become the nightmare
potential is all that is left

Hands

by Jennifer Moore

I have my mother’s hands.
Long slender fingers
with rounded knuckles.
Small and delicate,
but honest and hardworking.
I know they are hers,
because they once held me
and clothed me.
I was scolded with them
and sometimes punished.

And many times I saw one
or the other wave goodbye
as I boarded the terminal.
They wiped away the tears
that promised that next summer
we’d see each other again,
and softly whispered
“I’m sorry I left you.”

Hands that were once neatly polished
and studded with gold and diamonds
against olive skin.
“A woman’s jewelry says if she is someone
or no one”
I would like to miss those hands.

Cold, boney fingers like the dead
reach for me.
They are broken.
They wave a sadness through the air.
No glitter or gold to dazzle.
Their sparkle has been traded
in twenty-four hour pawn shops
for late night fixes
and last minute deals.
They anger me.

In rose-colored memories
they were soft and golden.
Now, they pass through shadows-
Weaving worlds of fabrications
and building prisons inside her mind.
I wish that I could hold them;
That I could feel sorry for the
pain they must endure.
I feel my fingers go numb.

“180 Calories” by Marilyn Bachelor
How Lovely Like a Cenotaph

by Daniel Byford

How lovely like a cenotaph, unnerving as eclipsed moonlight,
Her face dreams into sight: a cloud, then fog, then mask, then flame
Bursting into thought, searing into memory, flaring blood bright
Into embering hopes. Dare I even desire to know her name?
Framed in leather, brushed with silk, festooned with metal, gems, a flower
In her hair, she can only be painted on the wind and adorned
By sun or rain. The ghost of past love or oracle of future
Pain? No matter. Love is lost in learning it and is to be mourned
The moment born. It is the glimpse of endings borne through time—
Endured for the sake of love itself, the savor of it, the test
Taken inside the heart, which proves us or not—melding sublime
First sight to that one true soul that puts our soul at rest.
No new myth covers this old song married to the maker’s bones.
Love engenders loss, rebirths each seeming death, unveils stones.

Photo by Sabrina Lyle

“Fantasy Wolf”
by Phonpadith Khounmano
Hunter’s Moon

by Michael Williamson

The Hunter’s moon lights the world tonight
In an ethereal light that illuminates in black and white.
Orion rises in the east tonight
Signaling that it’s a winter’s night.
Smoke curls leisurely from chimneys that tell
Of cozy fires and inviting hearths.
Christmas lights color the dark
Telling of faith and hope and warm hearts.
The cold invites one to snuggle deep within
A handmade quilt with a dog or cat by the fire.
Wonderous is a clear winter’s night.

Elia

“Reflections in the Fog”
by Sallie Estes

“Waitin’ for the Ferry”
by Mary Nelle Black
Letter to the Woman at the Dating Website

by Joel Fry

When it comes to money,
I guard enough to live on,
Keeping my hands from the
big cash like an old man hiding
bacon from himself.

I’m easy going.
An Alka-Seltzer can settle
my mind. You should know,
too, that even when worry
sets in like a weevil, I have
a rare, bright face.

Yesterday every obstacle
was in place for me to overrun.
My account was overdrawn,
and the kids kept calling about
the cat. I didn’t become
frustrated, though. I’m not
privy to that.

If this is what you like in a man,
if you can stay abreast of my free-
dom,
give me a call.

Yours,
Jimmie

“Making the World Change”

by Joshua Mathis and Nathan Durham

B. Frank

I see the fruitions of my labor,
Cutting through Americana like a Jedi saber.
I don’t wait, I don’t hold, I don’t play 100% dedication,
Compelling thoughts filtering this roundabout reversible nation,

Why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
Coalitions of youth, broken bricks are all that remains,
Why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
If we all press forward, we have everything to gain,

The monotonically idealistic populous beliefs,
Waiting for some kind of savior to send them relief,
Why should we wait, for our world to change?
Creating a new nation, free of mental starvation, is such a beautiful thing.

Why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
Coalitions of youth, broken bricks are all that remains,
Why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
If we all press forward, we have everything to gain,

A chance to bring a hope to those in need,
A hope that fuels the spark against a furious greed,
The only doubt left is the one that is to heed,
Let loose, let go, realize potential and start the siege,
Hold on to the drive, running at full speed.

So, why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
Coalitions of youth, broken bricks are all that remains,
Why should we wait for the world to change? (To change),
If we all press forward, we have everything to gain,
Otherwise this world of ours will never ever change……

Musings of a Substitute

(for Susan)

by Margaret J. Vann

Most of us at some time in our lives become orphans.

An insight that came to me after noticing
my friends are growing grey (along with me).

Sitting at your desk noticing the things that personalize an office:
Postcards in a collage of memories and places
Seen and unseen
Memos to me, the substitute, on Post-it notes touches of you, my friend.

Because we are friends

I feel at home
I just miss your voice
You are now seen and unseen
And I remembered again that most of us
At some time in our life become orphans.

I, not yet, but you
bereft of mother, then father
write of memories (do not want to more than likely)
collages carefully framed feelings.
I cannot imagine the state of orphanhood
but I see around me
in this your office (this office like a home)
things that remind me of your unseen (to me forever)
Mother and your unseen (for this time forward)
Father.

I have hanging in my home lilies sketched by your father
and as I sit here, I remember him

I have in my home a tiny blue willow tea set
connected to the one in yours
by the savings graces of motherhood
and I remember her.

So how with my connections to you and yours
Can we ever be orphans?

We have memories of people
once seen now unseen memories
like the collage upon your office wall.

written between 1986 &1990 mj

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Long Ago in Spain

by Sue Pumphrey

A dark-haired house girl at a window watered the balcony’s cascading flowers.

On her narrow cobblestone street, sun-bleached buildings stood tall and rigid amidst steamy Mediterranean sunbeams while the cascading blooms sparkled.

A breeze bumped loose a blossom or two, and they drifted slowly down to settle about the dusty cobblestones at my feet.

Those days are gone, as fragile as a distant, drifting blossom at my feet.

“Sunrise at Sant’ Antimo Monastery”
by Carla Swinney

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“Sunrise at Sant’ Antimo Monastery”
by Carla Swinney
Smokers’ Paradise

by Sheila H. Byrd

It’s there
tucked into one corner
—a smoker’s table
lined with blue ceramic cups brimming with everlasting coffee,
black and creamy colored.
Neither cracked nor chipped cups abide here
and no need of ashtrays.

Daddy is straddling a straight back chair —laughing
Aunt Jean and Uncle Sherrill too are drinking in all—
Aunt Lorene has finally made her entrance.
The corner, filled with the heavenly scent of perpetually fresh tobacco, ebbs
and flows with joy and love and peace.
Non-smokers come and go in this cloudy circle, joining the spirited conversation.
For, what do angels fear of 2nd-hand smoke?
**Waterwheel**

*by Sue Pumphrey*

Across the field stands a small, stony spring house with its wooden water-wheel.

Acres of cattle fields lie just beyond, criss-crossed with busy paths of bovine destinations.

An empty park bench sits neglected nearby,

for passing pedestrians using exaggerated arm movements hurry past on sidewalks leading to far off destinations.

The waterwheel’s water darkly glistens in the hot summer sun.

Up and around and over,

the water yields again and again, putting on its dazzling show.

The sounds of traffic traveling

up and around and over

the criss-crossing streets mask the cascading water’s splashes.

The cattle cram closely

in the wide shade of the distant oaks,

too far away to see or hear the refreshing coolness as the water splashes into a dazzling pool of reflection.

**Writer’s Block**

*by Jennifer Moore*

I do not feel inspired. Perhaps I am just not talented.

Perhaps these incomplete ideas and fragmented phrases

Really have no depth, no passion, no fury.

The path from pensive to pen is twisted, tangled, taunting.

Mocking my frustrations;

Laughing at my need to feel, to speak, to create.

Where is my muse?

Have those gracious goddesses of art, music, and poetry

Thought nothing of the drive that burns beneath my flesh,

That aches within my brittle bones

For a voice, a song, a message.

Inside, sequestered beauty lies softly killed by silence.

Negligence of the sacred soul.

Her dying wish to be heard.
This morning, I sat in the passenger’s seat of John’s parked Camaro, waiting as he searched his house for his library card. I was perfectly content there, drinking in my surroundings like a fresh glass of water. The sharp morning sun fired down onto the maroon hood and black interior of the car. In certain areas, the heat was cut by icy air gusting from the dashboard vents. The deep rumble of the engine and air-conditioner made the glove compartment latch vibrate, so I touched it gently to stop the rattle. A thought occurred to me then; I had placed John’s library card in an unusual pocket of his wallet last week.

To the left of me, the modest black wallet resided in a cup holder, paired, as usual, with his five dollar, blue-tinted sunglasses and loose pen-nies. I pulled the lump of leather from the cup holder with a “clank” as the shades fell onto coins. Rubbing my thumb across the softly worn leather, I looked down at the wallet. The half moon shape that had formed over time molded to my palm naturally. As I held the wallet, I felt I was holding a reflection of the boy himself.

Then I gently flipped open the first fold, revealing thoroughly flattened, plastic photo pockets. The first picture was only slightly bigger than a postage stamp and damaged in blotches. After squinting, I made out two smiling figures posed in front of a barely recognizable baseball field. Of course! This was the first photo ever taken of me and John together. As I peered at it, the story of the locket-size photo came back to me. It was taken at Palmer Park on a humid day in August, years ago. John and his family were leaving town to visit his grandparents the next day, and John wanted to have a picture of us before he left. The equally hot summer following, while on a canoe trip, the picture was almost ruined when John jumped from our boat and into the river, forgetting that his wallet was in his pocket. I smiled to myself and took a deep breath. I could almost smell the glistening water and hear the clatter of canoe oars.

Suddenly, I remembered my search for the library card and moved on to the second flap. The first item showing was a worn piece of paper with a simple “I love you” scrawled in loopy, girlish handwriting. Far more elaborate notes have been exchanged between us over the years, but this sincere statement says it all. Behind the note, his various credit cards were stuffed into pockets. In a clump, the sleek, plastic rectangles were pulled out and fanned into my palm. In the stack there were various membership cards to beta and government clubs, movie cards, and photo IDs. I wondered if he would ever throw away these tokens from the high school which meant so much to him.

The last card in the stack was not the library card but a new, flashy identification card with a recent photo of wavy-haired John smiling straight ahead. Under his photo it says, “Student,” and next to him the card sports a wind-blown maroon flag with bold, white letters that read, “STATE.” I moved the shiny card back and forth in the sunlight, thinking about its meaning: college, a new adventure, long distance phone calls, tears, new memories, our future...growing up.

Finally, I stacked the stiff cards in my hand and pushed them back into their pockets. The pouch where I suspected to find the library card was hidden behind the other pouches and opened to the side, rather than from the top. Sure enough, when I felt inside the pouch, my fingers found the desired card and pulled it out. As the flaps of his wallet smacked closed in my hand, I paused reflecting on its contents: the history of a life.

Memories of illuminated baseball diamonds, canoe trips, and love letters are all still inside, welcoming the new items of today and showing signs of an exciting tomorrow.
“Old Barn Gate” by Marilyn Bachelor

“Roots & Shoots” by Sallie Estes

“Exhale” by Jessica Young

“Autumn Leaves” by Betty Bacon
One day, quite a long time ago by my standards, I met a person who has since had a huge impact on me. It’s kind of odd, however, because she isn’t a ‘real’ person at all. She is, in fact, the heroine of a television show. As strange as it may sound, the minute I saw my first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* I was captivated. In fact, I can still remember exactly how it happened.

It was a normal summer day in my dinky North Alabama neighborhood, sweltering hot outside with the air so thick and moist it felt like hot syrup against the skin. Inhaling seared the lungs, all the sweet flower aromas drowned by the overpowering scent of heat. Walking the neighbor’s Doberman Pinscher (something I did to earn a little pocket money) was a laborious affair. Listening to the repetitive *ch-ch-ch* clicking as sprinklers watered and the droning sounds of lawns being clipped, I couldn’t understand how anybody had the energy to mow when I could barely hold onto the dog’s leash. It was like walking in a sauna; the steamy heat sucked all the pep right out of me. It was with a very great relief when I could finally return the panting dog to its owner and then collapse in the cool haven of her air-conditioned kitchen. At last, I was out of that blasting sunshine.

With the gloriously icy air blowing on me, I soon recovered from my arduous walk. However, with summer pressing his sticky fingers against the squeaky screen door, I wasn’t keen to leave the house and the wonder of central air. Instead, I struck up a conversation with my neighbor, an opinionated former rodeo-rider. I’m sure the talk was interesting, as the spirited Mrs. Merchant always had plenty to say, but I don’t remember a lick of it now. Every ounce of attentiveness I had was lost as I shifted to a more comfortable position on my square-seat ed stool and happened to glance into the spacious living room where the TV was flashing. That was when I saw it.

All it took was a glance and I was hooked. This strange TV show was exciting—radically different from anything before. At first, my eyes were incredulous as I watched a tiny blonde high-schooler face down and kick the living daylights out of a menacing vampire before finally plunging a rough wooden stake into his chest. That fight scene, all of thirty seconds long, was all it took. *Buffy* had captured my interest and done it more grippingly than any show before.

To me the characters on the show felt real, as if they were friends rather than flat figures on a small glass screen. I wept when Buffy was forced to battle the man she loved; I rejoiced when she saved the world. I sympathized when she sparred with her mother, their angry words echoing my own fights with my mom. Most of all, I found that the monsters Buffy so readily faced weren’t really so fantastical. Once, a school project nearly killed her, and who hasn’t had one of those from time to time? There was the death of her mother, times when her friends turned on her, and she even had to take on the responsibility of taking care of her younger sister, all of which were monsters. Buffy beat the demons, yes, but she faced down and conquered her personal problems, as well. It wasn’t unflinchingly; there were times when she wanted to break and run from her duties (big and small), but she got by.

Even though the show ended nearly four years ago, my love for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has never shrunk. I can still quote lines of dialogue from her seven-year run, including almost one entire episode. And when I face my problems—essays to write, chapters to read, or math problems to calculate—I just remember that they really aren’t as bad as they could be. At least I don’t have to save the world in my spare time.
“Heart” by Kristopher Holcombe

“Happy Holidays” by Holly Sherrill

“Crying” by Phonpadith Khounmano

“Swan” by Heather Drough
Janet was right on time this morning. She knew because she looked out the window as she was brushing her hair and noticed her next door neighbor Mr. Stegerman fiddling with that box on his bedroom dresser. He did it every morning after he whisked open the curtains and gave her a friendly wave. Her window looked across the alley between the two houses, and she tried not to be nosy and stare into his window, but sometimes she just couldn’t help but notice. Mr. Stegerman didn’t seem to mind.

“What’s Mr. Stegerman doing, Momma?” Janet asked. Her mother had come in her room to collect the dirty clothes but paused long enough to glance out the window.

“He’s just winding a clock,” her mother answered. “Older clocks have to be wound up or they stop.”

Janet looked at the clock on her nightstand. It always told the correct time in glowing red numbers, and it was connected to a power outlet with a cord. The only time it stopped was when the power went out. Her mother left the room, and Janet finished getting ready for school. Soon, Janet knew Mr. Stegerman would leave the house on his morning walk. He walked every morning three times around the block, sometimes stopping at the park which was at the very end of their street. Sometimes he walked with Janet on her way to school if she wasn’t late leaving the house. Today, she was right on time, so she waited in front of the house until Mr. Stegerman came out of his. He was never late.

“Hi, Mr. Stegerman!” Janet called as she skipped up to walk next to him.

“Good morning, Janet.” Mr. Stegerman smiled at her and offered her the crook of his arm. The sidewalk was old and cracked with little brown weeds peaking through the cement, but when they walked together like this, Janet felt like she was in a parade.

After a few moments of pleasant silence, Janet asked the question that had been bothering her.

“Mr. Stegerman,” she began. She knew he wouldn’t mind her looking in his window. Sometimes he waved at her if he saw her watching. “Why do you wind that clock? My clock doesn’t wind up like that. It plugs into the wall. Can’t you get one like that?”

“I could, Janet,” Mr. Stegerman replied. “It’s a special clock though. My wife’s father gave it to us as a wedding present. It’s a seven-day clock. You only have to wind it once every seven days.”

“But Mr. Stegerman,” Janet’s brow wrinkled in consternation, “you wind that clock every day, I’ve seen you. Why do you do that if you only have to wind it once a week?”

“I asked my wife that same question, Janet. Every morning before she passed away, Ida would get out of the bed and go directly to the clock to wind it. ‘Ida,’ I asked her, ‘Why do you wind that clock every day?’ You know what she said?”

Janet shook her head.

“She said, ‘Sam, I wind that clock to remind myself that time passes. It passes on good days just the same as on bad days. Even if I don’t want to get out of bed, time just keeps ticking away.’ I thought that made no sense, no sense at all. But then, the day after Ida passed on, I woke up. I lay there just staring at the ceiling. I was so miserable at facing a day without her. Then I heard that clock ticking and ticking, reminding me of what Ida had said. Time was passing; I knew it wouldn’t stop just because I didn’t want to get up. So, I got out of bed and wound it up. I’ve done it every morning since then.”

“That makes no sense,” Janet giggled. “No sense at all.”

Mr. Stegerman chuckled and patted her gently on the head. “It may one day, Janet.”

Janet waved good-bye as she scampered off to school and forgot all about the conversation after a few days. Days passed into weeks, weeks into months, there were good days and bad days; soon it was almost time for summer vacation. Janet walked with Mr. Stegerman some mornings, sometimes she didn’t. She saw him working in his garden or sweeping his porch, and he always had a friendly wave and smile for her. He was always there, she knew, even when she didn’t see him.

Then two days before school was to let out, Janet came home to see her mother sitting at the kitchen table, a sad look on her face. On the table, Janet noticed was a small black clock. It was Mr. Stegerman’s clock, the same clock Janet had seen him winding through the window just about every morning. Up close, she noticed it was very plain; the dial was darkened with age, and she could barely make out the numbers printed on it.
Janet sat down at the table, she had a feeling she knew what news her mother was about to give her.

“Janet,” her mother said gently, “Mr. Stegerman passed away yesterday evening. He left a note that he wanted you to have this clock. His son brought it over just a little while ago.”

Janet only nodded; her throat seemed too tight to speak. Janet’s mother said lots of words, meant to comfort, but they couldn’t stop the ache. Finally, her mother wrapped her comforting arms around her, and she began to cry. She cried until she thought she could cry no longer and then went to her room to lie down. When her mother called her for dinner, she didn’t feel like eating and stayed in bed.

“You need to eat, Janet.” Her mother said, but she let her lay there just the same.

Janet watched it get dark outside, there were no lights on at Mr. Stegerman’s house, and she began to cry again. Finally, she fell asleep.

In the morning, Janet lay in bed awake and stared at the ceiling. Her eyes felt gritty and swollen. Slowly, she became aware of a small noise, a faint ticking sound. Turning her head, she saw that her mother had brought Mr. Stegerman’s clock and put it on her dresser. She looked at it dully, the minute hand moving almost imperceptibly. Janet sighed, tossed off the covers, and got to her feet. She went to the clock and looked at it closely. In the back there was a small tarnished key. Carefully, she turned the key a few times until it would go no further. She finally understood what Mr. Stegerman had tried to tell her.

Time would pass, whether she got out of bed to wind the clock or not.
Othello as a Tragic Hero
by Kevin Alspaugh

William Shakespeare’s plays exemplify the universal qualities which are essential to interpretive literature. Man’s collision with an inexorable fate is foremost in the genre. No greater example can be found than that of Othello as the tragic hero. His tragic flaw, transition from balance to imbalance, and his obsession for the truth work in concert to lead him along the inevitable path of destruction.

Othello’s tragic flaw consists of his susceptibility to jealousy, compounded by his naive nature and his status as an outsider in Venetian society and culture. His foreign nationality is a requirement for his rank as commander-in-chief, and he appears to enjoy little regard among the Venetians outside of his military prowess. An unflattering portrait of Othello is painted from the beginning of the play by Roderigo (1.1.86-90) and Iago (1.1.109-12) as they portray him as a black devil with lascivious intent towards Brabantio’s daughter. Othello is further demonized by Brabantio when before the Duke, he claims Desdemona must have been bewitched and stolen by the Moor (1.3.59-64). Despite his reply of “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.291) to Brabantio’s “She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.290), Othello is easily moved to jealousy. At the first hint from Iago, “Ha! I like not that” (3.3.35), Othello is hooked and begins to suspect the worst. Additionally, he is insecure due to the somewhat platonic beginnings of his relationship with Desdemona (1.3.130-165), his lack of social graces (5.1.18-20), his race (3.3.387-9), and his age (3.3.264-7). Othello is incapable of believing that someone as fair and beautiful as Desdemona could be his faithful wife (3.3.268-78).

At first, Othello appears to be quite balanced. When all is chaos and swords are drawn over his alleged abduction of Desdemona, he tells Brabantio, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them./Good sir, you shall command more with years / Than with your weapons” (1.2.59-61). When confronted by Brabantio’s accusations before the Duke, he calls for Desdemona to come forward and testify as to the reasons for her actions (1.3.115-18). Iago informs us that this balance will not continue with the aside “Oh, you are well tuned now / But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music” (2.1.194-5). After Othello’s mind has been poisoned by Iago’s machinations, he spends the entire dialogue with Desdemona in Act 4, Scene 2, accusing her of the most foul and faithless acts. Without telling her what he has heard, Othello never gives her a chance to refute the accusations. The seeds of this imbalance can be seen earlier in the play with Othello’s words “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not” (3.3.385-6). Othello is able to hide his emotions for a while, until his pent-up stress and rage send him into an epileptic fit (4.1.33-41). At this point, Othello has abandoned the logic and reason of his martial tradition, and chaos takes over his life. Jealousy has unbalanced his mind to the point of contemplating the destruction of his loyal lieutenant and brings him to the extreme event as he declares, “How shall I murder him, Iago?” (4.1.159). This is immediately followed by his decision to chop Desdemona into mincemeat or to poison her. But it is Iago who will decide the means of Desdemona’s murder and seals her fate with “Do it not with poison, strangling her in bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.191-2). Othello is driven to the point of no return. Fate has taken over, and the inevitable outcome is beyond anyone’s control. He is so consumed with hate and rage that he can no longer conceal his murderous intent. Desdemona can see it on his face (5.2.37-45). For the first time, Othello accuses Desdemona of infidelity with Cassio. She pleads her innocence and begs for her life. It is too late. Othello is in another world, and her pleas fall on deaf ears.

At Iago’s first insinuation of something untoward between Desdemona and Cassio, Othello is interested, and Iago’s opening gambit is on the table (3.3.35-40). Despite his repeated declarations of Cassio’s honesty, Othello insists that Iago tell him of his suspicions. With mock sincerity and caution, Iago allows Othello to draw him out. When they part, Othello seems almost convinced of her infidelity as he says, “She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loath her” (3.3.268-9). However, this is quickly followed with “I’ll not believe ‘t”
(3.3.279). Yet upon his next meeting with Iago, Othello demands of him to “prove my love a whore / Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof / Or by the worth of man’s eternal soul/Thou hadst better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath” (3.3.361). In each successive meeting, Iago feeds Othello’s obsession for the truth with one lie after another. Iago contrives the story of Cassio’s dream about Desdemona (3.3.420-1), the handkerchief (3.3.438-9), and the actual sex act (4.1.34). Othello’s obsession continues as he lurks in the shadows to overhear the conversation of Iago, Cassio, and Bianca (4.1.100-57). It continues to the very end when Othello implores Desdemona to “confess thee freely of thy sin” (5.2.53). Othello’s path to destruction begins with the dismissal of his loyal lieutenant. In the absence of Cassio, Othello relies on Iago’s judgement and advice. From this time on, Othello accepts Iago’s word as truth and the word of those closest to him as lies. Othello foreshadows the result with “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (3.3.92-4). Iago easily leads Othello to his own demise through deceit and subterfuge. Othello abandons all reason, refusing any alternate explanation of events, and blindly stumbles down the path which leads to his loss of wealth, power, fame, and love.

Othello’s last soliloquy defines him as a great man (5.2.337-55). However, it is only after the destruction of all that he holds dear that he realizes the truth. His susceptibility to jealousy unbalances his mind, and his obsession for truth leads him to destruction.
Paul’s Case: A Character Analysis

by Kevin Alspaugh

The early twentieth century was a time of great social upheaval and class isolation. In “Paul’s Case,” Willa Cather paints an intimate, narrative study of one young man’s inability to conform to his social status. Paul’s rebellion against authority, his isolation, and his proclivity for escapism lead to his inevitable self-destruction.

Paul’s character is exhibited by his attitude toward his teachers, his tendency to lie, and the embezzlement of his employer’s money. At first, Paul’s rebellion against authority takes the form of his snobbishly defiant attitude toward his teachers. When Paul appears before them to “account for his various misdeeds” (par.3), it is noted that “Disorder and impertinence were among the offenses named” (par.3), yet the actual problem was the “hysterically defiant manner of the boy’s; in the contempt which they all knew he felt for them, and which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal” (par. 3). In one incident, as a teacher is attempting to guide his hand at the blackboard, it is related that “Paul had started back with a shudder and thrust his hands violently behind him” (par. 3). Later, it is stated that “In one way or another, he had made all his teachers, men and women alike, conscious of the same feeling of physical aversion” (par 3). Paul resorts to falsehoods when confronted with feelings of helplessness in his present situation. Paul’s rebellion is exacerbated by “the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness that he always had when he came home” (par. 20), which leads him to contrive the lies “that he had no carfare, and it was raining so hard he had gone home with one of the boys and stayed all night” (par.21), and later, “that he was going to travel for a while; going to Naples, to California, to Egypt” (Par. 34). Paul’s propensity for falsehood and his growing disregard for authority eventually result in larceny. His decision to embezzle his employer’s bank deposit is well calculated and without remorse, as he recalls, “From the time he slipped the banknotes into his pocket until he boarded the night train for New York, he had not known a moment’s hesitation” (par. 46). The totality of his decision and foreshadowing of the conclusion of his rebellion are revealed when he recollects, “How easy it had all been; here he was, the thing done; and this time there would be no awakening, no figure at the top of the stairs” (par.47).

The social isolation of Paul is a major contributing factor to his mental state and eventual demise. Paul does not appear to have any close personal relationships. The other students at his school are referred to as classmates or pupils and are never mentioned by name. He interacts poorly with the other ushers at the theater, teasing and bothering them to the point that “they put him down on the floor and sat on him” (par. 13). He has no close friends, and Charley Edwards only consents to having him among his following because “the young actor, who could not employ a dresser, often found him useful” (par. 29). The isolation continues when “the Principal went to Paul’s father, and Paul was taken out of school and put to work. The manager at Carnegie Hall was told to get another usher in his stead; the doorkeeper at the theater was warned not to admit him to the house; and Charley Edwards remorsefully promised the boy’s father not to see him again” (par. 36). By isolating him from his only existing means of expression, Paul’s inexorable course of action is set in motion. In New York, Paul does not establish personal relationships. Paul surrounds himself with society without becoming social. He enjoys his new surroundings but avoids any personal relationship. His attempt to befriend the Yale freshman ends with disappointment. As he thinks about their night on the town, Paul’s last memory of the evening is that “their parting in the elevator was singularly cool” (par. 56).

Paul’s proclivity for escapism is demonstrated throughout the story. After the symphony concert at Carnegie Hall, “he had the feeling of not being able to let down; of its being impossible to give up this delicious excitement which was the only thing that could be called living at all” (par. 16). Unable to relinquish his obsession, Paul follows the soloist to her hotel. Standing outside, he imagines himself in her company and “seemed to feel himself go after her up the steps, into the warm, lighted building, into an exotic, a tropical world of shining, gleaming surfaces and basking ease” (par. 18). His reverie
continues as he reflects “upon the mysterious dishes that were brought into the dining-room, the green bottles in buckets of ice, as he had seen them in the supper-party pictures of the Sunday supplement” (par. 18). His fantasy is interrupted by the harsh reality of the wind and rain, and he is “startled that he was still outside in the slush of the gravel driveway; that his boots were letting in the water and his scanty overcoat was clinging wet about him; that the lights of the concert hall were out, and that the rain was driving in sheets between him and the orange glow of the windows above him” (par. 18). He is forced by the elements of nature to consider his present station in life and wonders “whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it” (par. 18). His trip to New York becomes his final, desperate escape from authority, his lower social status, and any interruption of his imagined success. He sets himself up in the most luxurious surroundings. In contrast to the dull, dark, and dirty world of Pittsburgh, he experiences “The lights, the chatter, the perfumes, the bewildering medley of color—” (par. 52) which surround him in New York. Paul is totally absorbed in his new life and questions the reality of that distant, previous existence as he thinks, “Had he not always been thus, had he not sat here night after night, from as far back as he could remember, looking pensively over just such shimmering textures, and slowly twirling the stem of a glass like this one between his thumb and middle finger?” (Par. 53). The fragile dream is soon shattered by the impending consequences of his actions. The news from home portends the coming disaster of his father’s arrival to return him to the world of “Sabbath School, Young People’s Meetings, the yellow-papered room, the damp dish towels;” (par. 59), and he has “the old feeling that the orchestra has stopped, the sinking sensation that the play was over” (par. 59). However, his panic is short-lived. He winks to himself in the mirror, and “with something of the childish belief in miracles with which he had so often gone to class, all his lessons unlearned, Paul dressed and dashed whistling down the corridor to the elevator” (par. 59). Thoughts of his father’s arrival and the return to his monotonous existence continue to haunt Paul. He considers using the revolver he has brought on his journey but cannot bring himself to that conclusion. With his money running out and nowhere to hide, he leaves the comfort of the city and travels to the bleak, snow-covered countryside. Exhausted, he dozes by the railroad tracks leading to Pennsylvania. He is awakened by the sound of an approaching train and with a new clarity envisions “the blue Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands” (par. 68) as he steps forward into death to resolve the conflict of his life.

In “Paul’s Case,” the protagonist is a product of his environment and the class conflict inherent in the social structure of the early twentieth century. His rebellious nature, his isolation from normal social contact, his vivid imagination, and his refusal to cope with reality lead him to his inevitable self-destruction and final escape.
In the work “MS Found in a Bottle,” Poe uses a descriptive tale of physical peril and unusual events to describe a man’s journey. He sets the tale in a sensation of seclusion and desperation. He wants readers to question whether the man is truly alive by combining elements of analytical and exaggerated writing styles to narrate the fearful, mysterious transition from life to death.

In the story, Poe’s narrator is an estranged man who sets sail from the port of Batavia in Western Indonesia on a voyage to the Archipelago of the Sunda Islands in Northeastern Indonesia. A forceful hurricane hits the ship one night while the slumbering crew lies anchored at sea. From this storm, the sole survivors are the estranged man and the Swede. The two float at sea for several days with the wind and waves still brewing around them. The ship is pulled southward to the Pole, described as lacking all sunlight, when suddenly they are overtaken by a larger ship. The narrator is catapulted onto the other vessel and never sees the Swede again. The final elements of the story involve the narrator journaling his memories of the events, his emotions, and his observations of the crew aboard the new vessel. The tale ends violently as the narrator’s ship is swallowed into the bowels of the earth.

Upon deeper evaluation of the story, it appears the narrator is actually the one who has died, and the Swede is the Angel of Death accompanying him on his final voyage. This theory is supported by the fact that despite the terrible weather events and being flung a far distance to the other vessel, the narrator and Swede speak of no bodily injuries. The story tells how everyone was swept overboard or drowned in their sleep. However, if this really did happen, voices of the crew would have been heard or their bodies found. There are neither in this case. Furthermore, the ship could not have flooded that quickly to drown everyone below, due to the size of the ship. Also noteworthy are the actions of the crew aboard the new vessel. The narrator speaks of being visible to them, yet no one acknowledges his presence. The narrator states, “I made bold to trust myself among a group of the crew. They paid me no manner of attention, and, although I stood in the very midst of them all, seemed utterly unconscious of my presence.” It becomes apparent that the Swede is the metaphorical Angel of Death sent to guide the narrator to the ship of the dead for his final voyage to the afterlife.

Significant to the theme of the story is Poe’s mix of his common writing styles, analytical and exaggerated. He allows the narrator to transition freely between moments of logic and reason and moments of high emotion and despair. For example, the story begins with the narrator setting the stage for the events to be recounted. He says he is often accused of “a deficiency of imagination” and prefers the reasoning of science and theory. When traveling on the vessels, he notes vivid descriptions of the weather, the detail and wood of the boat, and the frailness of the crew, as though he is making scientific observations. He gives support stating, “The ship and all it are imbued with the spirit of Eld. The crew glide to and fro like the ghosts of buried centuries.” He does not question his lack of injuries or even the lack of recognition from the crew. This calm rationale is puzzling given the turn of events he has experienced. Poe then juxtaposes this analytical mind with an exaggerated style of high emotion. The estranged man states, “To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible.” He cries of his despair, isolation and assumed demise, yet he alludes to a feeling of hope saying, “The crew pace the deck with unquiet and tremulous step; but there is upon their countenance an expression more of eagerness of hope than of the apathy of despair.” The mixing of the two writing styles allows the readers’ experience of the story to be heightened as they continue to question if the narrator is still alive.

The story ends with the larger ship getting caught in a whirlpool that pulls it beneath the waters. This is the narrator’s arrival at the afterlife. The estranged man comments finally, “The ice opens suddenly to the right and to the left […] the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance […] plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool.” This leaves an idea of how and why the final ship completed its voyage without instruments or mathematical navigation, alluding that the ship was
being pulled by a higher force or a repetitious voyage for eternity. The estranged man notices in two instances “decayed charts of navigation” and “the cabin floor [...] thickly strewn with strange, iron-clasped folios, and moldering instruments of science, and obsolete long forgotten charts.” These entries by the narrator give the reader a suggestion about what actual events occur. The two styles of Poe’s writing, exaggerated and analytical, keep the reader questioning but also allow for a shroud of mystery about the passage he is experiencing.

The setting and insights provided by Poe lead the reader to conclude that the estranged man was dead. The symbolic nature of the Swede accompanying him on his journey and the mysterious crew support this theory. Yet beyond questioning an interpretation of the story, Poe also successfully uses a mixture of the analytical and exaggerated writing styles to draw the reader into the story and experience the man’s transition into the afterlife.
With her feet up on the dash and her lips set in a grim line, Mom was fuming silently. Although she had firmly suggested we drive across the bridge, we were driving through a very wide river. Dad was calmly explaining that he had driven across this very spot a week ago during a hunting trip. Since we could see the bridge in the distance, I think he just wanted to share the thrill of driving his jeep through the river with us. Halfway across the river, water began seeping into the cab. Within a few minutes the engine had died. We were stuck, in the middle of a wide muddy river, in the middle of Korea. We were stuck in the middle of another Spille Family Adventure.

We were stuck, but not for long. Soon a handful of grinning Korean men were wading around our slowly sinking jeep. Speaking with exaggerated hand motions they were telling us to come on out. As my father deftly carried my mother ashore, these men laughingly toted my sister, brothers, and myself to dryland as well. While the men helped my father pull the jeep out of the river and dry out the engine the rest of us were led to a nearby farm. As they dried our shoes by the fire, a kind farmer and his wife fed us dinner. Cooked over an open fire, the meal we ate consisted mostly of scrambled eggs and vegetables. Their home was a small brown hut with dirt floors. They had no indoor plumbing, nor did they have electricity.

It was dark as we headed home that night, finally crossing the river by way of the bridge. My mother was not angry anymore as we talked about what a great day it had been. We marveled over our hosts and their lifestyle. It had been a sacrifice for them to be so kind, and we were very fortunate to have had the experience of spending the day with them.

Growing up as Army dependents, my siblings and I had many such adventures. Through times like these and the relations we formed we easily learned to accept the unique diversity in people. We moved every three years, living in New England, California, and Georgia, as well as South Korea and Germany. As we traveled, our family learned to grow and embrace the world, we children all the while unaware of the lessons we were living. My parents had a deep spirit of discovery, and they always made moving another grand opportunity for new and exciting adventures.

While living in their country, we had many opportunities to form relationships with Korean people. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Chong, spent most of the day with us. Much like a Korean version of Alice from “The Brady Bunch,” she often cooked our meals and prepared our lunches, and although she would never taste one, she became an expert peanut butter and jelly sandwich maker. Mrs. Chong was like a mother to my youngest brother, John, who was born in Korea. He became her baby the moment she saw him, and she cried like a mother over him the day we left. She contemplated coming back to the United States to live with our family, but decided to stay in her country when she found another American family to work for.

Sun-Lee (pronounced soon-lee) was another special person in my life. She was the daughter of a couple that my mother taught in a Conversational English class. Sun-Lee and I occasionally spent the night with each other. Our families often commented about the fact that we could not converse, yet understood one another very well. Spending the night with her meant eating dinner seated on the floor at a low table. Her whole family, both sets of grandparents included, would be there. Watching me, they would nod and smile while we ate from community bowls. They always had a fork for me to use, and when Sun-Lee stayed the night with me, she ate with chopsticks we owned but could not master. At her house we slept on thin straw mats with hard, firm neck rolls for pillows. Although Sun-Lee taught me how to sleep Korean style, it was most comfortable to lay exclusively on my back, with my hands resting on my sides, and the unyielding pillow supporting my neck. I could not understand why they did not want soft cozy beds, covered with cool sheets, and filled with large, fluffy pillows. Still, at our house Sun-Lee slept on the floor by choice, with a pillow rolled tightly up under her neck.

During our tour in Korea we had many intercultural experiences like these, but an Army base stands alone as a model of cultural diversity. American soldiers travel all over the world, and therefore fall in love all over the world. When I was young, most soldiers were men, so many of my friends had mothers of other nationalities. One of my first boyfriends had an Italian mother and African American father. As children we spent our days
playing outside with every child on base, whether they were of Asian-American, African-American, or German-American, like me. America is sometimes called a big melting pot (of people). The American Army is a small melting pot. An Army base is a small community, and with such a short time to form friendships, people become fast allies.

On each base there was usually one church that served all denominations. Although while I was growing up my family did not attend church, as a teenager I sometimes went to church with friends. I saw how having to share this building led people of different faiths to share their similarities. For example, Christmas pageants were interdenominational because there were fewer children to participate. The youth group was a combined effort as well. The focus of the group seemed to be one of understanding, and this fostered a trust that is rare among different faiths.

The year I turned fourteen, we moved to Germany, the country my father immigrated from. Being older, I had a bit more freedom to explore the world. Almost at will, my friends and I pursued the city of Heidelberg. As teenagers we liked to shop and eat fast food. McDonalds did not exist there, but they did have pizza, to go with their famous beer, and French fries. French fries, called pomme fritz, were sold by sidewalk vendors with a sweet apple tomato sauce they called ketchup. We could drink alcohol there at the tender age of sixteen, as well as go to clubs and bars far off base. Once at an anniversary party for my father’s aunt and uncle, Uncle Fritz secretly kept my sister’s and my glasses full of a very sweet thick cordial called apfelkorn (apple schnapps). He was so funny, tiptoeing over to us, shushing us as he furtively poured. Sharing his mirth, we drank obediently—It was his party after all. Besides, he said to my parents later, at sixteen and eighteen we were plenty old enough. My father laughed, but my mother was not amused at all.

There were fewer than four hundred students attending Heidelberg American High School, and most of us spent our Friday nights at the Teen Club dances. Everyone danced with everyone, and we enjoyed each other as people. We dated one another regardless of our ethnic background, what we ate for dinner, or what language we grew up hearing—regardless of the color of our skin. Daily at the Teen Club we could play a game of pool, try our hand at foosball, or just hang out and watch television. The Teen Club gave us a central gathering place as well as a reason to interact socially.

Every country we lived in rendered an assortment of experiences: I caught a huge puffer fish in California off a pier where they sold the best corn dogs ever made; I raised the American flag next to the Korean flag, surrounded by a hundred girl scouts from both countries; I learned that even in America it was possible to need an interpreter; when upon receiving an obscene phone call, my mother had to ask the Southern offender to repeat himself three times before slamming the phone down in disgust. I had the honor of attending my high school prom in a medieval castle, dancing where kings and queens had waltzed. My older sister had the honor of graduating in ceremonies held there as well. We learned that the Korean language bears no resemblance to English, nor does their alphabet. On the other hand, German and English are quite similar, and we share the same alphabet. We enjoyed ramen noodles long before they were introduced to the United States. We fell in love with German chocolate and pastries—so much in love that when Dad travels to Germany, he usually brings back twenty pounds or more. All of these memories have their own unique lessons, but the most important lessons were taught in our home.

During one tour of duty we spent three years in Atlanta, where racial tensions were high. This was my first real experience with racism, and I was struggling inwardly with concepts that I had never had to think about before. One rainy afternoon, I overheard my mother while she and a neighbor were sharing a cup of coffee. They were discussing the most recent news concerning the integration problems facing our community. Making a final point, unaware of my presence, my mother said just what I needed to hear: “When you bleed,” she asked her friend, “what color is your blood?” “Red,” her friend replied. “And when you cut the finger of anyone else in the world, black, Asian, or Indian, what color do they bleed?”

My father grew up in post-World War II Germany. He came to the United States as a young apprentice to his uncle who ran a hotel in New England. Teaching himself to speak English, he decided to become an American citizen and join the Army. My mother grew up in a small industrial city, in pre-civil rights America. They were not strangers to controversy or bigotry, experiencing it in their families and countries, yet they were able to move beyond the conventional ideas of their respective upbringings, and in the process, through Army life, shared the beauty of the world’s people with their children— who are forever grateful.
“Are you a city girl, or a small town girl?” was the question giddily inquired by my girlfriend as we drove through Atlanta last month. I pondered the question as she informed me she was “a city girl through-and-through.” The truth was, I didn’t know. My town is of medium size, and I hadn’t experienced enough of a large city or small town to be sure. A few weeks after the question was asked, I took a vacation to Europe with my family. While there, I had the chance to spend time in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and St. Goar, Germany; thus, I can now answer my friend’s question. Though Amsterdam and St. Goar are each awe-inspiring European cities, the contemporary liveliness of Amsterdam suited me better than the quaint stillness I discovered in St. Goar.

My journey began as soon as I stepped off the train in Amsterdam. That first day made such an impression; I remember it like yesterday. The blue and yellow bullet train whizzed to a stop, prompting my jetlag-weary eyelids to blink open. I heard the hum of rolling suitcases and jumbled conversations beyond the window of our compartment as my eyes fluttered closed once more. Finally, a loud thump jolted me fully awake. My father had just removed a suitcase from the overhead compartment. I gathered my bags, followed my family through the narrow corridor, and attempted to corral my jostling luggage as I made the foot and a half leap onto the platform. Disregarding my rushed family, I stopped in my tracks to absorb the panorama. I was inside a wide, elaborately decorated glass dome, surrounded by the echoes of international accents: French, Spanish, African, and of course, Dutch. Trains of all lengths screeched and roared in and out of the station on the eight tracks before me. It was my first experience inside a train station, and it was grandiose.

During the next few days, my family and I explored the city of Amsterdam. We were surrounded by canals lined with houseboats and fishing boats, roads swarming with motorcycles and bicycles, and uniquely fashioned townhouses which walled the city. The city itself was a breathtaking kaleidoscope of flowers. Flora overflowed from each window-box, bicycle basket, and crack in the sidewalk. With each step I trod in Amsterdam, I sensed the ghosts and angels of history. I walked through mansions boasting Rembrandt covered walls, heard stories of Van Gogh’s sorrowful paintings, and immersed myself in the life of a teenage girl, much like myself, while touring Anne Frank’s modest secret annex.

The people who hurry about Amsterdam seem to be a different species. They are friendly, youthful souls who chatter in Dutch with their contemporary neighbors. I passed them everywhere. They pedaled past me with good posture on their bicycles, scampered on and off trams which zipped through the city, and took my order at each charming pastry shop or lively bar and grill. When they realized my family was American, their faces lit up, excited to practice speaking already-fluent English. Amsterdam comprises seven hundred thousand of these people.

I thrived on the hustle-bustle life of modern Amsterdam. Hopping trams, filing in and out of tiny shops or towering malls, and conversing with college students at any time of night or day is a life I would love to live. I felt free in Amsterdam. However, our family soon had to move on. Our next stop was St. Goar, Germany.

The train we rode to St. Goar was a short, charcoal colored, local train. It was stuffy, with no air conditioning, but the windows propped open with a little elbow grease. We ventured through the misty mountains in early morning. Small gingerbread houses lie sprinkled at the bases of hills along the sparkling Rhine river. A subtle stillness blanketed the towns, making me hesitant to mutter even a whisper. Gradually, our train came to a stop only a street’s width away from several of the old-world buildings. When my parents ushered me to gather my things, I was confused. There was no train station. We stepped off the train onto a long slab of concrete beneath a wooden pavilion. A man in a brown coat and his son exited the train with us and went on their way without a word. The train crept away too, and we were left there, not a soul but us in sight. To my right was a large metal box which took the place of a ticket clerk, and to my left was a staircase leading underground beneath the railroad tracks. A flickering, fluorescent light greeted us as we made our way down the stairs and around the corner. Eerily, the Thomas Kinkade countryside we had observed from the train returned with a step beyond the platform.

Soon, my family and I were venturing inside one of the most charming villages I would ever lay eyes on. We slept in a two story mom-and-pop hotel above one of the two restaurants.
in the city. Our view was of the Rhine river, only one hundred feet away. Slow moving barges and large ferry boats labored along night and day. The mountains were quilted, as far as the eye could see, with wine vineyards, and every so often there rested a castle lingering from the 1400s. A walk through the winding, cobblestone roads led us past doll shops and bakeries fashioned in the German way, with wooden planks and light-colored brick. Steep trails with hundreds of steps directed us up to the ruins of a cathedral, and before I realized it, we were walking through rows of grapes. While looking over the picturesque town from the mountain top, I felt I was gazing into a fairy tale from long ago. I half expected a white horse to come escort me back to the hotel.

A no-nonsense atmosphere was apparent to me whenever I heard the frank conversations exchanged between locals. Most of the Germans we met in St. Goar were older, with a stern air about them. They were conservative and kept to themselves. As if the town wasn’t still and ghostly enough, there was an unwritten rule requiring St. Goar’s people to be sound asleep by half past eight and up again at six in the morning. The lonely, quiet atmosphere didn’t suit my personality. I was ready to move on to a larger city by the time our days were finished in St. Goar.

The next time I see my friend, I am going to let her know that I, too, am a city girl. I thrive on seeing new faces every day and enjoy ever-changing activities. The big city fulfills my need for spontaneity. On the contrary, waving at the same few people I greeted yesterday or being in a place where nothing new happens, stifles me. If I’m in a small town, I won’t stay there long. It’s wise to discover the surroundings one feels most alive in, and I’m a city girl.
“Chairs” by Monica Mueller

“Forgotten by Time” by Tammy Hillis

“Good Friday” by Kevin Alspaugh

“Blowing Bubbles” by Sarah Watkins