Agate (á-g-it): a fine-grained crystalline mineral that forms in cavities in volcanic rock. Agate is prized for its beautiful patterned colors, and its hardness makes it ideal for delicate carving.
THE 2008 AGATE AWARDS

WRITING

1st Place
John McGill, “Cave to Cubicle”

2nd Place
Mabel Almanzer, “A History of Schools”
Ben Bocian, “Straws”
Cassandra Brown, “You Were Tristan”
Jason Grant, “A Non-Existent Finish Line”
Annisia Perry, “Some Like it Hot”

ART

1st Place
Brianne Slocum, “Focused George”

2nd Place
Kentaro Kariya, “Delhi with Mt. Fuji”
Amanda Krzyston, “Between Darkness and Light”

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

On the road with the 2007 North East Region Champions

In my own words
Thomas Recinella ................................................................. 5

Delhi with Mt. Fuji Painting
Kentaro Kariya ....................................................................... 40

The Happiest Japanese in the Catskills
Akira Odani ............................................................................. 41

A History of Houses
Josh Moody ............................................................................... 43

You Were Tristan
Cassandra Brown .................................................................... 44

A Sentinel Photograph
Cassandra Brown .................................................................... 45

The Shogun’s Garden
Samme Chittum ........................................................................ 46

A Non-Existent Finish Line
Jason Grant ............................................................................... 53

A History of Music
Aaron Kinberg .......................................................................... 54

Cave to Cubicle
John McGill ............................................................................... 55

Where is Hip Hop?
Wesley Worrell ........................................................................ 56

Translation of William Shakespeare’s The Tempest
Lisa Krauss ................................................................................ 58

Ferny
Miriam A. Sharick ..................................................................... 60

Bird Photograph
Jackie Parslow .......................................................................... 61

Emerald in the Rough
Miriam A. Sharick ..................................................................... 62

Jasmine’s History of Trouble
Jasmine McKeiver ..................................................................... 66

Life of the Mother of Twins
Shannon Tanksley ..................................................................... 67
Spring Door
Alan Kaplan ................................................................. 68

Some Like it Hot
Annisia Perry ............................................................. 73

The Surrogate (Chapter One)
Kirby Olson ............................................................... 74

Steps Photograph
Riikka Olson ............................................................. 77

Straws
Ben Bocian ................................................................. 78

A History of Schools
Mabel Almanzer .......................................................... 80

Bad Dolls Doing Hard Time Photograph
Mike McKenna ........................................................... 81

A History of Pets
Michelle Brush ........................................................... 82

Going To
Sharon Ruetenik .......................................................... 83

Untitled Drawing
Eriko Nishina ............................................................. 87

What My Daughter Lost at 16
Sharon Ruetenik .......................................................... 88

Notes on Contributors .................................................. 89

Beween Darkness and Light Photograph
Amanda Krzyston ........................................................ Back Cover
On the road with the 2007 North East Region Champions
In my own words
Thomas Recinella

Saturday September 9th 2006
3:30 am
Alumni Hall Hospitality Center

I have a feeling I have never experienced since coming to Delhi in 1999. For the first time since 2000 we are having tryouts for the team that will be trying to get back the state championship title instead of for a team that is defending it. After six consecutive state championships, we finally met our match right here on our home turf this past February. We lost. What a relief it was too. After six straight years of compounded pressure, put on me by no one but myself the weight is off my shoulders. We are once again fallible. The loss has humanized us. It has taken away the mystique the façade that was built by constant success. It had come to a point where I felt like people just took it for granted that we would win. That really pissed me off. It felt as though the work that these kids put in day in and day out, not to mention the coaches, was being completely taken for granted. By virtue of that it was diminished in some way. Not any more, the mighty machine crashed and now it can be built anew. A new start. It is kind of nice to think of. I am opening the tryouts this year to all culinary students regardless of year. Freshman and veterans alike will be trying out side by side. They will start to arrive at 4:00 am; tryouts were scheduled for 4:30, but I know that most will be here early. Especially the five members of last year’s team who had the dubious honor of being the first Delhi team ever to lose a state championship since the inception of our competitive cooking program. I know at least four of them will be here. Why so early, many people ask me. Any one can show up at 3:00 in the afternoon. Whoever I have show up at 4:30 in the morning on a Saturday is someone that I know for sure is interested. It saves a lot of time, my time and their time. The starting time of tryouts is a weeding out process on its own. What I understand right now is that the loss in February will make them better than they ever could have hoped to be. It is the best thing that could have happened to them. They will work today with a fire in their eyes. My coffee tastes pretty good this morning.
6:00 PM  
Alumni Hall

We are done. Today’s tryouts went about the way I figured they would go. Four of last year’s team members showed up. In addition we had 12 freshmen and several upper classman new to competition. If I had to pick the team today I can pretty much guess who it will be. There are some surprises. Sarah and Felicia, two freshmen, stood out big time as did a young man who apparently had a fire alarm go off in his dorm and could not get back in to get his chef coat when he realized that he had forgotten it. It was raining out this morning and he came anyway, soaked and wet but ready to work. I will keep my eye on these three especially the two girls. Their skills are very good and their hustle is even better. They move fast and purposefully through the kitchen, they work clean, they treat others well. Of the three, Sarah wants to be here the most. She wants this the most. As a high school student she came to three competitions here at Delhi to watch. She is hungry for it.

Saturday September 14th  
4:00 am  
Alumni Hall

The numbers have dwindled a bit. The veterans are still here and I can not imagine them doing anything but stellar at our competition one month from now. That will be the final tryout and I will name the team that weekend. The freshmen are finding this to be hard. I can tell that they are questioning what they are doing here. I expect more to drop; we are down to 8 freshmen today. Sarah continues to impress me with her dedication and her sheer will to be here no matter what. Her knife skills are lacking compared to Felicia’s but her attitude and her commitment are second to none. Skills will come later. Sarah will be a powerhouse in a year. I can just see it.

Sunday October 20th  
6:00 PM

At the conclusion of our 8th annual ACF competition I named the 2007 culinary team. It is not a surprise. It will be Nick Hernandez, Chris Lent, George Diaz, Mike Stamets and Tami Eicholz. The four guys were all on last year’s team and Tami is new to the team process. However she made her right to be on the team undeniable when she won a Gold medal in individual skills competition, arguably the hardest student category. Nick
as well won Gold and best in show. He will lead the team as captain
and Chris who was the captain of the ill-fated team last year will serve
as alternate. I get the impression that he is disappointed but it is the
best fit for the team. Tami will do the dessert, Mike the entree Nick the
appetizer so he can get it out first and keep an eye on the rest of the
courses and George will be doing the salad. He is also not happy with his
position. He served on the team two years ago as alternate and last year
as dessert person and he was hoping to be named captain of this team.
But he will get over it and be the loyal hard working team member that
earned him his chance to go for it one more time. Sarah scored a Silver
medal in individual skills, proving that she is here to stay. She did not
make this team but she will be on our youth team. Felicia dropped out
of the process a few weeks back. One young man has proven to be a less
than good choice for any team. His grades are very low and I may have to
drop him from the team tryout process. I set the schedule for practices.
Four am fits everyone’s schedule as does 9:00 pm The team signs the
Delhi competitors’ code. First and foremost they pledge to maintain
academic excellence. That is the highest priority. Frankly I think that
surprises students who make our teams at first but they find out quick
that I mean it and it is non-negotiable. The next three months will be a
blur for this team.

Monday January 15th 2007
4:00 am
Alumni Hall

A lot has happened since my last entry in this journal. Since October
20th we have formed two teams. We will have the hot food team and
now we will also have a youth team, which will compete for the Youth
Team USA tryouts. Mike is the captain of this team that has an age
restriction due to international apprenticeship rules. Also on the team are
George, Nick, Sarah and Felicia who has returned as the dessert person.
One fine young man did in fact lose his position. Felicia has replaced
him. The hot food team has practiced for the last weeks of the semester
and now returns the week prior to classes starting and will be practicing
hard to go to the state cook off on February 3rd in Erie New York. They
must win to advance to the Northeast Region Championship and face
the best teams in ACF’s Northeast Region. This is the first year that we
are competing under the new rules it is quite interesting. At the state
level the teams must prepare a pre selected poultry dish from Le Guide
Culinaire by Escoffier. They have to match appropriate sides etc and have
to also do an appetizer, salad and dessert course. They also have to do a skills phase including chicken and fish butchery, vegetable knife skills and pastry skills. We are underway and I regard the team as they drag around Alumni Hall. It is going to be a long week. Coming back form a break is always the hardest on a team and it seems to be particularly hard on this one. The youth team is also back as is Brianne, a second year culinary student who is not on either team but has offered to help with making stocks, cleaning etc.

Saturday January 20th

Well, the team did pretty good this past week despite their best efforts. It is clear that Chris and Nick just do not get along; this will haunt us, I think, as we move along. It seems that Mike and Nick also have a problem with each other. At least I have Tami and George who seem to be able to work with anyone no matter what. It can't get much worse than this. Personality problems can really sink a team if they allow it to creep into the kitchen. If they can keep it out of the kitchen no problem but these guys seem to be unable to do that. This is the team I picked for better or for worse and as long as they all stay in excellent academic standing they will stay on the team. So they will have to find a way to make it work, if it kills them.

Tuesday January 30th

I was wrong, it could get much worse than my team acting like a bunch of idiots. We just came back from the Collegiate National Ice Carving Championships in frigid Frankenmuth, Michigan to the news that our colleague and dear friend Roger Brain has finally lost his courageous battle with cancer. He died yesterday. It is hard for me to think about the pending state championship this coming weekend. I lost my own sister to colon cancer in 1999 and I was holding her hand as she died. I always told myself I would go see Roger when he was in the hospital but could not bring myself to doing it not able to get my sisters image out of my head. Most of the team members knew Roger and they are not doing any better than I am. I will volunteer I think to drive one of the vans for Rogers funeral. At least that way I can help to get as many people there and back to the school as possible. It will help me to keep my mind occupied. Roger was one of the people I have met in my life that I admired more than I can express in words.
Friday February 2nd
9:00 PM

We depart for Buffalo in about 15 minutes. I have decided that we will drive through the night. It is only a five-hour drive, but it is snowing like mad. We have two vans one 12 passenger with the team, equipment and food that I will drive and a seven passenger that will be driven by Professor David Brower and Chef Julee Miller, who are accompanied by many Escoffier club students to watch and support the team.

Saturday February 3rd
6:00 am

We had quite a ride last night. It took us almost an hour alone to get across 28 to I-88. The snow was pounding us. By the time we were just outside of Syracuse we were absolutely obliterated with snow. As we fought through the snow, we came up with an idea to pay tribute to Roger in ice. Most of my team does ice as well and they are members of my culinary club so we have decided to do a large ice sculpture, of multiple pieces describing the lessons that we feel everyone learned or could learn from Roger’s life. I was happy for the snow pounding the van keeping it nice and dark so that no one could see the tears in my eyes as we fleshed out this beautiful thought at 1:30 in the morning on I-81 north. I told the guys that I will run the idea by Marty Greenfield to see if we can display the sculpture at the student senate banquet and also we will display it at the hospitality banquet. Roger himself would never have wanted anything like our idea. He was far too modest and humble for that. But he would understand our desire to do it and he would love that the students helped design it and sculpt it. He loved the students as much as they loved him.

I am going to get an hour of sleep or so after the judges meeting with the competitors. Once we know when we are cooking and phase one skills have started, I will find a secluded spot in the Erie community college restaurant and sleep for awhile. We arrive this morning around 4:30 or so. It took us 7 hours to get here. The snow just got worse as we went. But the last thing I was going to do was turn around and give Buffalo a bye and a free trip to the Northeast Region Championship. The building where the competition will take place is opened as we discover after just about all of the guys on the trip have already relieved themselves in the bushes. The ladies are happy to hear my news that I found the dock door wedged open. We move all of our equipment and food into the deserted
kitchen of the school and set up our own staging area. By the time anyone from the hosting school arrives at 5:45 am, we are all ready to go. We have picked the second slot which means we will cook last. Skills will be done shotgun start and I feel comfortable with our skills. They could be better but that is always the case with this kind of thing it is never good enough anyway. I go to get some sleep as Julee stays with the team. I sleep through skills and Brianne wakes me up in time to see the Buffalo team take to their station. We are in their school on their turf. There are more Delhi hats, sweatshirts and people than anyone from the opposing team. It is a sea of Delhi supporters. 30 minutes after Buffalo starts we start in the station right next to them. Our skills run was ok just ok. It could have been much better. But what the hell. My coffee doesn't taste so good right now; it is cold. I am infuriated as I see the alternate from the other team throwing their food scrap into our trashcan. This can translate to a huge point deduction. My alternate who also sees it points out to the floor judge that this is happening. We never put any food scraps in the trash it is taboo and poor form. Not to mention down right wasteful. The floor judge watches a bit closer and sure enough it happens again. This time he is there to speak to the Buffalo team captain about it.

11:00 am
Buffalo’s food is up and it looks ok. Not great, but ok. In 30 minutes our food will be up.

11:30 am
Our food is up; it looks great and we are 30 seconds early. This team never came up early once – not once – in practice. They were late every time. My coffee tastes great.

1:30 PM
We are the 2007 ACF New York State Champions, for the seventh time in eight years. When I first fielded a team there used to be seven teams at the state cook-off, than 6 than 5. The amount has dwindled I think because of the cost. But it doesn't much matter. To win the right to represent our state you still must score the highest score no matter how many teams. We won today with a mid level Silver Medal, Buffalo won a Bronze. We are once again headed for the ACF Northeast Region Championship. The ride home is grueling. I am exhausted. The one hour of sleep I got made it worse more than better. I also found out that Mike and Nick almost had a fist fight before we left last night. It is a good
thing they didn’t tell me before we left. These guys, I love em and they drive me crazy at the same time. We stop for gas and lunch at a rest stop on the thru-way. I am famished as is most everyone else. We eat and are on the road once again. Brianne is in the front seat talking to me to keep me awake. She is doing a good job of it along with my Tim Horton’s coffee and walnut crunch donut. Between the caffeine and the sugar I am good to go. David Brower is driving the other van again. We are alike in that way. Machines when it comes to driving. It is ironic because as a student David drove in a van with me my second year here to the hotel show in New York City. He was with me when we got lost in Harlem that time at 3:00 in the morning. What a trip that was. I re-tell the tale to Bri and she laughs pretty hard as I explain the many adjectives that I used when I made the wrong turn off of the GW bridge so many years ago. We arrive back in Delhi to my team’s customary greeting whenever we are out of town win or lose. My wife and kids meet us at Alumni Hall with Pizza. The pizza is much like my coffee it always tastes better when

Pittsburg Staging Area Zero Hour
From left to right: Tom Recinella, George Diaz, Chris Lent, Nich Hernandez, Michael Stamets, and Tami Eichoiz.
Photo by: Brianne Slocum
we have won. My wife is happy for the team of course. But the fact that we won is a bittersweet reality for her. She knows that it means another 6 months of ass-busting work and time away from her and the kids.

February 25th 2007
4:00 am

We are practicing as much as possible. This team wants to win the Northeast Region Championship. I want them to win; Julee wants them to win. But I worry about their personal problems with each other. We have had to have several team meetings since the state cook-off. Almost like counseling sessions for them to work through their problems. A few times I have considered calling the health center to see if I could get the team in to one of the counselors but I think differently about it. I will try to handle it myself. I will do what I can within the family. It is winter break. We leave in five days. Julee and I will leave in two vans one with the equipment and food driven by me and the other with the team and the luggage driven by Julee. Julee hates to drive these vans but to her credit she does what needs to be done. Rick Golding who always supports us will come the next day with the rest of the Escoffier club members who are also attending the Northeast Region Conference. By the time we leave we will have crammed 10 practices into a very short window of time. Each practice takes a total of 6 hours by the time clean up is done. On top of that we now have to do a platter program as well at this level. That will be the back breaker for many teams. We have a competitive cooking program many schools do not. However most schools have more money than us so it evens out a bit. When it comes to $$$ we are always the underdogs. The platter is coming along. Chris our alternate is doing most of the work. He is very good with this type of work. Tami helps with some of the garnishes. The rest of the team works on the mise en place for the menu and skills. The hot program is progressing slow. Skills are even slower. The boys have a mental block on the pastry skills. It can be frustrating but I keep the mood positive and we power though some very long days in excess of 14 hours each day leading up to our departure.

Thursday March 1st 2007
4:00 am

We departed Delhi today for our destiny whatever it may be. This team has worked hard and is still haunted by the ghost of a second place finish in 2005 at the regional championship and a loss last year at the state
championship. The state loss was put to bed four weeks ago in Buffalo at the state cook off and now we will strive to put to bed our very close second place finish in Columbus Ohio. Only George Diaz remains from that 2005 team but the sting that he felt has been shared with his teammates his brothers and sister now after all that they have been through. We are Team Delhi that is what I tell them; it is our mantra: it doesn’t matter what team it is, what year gone by, they are all one, they all represent our school or program our town. It is an 8-hour drive to Pittsburgh the weather is good the roads are clear for us today but there is a storm coming according to the reports. Mr. Golding will be driving in it tomorrow.

2:00 PM

We have arrived in Pittsburgh about an hour ago. No parking lots will take us. Even the ones that I contacted in advance have now changed their tune. They are either too full or our vans can not fit. We are in the very narrow alley behind the building where the hot food competition and skills segment will take place. We will be off loading our equipment and food and securing it so that it can not be tampered with. We did not expect to do this until Friday so in a way the lots being closed right now were a blessing. I am sure that we will find a spot soon. Julee is having one hell of a time turning the van around in the narrow ally. We have pulled in the wrong way on the advice of the school to get a better angle on the door. The New Hampshire team is there with their van blocking the whole thing. What a circus this is becoming. I cant help but laugh. What else can I do? I look at Julee who doesn’t look amused and I laugh even harder. She grimaces at me and than bursts out laughing herself. The team stays with the vans and the equipment as I head in to scout out the location of the coolers where we will keep some of our food. Some of it will remain with us in portable coolers in our room, primarily the proteins - the most expensive items.

9:00 PM

All of our equipment has been secured as well as our food. We are checked into the hotel and the vans are parked. I have sent the team to sleep until 12:30 am at which time they will get up and start to slice and brush their first glaze onto their platter elements. We were able to find a small pizza place and get a bite to eat after which I walked the halls of both buildings where the competition will take place. Cold food will be displayed on the 18th floor. The kitchen space will not be available
until 8:00 am. and is on the mezzanine floor between the first and second floor. There is no elevator access to this floor so after carrying all of their equipment up the stairs to the mezzanine level, the team must layout their platter on the mezzanine floor and carry it up a steep flight of steps in an old stairwell to access the elevator to the 18th floor. Not sure who planned this venue but it is obvious to me that it was someone who has never done a platter before. I also walked the steps at the other building. My team needs to carry their carts and equipment up 29 very steep steps to get to their kitchen. Once again not very good planning on someone's part, we will be prepared, as Dwight Eisenhower once said “The plan is nothing, planning is everything.” Curiously enough, there were no other team coaches to be seen in either building. Only Julee and I were there in the way of coaches. We settle into the hotel. Julee goes to her room and I to mine; the team sleeps. I wake them at 12:30 most were already awake.

10:30 PM
Haven't slept yet. I am anxious to get started. I am anxious to see them do what they came here to do.

Friday March 2nd
1:30 am
Visited the teams room, they are slicing their pieces and fixing the problems. Some seem tired and irritable, some seem OK. Chris and Mike specifically are bothered by the main piece. I can feel them losing confidence. I tried to allay their worries but when people are determined to be negative it is almost impossible to stop them. Its like trying to stop a locomotive that is out of control. Nick and George will be fine as will Tami. As that piece comes together I think Chris and Mike will start to feel better about it. I know it will be dynamite they don't believe it right now. I chewed them out and put the screws to them. They needed it. Nothing breaks a team apart at this stage like a team member losing confidence and, I won't allow that to happen. We have all worked too hard. I am taking a walk down to the school to see what I can see. I need the fresh air and I need to be away from the negative energy that is gripping the room.

3:00 am
I am back from my walk and the school was closed no sign of anyone other than a few bums outside. A guy propositioned me on my way down to the school. Good thing I have been jogging lately I made it a point to
run back to the hotel. Stopped in to see the progress of the team, they look good. Tension is mounting between Mike and Nick, just nerves and being tired. These are two guys that would do anything for each other, and have regardless of their personal differences. Goes to show what sleep deprivation and fatigue can do. But to their credit they are still moving along, which also goes to show what great character they each have. However, to my eye and my senses, the tension in that room is palpable. You could cut it with a knife. George is a rock like always. Tami is steady and Chris seems to have settled down a bit. I informed them that I will be trying to get an hour or so of sleep and they must be ready to go by 5:45 am.

6:00 am
Sleep never came. It commonly doesn’t for me. But I meditated for a bit and reflected back on teams gone by. I always talk about the 2003 team that went all the way and won Gold. I realized tonight that if this team keeps focused and on track, I will be talking about them for along time to come. They have already superseded the ‘03 team with the work that they have done to this point. There was no platter requirement back in 03. We must walk all of our equipment the six or so blocks to the school. It is not fun. The team does it relay style, a system that serves them well and one that I will have them keep using throughout what I think is going to become a very rigorous weekend.

6:30 am
We are in front of the school. No one is here. I have called several times and even though I was promised that we could get into the school at 6:30 am no one is to be found. Big surprise Team Delhi always beats everyone to the competition sight, including the host team. We will wait. Busting our asses seems to be the tradition that goes hand and hand with winning.

7:00 am
We are in the building, carrying everything up the stairs to the mezzanine kitchen including our wheeled cambro carts. We are the only team there. We picked a station in the main kitchen but I have decided to move to a different area that is more secluded and allows us to be away from the kitchen proper. I remember my pastry instructor in college, Chef Stec was always saying, “Come early leave late.” When you’re early you have options. There are no walk-in coolers in this building and no reach-in refrigerators big enough for our platter. No matter we will use ice and a large lexon tub to chill the platter once it is done.
Our station for cold food is well established and Chef Julee and our captain Nick have headed out to get dry ice and some produce for the hot food segment on Saturday. Tami and I walk down to MacDonald’s to get a bunch of breakfast sandwiches. The team works on glazing the remainder of the platter, pouring the mirror, dipping the pieces and slices all of the things that we do in comfort in our own kitchen for our competition and the hotel show we have now done in a hotel room and in the discomfort of a strange kitchen, but no problem. Team Delhi is adaptable. We will pull through. Of this I have no doubt. The breakfast sandwiches hit the spot. I remind the team that they have only until 12:30 pm to get this platter finished and than move it up to the 18th floor. I have already walked the route with them this morning and they know the score. They know exactly where they need to go. We are indifferent to the challenges that it proposes. We are focused completely on one thing and one thing only. Winning, it consumes our thoughts. I ponder for a moment that we are in a bubble. In our bubble nothing exists, no family, no job, no news, no weather, nothing. We don’t talk about anything else for three days. We are all we have, our goal is all we have. There is nothing else for us. The only thing that exists is us, our competition and the task at hand. To win the Northeast Region Championship for a third time in seven years. That’s it. Nothing else matters right now. This thought may seem foreign to someone. I could see an outsider certainly thinking that this is silly. What it is, is dedication. In a world where work ethic, consideration of others, the common good of the team and the group have been replaced in many ways by self centeredness, and the me myself and I mentality, it is refreshing to be with a group of young people who are here for the good of the team. If I told this team that they had to scale the building to get that platter to the 18th floor, they would figure out a way to do it especially Mike and Nick. They were born “make it happen” guys. When I try to explain to people that one platter by the time it is done could have more than 900 to 1200 steps in the making of it, they look at me with utter disbelief. They think surely that I must be full of BS. But this is meticulous work and it must be done as perfectly as possible and can not ever be perfect enough. The personal problems that exist between some of the team members still haunt me and stick in the back of my mind. But there is not much I can do about it, so I try to let it go. Hopefully in the end they can put it aside so far they have.
11:00 am

A lot has happened since my last entry. Around 10:00 am the other teams started showing up. The kitchen where we had initially set up is an absolute cluster bomb, wall to wall people, all sorts of air movement. Horrible conditions for working on platters. Our area is secluded and private. The early bird gets the worm. Or in this case, more importantly doesn’t get a lot of air movement. We made the right decision in moving. The team knows it and I can see their confidence level coming back to where it needs to be if they are going to in fact win the whole thing. I do not allow my teams to be cocky or arrogant. I squash that right away. However I encourage professional confidence. Quiet determination, I want them to let their skills and work do the talking for them. I can see their shoulders straighten, their body language tells me that they are pleased with their platter they are seeing what I have been seeing since they made the pieces. I knew they would eventually. Things are coming together for the cold program however satisfaction and complacency at this stage can be deadly. Some of them went to the bathroom, which is only accessible through the other kitchen. They saw other teams work and they are talking about it. I don’t like them seeing anyone’s work good or bad. I need to refocus them. I lay into them a bit and let them know that they are moving to slow. I tell them that they will be disqualified if they don’t speed up because they won’t make the set up window. That is not really true, but it does the trick and they kick it into higher gear and more importantly they focus on their work and their work only. I need to be rough on them right now. It is a delicate time. It takes a practiced touch. Knowing when to be tough, when to push and when to let be. I try always to be whatever my teams need me to be at that time. It has taken me many years to figure it out. It is part of my own maturing process with this whole thing. Honestly they are working at this platter at a higher rate than most professionals do. They are doing it without my help. All of these five kids have taken my competition class; they have all done at least one individual platter. I hear some voices echoing in my head, “Why do we waste our time doing this hotel show crap?” I wish those people could be here and they could see exactly why it is important. Not just for the platter itself but for the time management skills and the organizational skills that go into it. The camaraderie the care and consideration for the common goal, much the same as any commercial kitchen where the staff has to all work towards the common goal, of pleasing the customer or else no one has a job for very long. If I can just get them over the hump, through their personal problems with each other, that is the only thing that weighs on my mind. My coffee tastes rather bitter.
1:00 PM

Julee and Nick are back from their errands. It is good to have the captain back with the team. The platter is done and now needs to be moved up stairs. I have been floating from kitchen to kitchen, scoping out the other teams platters as have all the coaches. I am pleased with our work it certainly is the best that I can see, but I have not seen the Pittsburgh platter yet as they are working in a different building from everyone else and I know that they will give us a run for our money. Julee looks exhausted. I understand and should probably have said something encouraging but right now I spend my efforts on the team and the team only. She and I can suffer and it doesn’t really matter for the efforts of the whole will not be compromised. We need to suck it up and power through it. Right now the kids are all that matter.

2:30 PM

The platters are all in place. All of the teams try to relax and eat a box lunch while the judging is taking place and we await the competitor meeting with the judges. Our platter looks awesome. The Pittsburgh team’s platter looks very nice as well. The other teams’ platters are in an entirely different place as far as skill and layout and everything. It is apparent to me right now that if the menu and skills segment goes this way, it will be a competition between New York and Pennsylvania for 1st place and the other seven teams for the other places. This does not surprise me. The coaches of the Pittsburgh team are good friends of mine. They are dedicated professionals and they care about their teams very much. They prepare the same way that we do. The first time we ever won the regional championship, we had to beat them and it looks like we will have to do the same this time as well. I can’t eat anything other than a few Oreo cookies but damn they taste good. I glance around the room at the other teams and I look at my team. It is obvious to me what teams have come to win and which teams are just here to be here. We are here to win as is Pittsburgh and Ohio. However Ohio’s platter is not on par with Pittsburgh or ours. They have lost ground. That makes me happy. My coffee tastes pretty good.

7:00 PM

The judges meeting is over and we have picked our spot for the menu segment. We will be going ninth, dead last. I like it. I like it a lot. We viewed are station and have spent some time deciding how we will make that station work for us. It is by far the worst station of all of the kitchens.
But it doesn't matter. As Ferdinand Metz four time manager of Culinary Olympic Team USA, is fond of saying “a great soccer player can play on anyone’s grass,” and we will be no different. We will make that station ours and we will work it, it will not work us. We are leaving now to go back to the hotel and get some dinner. Our captain is sick he is dizzy and has a migraine like headache. I have told him to sleep in Mr. Golding’s room so that he will not be bothered. The rest of the team must get the final preparations done for the morning. Sharpening knives, mise en place etc.. He would get no sleep being in their room. There has been quite a bit of tension between the team members. Two of them dislike each other more than I could have ever guessed. The stress of the process and the weight of carrying the Delhi tradition has brought out the worst in some and the best in others. My captain is suffering for it. He is young as they all are and this is his first real test of being a leader. I know he will be fine. It is the stress of the day and he needs some sleep. He assures me that he will be fine in the morning. I know he is right. They are on the brink and I remind them that it is only partially over. The platter is worth the least amount of points. Ironically enough it is the most work. It represents weeks and weeks of work that in the end is only worth 10 points in this
particular format. Oh well what the hell. I look around again I can see the judging area from where I am seated. I am one of only 120 ACF certified judges in the United States and I know every judge that is here judging us. I know them personally. They have judged me, my teams and I have judged with them. I can read their expressions. They love our platter, they also love the Pittsburgh platter as well. But somehow I feel deep inside that they like ours more. My coffee tastes really, really good.

**11:30 PM**

At around 8:00 pm, we came back to a disaster at the hotel room. The Westin equips its rooms with energy saving card slots. The only way to have the power on in the room is if you leave the room key in the slot on the wall. Our electric cooler was plugged into the outlet in the room with our fish and lobsters and chicken in it. One of us no one knows who and it doesn't really matter pulled the key out of the wall not thinking when we left at 6:00 am this morning. We came back to all of the above items being spoiled. I sent the team to get some dinner, not sure where Julee went I think she is with them or she went to sleep. Rick Golding and I hopped into a cab and proceeded to find new lobsters and new chickens. Julee had already picked up the fish that I had Fed-xed over night to my room and that was iced in the sink of one of our rooms because it couldn't fit in the cooler thank God, and it is as fresh as if it had just come out of the water. Rick and I lucked out and got a good cab driver who knew exactly where to take us. We found organic chickens a little smaller than what we were practicing with but what the hell and a whole lobster. By 9:30 pm we were back to the hotel and the lobster and chickens were iced and I was about ready to fall over from hunger. I realized I hadn't eaten anything all day other than the breakfast sandwiches and some Oreo cookies that were in the box lunch. We were able to get into the hotel restaurant which promptly raped us on dinner but it tasted good, I think. Hopefully we have diverted a disaster but only time will tell. This could derail us if we let it. I will not let it.

**Saturday March 3rd**

**3:30-5:30 am**

We meet in the lobby. Mr. Golding God bless his soul is driving us over to the competition site. His van is parked underneath the hotel. We see some weird things on our drive over. A man in a tree and the same man follows us down to the school. He is outside the van saluting Mr. Golding who looks every which way but at him. The man becomes belligerent and
starts flipping us off and calling Mr. Golding obscene names. He has a bottle in his hand and looks as though he may throw it at the van window. I am in no mood and I am ready to get out of the van and deck him but I think better of it. He shortly walks away and a cop comes by. We don’t see him anymore. Once again we are the first ones there. At about 5:30 am the host school’s faculty comes in. I must say that they have all been very gracious and they have been quick to help with anything that we may need. It seems to me that they were stuck hosting this event and have done the very best that they can to compensate for the challenges that come with having no elevator access etc. We move into the back kitchen staging area and check our food in the walk-in cooler all is well. Set up for knife skills starts at 7:00 am and the skills competition itself starts at 7:30 am. We will be ready. Leaving our food anywhere out of our control always gives me ulcers. As the hotel incident shows, bad enough things can happen when we have our things with us let alone when we have no control over it. It comes down to whether I trust where we are or not. I trust the faculty at this school based on my relationship with two of their instructors. It still makes me nervous. Coolers can crash and shit goes wrong. It just happens. And nobody cares. You suck it up and make it happen no extra time no gifts. Champions make it happen no different than in sports. You take the hand dealt to you and you win anyway.

7:15 am

The team members pick their assignment for the skills run. It is the worst possible draw for us. I can not help but laugh as does Tami and the rest of the team as Tami pulls vegetable skills her worst discipline and then Mike promptly pulls pastry skills his worst discipline. Chris pulls chicken and Nick pulls fish. Chris and Nick are good draws for us; they can both fabricate protein like no tomorrow. I figure they will make up the ground that Tami and Mike lose. I don’t share these thoughts with them. I lock them away in the far reaches of my mind. But I am worried. Our entire hope of winning could be crushed by one of these four skills assignments being done just slightly less than perfect. I keep my thoughts to myself. My coffee doesn’t taste so good right now. In fact, it tastes like warm pee.

8:50 – 10:00 am

I couldn’t have been more right and I couldn’t have been more wrong. Nick and Chris absolutely nailed their skills, as I knew they would. Mike did the best pastry run he has ever done and Tami had a vegetable skill run for the history books. She absolutely nailed it. Things were looking
good for us. As I looked around the room I started to see us pulling away from our competition everyone, that is, except Pittsburgh. They looked very good as well. I knew that it was crucial for me to keep them focused. To that end I herded them back to the staging area and made them stay there until critiques were called for skills. Our critique for skills went well but there were enough negatives to keep the team on edge. I know what words to key in on and again I didn’t share my insight with them. Our skills critique was good very good and I knew that this was ours to win but we had to stay focused. The one problem would be Pittsburgh they are a well coached team and they are sharp. They would be our one hurdle again just as they were in 2001. But I know my team and if there is one thing they can do well, it is jump hurdles. I kept my emotions to myself and the stoic look on my face that has become a patent expression for my teams. They expect it. My coffee is tasting pretty good. I tell them that we need to stay focused that our skills were not up to par and our menu program must be flawless to make up the ground. I realize that they know I am bullshitting them. They saw the other teams’ skills, they saw their own and they saw the platters. They look at me as if to say “what are you talking about?” I tell them again that they need to stay focused and forget the platter and forget the skills, good bad or ugly it’s done and now all we have left is the menu. Focus on the menu, that is all that matters that is all that exists from now on period.

1:00 PM

The team is done weighing up their final mise en place and ready to go. They started carrying their equipment up the stairs and it has been a bit scary. Looking at these stairs I can not help but think of an incident along time ago when I was a child going to St. Michael’s School. Since then I have had a deadly fear of steep stairs. It comes back to me today and I know I am going to spend the remainder of the day in a strained metal condition as my team has to carry their equipment up this staircase. I can hardly focus on anything else but those damn stairs, as I see student after student tumbling down the stairs in my mind’s eye. Brad Barnes the ACF National Chair for certification is there and he is giving me his usual look of what the hell is wrong with silly Tom. The same look he always gives me when I have a team in the regional and he is there. I always get the impression that he is mildly amused by how much I get worked up over my teams. But this is different. There is no way for him to know that of course. Maybe I’ll let him read this and he can understand why those steps freaked me out. I am pacing the hall way in between my
team bringing loads of equipment up the stairs. My mind is a blur imagining myself dangling from a stair case as a seven year old stuck in the rail. These stairs have no rail. When my team is coming up I am either helping them or walking behind them. I am a mess on the inside and can almost feel my hair turning greyer and ulcers gurgling in my stomach. It is all in my head of course but I can’t break free of it. These stairs will be an obsession for me until we are through with them. When I first saw them my heart sank. But I didn’t let the team know how I felt and I will not. Not today that is for sure. My coffee is cold and as I look into my cup it seems like a dark pool a black abyss and it doesn’t taste very good right now either.

1:30 PM

All of our equipment and food is now up the stairs and I can put that issue out of my mind until we have to descend them again. The team is anxious but calm, I can see it in their faces, faces that I know so well after semesters of having them in classes and now two months of being in practice with them just about every day. I like to reflect on things when we are doing this process I think it helps me to keep my mind in a good place. I think of how lucky I am to have had this opportunity to spend this time with these five people. People who come from completely different backgrounds. Together we have become a team but much more than that as well. We know each other we trust each other despite their personal differences they know they can count on each other. In a way I feel bad for those people that I work with who don’t understand how good this feels this bond that we have. This is a group that will always be connected they will always have this experience to bind them to each other no matter where in life they go or end up. And I am privileged to be a part of that group. These thoughts and many more race through my mind as I put on the tough coach’s face that they need me to have right now. They need to see that I am the same as I have been through out the process. I can not show them a different person at this point. They can’t see that I am anxious, excited or even how proud I am of them. There will be time enough for that later. Right now we came to play and play we must because Pittsburgh looks pretty good in the kitchen from what I can see from where I am standing, all though they certainly are not as tight as us and certainly not as orderly. That could be the edge we need to seal the deal. It has done it for us before. They seem to be a bit harried and a bit cluttered on the table that is a surprise to me. But it is a pleasant surprise and one that I hope my team can capitalize on. It seems that the Ohio team has come up two minutes late and their platter and skills were not as
strong as I had expected going into Friday’s cold program. Coming up that late in menu at this level is equivalent to a death knell. In a competition where first, second and third are often spanned over only a half a point, losing an entire point for coming up two minutes late is a crushing blow. That is encouraging. It reaffirms for me that this is indeed going to be a shoot out between my team and the team of my good friends Art and Rikk from Pittsburgh. I love to have my teams compete against their teams. It fuels me on to have my teams strive for excellence. They are the ones to beat but maybe in their minds we are the ones to beat. As long as we don’t beat ourselves, I’ll be happy no matter what the outcome. 

The Ohio coach looks pale as he passes me in the narrow hall his team is cooked and he knows it. He is an acquaintance of mine and his co-coach is a good friend of mine. He glances at my kids, my well-oiled machine and says a curt hello continuing down the hall. My coffee tastes better than ever! In a matter of a few minutes it will be time, time for us to do what we came here for, time for us to once again make New York State history in this process. I really think they can do it. I have been watching the other teams and their skills and platters are all consistent with their menus. And that is not good for them and great for us.

2:00 PM

My team moves into the kitchen at long last. This component of the competition is worth 50 out of 100 points. Skills are worth 20, kitchen 20 and platter is worth 10. It is D-Day. We are here and all of the work the ass busting the late nights the early mornings the time away from my wife and kids the team arguments and debates everything is coming to a head right now. Just prior to moving into the kitchen I observed George in a silent moment of solitude a moment of reflection on days gone by and demons from the past as he sat at the top of those impossible steps head in his hands in his own world. George is my veteran on the team he is the only one to have been on three teams. The loss at this level to Ohio in 2005 by a hair still burns deep in his heart. He too saw the Ohio team come up late. He saw like everyone else their knife skills and he saw their platter program. He knows that this is the moment. He knows what is at hand, the chance to redeem that loss that he and his team sustained two years ago. Winning today would assuage all of his doubts about that day in Columbus that team, his own efforts. His own skill, we have spoken of it often. He has a deep desire to win this championship. He wants to, as he says, “Go down with the greats.” He is, of course, referring to the two previous teams that won the regional for us in 2001 and 2003. He knows that we were the first New York team to ever win the Northeast Region
Championship and no other has done it yet except us and he wants desperately to be on the team that wins the third one. I want this win for everyone and of course I want it for the school but I really want it for George. George is a good kid. He is Nick's rock. He is the unofficial leader of the team he doesn't speak often but when he does people listen. I want this win for everyone and I really want to see George get his wish of going down with the greats.

2:30 PM

It seems like years ago that we were in Buffalo cooking for the right to be here today at this moment. In reality, it has only been four short weeks. The team is cooking. Nick's head is pounding and his game is a bit off. There was some last minute tension in the staging area that has gotten to him. However, these five kids are so well trained, so well rehearsed that it is impossible for anyone but me to tell. To the judges they look calm and cool, confident and capable. They are having a good day in the kitchen. They are sharp, alert and on the ball. Their steps are precise and to the point. No wasted movements. It shows what ten practice sessions can do for a team. I hate to cram that many practices in and normally I would not, but with the way things have happened I had no choice. The rest of our culinary club is here as are Nick's parents and brother. I am a bit oblivious to them and I try to be more communicative. After all, they have traveled far to watch this. This is the pressure cooker. No turning back; everything weighs on this 90 minutes, and of that the last 15 minutes is absolutely crucial. All the good that a team does in the first seventy five minutes can be undone if they fall apart in the fifteen minute plate up. All looks good to me. The floor is dry now seven minutes prior to their cooking time starting. The sink overflowed all over the floor. No matter. They took care of it and all is well. Apparently there are no over flow valves on the sinks according to one of the faculty from the school. But it doesn't matter nothing is going to stop them. Pittsburgh's food did not match their skills or their platter program. I am convinced that this is ours to win or lose. We control our own destiny today. And destiny is calling to my team. I nurse my coffee that Brianne, one of my club kids, brought to me. It tastes pretty damn good.

3:45 PM

Our plating window has opened and our appetizer zipped out right on time at the 75 minute marker giving us the full window to plate the last three courses, just like we planned, just like we always plan. I noticed
some tension between Chris and George while George is plating the salad. I am sure I will hear all sides of what it was about later. I really don’t give a damn what it was about. I could just about slam their heads together at this point. But they are acting like 20-something-year-old men and there is not much I can do about it right now. Nick leans in and says something. Whatever it is it seemed to work. If this team has a downfall it is that Mike, Nick and Chris feel a need to always get in the last word. They can not shut up when it comes to that. If they are the winners today I fear that it will derail them at the next level. But I try not to worry about it right now. Other than that they look better than ever plating. All is moving along well. The floor judges are still talking with them, which is a good sign. They are joking with them too, which shows that they feel that the team is calm and having a good time. I can tell from where I am that these floor judges like them and being an ACF judge myself, I can see why. Boy, my coffee is stellar.

3:59 PM

Our dessert course goes out a minute early. It looks like it is supposed to. Let us hope it tastes like it is supposed to. This damn team has not come up on time once in every practice. Yet they come up 30 seconds early at the state championship and they come up 1 minute early here at the regional championship. Go figure. Says a lot about adrenaline. Tami our only girl on the team and everyone’s mother is smiling broadly. She is happy.

8:30 PM

Our tasting critique is done. For my ears it went well. I am not sure how the team feels. Fortunately, we had the entire club here with us and they helped to carry the equipment down the stairs and wash it. So we were packed long before the critique started. Over the last four or so hours I have heard a lot of complaining from coaches and team members alike regarding waiting for the critiques. I don’t get it personally. This is what it is about. With all of the work that has gone into this I can not imagine why anyone would not want a thorough critique. We did not mind the wait at all. We all sat together at a huge table in the kitchen where the skills segment had taken place. The entire Escoffier club, Julee, the team, myself and Rick. They played games we drank a plethora of coffee, Julee drew pictures on a few latex gloves that one of the kids had blown up like balloons. We waited and had a great time of it. I am proud to say that our culinary club, with no prompting from me or Julee, helped other teams.
carry their equipment down the stairs. We have a great bunch of kids and it showed today. I am about exhausted at this point. I am waiting like everyone else and it is the worst time, but it is necessary. This is the hardest of all. Every word from the previous critiques creeps back into my head. I key in on every little negative and forget all of the positives. My brain is tired and physically I am exhausted. My mind is in no shape to remind me that we have had two very good critiques thus far. We are being called for our private critique with the tasting and floor judges. Here goes.

When I left our critique, I had the impression that the judges were giving the critique from the point of view of you’re moving on to the next level here is what you need to do to win there. I have heard two critiques like that before and this sounded no different. We did, however, get worked over by the pastry tasting judge. She was rather harsh, unreasonable as far as I was concerned. She is a new judge. Maybe she felt she needed to show how tough she is. Who knows? It stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the critique. My coffee is cold. I think I need a new cup.

10:45 PM
Sleep does not come to me. I am not surprised. I lay awake mulling over the whole thing over and over again. I know myself too well by now and have been doing this for far too long to even try to fight it. I go through stages and right now I am entering my stage of doubt, second guessing everything. It is my way with this process.

Sunday March 4th
5:00 am
I wake up automatically, my mind ready to go to the gym. However, my body says no. The last time I remember looking at the clock it said 2:35.

7:30 am
I am up again. Today I am a judge for the 2007 Chef of the Year Competition. There are only 2 competitors.

6:00 PM
I am getting ready to go down to the reception. This is really it. We find out tonight how it all panned out. The food tastes bland, as all I can think about are the negatives. I am familiar with this pattern; it is always like this for me.
The time is here and they begin to call the team names. Nine teams in all and they always call in ascending order of points. Lowest to highest. The first four teams called are all certificates of participation. They didn't even score bronze medals. Wow! That is the first time I have seen that in the entire time I have been doing this. The next two teams called are bronze medals. Big surprise: the remaining three teams are Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. I feel confident that we are at least second. In our previous six trips to the Northeast Region Championship we finished dead last the first time, won the second time, took second the third time, won the fourth time, took third the fifth time and second the sixth time. The announcer calls the Ohio team with a silver medal. Just us and Pittsburgh. My mouth is dry and time stands still. I look around the table. Everyone is on the edge of their seat, the announcer drags it out as I knew he would. They always do. The team joins hands and lifts them into the air. I snap at them to put their hands down. To me it looks cocky. The announcer clears his throat and says, “The next team with a Silver medal is the ACF of…………….my mind blanks out in a flash as I see our season behind us, all teams are always announced by their ACF chapter affiliation first and than their school. All ACF chapters begin with ACF in their title. The quiet around us is deafening as he finishes the words “of Greater Pittsburgh.” Our table explodes into a rush of bodies and a blur of movement. Everyone is upon us from the club and other tables slapping us on the back beating us with joy. Tears are flowing freely in people’s eyes. The look of relief and joy on George’s face is something I will never forget. He is now one of the “Greats,” as he puts it. I hug my captain and am turning to talk with Julee as the announcer says,” And The ACF Northeast Region Champions for 2008 with a silver medal is the team from the State University of New York at Delhi.” We have done it, we have won the Northeast Region Championship for a third time in seven years. We remain the only team and school from New York to ever win this championship. The team is up and walking to the front in order of height. I motion Julee to go in front of me. Julee and I have coached teams together since she arrived shortly after I came to Delhi. We don’t always see eye to eye on things and I think that is a good thing. I think that is what makes our teams strong. It allows us to approach everything from all different angles. It assures in the end that we have tried it all and it results in us having the best possible menu for the team. Julee has always told me that my approach to our teams
intimidates her a bit. I think I get a bit over the top every time we move ahead to another level. But in the end we always seem to turn out first-rate teams, so I think it is all for the better. Originally, we had decided to leave that night after the awards and drive back to Delhi. However, there is a blinding blizzard and Rick and I decide it will be best to wait till morning. The kids are all dancing now, the team with the rest of the club members. The long hours of practice for the time are forgotten with the trophy sitting on our table. The long hours, the long weeks, the fights arguments and debates. All washed away with the euphoria of being a champion. I watch them as Julee and Rick and I sit quietly together each lost in our own thoughts. Immediately following the trophy presentation, I left the ballroom to call home and tell my wife. Then I worked through the list of dozens of people I needed to call. This is the sweet time, the best time. My coffee has never tasted so good this entire trip. I want to soak it in. We are now officially one of the best four teams in the country. We have until July to try and become the best team in the country. I have been down this road twice before and I know the work, the sacrifice that it will take. I also know that this team has bigger problems to over come than skills and organization. Three of them don't like each other at all. And they have a hard time, an impossible time not letting it enter the kitchen with them. That will be their downfall if anything is. Oh well. I have almost five months to worry about that. Right now I can just enjoy the fact that Julee and I are coaches of the Northeast Region Champions. We are the champions. We beat the best 8 teams in the region to earn that title. I want to savor the moment who knows if it will ever happen again. There will be problems on the road ahead; it will not be perfect, it will not be easy. But as I look at the team right now with their silver medals dancing and laughing with each other high fiving, and just being kids. Everything seems perfect and even this hotel coffee some of the worst I have ever had anywhere, cold as it is, tastes really damn good.

April 2007

I gave the team the month of March off to get back to their studies. We will start practices this month and run them twice a week. Not much to comment on here other than the fact that the team problems continue. Nick and Chris really cannot stand each other. I knew they had problems when I formed the team but never imagined that they went that deep. Some of the team went to New York City to practice by entering in a professional competition. Tami won a Bronze medal, Chris won a Silver medal, Felicia won a Bronze medal as did Mike and Brianne topped them
all with a high Silver medal. Nick and George served as helpers and Sarah scored a certificate of participation. Problems have now escalated between Mike and Nick as well.

May 2007

I have arranged with several master chefs to bring the team to them to run their menus for them to get feedback. I am giving the team a break after commencements and they will return the Tuesday after Memorial Day. After that we will spend almost everyday together.

Monday June 4th 2007

5:00 am

We leave for Westchester Country Club to do our menu twice for Master Chef Edward Leonard. He is the manager of Olympic Team USA. I drive one van and Jessica Backus-Foster drives the other. We get to the club about 9:30 am by the time we are ready to do a run it is 11:00 am the critique is harsh; it doesn't go well. But that is why we came to get worked over. We depart the club around 6:00 pm and find something to eat. Jess locks the keys to her van in the van with it running. It is so outrageous that we cannot help but laugh while she almost cries. We end up getting into the van through a window that Chris left open. We depart and get back to Delhi around 11:00 pm.

Tuesday June 5th

We have a very small window to turn around and we are leaving for Michigan on Wednesday morning to go to my alma mater, where we will do our menu for three master chefs. It is a 12-hour drive and this time Rick is also going to help split up the driving. For some reason George thinks it is a good idea to eat a raw fish eye from one of the fish that we have fabricated he does this around late afternoon on Tuesday.

Wednesday June 6th

3:00 am

Alumni Hall

We depart for Michigan. It is an uneventful drive other than the same old funny things that happen when you're on the road with a bunch of 19 and 20 year olds. Brianne comes with us to help. She has been with us the entire time. We arrive in Michigan around 4:00 pm. We go to Schoolcraft College and off load our equipment and food. We check into
the hotel. The damn state credit card doesn’t work. Big surprise. We depart to find something to eat. I take the group to an old hamburger shop in my old neighborhood. It has been there unchanged for more than fifty years.

**Thursday June 7th**

We cook for the masters. They rip us apart. Not as bad as Westchester, but bad nonetheless. Even worse Nick and Chris argue constantly to the point where Tami sequesters them in the walk-in cooler and forces them to talk to each other during clean up. By the time we are done George is barfing uncontrollably. The fish eye he ate is working its way out of his system along with everything else he has eaten. We stop to visit my dad at his house only a mile from the college. While we are there we pick up an antique Garland stove to bring back with us. It is the stove that he grew up with. My team loves the stove. It is a good distraction to a trip that has been marred by the realization by everyone that Nick and Chris cannot put their personal issues aside. They say they can they talk it but they do not show it. Their actions prove otherwise. It is a long ride home and I ponder another month and half of these two unraveling the success of the team with their own personal battle of who did what wrong. I feel bad for George and Tami. Not so much Mike, who also has the same problem of letting his own personal battle with Nick affect everything around him with seemingly no thought of what it is doing to his team. Immaturity, plain and simple.

**Friday June 8th**

3:00 am

We depart Michigan for New York. I will give the team the weekend off. We will practice next week for a few days. And than I am off to meet Master baker Noble Masi to get his input on our dessert. I will take the weekend to myself with my family.

**Monday June 18th through July 9th**

This is a busy time for the team. We practice almost everyday during the week and then I release the team on the weekends to go do whatever they need to for work etc. During this time Fritz Nuekam a certified Master Pastry Chef comes to Delhi to spend a few days with us to work on our dessert. He is a friend of mine who know from competitions also a fellow judge. He is a really nice person and the kids enjoy working with him. We
also cook the menu and open it up to people from around the campus to come and eat for a donation of their choosing. I didn't like the idea at first. It was thought of by our VP for Business Brian Hutzley. But it turns out to be a really fantastic way to get feed back and to also have support for the kids. Some people give nice reasonable donations; others are embarrassingly cheap about it. I guess you have all kinds. The team also has a chance to cook their menu for the new SUNY Provost. She seems like a nice lady. The food starts to come together. They must put out 24 portions of a four-course menu in 3 hours with 30 minutes to plate it. Everything being done from scratch. Not an easy task. I am having a gout attack a bad one. I can barely get my shoe on my foot. I hobble around the kitchen on one foot using crutches something I haven't had to do for gout in many years. I am also sick. I think I have a severe sinus infection. Oh well I'll live.

**Tuesday July 9th**

4:00 am

We are leaving to go back to Westchester again. I am really sick and I don't have a good feeling about this trip, but they have set the time aside for us so we are going.

5:00 PM-9:30 PM

We are done at the club. It didn't go well. I feel about ready to fall out right now. We leave the club, both vans packed and ready to drive back to Delhi. We have to stop on 28 after getting off at the Kingston exit. I am coughing so bad I can barley keep my mind on driving. We stop at a Mobile station because we have the Mobile gas cards. I am dehydrated and I feel weak. The next thing I know I am spitting up a combination of phlegm and blood. Brianne comes over to see what is wrong. I regard the team as they stream in and out of the gas station buying their drinks and snacks. I have at this point probably the worst premonition that I have ever had since starting as a coach back in 1995 in Michigan. I feel that there is no way we can win and with our departure date less than 10 days away it is an awful, awful feeling. I of course keep my thoughts to myself. I don't even tell my wife about the blood or the thought. But I know right then that we are done for. The problems have persisted. The team cooks now as though they are walking through an exercise. There is no passion, no love that shows. They are detached. There is nothing for it but to steam ahead and hope for the best. And it is not all of them. Tami comes to each practice with her wild-eyed wonderment, Sarah comes ready to rock every time. Felicia always has a warm word to say, as
does Brianne, who never complains and really is the only one who would have a reason to. Considering she is doing everything with absolutely no chance of winning a medal. She is here to help. Between when we leave for the club and return to Delhi, we completely redo the dessert that Tami is doing in the van on the way back. In fairness the guys work but they do not work like they care anymore. They work like it is a burden. Cooking is about passion and a love of the food and the craft. They had that at the state level and they had it for sure at the regional level. They have lost it somewhere. I need to figure out how to get it back for them but I don’t think I can. I can’t cook the food for them. They have to do it.

**Monday July 16th**

This past Saturday I took the team to the Winnisook Club where my wife and I run the foodservice over the summer on the weekends. The club paid for their ingredients and in turn they did most of their menu for 40 servings. Not a bad deal. Yet again Chris and Nick clash with each other. Team meetings are now a lost cause they always descend into blame games and he said she said. You could script them. They start out with Nick and Chris arguing, while Tami and George try to patiently point out the positives or contribute constructive input. Mike always hops in and blasts Nick and than from there it is all down hill. I rarely include Sarah and Felicia in on these because they primarily have to do with the hot food team not the youth team. We are leaving this Wednesday morning and I can not wait to be on the road with this team I think that may help them to focus on the task and it might break the quagmire that they find themselves in. It is not all bad. They are learning a lot. They have done a great deal of menu research and food tasting. They have expanded their repertoire one hundred fold. Hopefully they realize that. Jessica and I have talked about this team and their problems. We both care a great deal about them but we realize that what they are having trouble with is really something that only they can fix. We will continue to be there for them as much as we can.

**Wednesday July 18th**

3:30 am

We depart Delhi for another date with destiny. This time at the National Championship in Orlando, Florida. I am driving one van with my captain Nick, the food and the equipment and Jessica is driving the other van with everyone else. We will drive about half way stop in North Carolina for the night and continue on the next morning arriving at the
Marriott World Center on Thursday afternoon. Other than my hotel room being haunted at our stop the trip is uneventful.

**Thursday July 19th**

**10:00 PM**

**Orlando Florida World Center Marriott**

We are finally checked in. We had another credit card debacle but thanks to a lot of people at the Delaware National Bank and CADI it is taken care of. Suffice to say it sucked a real pain in the ass. We have private work space at the Gaylord Palms hotel not far from here where we have several alumni connections. They have welcomed us with open arms and it is really heartening to the whole team.

Following is a schedule that is pretty accurate to how the last days of the team played out. The only things not reflected in the following lines are the many hours of exhaustion that everyone endured, the tears the joy the laughter and the many, many things that go on during such a whirlwind time. Instead of recreating this I thought it would be better to just include this schedule it pretty much says it all. I was unable to keep consistent journal entries after July 19th it was just impossible.

**Friday July 20th**

7:00 am Dr. Petrillose, Chef Tom, George and Mike will go to Florida Carbonic to pick up 200 pounds of dry ice. Every one else will meet us at the Gaylord Palms. When the above people have brought the dry ice to the palms they will head to Sun City Center to pick up the six orders that are going there. Everyone else will be at the Palms working on the cold program.

9:30 am arrive at The Gaylord Palms

10:00 am start mixing roll dough’s let rest cook, punch down and scale, let rise and brush with egg wash bake.

10:00 am to 3:00 PM cold food production

1:00 PM bloom 2 pounds of gelatin

3:00 PM to 8:30 PM break for rest and dinner Mandatory for everyone

8:30 PM return to Gaylord Palms

9:00 PM add remainder of water to gelatin and melt slowly
9:00 PM prepare items for glazing
_slice main pieces
_prepare vegetables on pins or tooth picks etc
10:00 PM first dip of all items
11:30 PM second dip of all items

Saturday July 21st
1:00 am third and final dip of all items
2:00 am – 3:00 am clean kitchen and set up for cleaning of pieces
3:15 am 4:15 am clean all pieces
5:00 am layout platter and judges plates
5:30 am to 6:00 am depart Gaylord Palms for the Marriott. Brianne will accompany Dr. Petrillose to Gary’s Seafood to pick up our product and bring it back to the Palms. They will call us when they are on their way back.

6:00 to 6:30 am arrive at Marriott cold program needs to be set in place by 9:00 am at 7:45 am Chef Tom will take Nick, George, Tami, and Chris to the hot food team meeting with the judges. Chef Backus will stay with Sarah, Mike, and Felicia to set up cold food on time.
10:00 am Chef Tom will take Mike, Nick, George, Felicia, and Sarah to the Youth Team meeting with the judges. Everyone else will wait for them. After the Youth Team meeting we will all return to the Palms and store the produce from Gary’s Seafood. After returning to the Palms the Youth Team will mise en place their hot program and inventory EVERYTHING.

5:30 pm we leave the Palms to view the kitchens at the competition site. We will do final strategies at that time. We will not stay at the Palms later than 9:00 pm, you need sleep. When we leave the Palms, we will bring everything for the Youth Team hot program with us to the Marriott except the dry ice. Once all is stowed away and secured, we will have a final strategy meeting in my room.

Sunday July 22nd
D-Day for the Youth Team

6:00 am the Youth Team Brianne, and Chef Tom will assemble in the staging area and make final preparations. Chef Backus, Chris and Tami
will go find breakfast for everyone. If the dessert is still in question for the hot food team Tami and Chef Backus and Chris will return to the Palms and work on it while Chef Tom and Brianne and Dr. Petrillose stay with the youth team. Either way Dr. Petrillose will return to the Palms and get the dry ice for Felicia, Chris will help him.

11:30 am Critiques will start for the Youth Team. Immediately following critiques we will eat lunch together. After lunch we will return to the Palms. The Hot Food Team with the help of Felicia, Sarah and Brianne will mise en place and inventory EVERYTHING. We need to be departing from the Palms no later than 9:00 PM with everything loaded into the van except the dry ice. We will bring everything to the Marriott. All food and any small ware items needed to do final prep will go to your rooms. All equipment will stay in the vans.

**Monday July 23rd**

_D-Day for the Hot Food Team_

4:00 am we will meet at the vans and unload everything. I want it into the convention center by 5:30 am. Dr Petrillose and Felicia and Sarah will return to the Palms to get the dry ice to bring back to the Marriott. (If we need more dry ice we will change this plan.)

5:30 am all food and equipment is in the staging area giving you a full 2 hours and 15 minutes before your set up window beings to settle in and set up your carts, your freezer, etc.

7:45 am Set up window opens. YOU’RE on your OWN. Chef Backus, Dr Petrillose and I can do nothing more for you. Good Luck.

**Monday July 23rd 2007**

_National Championship Awards Ceremony_

We have placed third in the nation with a silver medal. I can tell that the team is disappointed. I was surprised. I thought that they would at least finish second by the looks of things. But in the end, I wasn't tasting their food so it is hard to tell. They did have some major problems in their cooking window. In the final analysis I think it comes down to the fact that they just made too many mistakes and the stubbornness of one of them also cost the team big time. As I intend some day to release this journal for people who may be curious about this process, I will leave it at that. The youth team came in with a Bronze medal. Not too bad. I thought they would win Silver but the judges thought differently.
Tuesday July 31st

The team is gone now. Scattered to the wind, on their way home to enjoy what is left of their summer break. As I sit in my office in Alumni hall I contemplate the fact that this was going to be my last team. I was ready to walk off into the sunset when this team was done. I don’t know anymore how I feel about that. I guess I have awhile to think about it myself. I reflect back on the past months. Nick in the end was one of the best captains I have ever had. He will become a great leader for a professional kitchen. Chris with his creative eye was an integral part of the team and in the end he was the difference at the regional championship with the platter. Mike with his do or die mentality was the cornerstone of the team. For all of his wrong decisions he more than made up for them with his dedication and sheer will to be the guy that everyone can count on. His big heart is his greatest asset. Tami, the mother of the team. What can I say about Tami, she is wonderful the inquisitor extraordinaire. If there are 60 minutes in an hour Tami is asking 75 questions forever searching for excellence. George the boy who came to Delhi and left as the man that became one of the greats. I think as well about Brianne. She through sheer work ethic and integrity has cemented herself in the minds of everyone as the next super star along with Sarah. If I do field a team next year I will look to these two ladies to be the leaders. Brianne stood out so much because in the end she had nothing to gain in material terms. She was not eligible for a medal no trophy to hoist nothing. She endured with us the entire experience for nothing more than her love to work and learn. Sarah has lived up to everything that I thought she would and more. I see Gold in both their futures if they choose to pursue it. Felicia a wonderful pianist, alas I don’t think she was as enamored with this process as the rest of the team members. But she will always be a part of the team. A highly gifted and creative soul, she will be remembered for her incredible chocolate piping skills, far better than mine and her soft smile and kind words when the tension was at its worst. What these kids will come to know some day is that the experience itself has transcended any medals or awards. It was the journey to find excellence. A journey that is never complete a journey that really never has an end. They lived it together, Julee, Jessica and I lived it with them. And we are better people for having had that experience. I love this team these students, people that I have had in my home. They have eaten at my dinner table with my wife and my own children who look to them as older brothers and sisters. It was my honor to walk this journey with them. Some day if not already they will figure
this out themselves when the medals are sitting in a drawer gathering dust and the only thing to remind them of these experiences are the images in their mind. They will not remember their personal problems they will not remember the bad times. They will remember only the greatness that they were a part of.

Many images stick in my mind from the past ten months when this journey began with our first tryout. Some good some bad, I think that three images will stay with me forever and those three images will come to optimize this experience in my memory. First the sight of George Diaz sitting on those impossible steps in Pittsburg minutes before the team takes to the kitchen in what would be their winning run to the Northeast Region Championship. In that fleeting moment without words he spoke for everyone, he echoed our hopes, our fears and our dreams. Second the sight of all of them moving into the kitchen at the National Championships wearing our school name proudly and third and most important. On the drive back from Orlando we stopped at a MacDonald’s somewhere in South Carolina. As I leaned against the van door I watched the team, my students, my kids, slapping at each other laughing and being 19 year olds and 20 years olds. I saw all of the things in that moment from the last seven months. I knew right then that for the rest of their lives they would never forget this run to the National Championships. They would remember it always. I smiled at Jess and made my normal obligatory smart ass comment she of course slapped me on the shoulder and I sipped my MacDonald’s coffee. The best cup I ever had.
2007 Northeast Region Champions
From left to right: Michael Stamets, Julee Miller, Chris Lent, Nick Hernandez, Tami Eicholz, George Diaz, and Tom Recinella
Photo by: Brianne Slocum
Delhi with Mt. Fuji
Kentaro Kariya
The Happiest Japanese in the Catskills
Akira Odani

I believe humans are an integral part of nature and therefore happiest when they live close to their natural habitat. Until recently, most people were engaged in hunting and farming, living off the land. They carried on their lives in harmony with the rhythm of the natural world. With industrialization and mass production came urban centers where the majority learned to earn their living in deforested, congested, and largely artificial environments. Human hearts, however, still yearn for the splendor, mystery, and grandness of unspoiled nature.

Having escaped the city life in favor of solitude in the Catskills about four years ago, I am more convinced than ever that the mountains, forests, and streams are where my spirit thrives. The mountains, with their ever-changing color, inspire me with grounded timelessness. The cascading streams of cold water cutting the valley teach me the power of fluidity. The glittering stars in a dark night sky awaken us to the smallness of humans and the vastness of the universe. I am awed and encouraged to dream boldly, to explore new ideas, and to hope for a better future by my natural surroundings in the Catskills.

I was born in Tokyo in September of 1945, soon after the unconditional surrender of Japan to the Allied Forces. My older sister was killed in the spring fire bombings of Tokyo. My mother used to tell me how she ran around barefoot in the burning neighborhood, clutching her infant’s bloody body, looking for a doctor to save her. I was in my mother’s uterus in that frantic and desperate rush. A month before my sister’s death, my mother and father went to look for the dead body of her father in the downtown industrial district, where virtually no one survived. She used to describe the stench and the charred bodies on the streets and the bloated corpses on the oiled surface of the debris-clogged river.

No wonder that I wanted to escape the cramped quarters of my surroundings! At age five, I plotted to get away from my family by taking a train out of the city into the country where my cousin lived. I was found crying in a vacant and darkened train around midnight in the service yard.

I kept looking in my teenage years for a way out of my family misery, out of the confinement, ultimately out of the country. Early on I realized that education could offer that opportunity. When I was 17, a 45-minute train ride to a prep school meant the possibility of college admission and a
future beyond. The commuting was as rough as playing rugby. The platform was always full of passengers rushing to work. As the train pulled in, the doors opened and few struggled to get out. I saw the jam-packed people inside, hesitated, but did not see any other option. I joined the others swarming to a door, pushed against the body mass while holding onto my bag. I leaned forward and grabbed the steel frame of the doorway for leverage. Once my body was at least two thirds inside the vehicle, the “pusher” of the National Railway Corporation shoved my back in to let the door close.

Once inside I wiggled my twisted body in search of the most comfortable posture avoiding face-to-face encounter with any of my neighbors as the now moving train swayed left and right. The complete silence around me was unnerving. Nobody acknowledged the others’ presence in the packed car. I muttered to myself that I must get out of here. Japan was a pressure-cooker for me. I, the young and angry man, was ready to explode.

My desire for exit was not unusual among the Japanese youth then or now. The nation is small, about the size of the state of Montana, where 173 million people live today. As the four main islands are all volcanic and mountainous, the habitable space is even more limited. The population density is about 50 times higher than in the United States. The majesty of nature is mostly forgotten in the urban centers of Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka, and Nagoya.

I was lucky enough to come to the United States for a graduate degree in 1968. I learned, acquired, lost, and then regained a lot of knowledge, wisdom, and love in the forty years since then. As an adult I visited Tokyo and other international cities many times. I now choose to live in Andes.

Recently I entertained eight Japanese students at my home. As I drove the students back to their dormitory, I pointed out the cluster of orange lights glowing on the opposite side of the valley on Route 28 near Delhi.

Some of the students in the car exclaimed, “Ah, Kireei!” How beautiful! Indeed the campus looked magically appealing across the valley that night. A group of buildings reflected the color of numerous street lamps creating an illusion of a wonderland. The natural surroundings of the College are liberating and inspiring. So, too, an American education can provide these foreign students with the same courage, inspiration, and faith in their possibilities as it did for me.

That night I was the happiest Japanese in the Catskills.
Who knows? Six or seven. They all kinda look like me-changing, getting bigger, more mature. White siding, green and blue shutters. A small apartment when I was a baby. Then a trailer, one-floor, two-floor, three bedrooms, pool. We never really seemed to fit, these homes and me. Some things never changed though. Gable roof, location, my bed, and always just the two of us, at least in my heart. The pain never really left either. Snow falling off the roof, or me falling off the roof.
You Were Tristan
Cassandra Brown

I showed you and told you all my secret places and girlhood dreams as we laid in the long grass in the field behind my house, staring up at the sky.

Your arm as my headrest, your heart, my time piece, and I never felt so vulnerable.

And August was never so blue.
A Sentinel
Cassandra Brown
The Shogun’s Garden
Samme Chittum

Your life seems like it will never end
Spring comes every year
It never changes
Then death arrives with the dawn
And you realize
That it was all a dream

His arms held above his head, Kira tensed his two-handed grip on the steel pruning shears. The dry, brittle twig transmitted its message of resistance through the shears, which waged a silent battle with the spirit of the tree before it surrendered with a snap that made the supple limb recoil and bounce. A flutter of pink blossoms drifted past Kira’s upturned face, inviting a single petal to land on a cheekbone moistened with sweat. In which season, he mused, is it better to die? When a man dies in spring, he knows what it is to taste life on his tongue, to drink from a swaying, wooden bucket hoisted straight from the well, its over-flowing droplets plunging irresistibly into the dark, liquid mirror below. Although young, Kira was a veteran of the great battle of Sekigahara in 1603, when Lord Tokugawa had defeated Lord Ishida and assumed the mantle of Shogun. As a boy, Kira had studied the poems written by defeated samurai who had chosen to disembowel themselves with their own sword rather than endure the disgrace of defeat. Composed in the last sacred moments before death, these farewell poems turned verses into bright-winged birds, set free before the samurai thrusts the katana into his soft belly, the point searching for his spine.

Perhaps it is better to die in winter, he mused, when clotted clouds hang low in the sky and turn the color of an angry bruise. In January, the gravel in the Shogun’s rock garden became brittle with a thousand knife-like edges. The flesh of a foolish toe peeping out through a tear in a well-worn sock is stung twice – first by the gravel and a second time by the snow that arranges itself in shifting, wave-like patterns along the winding garden paths. The night after the battle of Sekigahara, when the groans of the dying disturbed the rest of the living, a great snowstorm arrived like an absolution from heaven, shrouding the earth. Kira had walked among the dead the next day, looking for a missing companion, his own heavy footfall leaving behind a scarlet imprint stained by the blood that seeped through the snow from the engorged and sodden battlefield.
Kira marked time by the years since Sekigahara, when Tokugawa and the ninja from Kira’s Hattori clan had defeated Lord Ishida. The new Shogun had established an uneasy peace and banished the boy emperor, Hideyoshi, to an isolated Castle in Osaka. Tokugawa remained vigilant for threats to his life and power. All those who opposed him and the imposed peace that rested uneasily upon the country would be killed. For three years now, Watanabe Kira had been assigned the task of guarding the castle grounds, along with a dozen other Hattori ninja who were disguised as gardeners by day, but by night carried out raids against rival Fuma and Koga ninja clans. Every morning, Kira left his solitary pallet in the gardener’s hut on the western perimeter of the gardens before sunrise to meditate alone in the fading dark and remind himself of who he truly was, a Hattori ninja, a warrior and body guard in the service of the Shogun. To any who passed Kira during the day, who noticed him combing the gravel paths with a wide bamboo rake, he was a gardener – the human equivalent of a harmless garter snake. Yet he was in reality a coiled serpent, a muscular spring of a man who could locate with lethal speed the exposed and vulnerable pressure points on his opponent’s body.

Unlike the noble samurai, the ninja’s arsenal of weapons included espionage and deceit. Two years after Sekigahara, the secret ninja wars were still burning like brush fires and assassination plots were rife. While Kira was assigned the low-status task of guarding the castle grounds, one of Tokugawa’s most trusted ninja confederates, a right-hand man to Hattori Hanzo, carried out a daring scheme in which he played the role of an angry defector. He fled by horseback and sought refuge in the camp of the enemy, pledging loyalty to his new master, Lord Sanada. The defector was in reality a double agent, who assassinated Sanada by presenting him with many gifts that included a small black kitten whose claws had been dipped in poison.

Other than infrequent night raids to hunt down and extinguish the remnants of the defeated forces of Lord Ishida, Kira’s life had assumed a monk-like routine that was not incompatible with the ninja training of self discipline and introspection. Yet he chaffed under the unrelenting demands of the one man who had made his life nearly intolerable since his arrival – the aging and fiercely uncompromising head gardener, Matsunobu Monza. The Shogun’s master gardener could barely conceal his contempt for Kira’s ineptitude.
“No, no, no!” had been the first words Kira had heard Matsunobu pronounce as he came across Kira weeding a small bed of flowers. Matsunobu was aghast to discover Kira had been pulling out both flowers and weeds. “What sort of bodyguard kills those he has been instructed to protect?”

Kira, who had had been working on his knees, rotated his body to face Matsunobu, and kept his eyes to the ground.

“I am sorry Matsunobu-san. You are right, of course.”

“I ask for gardeners and they send an assassin to kill my plants.”

“I have no excuse. But I am willing to learn,” said Kira, without sincerity.

“You will not learn by pretending to be something you are not,” Matsunobu replied. “You can not be banned from the palace gardens altogether, which is what I would prefer. Yet you can be kept from doing further damage. Touch nothing until you are given further instructions,” said Matsunobu, who turned on his heels and stalked away, but not before summoning one of the well-trained and obedient gardeners who had worked for him for more than a decade.

“Hiroshi! Come here! Make sure Kira is kept far away from any living tree or flower. Find something, anything else for him to do.”

“Yes, Matsunobu-san,” said Hiroshi, bowing slightly and keeping his distance from the disgraced Kira.

For three years, Kira was confined to the most rudimentary tasks – moving and storing empty garden pots, raking gravel and oiling and sharpening the collection of garden tools – all jobs that Hiroshi decided Kira could perform without endangering the artfully groomed perfection of the living garden, which consisted of four islands connected by bridges, afloat in a small lake surrounded by manicured footpaths and trees.

Although Kira had at first felt trapped in the perfect, pretend world of Matsunobu’s island garden, he found himself distracted at odd moments by the creatures that to him embodied freedom – the spectral bats who emerged at dusk to dart like shadows through the air and make a meal of mosquitoes and moths. The bats, Kira thought, were masters of invisibility and stealth. They made no sound and seemed guided by a magical ability to find their way with a flawless precision in a moonlit world.

The second summer he spent as a reluctant gardener in the service of the Shogun, Kira was going about yet another menial task when he was arrested by the unexpected sight of a bat lying at his feet. A powerful
daytime summer storm had washed the bat from its place of rest under
the eaves of a gardener’s shack. Slipping on his gardener’s gloves, Kira
selected a stout wooden ladder to lean against the side of the building.
Turning his attention to the bat, he carefully scooped up a handful of
wet leaves on which the stricken creature lay. The nimble Kira had no
difficulty climbing the ladder to the upper eaves, while using his free
hand to cradle the nest of leaves. Carefully separating the damp brown
leaves from the delicate, webbed wings of the bat, he marveled at its
mouse-like ears and nearly weightless, fur-covered body. He placed the
bat on a dry section of a wide timber just below the eaves, but not before
he said a prayer to whatever spirits protected flying creatures of the night.

That same summer, he discovered another class of garden residents
who were also free to come and go as they pleased. One day while
hefting the red ornamental pots that were being removed from storage
in outbuildings where they were kept during winter, Kira’s slow progress
was halted by an oddly robust humming noise that his ears told him was
produced by an insect bigger than a bee, and in fact larger than any insect
he had ever heard. Bizarrely, this mysterious insect did not fly past on its
own busy way, but remained disconcertingly fixed and persistent, creating
an ominous whirring sound that Kira’s nearly perfect hearing identified
as emanating from a source a mere two feet away. In the next few frozen
moments, Kira’s eyes located the source of the sound.

Suspended in front of him, level with his chest, was a tiny, iridescent
green-and-red-feathered head and torso. This magical being, which
surrounded itself with a blurry halo of wings, was a humming bird
who had been deceived by the seductively bright red pot in Kira’s arms.
Astonished at the hummingbird’s mastery of movement that achieved
the opposite of movement – perfect stillness in midair – Kira had only
a moment absorb all the visual clues before the tiny bird vanished
by transforming itself into a streak of color that disappeared along
a horizontal line to Kira’s right. He left Kira with the unmistakable
sensation that it was he – Kira – who had been taken unawares, inspected
by a superior being, and summarily dismissed.

When he told Hiroshi the story of the hummingbird, the smaller
man smiled knowingly.
“There is much here that only a gardener can appreciate. But it is all there
if you look.”
Over the first three years Kira spent confined to the walled sanctuary of the castle grounds, a strange metamorphosis unfolded. Kira found himself increasingly engrossed in his work in Matsunobu’s walled world. His years of training in ninjutsu had instilled in him an intense concentration and attention to form that, over time, found expression in menial chores. The first year he spent raking gravel, he performed his task with a begrudging sense of duty. The second year, he discovered that the act of raking gravel and sharpening shears to be deeply soothing and meditative. He began to use the sharpening stone to put the keenest edge on the blades and to devise his own system for arranging and mounting the gardener’s tools on the wall of the shed. The third year he found a hidden universe in the simple, harmonious patterns he raked in the gravel that seemed to mirror something refined and orderly in his formerly restless spirit.

One day he was raking the path that led to a bridge connecting two islands when he was approached by the head gardener. “Come,” Matsunobu instructed without first greeting Kira. “I have something to show you.”

Kira followed Matsunobu along a path that led to what he knew to be the head gardener’s inner sanctum—a greenhouse where he kept the collection of orchids that Matsunobu himself tended with fastidious attention, coaxing from their regal stems the elegant and complicated blooms that reminded Kira of the painted faces of geishas. Choosing an orchid in full flower, Matsunobu solemnly lifted and carried the pot like a priest transporting a sacred relic. Without being instructed, Kira followed and watched, sensing he was about to see something only a select few would be allowed to witness. Once outside, Matsunobu placed the orchid on a crude, raised platform of flat stones and stood back before turning to Kira with a sly look of anticipation on his face. Once again, Kira’s keen hearing alerted him to the arrival of the assassins that Matsunobu had summoned by producing the orchid. A cohort of agitated bees surrounded the orchid and hovered for only a moment before descending on the open face of each flower and clamoring relentlessly into its secret interior, not unlike, Kira thought, an attacking force of ninja invading a castle. Kira’s surprise grew to alarm as hundreds of bees swarmed the vulnerable orchid, until the entire plant was hidden beneath a living, moving blanket of bees.

“Ah,” said Matsunobu, noting Kira’s concern. “Yes. The bees are here for one reason, and that is to kill their sworn enemy, to overpower
and murder him before he murders them. But they have been deceived by the plant. The orchid has cleverly made its blooms to imitate the same wasp that invades the hives of bees and destroys entire colonies in order to steal the honey. By mimicking the wasp, the orchid fulfills its own purpose. A clever deception, is it not? One a ninja might appreciate?"

That night, Kira fell into a deep, trancelike sleep, only to be awakened by the hissing sound of a whispered command emanating from the shadows of his hut. “Get up! Quickly!”

Kira needed no further prompting. He rose without speaking and pulled on the clothes he kept beneath his pallet for just such occasions. Outside, the moon was hidden behind slow-moving clouds. Walking single file, he joined the other moving shadows of hooded men in their silent procession alongside the moss-covered walls of the castle until they reached an ancient wooden door that opened unto a gated area outside the castle walls. Here the Shogun’s horses were kept in a large stable that smelled of hay and dung. Kira was handed the bridle to a mount he had ridden before, and expertly climbed on the back of the dark mare, whose large muscular body felt at once comforting and powerful.

And so they rode, as if in a dream, through the silky dark of the warm spring night until the roadway became a path and then a clearing in the forest. Kira felt a strange pang of separation as he responded to another silent signal to dismount the mare and proceed on foot. Did someone whisper their mission in his ear that night – or had he been told days before that they were to find and attack a small party of men hurrying along a mountain road, heading southward? He could not quite remember. He knew that it was the official in the palanquin, hidden behind the silk curtain of the small traveling compartment, who was the object of their mission. They must kill the nameless man in the palanquin, a tax collector who had been stealing the Shogun’s gold and was now seeking refuge in the territory controlled by rival ninja clans.

Concealed in the trees along the roadside they waited, thin, slight men as supple and limber as the saplings that concealed them. As the small party of travelers bearing the palanquin approached, Kira’s entire body tensed in anticipation of the moment when he would fly through the air, silent yet swift, like the bat, then hover for a moment in mid-air like the hummingbird before he became a blur of motion. Like a swarm of bees, he and the other ninjas would strike as one, inflicting lethal,
stinging blows on the body of the traitor. Kira was the first to grasp the silk curtain and pull it aside. But before his eyes told him that the compartment was empty, he realized that it would be. But it was too late. He had forgotten the orchid and its lesson of deception. They had fallen into a trap. Some part of Kira stood back and watched as the sword that pierced his own heart was pulled free, allowing his body to fall backward as if he had been dropped from a great height. So this is what death looks like, he thought, as he hovered overhead, and gazed into his staring, childlike eyes, visible now in the subtle illumination of early dawn that revealed the pink carpet of cherry blossoms covering the earth where his body lay.

“Kira! Wake-up!” a voice announced. Kira’s eyes opened reflexively to reveal the round, worried face of Hiroshi peering down at him. “Matsunobu will be angry if you are not at work when he arrives. The paths must be raked before the Shogun returns to the castle.” And so, Kira the gardener – spirit restored to his body – rose to begin another day’s work.
A Non-Existent Finish Line
Jason Grant

I chase that wicked green, listen out for sirens
By all means, being rich seem to be the only dream
And we’re only helping out; they need more drugs to cope
Cops want to stop that effect, but they’ll need a longer rope
To catch all these bandits, and clean the gutter out with soap
And try to sink boats, all these Dominicans with coke.
Police flood the streets, hundred eyes, need a better cloak
But my daughter needs to eat, plus I’m tired of being broke
Now I’ve applied to hundred jobs, no response, is it the skin
That these people in those suits give me dirty looks again?
And that leaves no choice for me to touch coke again
Only for the reason that my daughter is going to be starving, man
It’s like the Devil made a scratch in the pavement and we’re falling to the bottom
Like God picked his favorites and we only add to the problem
Spiraling into destruction, with every needle and every bottle
If God had made a way, he made it with the same chance as Lotto
A History of Music
Aaron Kinberg

White, black, wood, and ivory
piano with 88 keys to my happiness.
The chime, melody floats
through air with every struck
note. One monumental night
a stage is set, set to please a crowd
with grand music. I am the centerpiece
of the stage. A band. A band surrounds
me. I am in the middle of it all. Or so
it felt. Playing my heart out, sending
messages. Messages to people's souls
Key ingredients to my happiness.
My first guitar was handed down to me
by my father. His eyes told me musical
inspiration. Pluck, strum, twang. A new
instrument wanted to learn my name. Pianos.
Guitars. Drums. Key ingredients
to my happiness. Thud of the base drum. Snap
of the snare. A new sound in my repertoire
flowed with a bang. Drums were a new passion;
they completed me. Pianos. Guitars. Drums.
Key ingredients to my happiness.
Cave to Cubicle
John McGill

Cave dwelling cavemen in caves long ago
moaned, grunted, and cried in a sound we don’t know.
Perhaps they told their kids when to harvest and sow
or maybe the elders spoke of stars and river flow.
*If the cat got their tongue*…
They’d grab some sticks and some sand
and burrow directions to a far away land,
so younger much stronger more virile young men
could go there, destroy, and return home again.
*If the tide came in*…
They’d scratch up a rock in a peculiar way
and others would read what they could no longer say.
Rocks, being hard, lumpy, and gray,
are ardent little lumps that remain scratched today.
*If they commenced massive mineral mining*…
Then they’d extort rock and tree,
crushing pebbles, slicing oak for paper ink industry.
Heck, kill a cow, leather bound for a noble,
so he can read exactly what the cavemen would have told him.
*Until the revolutions*…
Keyboards and rodents killed the paper and pen
along with idiot boxes that reek of man’s sin.
But now Google and you tube and xtube and more—
everything becomes history, even night shift for a whore.
*Until the connection drops*…
Then I’m drinking with grandma, and as she weeps over brandy
and her lost, Brandon, tells me a lifetime of memories.
I doubt Google could do that.
Where is Hip Hop?

Wesley Worrell

Is hip hop dead? As a big fan of hip hop I have been asked this question a lot since the controversial release of Nas’s album, Hip Hop is Dead. In the title song, Nas talks about the decline in hip hop and blames it on commercialization and lack of substance and meaning in the lyrics. Is hip hop really dead or did it transform and change like everything else does over time? I believe that hip hop is a moving, living thing. In its new form, it is still hip hop.

I have been listening to hip hop music since I was about seven. My mother brought me Edutainment by KRS-ONE. I loved it. I liked the message, the beat, the lyrics, the creativity and just the overall feel of the music. At that time in 1995 hip hop was more about the lyrics, and positivity. Rappers like Biggie Smalls, Tupac Shakur, The Wu Tang Clan, A Tribe Called Quest, The Fugees, The Roots, Snoop Dogg, Keith Murray, Redman Method man, Mobb Deep, Outkast, Onyx and many more were making hits. Critics say that’s when hip hop was “alive,” “at its peak,” and “just so raw.” So, what happened?

In the following years rap artists started selling millions of records, going on huge tours and even launching lines of clothing. With the money and fame came the term “bling bling.” As rappers became more affluent, they began to live a more opulent lifestyle, buying top of the line clothing, purchasing expensive jewelry, buying several cars and purchasing massive houses. Some artists making full songs about it, some even basing there rap personas on it. This seemed generic to a lot of fans and because it was new – just like the millions of dollars that artists were making.

When major record labels heard about this, they realized they could make millions, so they marketed it. There were rappers and hip hop artists in commercials, bill boards, and other ways of advertising. This was a brilliant way for labels to make millions until the age of the download.

By 2000 illegal downloading or file sharing became popular. Even if one was down loading music legally for the most part, they were only buying one song instead of an entire album. At this time a decline in hip hop and rap record sales took place.
Knowing all of these facts about, the focus on mainstream hip hop and rap, the age of the “bling,” and the role that downloading played: It is noted that anything and everything changes through time. For example, rock and roll music was not the same as it was 30 years ago, 15 years ago or even 10 years ago. It went from Trixie Smith in the 1920s, to Roy Brown in the 1940s, to James brown in the 1960s to Korn in the 1990s. Rock and roll has gone through many changes and developed several sub-genres and it is still alive and making great music.

While mainstream record labels have their hands all over what music gets played on television and on the radio there is still a lot of “real” music out there. It is called underground hip-hop. These rappers do not go on huge tours and are not in fast food commercials. For the most part their music is raw and is not about materialism, violence and sex. To name a few; K-OS Jay D (or Jay dilla), Dilated people, Pack FM, El-P, Dead Prez, 4pm, Jurassic five, and just so many more. I have had the pleasure to listening to them all, and it is all amazing music. For the most part this music is straight forward and some of it has that old school early mid nineties sound. These songs are not produced by super producers and these artists are not managed by big time corporations who many have said are responsible for the death of hip hop.

When hip hop and rap became a million dollar industry artists started living a lavish lifestyle. Artists started living this lifestyle so they started putting it in their music. Many have said hip-hop/rap is just about bragging now. However: since the beginning of hip hop it was about being “Def” and “fresh”. Instead of buying a pair of seventy dollar adidas shoes artists are buying five hundred thousand dollar cars. It is just a change from one thing to another.

With the way hip hop has changed I think that it will change again, going from one era to the next. As a DJ and an MC, I once told myself that I would play music that people aren’t used to – maybe a song about love peace and unity. I then said, but how many people would want to listen to it?
Translation of William Shakespeare’s The Tempest
Lisa Krauss

(Act I, Scene ii, Lines 334-347)
October 25, 2007
Completed as a project for Shakespeare class

Original
Caliban:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first,
Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn day and night. And then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o’th’isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which was first mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o’th’island.

Translated
Caliban:

This place
-- a rightful piece to be passed
from my mother and to myself,
has mid change,
skipped hands.

Your first words, your
first actions
were marinated in charm;
your nurturing knowledge gestured
to explain the very sky
-- in darkness and in light.
And then,
I loved you.

I shared thoughts in turn,
giving gracious gifts of knowledge to fill
the void where none had laid.
A map of your own world, given
in it’s entirety;
from wanted range to wished not.

I curse myself for such a slip.
Every malignant magic of my mother and this place
be put on you, your only subject,
who was rightful king before dethroned by you,
before forcefully kept
here and from
my own land.
Ferny
Miriam A. Sharick

A forest floor can be ferny,
It’s written; subliminally cool and inviting,
Fiddleheads serenade as fronds unroll from their rhizomes
And flow, shading the temperate soil or draped
Over tropical limbs like elegant gowns.
Lift up the hem of a skirt: brown dots,
Embroidering hosiery and slips.
Stroke the fuzz; sporecases open like visors on helmets,
Wafting spores to damp shade in a dry breeze.
One special spore out of millions might finish a fern.
Coy? Maidenhair arches her eyebrows and
Spreads her dichotomous pinnae: roll in me!
If a girl can be called Fern,
Can her friends call her Ferny?
Bird
Jackie Parslow
Emerald In The Rough
Miriam A. Sharick

All semester, something bugged me about Esmerelda’s grade. No way should she have been carrying an A, but that’s what my grading program kept indicating. And I couldn’t figure out where the inconsistency was.

Esmerelda was a couple of years older than a traditional first-year student. She was sweet, shy, pale, and strikingly pretty. But she had been so fiercely overprotected all her life that she was undereducated for her intelligence and surprisingly unsophisticated for a downstater; she didn’t know how to access her e-mail, or even that she was supposed to. She spelled her name unexpectedly, too. I attributed her contradictions to the smothering shelter of her mother. Esmerelda had never had a father or any paternal relatives or any male influence in her life, ever. Her mother had also alienated all of her own relatives, including her own mother, Esmerelda’s grandmother, so that Esmerelda had been cut off from all family relationships except this mother of hers.

Esmerelda’s mother had made every single decision in Esmerelda’s life, except the decision to go to college, and she tried to suppress this shred of independence too; for months she kept accusing Esmerelda of not loving her by going through with this education nonsense. And at an out-of-town school, no less. She could hardly afford it and could not get Esmerelda qualified for financial aid; all her assets were tied up in a lawsuit. When she finally realized that she couldn’t stop her daughter from going away to college, she grudgingly bought Esmerelda a car, a cell phone, and a semester’s worth of tuition and granted her a small housing allowance. On-campus housing and dining were out of the question; Esmerelda had to find an off-campus room that was cheap enough so she could cover food, books, and gasoline. And she did; she rented a spare bedroom in an old house owned by an elderly widow whose grown son had long since moved away.

Within two days of starting school, Esmerelda decided that her original choice of major didn’t suit her, so she transferred out of those courses and into some more general ones, including mine. I realized immediately that, despite having graduated from high school, she had learned no science and no lab skills. My course would be a struggle for her, but she loved it and tried hard all semester. She loved all her courses. For the first time in her life, she had friends; she had encouragement from her teachers; she had real success in the classroom. She eagerly described to me her new vision of a career and where she wanted
to transfer and what other courses she planned to take. Publicly, I
applauded her; privately, I had my doubts.

Esmerelda had no aptitude for science. She couldn't pronounce any
scientific term at first glance and couldn't seem to learn any definitions
or recognize any organism parts or describe any process in terms of
the order of its steps. She never even learned to focus her microscope
properly. She didn't know how to use mapping and chunking and
frameworks and those other study skills that good students in general,
and science students in particular, start acquiring in junior high and build
on with the avid geekiness of the budding naturalist or basement chemist
or electronic hobbyist. She tried so hard to just memorize everything
that she confused everything. I tried to teach her how to study, but I
didn't have the time to make up for all her academic neglect, and she
didn't seem to know how to follow any of my suggestions.

Esmerelda's mother harassed her continually. Her mother would
ring her cell phone at all hours; I would frequently pause in mid-
lecture, chalky hand poised over the blackboard, as Esmerelda blushed
and turned off the phone. This happened in all of her classes all the
time, I learned from her other instructors. And the consequences
of not answering the call on the spot, she told me, were screaming
diatribes from her mother later about what a terrible daughter she was
to behave so hatefully to the mother to whom she owed everything,
which invariably reduced her to tears. I was appalled. This is emotional
blackmail, I often told Esmerelda. It is not proper parenting. No child,
especially a grown child, should ever be forced to endure this. You need
counseling, I told her. Oh, no, she said, I could never get my mother to
go; you can't ever tell my mother she's wrong. Not for your mother, I
replied grimly, for you; you need professional advice on how to deal with
this. She shook her head helplessly.

The week before Thanksgiving break, Esmerelda received some bad
news. Her landlady's son was returning home for an extended visit,
and Esmerelda's lease was withdrawn for the next semester. Esmerelda
searched and searched for an apartment, a room, anyplace that her
meager housing allowance could accommodate, to no avail. She couldn't
continue college here. Her mother triumphantly demanded that she
live at home and attend the nearby school, but Esmerelda had lived long
enough on her own by now to defy this demand; she had contacted a
friend of her mother's who, she told me, would give her living space for
a nominal rent. This would permit her to transfer to a college a county
removed from home. I was dismayed; wasn't there some financial aid
plan that could keep her here? No, she said sadly, she and her mother
had investigated all that a year ago. Her mother had so much money that, on paper, Esmerelda wasn’t entitled to any aid, even though nearly every dime of it was tied up in this lawsuit. Privately I wondered whether Esmerelda’s mother was telling the truth and whether the mother’s friend would really support Esmerelda’s independence at the potential cost of a friendship. I’ll never know.

Esmerelda just couldn’t be running an A. True, she aced all her lab exercises, but only after revising every one of them. I’m not sure she understood any answer she looked up in her text and dutifully copied into her exercise, but I couldn’t make an issue of each in turn. She failed most of her lab quizzes, all of her lab practicals, two of her three lecture quizzes, and two of her four lecture exams. My grading program wasn’t in error, so I must have made an error somewhere. I finally found it, the night I graded her failing three-part final; I had made a typo in her average-calculating formula. When I corrected the typo, her average graded out to a B minus.

I thought about saying nothing and just giving her the A. She had every reason to believe she was getting one, and she could have used a break, and besides, I reminded myself, I’d fudged grades before. Once I gave a student an A minus when she was two thousandths of a point short. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her this, and I didn’t want her to flee my office in tears; I simply told her she had just squeaked into the A range. Of course she was overjoyed. Another time, a student who’d been limping along at a C through midterm told me his father had dressed him down but good for being lazy and indifferent. The boy was embarrassed enough to promise his dad, and me, that he would now really do his best. And he did; he aced everything from that day on, and when his course average graded out to two hundredths of a point short of a B plus, I gave him the higher grade. Again, I didn’t tell the kid; I wasn’t going to spoil his pride of accomplishment. There have been a few others: fellas whose C minuses were gifts. But I couldn’t give Esmerelda an A for less than a B’s worth of learning, and I dreaded having to tell her.

All semester, I had nurtured and strengthened this child, watching her grow in ungradable ways. I had even given her a bottle of iron tonic, because her paleness was due to an anemia that her mother refused even to acknowledge had been diagnosed. Now, about to shatter her self-esteem, I could hardly look her in the eye. As I handed back her dismal final exam, I gravely described my mistake, apologized for it, started to make a speech about what a good person she really was, but the inevitable happened; she teared up and ran out of my office crying. I didn’t call out
to her or run after her; I knew there was absolutely nothing I could say or
do to change the situation. I reached for a tissue.

Esmerelda will have some difficult times ahead. She will have to
enter another, larger, less caring college. She will have to live in very
restricted circumstances. She will undoubtedly receive more pressure
from her mother to give up. And she will have to take more science if
she wants her career. Science is demanding of students who must master
it and unforgiving of those who don’t. Esmerelda has a long way to go
before she is cut and polished into a capable woman. I have my fingers
crossed that I helped get her started; God forgive me if I destroyed her.
Jasmine’s History of Trouble
Jasmine McKeiver

First time I spilled the milk; second time I hit my sister; I knew I was in a heap of trouble. Despised sharing my toys because they were all mine. Decorating the walls with my blue crayola crayon got me a burnt backside.

My mother would give me the green eye, signaling trouble. Times I wanted to go out, and I couldn’t, I would just shout. I always stayed in trouble, no matter how little or big. Talking back, by no means did get me distant; it just kept me in a history of trouble.

Arguments lead to trouble; standing up for myself lead to more trouble. The night I told a tale had me in worst trouble. I told her I passed all my classes when I really got a D. Man, did she give it to me. I could never escape trouble because it always followed me.
Life of the Mother of Twins
Shannon Tanksley

Two cribs, two car seats, two highchairs, one rocker and one parent with two arms. Sleepless nights and yawning days. Diaper pails overflowing with waste and worry. Lost business trips and pizza lunches replaced by park outings of peanut butter/jelly sandwiches. First day of the big yellow school bus stopping in front of our door, picking up two excited boys toting Spiderman and Scooby Doo lunch boxes, my eyes tearing in the doorway. Train pictures cover inside walls keeping company with knights in shining armor. Afternoon soccer games, nature hikes—spiders, snakes, and many animals that follow them home. Warm snuggly nights end with taking turns reading Treasure Island. Joined as a family, part of our lives forever.
The diner door jumped open on the rinky-dink springs that the owner Henry had installed after the old bronze door closer gave up in 2004 or so. The sound the springs made let all know who had entered, as their eyes rose to see the newest arrivals.

Before noon it was the farmers, some of whom left ‘barn’ on them before coming to town. Ex-city folk like me were often offended but hosing off your boots was not a priority to these sad hardworking men and often their sons, who seemed bitter and trapped in a very unrewarding life.

The farmers had their corner to which old Blanche in her pink uniform with the pinned hankie and nametag wandered over, more of a sashay, since she had once been a dancer. She was in constant motion, like a dervish working as an adjunct to the cook. He’d make the main course, but she would set up plates, get rolls, soups, salads, desserts and all the necessary sides. They were a well oiled machine organized by Henry the owner.

He stood at the register, nodding and counting bills, putting a clump in his pocket. He probably had a gambling problem but no one ever said anything. The town had no room for Gambler’s Anonymous, though it did have a single A.A. group that I’d gone to for a while, until my wife died and then all hell broke loose for me.

In a mere nine months after she died, I lost my house, my truck, her car and a chunk of my lung, since I’d smoked as a youth and took it and booze right back up. A minor stroke left me mildly ‘limpish’ on my left side. I almost forgot that I lost the diner. Drinking instead of opening, it wasn’t long before I forgot to pay taxes, suppliers and the help. Blanche had also worked for me, and sometimes she would give me the saddest look with her smile not leaving her face. Henry picked up my foreclosure for peanuts but allowed me some minor dignity by letting me stay on. Truth is, when a busboy or dishwasher didn’t show up back when I was the owner, that’s what I would do, anyhow.

That’s how I ended up carrying a grey plastic busbox full of dirty dishes which I’d be washing soon. Most days, that was all I did for 40 bucks cash regardless of how long I worked. There has always been a ‘don’t ask-don’t
tell’ about restaurant help. Take your money, get your bottle and a burger and hide out until the next day.

It had been a couple of years since I’d lost the place, and though some older people knew me, I had become part of the wallpaper, but not quite as colorful. As the elders dropped dead there were fewer nods of recognition.

But I saw it all. Like the proverbial fly on the wall, I watched the middle-aged lunch-ladies laugh and flirt with anyone, the young mothers with kids in tow, a few lesser businessmen holding court from 12 to 3. Truckers, clerks, shopkeepers and students kept Henry in business. Lots of saved seats and regulars. The local doctor, lawyer and dental clinic folks had taken up lunchtime residence at the almost upscale place at the strip mall, at the South edge of town. There were still enough people to fill all the tables and part of the counter at Henry’s, most all the day, every day from 6:00 AM to 6:30 PM. Then came the afternoon shift at 3:00, though often Blanche would work a double, and one of the ‘girlies’, usually an older high school student, would pick up an apron and work until the 6:30 closing. Henry could not remember any of the younger waitresses’ names, so to him they were all ‘girlie’.

No one cared, it’s the country and political correctness is not so darn important up here.

I knew the waitresses’ names, but they usually didn’t know mine. Most orders started with “Could you” and then drift off into a cleanup job or when terribly busy, a coffee refill on table number whatever.

Henry didn’t want me to refill cups, because I seemed to spook people when I approached their table with the dark hot coffee pots, decaf with orange handle in my weaker left hand. I think I just wanted to be noticed, I was quite bereft of human interaction, I worked alone, yet in a crowd. I drank alone. I expected to die alone, though not soon enough for my taste.

On Tuesday, the special was beef stew, really hearty with a chunk of homemade looking bread. The diner would sell about 100 bowls, most everything else was neglected, except kids would do the burger and fries thing after school.

I washed load after load of gravy laden shallow bowls.
Scooting around the patrons with my full busbox, up the aisle into the kitchen at the sink and dishwasher, a graceful ballet that never ended with that horrendous crash. The sounds of restaurant kitchens are always exaggerated. Heavy old ceramic plates and cups clinking and clunking against sinks and silverware, the symphony in the back of the house.

The door made its spring noise at 3:52 PM on that Tuesday in February, and almost all nearby eyes looked up as a young couple entered, and then the diners went back to their stew. I looked at the clock above the door. I wanted to take a sip and a puff or two in the back alley, but I had to wait until 4:00 for my ten minute break. A minute later, I noticed that the scruffy couple had entered into a whispered conversation with Henry and one of the ‘girlie’ waitresses, whose name was actually Sandy.

The man was short and squat but very tough looking, with a lot of tattoos showing above his collar. His girl was rather tall and quite attractive in a skinny, seedy kind of way. She was fashionably ear and nose pierced. One could only guess at other holes. She had very red hair, he had none.

They were both wearing scuffed Harley leather jackets, open except for the bottom zipper. It looked like they were placing a ‘To-Go’ order with Henry and Sandy. I was daydreaming, holding my empty busbox ready to dash out and clean up the last two tables of students. By four in the afternoon I was pretty much caught up from the lunch rush.

All over the restaurant was the usual laughter and loudness, first from one group than another. Old men guffawed, young girls giggled, just like every day.

Except something was wrong at the counter by the cash register. I am not sure where on my body I felt it, but it was there in my gut, brain, heart. I was clearly the only one who felt the bad vibes.

The strange couple was whispering threats to Henry and the waitress. Though I couldn’t hear their words, I just knew.

I couldn’t see their guns, but each held the side of their leathers open with one hand and pointed to their waistbands.

I could see the hardness on their faces and their resolve. In my mind it had to be guns.
I was in the kitchen just at the edge of the pass-through. The cook was already in the alley doing what I had planned for 4:00 o’clock. All the seats at the counter were empty, except old Billy’s end stool. Just the four bodies at a face-off. As I watched I saw a trickle of pee come down the leg of the terrified young waitress, not enough to make a puddle, or noisy enough for anybody but me to notice.

I didn’t know what to do, not a hero, perhaps a coward, I’d never been tested.

All of a sudden in my danger charged state, I heard Blanche call out that ‘they’ needed both decaf and regular coffee refills at the right corner table. I filled two pots, and sidled out of the kitchen behind the counter towards the corner. I made sure not to spook the customers or the interlopers. I was barely a whisper. I filled the empty cups, and began to retreat to the kitchen, when I decided to go towards the register behind the visitors. My sad and accidental invisibility did the trick. As I passed behind the couple, I turned and slammed the two steaming hot coffee pots on the left and right sides of their heads.

Turns out she took decaf, so my slightly weaker hand was still able to knock their heads extremely hard, and loud with scalding coffee and breaking glass, and shortly a lot of blood. Some of you may know how hard it is to break a commercial Pyrex coffee pot, some law of physics, perhaps, but I did it, twice. Simultaneously.

Henry sprang into action, put the guy in a half-nelson and pushed him face forward on the floor. No one knew he could do that, and I grabbed the bleeding girl and pulled her jacket down her arms, so she was pretty much immobilized, though she was already in shock and helpless.

Cell phones had emerged as the glass broke and by the sounds of the sirens, the police were already close.

The joint was jumping now, everybody standing and yelling, asking and making sure everybody was okay. We all were, except the two armed robbers. The police arrived and took them to the hospital in cuffs and spent three hours questioning all the patrons and staff. It was the most exciting thing to happen in town forever.
After all the noise and then the clean-up, Henry wanted to open the diner back up, even though it was way past closing time. We all spun tales that evening and for many days after.

I was a hero for a while, everybody patting me on the shoulder or giving me a handshake or a nod.

By the spring I had started to retreat back into the wallpaper.
Some Like it Hot
Annisia Perry

I knew I had belonged to the public and to the world, not because I was talented or even beautiful, but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else. –Marilyn Monroe

In 1946, after Josephine and before Madonna, sauntered in Marilyn. Known as Norma Jean until the 23rd of the year when she started down that road that would end individual freedom. She didn't strike gold until she entered the Asphalt Jungle in 1950 then she rowed down that river of no return as she spiraled deeper into a Hollywood where women wanted to be her and males just wanted her because gentlemen prefer blondes. The original material girl taught us that diamonds are our best friend. Marilyn was considered a beauty without brains, curves that didn't deserve respect. She was the property of the American dream. No one coming from nothing becoming a superstar in a place where stars are embedded in the ground and Marilyn's hands made her own Heaven. Now she too has a place where she belongs. No longer a misfit bouncing from home to home with nowhere to call home. She belongs to Hollywood, land that doomed her, sent her to love sleeping pills, not the arms of her husbands. Prince of Baseball, Count of American Intellectuals both wed to America's Showgirl Queen who had more than a seven year itch. But something's got to give. Marilyn had to move over because her bus stopped and a new material girl got on.
We had finished supper and the wife and I were getting the child ready to walk down to the annual July Fair and parade. I had just zipped up the back of her dress, and was pulling on my own pants, and zipping up, when she said:

““I want to be a surrogate.”

“Let’s postpone this discussion!” I said.

“All right,” my wife said. “You have exactly 24 hours as per the family rules. No more. I think Falstaff should wear his black shoes.”

I was constantly worried about Falstaff’s health and had had post-traumatic stress over the many scenarios my unconscious often summoned in regards to his death. Sometimes in my head there was a scream that started out of nothing at all, and when something else added to the noise in my head I would have liked to take my head off and smother it with pillows. Looking into his bed one night I imagined that Falstaff’s veins had turned blue. By the time the ambulance arrived he had died from something called meningitis. In actual fact I was tucking the healthy and seemingly indestructible boy in. I had read about a boy who had died from that disease the year before in Davenport, Iowa. I had been something of a Lutheran before Falstaff was born but had gone back to the church after the imaginary funeral with renewed vigor, hoping to allay my crisis of nerves. I couldn’t put Falstaff’s possible demise to one side. Breakfast, dinner, bedtime: ticks to typhoons. My sanity had been undermined, but it seemed to me that my wife’s had gone around the bend. Now she wanted to be a surrogate?

Some fifty years ago people seemed to live in a Norman Rockwell world. What sense did surrogacy make from that perspective? Today everything was rocket science. I read about science, but I didn’t have any understanding of science. I tried to change my black mood.

We started to walk. Courthouse Square was a lush lawn of about an acre with four or five mature maple trees (the original name for Delhi was to be Mapleton), some park benches, a vintage bandstand or octagonal gazebo, and a Civil War statue in which Liberty in the form of a young woman holding a torch aloft stands high above the Delaware County soldiers of the Civil War. The values of justice and the American way seemed to pull me back to an easier time. The foreground of the Square provided a visual contrast to the strikingly handsome Victorian courthouse made from red brick with a stone trim. There are games at the Fair for children who shoot baskets in exchange for a variety of prizes such as toy dinosaurs and plastic sunglasses and gooey eyeballs and fake teeth. You can also play
hopscotch, one-putt into a cup, or check out the local merchandise from ice cream and cake to Tibetan pennants, locally produced books on Delaware County History. There was even a witchcraft booth where Wiccans sold amulets.

I looked out of the corner of my eye at my wife and child, their noses like chimneys. I had a position at Delhi Prep as a philosophy teacher but I had no real interest in philosophy except when it tended toward theology, but was too shy to go into the ministry. My wife enjoyed the experience of pregnancy, meanwhile for the last year I had been trying to impregnate her. If I had read the anatomy books correctly then I’m certain I had been doing it right. Perhaps I couldn’t bear to raise another child just to think about the possibility that he might die, and then wait until the Resurrection to see him again. IVF had something to do with a test tube and a fistful of cash. I knew that Liisa had contacted a genetic laboratory in northern Virginia. Perhaps she would carry another child for someone else. She might die. I barely knew how to pour milk for Falstaff and had no idea what he required on a daily basis in terms of footbaths, nutritional supplements, although I did know where he slept.

We arrived at the Square. Falstaff ran to the basketball game and scored buckets in exchange for toys and other treats. Falstaff put on the bright green sunglasses he had won and proclaimed himself a rock star.

There was a County history booth at the fair so I talked to the lady with owl glasses.

“What was the original idea for the Fair on the Square?” I queried. She handed me a brochure.

“On July 7, 1951 there was a famous painting of Delhi that appeared in Saturday Evening Post by Steven Dohanos, a prolific painter of Post covers. It featured the gazebo with the Delhi village band, and a host of onlookers in festive array. The mayor in the early 1970s said to a few of her friends, ‘Let’s recreate that cover. Let’s do Norman Rockwell.’”

The tradition of the Fair on the Square is that each year they reenact the Norman Rockwell 1950s. Bands play in the gazebo, children mob the square, there are parades of fire trucks, and fireworks illuminate the sky. There are soft pretzels and popcorn for a dollar and hamburgers cooked by the Kiwanis club for $2.25. Jazz and rock bands play golden oldies in the gazebo. Teenagers help my child roast marshmallows. Competing fire-engines partake in water-cannon contests. We talk with old friends, remark on the growth of children, gossip about who has run off with whom, and discuss the rumor of the school supervisor’s politics.
As I walked around holding Falstaff’s hand I looked at the statue of the thirty-foot high Civil War monument in the center (it is rumored to be tipping slightly), and looked at the graceful brick courthouse designed by Isaac Perry (he designed the State Capitol Building in Albany), I tried to think about the feelings they invoked. I was curious about how the impression of courtly hospitality had been achieved. Falstaff was dancing through the crowd pretending he was on American Idol as he made a rapid stepping motion with his left leg and held his fist up to his mouth like a microphone. His leg neatly timed to the music, he twirled around.

It was time for the firemen’s parade. The firemen of Delhi, Hamden, Delancey, Bovina and other villages went past blowing bagpipes. Falstaff watched with his ice cream as the firemen marched almost in step. We then let Falstaff play with his friends for another fifteen minutes as we talked to neighbors about a fox that had been sighted.

It was time for Falstaff to sleep. I collected him in my arms. The child came home with booty from the games, his face painted like a pirate, asleep on my shoulder. Times have changed and I had a lot on my mind besides Norman Rockwell reprisals. Real life contains nightmares that hurtle people against unreason. Did we dare to rent out my wife’s womb? What would our pastor say? I had 21.5 hours to think. Wasn’t surrogacy slavery? Would I prefer that my wife work at McDonald’s? Our finances were like staring into the Grand Canyon. The surrogacy idea might at least be remunerative and we needed to build up the rainy day fund in case Falstaff fell sick because we didn’t have any health insurance.

The following evening my wife asked if I was ready to discuss. If I started to discuss I would have ended up with my car-horn stuck. She informed me then that as per the rules, we would be traveling to Washington, DC to discuss it with a doctor. As a father, I was apprehensive about the reasons which would take us to the capital.
Steps
Riikka Olson
Straws
Ben Bocian

I recently went into a Starbucks to buy a grande caramel frappaccino. After paying for my order, I grabbed my frosty drink and went over to the straws, all five million of them. I figured I'd grab a handful because it's always good to have a few straws lying around the house. After grabbing six or seven, I began to walk out of the place, but the guy behind the corner stopped me and said, “Only one per customer, sir.”

I was somewhat baffled, so I stopped and turned to him. “Excuse me?” I asked.

“It’s our new policy. Only one straw per customer.”

I was somewhat amazed at my predicament, so I got frustrated. “Is there any logical reasoning behind this policy? Is there some sort of massive straw famine going around that I’m not aware of? Are there children in underdeveloped countries or urban neighborhoods dying in the streets because of lack of straws?

Then, as I was rambling on, I thought of all those kids with broken jaws in pediatric wards who can’t chew and have to intake all their food by blending it into a big Egg McMuffin smoothie. I thought about all the guys who come home to angry wives and girlfriends who knock them in the mouth with cumbersome pocketbooks, and force them to eat nothing but applesauce and yogurt for the next month and a half. I imagined how different The Wizard of Oz would be if it didn't include the song “If I only had a Brain”. I pictured all the sippy cups out there that can’t get on the dance floor because they don’t have straws to tango with. I mourned for all the people that would be shafted because they couldn’t do things fairly by drawing straws. I laughed at all the bullies who wouldn't be able to launch spitballs at nerds. I pitied Master Shake from Aqua Teen Hunger Force and how his straw seems to be the source of his power. I envisioned the Tropicana logo if the orange didn’t have a straw sticking out of it. I wondered about all the rookie scuba divers out there who are too broke to buy snorkels. I worried for all the people with nervous habits with no straws to chew on. I pictured a young couple sharing a root beer float in a small diner in downtown Flushing, where Greeks cook the food and Mexicans clean the tables, and how difficult it would be for these two kids to fall in love.

I thought about a universe of unused straws undergoing severe depression, swallowing Cymbalta, yet still committing suicide by jumping into dumpsters. All these straws needed was to be sipped because straws are people, too, and we all need affection. So despite my hatred for the
guy behind the Strawbucks counter, I put all of the straws back but one, bade them adieu, and walked outside to spend some quality time with my one and only straw.
A History of Schools
Mabel Almanzer

Ms. Santiago
grey curly pony tail.
We wandered through a building
with no entrance or exit. At Catholic
school, my first birthday party; yellow
and white frosted cake. P.S. 64-I learned
that teachers were not only women
but men as well. My first friend, Haxel,
held my hand for 24 hours. Junior high
taught me boys and girls aren’t the same.
I spoke out more and more
and spoke about bad lunches
and other girls’ hair. High school
was a flight with many stops
but no return.
Bad Dolls Doing Hard Time
Mike McKenna
A History of Pets
Michelle Brush

Sandy yellow cocker spaniel, old, arthritic legs; bit my sister on the neck. Put down. Stray cat named Pumpkin, found around October, had kittens and became violent. Exiled to the pound. Brown hamsters, One named Godzilla had babies then ate them. Banished to the pet store. Bubba, the iguana, six feet long, skin always peeled, lived in a dog cage, attacked my cat, then my mom, then anything green. Bubba off to nameless holder. Found a black lab/hound mix in our garage nursing four puppies. Twenty pounds overweight, couldn't walk. Bought A Shepard/spitz mix, impregnated the lab, now Thirty pounds overweight. Gus remained, a puppy, hit by a car, almost died, English teacher paid for surgery. Now mentally retarded, wags his tail when punished. Just for sanity added a crab, lots of fish, an ant farm.
A chapter from a novella describing the life of Ike, a writer/illustrator of a series of easy readers who uses a borzoi as his main character, and his wife, Sally, an illustrator of folk and fairy tales.

Ike works late this early November night. He has been whored out by his agent to illustrate a history of film for the 7-10 year old set; his borzoi leashed to guide the celluloid interpretations of someone else’s reality, someone else’s notion of what matters. Ike hates the unbalanced sensibilities of the author—the innumerable variations of the vampire’s bloodlust, the endless tales of young love performed between a merciful sun and easily imprinted sand. The borzoi wants to teach the young readers to dance down a flight of gleaming stairs with Shirley Temple and Mr. Bojangles. The wise wolfhound wants children to understand that no matter how many apples pass from desperate hand to desperate mouth on street corners, there is always a nickel to applaud blonde, dimpled little girls tapping their Mary Janes, each exaggerated shuffle echoing through a foyer larger than the tenement flats of most of the enchanted viewers.

As the teakettle whistles, Ike draws his borzoi admiring the speed and stamina of Ruby Keeler’s pounding limbs. People smoke around him. A uniformed usher guides patrons to velvet upholstered chairs where men and women remove their hats as a courtesy to those seated behind them. Ike glances up from his work and looks at Sally as she comes into the study carrying a cup of Earl Grey tea. He pulls out from under the drawing table, smiles, and pats his thigh. Sally does not perch on his lap but rests the tea down and rubs Ike’s forearm. Her eyes are wide, and she chews her lower lip for a moment.

“Ike, I must go to Harlan.”

Ike tries to buy time not remembering if Harlan is a student at the art school or a cousin or the man who grinds his wife’s flavored coffee beans. Sally was always “going to” someone. It was always important and only Sally could soothe or direct the individual in question. She would return home from these missions and either say nothing or share every minute detail of the beekeeper’s story. Withdrawn or exhausted, Sally would always want her husband, as if the pain of others demanded a personal affirmation of the joy of her own life, their life. Ike worried that Sally morphed in this role of the wise crone. Her tongue seemed sharper as it circled the inside of his mouth, and her legs felt stronger as she wrapped them and her
arms around his back. It was all as hot and moist as a benign swamp-
Sally's insides, their gyrating bodies, and the air around the bed. If Sally
must go to the multitude, Ike accepted, indeed embraced, the notion that
he must go to her.
“Will you be gone long, dear?” he asks her back. He notes it's
approaching seven and he wants to eat dinner soon.
“It's Harlan,” Sally tosses over her shoulder by way of an answer.
“Can't he meet with you here, Sal? Do you have to go before
dinner?”
Sally stops tying her shoes and looks up at Ike.
“Oh, Ike, you know he can't come out. And we're only having
chili. It can sit in a pot for a few more hours.”
Sally begins working on the other shoe. Ike realizes that Harlan
is someone important who needs no identification. Ike tries another
inroad.
“Shall I go warm the car for you?” he asks casually as he sips his tea.
Sally looks up as she tugs on her penguin printed socks.
“There's no place to park near the Gilroys’.”
Ike tries to remember his local history to come up with the decade
that Harlan Gilroy died. Was it before or after the Spanish American
War? Last September Sally had taken Ike to the Gilroys’ private graveyard
for a picnic. They had wandered about reading epitaphs after eating crab
salad and devil's food cake. On that late summer day Sally had explained
how the sundry Gilroys had met their mortal end, what each wore in
their rosewood coffins, and how the mourners grieved. At that time Ike
assumed that Sally had acquired these details from Reynolds Grange, the
village historian. But two weeks following the picnic, at some enforced
social event, Reynolds seemed astonished at Ike's knowledge of the Gilroys’
passing to the other world.
“But how do you know that Allura was buried in a yellow dress?”
Reynolds asked as he pulled the tale off a shrimp.
Ike was angry that the hostess, Mercy Owens, had not taken the
trouble to perform the peeling for the guests. Ike mumbled something
about an old newspaper clipping and tried to walk toward a young woman
carrying a tray of bruchetta. But Reynolds would not let him off so easily.
“But all the newspapers,” Reynolds persisted as he popped a
cheese puff into his greedy little mouth “were burned in the library fire of
'36. And how would any reporter know about the dragon earrings from
Nathan Boynton?”
Ike learned long ago that he could never be trapped because he
carried the trump card of artistic eccentricity.
“Ah, the borzoi told me,” Ike smiled and walked toward a group of local hunters who were using their arms as measuring sticks for buck horns. Here was an audience who never tired of hearing of applauding the coursing practices of the Russian aristocracy. Behind him, Reynolds was shaking his head at the oddness of people who spent their lives drawing pictures for children and made a very good living at it. The villagers tolerated Ike who they saw rarely but they liked Sally because she remembered what instruments their children played and came to their pancake breakfasts.

“Sal, dear, it’s very dark tonight. And cold,” Ike tries.

“But it’s always that way for Harlan, Sweetheart. He won’t notice.”

He follows her down the center hall to the front door.

“I was thinking of you. I’ll build a fire. I don’t need to work anymore tonight. We can listen to the Chieftains or watch a DVD. How about Tombstone? Aren’t you working on a Hansel and Gretel adaptation set in the old west?” he pleads.

“That’s almost done, and it’s not so cold out. And Harlan is so lonely and troubled.” Her hand is on the handle of the Dutch door.

Ike wants to ask if this man, dead for several decades, called on a cell phone or sent a servant to the back door to summon Sally. But he says nothing because he cannot endure further evidence of his wife’s pathology, of her small but flawlessly rendered madness. Of her ineffable belief that she communicates, no, she consorts with the dead. Because Sally, the illustrator who can discern with absolute disinterested authority that a line needs to be lengthened or a color deepened to its ultimate hue, the lover who holds him inside of her long after they both come home, is utterly convinced that she speaks to beings long assimilated into earth, sucked dry by maggots, and absent from the blemished memory of the living. Ike’s very own Sally could appear on afternoon talk shows sharing experiences with women who glue patterned plastic on their fingernails or flaunt rose or unicorn tattoos on their sun withered shoulders. Ike shudders to imagine his wife, his baby girl, would be lumped with this crowd. Reporters from the National Enquirer would park their red and yellow Trans Ams in front of the house and follow Sally up the road to the Gilroys. They would ask about white lights and angels watching people button pajama tops or pour chili into soup. And Sally would respond with serious respect to young women and men whose tongues and lips were studded with metal.

But none of these public nightmares have come to pass. Sally speaks only to Ike of her conversations with the dead. Not because she fears ridicule or the rabid interest of the media but because she wishes to maintain the integrity of the dead. Sally does not believe that telling Ike about her friends is betraying a confidence. He will tell no one because
he is a virtual recluse and Sally cannot imagine that Ike is counted under the caution, “Please don’t tell anyone about this”. What Sally does not know is that Ike is consumed with guilt about this business. Sally never talked to dead people until after she and Ike married.
Untitled
Eriko Nishina
For Jodi
In Memoriam-Amanda Krzyston

What my Daughter Lost at 16
Sharon Ruetenik

Black boots by tan boots
Title of Legendary Soul Sisters
Camisole and wife beater trades
Omnipresent One
Unrestrained laughter and shouts
Thelma and Louise road trips
BFFs echoed throughout the universe
Her bold and better part
College roommate
Early AM giggles and fierce promises
Hairdresser, make-up artist, fashion consultant
Piggy backs through village square
Plaid Vans by stripped Vans
“Just one more drag then we’ll quit” buddy
Her maid of honor
Her first child’s godmother
Omnipotent One
The one to walk with, eat with, study with
Midnight baking
Straight shiny brown hair swaggering by blonde curls
Her vault
Dripping river dreaming
Nod, glance, smirk of total understanding
Omniscient One
The other white girl who loves Hip Hop
Green flip flops by silver flip flops
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Amanda Kyzston, a spontaneous and unique spirit, had a distinctive personality. She possessed a well developed sense of humor, a love of animals, and an appreciation for the beauty of nature, as expressed in her photography. A strong minded individual, Amanda made friends easily and enjoyed new experiences. Family and friends were her foundation; she will be greatly missed by those she touched in her short life.

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Between Darkness and Light
Amanda Krzyston