

# Hedera helix

*Literary Journal*

2004-2005-2006  
Volume III



## SIGMA KAPPA DELTA

The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges

# *Hedera helix*

Journal of Creative Writing  
Sigma Kappa Delta  
**The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges**

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## Purpose of Sigma Kappa Delta

Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing. ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for

- Scholarships
- Awards
- Leadership
- Competition
- Publication
- Travel
- National Conferences
- Networking

Access [www.english2.org](http://www.english2.org) for complete eligibility requirements.

Hedera helix – the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ, symbolizing resilience and individual growth.



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Short Fiction Award  
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Literary Analysis Award  
Marty Kellum ~ *The Importance of Book XXIV in  
Homer's "The Odyssey"*

### Judging for Writing Awards

Willing volunteers involved in the fine arts judge entries to the writing contest. We appreciate the time and effort of the following judges: Kay Daugherty, Glenda James, Mary Ellen Garrett, Dr. Thalia Love, Steve Callatrello, Dr. Ray Bell, Mary Ann Faulkner, Mattavia Burks, Dr. and Mrs. Larry Little, and Bernedetta Jones.

From the Editor

As of this printing, Sigma Kappa Delta has grown to 70 chapters nationwide since it began in 1996. A volunteer board of directors consistently works to recruit chapters, maintain chapter activity, offer assistance, provide yearly conferences and awards, and manage the business of the organization. This, they do in addition to their regular duties at their various colleges. Their work is to be commended, as is the work of the students whose writings are offered here.

*Hedera helix* (yes, in keeping with the Latin spelling of the scientific name for English Ivy, the “h” in helix is lower case) is published every other year. It is a small volume since we are a relatively small group. As Sigma Kappa Delta grows, just as ivy spreads across a hill, so will the *Hedera helix*. A goal of the board of directors is to eventually be able to publish the journal yearly.

In this third edition of the *Hedera helix*, we are proud to put forth the best writings submitted by two-year college members during the past two years. Winners of the 2004, 2005, and 2006 national writing contests are included as well as other commendable submissions.

We hope you enjoy the works of these students and appreciate the value of the two-year college experience in our society. Writing something worth reading is no small feat. “To write what is worth publishing, to find honest people to publish it, and to get sensible people to read it, are the three great difficulties in being an author.” (Charles Caleb Colton)

So, sensible reader, turn the page and enjoy.

*Jan Anderson*  
*Editor of Publications*

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## From One of Our Own

We celebrate the fall publication of Theta Beta member Kris Reisz's first novel, *Tripping to Somewhere*. Kris has signed a two-book contract with Simon & Schuster Publishing. Here, Kris speaks of the influence of his community college experience. Be sure to read Kris' personal essay, "Jealousy," in this issue of the *Hedera helix*.

### What I Learned in College

By the time I was twenty-four, I had flipped burgers at an all-night diner, framed houses, and worked on an ambulance. Then one day, I went to work and learned that I'd been fired. Losing my latest job spurred me to start thinking about all the things I wanted to do and how I wasn't doing much except living paycheck-to-paycheck. I decided it was time to give college a try. I didn't have much of a plan, but I knew I needed a change.

I was nervous about going back to school. Enrolling at Calhoun Community College, I only signed up for two courses and was half-convinced I'd flunk both. My teachers never made it easy for me. Instead, they worked tirelessly, prodding and cajoling me to raise myself to their expectations. I felt both challenged and excited by courses in literature and history. Before long, I was enrolled full time. I contributed to Calhoun's literary magazine and its student newspaper. Also, I became active in Sigma Kappa Delta, flying to the national conferences in Daytona Beach and Kansas City.

School reignited a passion for the world that I'd let grow cold. I scraped together enough money to spend a few weeks traveling through Europe, something I'd dreamed of doing for years. Also, I began writing again. I'd enjoyed writing stories and poems during high school and even managed to get a few published. Since then, I'd given it up almost entirely, never seeming to have the time. Now, between classes and work, I made the time, pecking out a fantasy novel over two years.

# Poetry



## On the Edge of Darkness

I wonder what it is like to live life  
as a fraction of the overall scheme;  
to never make a commotion,  
to never have a theme.  
I wonder what it is like to be an understudy, yet never  
act;  
to have your infinite impression on the universe  
culminate into four words:  
*Mistah Kurtz –he dead.*  
And be heard from no more.

Josh Dendy  
Theta Beta Chapter  
2005 *Hedera helix* Poetry Award Winner



## Socks Don't Taste So Bad

My mouth – so much faster than my brain -  
Often says the most interesting things.  
Old Sam once said  
“Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool...”  
But I don't know.  
Can I learn when I don't even know I need to?  
  
My mouth – so much faster than my brain –  
Often surprises everyone in the room.  
How did Sam finish it?  
“...than to open it and remove all doubt.”  
But I don't fret.  
Everything is an opportunity to learn something new.  
  
My mouth – so much faster than my brain –  
Often plays host to my foot.  
The wise often say,  
“Think before you speak.”  
But I don't listen.  
If I insult a famous poet, that's OK –  
  
Socks don't taste that bad.

Marty Kellum  
Theta Beta Chapter  
2006 *Hedera helix* Poetry Award Winner

## **Lady Spring**

As the earth tilts on its axis  
In a cosmic phenomenon,  
Lady Spring is awoken from her slumber,  
Which had lasted all winter long.  
She stretches out her branches,  
And takes a deep breath,  
Then sighs over the land,  
Beginning to beautify her flesh.  
She dresses herself in daffodils  
And puts on a fresh new scent.  
She adorns herself with aster,  
And causes a freshness to roll over every fence.  
Her sigh awakens the birds and bees  
And sends a whispering wind through the trees.  
And before she has a chance to depart,  
She leaves an impression on every heart.

Laura Tipton  
Alpha Chapter



## **My Humble Muse**

My muse is a humble muse.  
She serves me late at night.  
While the city sleeps,  
I wander in from empty streets.  
She bends crane-like over eggs and tea;  
she knows  
no ambrosia.  
And she does not walk on clouds;  
Instead, she glides most humanly across greasy tiles  
wearing Keds she bought at the Dollar Store.  
A mere pen serves as her scepter.  
Yes, my muse is a humble muse.  
She feeds my body and my soul.

Josh Dendy  
Theta Beta Chapter

## Seasons on My Way Home

Yellow flutters by  
back and forth  
across the road.  
Oceans of future fabric  
lie on both sides of the road.  
Dangling emerald leaves  
dance in the breeze  
created by the passing traffic.  
Good-afternoon, God.  
It's lovely to see you  
on this summer afternoon.

Skeletons line  
the horizon  
all the way home.  
Landscapes of red clay  
as far as the eye can see.  
The earth sleeps  
and saves its strength  
for coming months.  
Good-afternoon, God.  
How lovely of you to call  
on this winter afternoon.

White fluff scatters  
the road side  
mile after mile.  
They are beginning  
to harvest their lots.  
The emeralds have left  
Amber and ruby in its place  
to fall in the breeze  
created by the passing traffic.  
Good-afternoon, God.  
It's lovely to see you  
on this autumn afternoon.

New life emerges  
from the ground  
all along the forsaken road.  
Standing up proudly  
the skeletons show  
their new brood.  
Waking from its sleep  
life prevails again.  
Good-afternoon, God.  
It's lovely to see you  
on this beautiful spring day.

Shannon Banks  
Theta Beta Chapter

## Where Has It Gone?

I look down at the scribbled words,  
They make no sense to me.  
I write a sentence hoping that  
It makes some sense to thee.  
You ask about a favored piece,  
I hope this sounds OK  
I say that I enjoyed the first  
Poem read in class Thursday.

I look down at my watch and think,  
The time sure has flown by.  
I think about the times that I  
Enjoyed - and then I sigh.  
Remembering the fun of life  
Without the gloom of school,  
Of times gone by when all was good -  
No homework, class, or rules.

My mind, it wonders here and there,  
There seems no end in sight.  
I snap back to myself and think,  
I probably should write.  
I'm sure that I can make an A,  
But where should I begin?  
That's when I hear the teacher say,  
Please turn your papers in.

Marty Kellum  
Theta Beta Chapter

## The Waitress

It was a fascination with either alcohol or ethanol that kept me coming back for more,  
even when I knew I wasn't about to make a move,

or even hint at my intentions –

while you were busy playing with your hair and serving,

because that is just how you are and no one would assume anything less,

or anything more,

but I could not imagine anything but –

and still it seemed odd to not say anything,

but I won't say anything,

my lips stay sealed to protect the very fibers of our existence here,

for the same reasons that we ended up where we were that night,

you asleep,

and me driving back home.

Michael A. Chmielewski

Delta Beta Chapter



## Distorted Reflection

Have you ever looked in a mirror,  
and not recognized who you see?  
As I stand here staring I wonder,  
could this reflection be me?

Who is this child before me,  
watching with hopeful eyes,  
waiting for Daddy to love her,  
praying for him while she cries?

Who is this young woman standing here,  
so full of anger and hate.  
Giving herself to any man;  
what will be her fate?

And who is this woman that I see?  
She's loved by an adoring man.  
Can he replace what Daddy took away;  
when will she be her own biggest fan?

Have you ever looked in a mirror,  
and been surprised by what you see?  
Now I stand here knowing,  
that these reflections are of me.

Kristin Meurer

**Rho Beta Chapter**

2004 *Hedera helix* Poetry Award Winner

## Dancing

When dancing,

always remember to step on the toes of the person in front of you,

or beside you,

or behind you for that matter,

and always make sure that you are in constant contact with someone else,

rubbing shoulders,

bumping rear ends,

knocking heads,

make sure you lift your feet and don't just sway back and forth,

be filled with energy!

Let your hair become sopping wet with the sweat of everyone around you,

not just your own,

when one of your favorite songs comes on,

always overreact and scream all the lyrics as if you were on stage without a microphone,

never take a break from dancing,

this will only make you tired and lose interest,

dance by yourself,

don't worry about dancing with someone,

you can do that later when you get home,

if you wear glasses, wear contacts that night,

or make sure you hold your glasses so they do not fly off your face,

make sure to drink before you get to the club,

this way dancing can commence right away,

and who really cares about inhibitions at that point?

And most of all,

enjoy yourself and forget what other people are doing or thinking,

this is your time,

you are a star.



Michael A. Chmielewski  
Delta Beta Chapter

# *Personal Narrative*



## A Man at the Woods

In early August of 1978, the four-month search for my missing Uncle Ricky ended unsuccessfully, and my family tried to regroup at my grandmother's trailer to make sense of his disappearance. Trying to escape Granny's confusing and forlorn sobbing, my brother and I retreated to the backyard. Granny's field lay fallow that year, so we used it as a giant sandbox for our Hot Wheels games. Our play clothes, not yet dirty, (his orange Sunkist Soda t-shirt with cut-off shorts and my yellow-daisy sundress with a missing button) made us easy to spot in the open field.

Afar, I heard a train whistle blow; I looked up from the miniature General Lee and patrol car chase to see a strange man standing at the far end of the field, not two hundred feet from me and my brother. Dressed in a red and black plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a red cap, he stood out against the thirty acres of forest behind him. Even at seven years old, I knew something was wrong. I jumped from my knees and sprinted barefoot around the left side of Granny's faded green and white mobile home to the front porch.

"Momma, Momma," my brother and I yelled, "There's a man at the woods!"

"I told y'all Bobby did it, and now he's a watchin' the house," my Aunt Ruth bellowed as she jumble-jogged her two-hundred forty-five pound mass onto the porch. Earlier, while picking blackberries on the other side of the chicken coop parallel to the field, she had seen the man, too. Confusion followed briefly until Dad retrieved his .357 Magnum from the truck dash and said, "Let's shoot some cans at the edge of the field." Aunt Ruth grinned, nodded, and pulled her snub-nosed .38 from her bright-yellow purse in the

trailer. But the man vanished into the forest leaving only boot prints in the tilled and empty earth.

Ten years later, a shiny-blue Buick drove into the yard, and two men with white-starched shirts knocked on Granny's screen door. They flashed shiny badges and introduced themselves as Investigators Gasket and Green from the homicide division of the Birmingham Police Department. Granny sighed, looked at me, and said, "Neicy, get these men some tea." The somber men told my grandmother they had information about Ricky's disappearance and asked if she knew a man named Bobby Bates. Granny closed her Bible and replied, "Bobby was my boy's best friend; they grew up together." In the living room, with Jimmy Swaggart on the television and the slow-spinning ceiling fan faintly stirring the air, the investigators explained that Bobby had died recently and left a library of journals under the floor in his house. Bobby's wife found the journals and called the police.

Green said the journal entries, dated almost to the hour of each event, revealed that Bobby meddled in everything illegal. Prostitution, pornography, gunrunning, and gambling started his list, and my uncle Ricky, although mildly retarded, knew too much about Bobby's schemes. Bobby cut the brake lines of Ricky's car, but when that plan failed with only a bent fender, the journal explained the need for a more aggressive method. Two weeks of entries revealed the organization of Bobby's plan. The brakes were fixed at the repair shop, and Bobby, always the smiling friend, gave Ricky a ride to pick up the car. The journal said Bobby drove exactly three miles from the trailer and pulled his truck onto

the gravel shoulder near a wooded area close to the railroad tracks. As Bobby absently stuffed a three foot-long piece of cotton rope into his pocket, he told Ricky he wanted to show him the new drop point. Ricky naively followed him thirty yards into the woods, and then Bobby suddenly turned and sprang on him winding the rope twice around Ricky's small neck. Bobby maliciously described the disbelief and confusion in Ricky's eyes as he realized his friend's intent. Finally, the journal said, Bobby left the body, but he watched it deteriorate as he smirked at our search parties. Bobby's notes claimed, "They almost found the body once, but soon there would not be anything left to find—the animals and worms demand their share."

The disappearance of her son came back to my grandmother with a crushing force as she listened to the investigators' story, and with watery eyes and a quivering bottom lip, she gripped her Bible, thanked the men, and told me, "Neicy, their tea glasses are empty." Investigator Gasket said further journal entries commented on watching the trailer, but one stood out among these—Bobby approached the back field from the woods and watched two small children playing in the dirt. He contemplated which would be the easier to snatch away—the orange soda or a fist full of daisies.

Evelyn Houston

Theta Beta Chapter

2005 Personal Narrative Award Winner

## The Sharpened Shovel

War claims more than a soldier's death. It is a gruesome parasite – a cancerous tumor feeding from society's simplest. Its insatiable maw sucks the spirit from the bone leaving a distorted and hollow shell, and no one wants to take responsibility. The chivalrous idea of war is false, and security is only guaranteed by terror and interrupted by absolute anarchism. My friend Patrick, after returning from the war in Iraq, taught me the raging country across the world is not really so far away.

The familiar highway between Alabama and Georgia is dotted with mile markers and simple signs, but a weekend road trip across I-20 with my friend changed my direction on war. Patrick spent just over a year on foreign soil before returning to the states. But the person buckled in the passenger seat was different – changed somehow. Before he left, a silly smirk and a quick joke kept me slightly off balance, but his lightheartedness was now replaced with astute awareness and an occasionally twitched cheek muscle. His brown eyes had become fierce, and a scar above his left eye traced a two-inch seam perpendicular to his eyebrow. The first joint of his right thumb twisted at an odd angle upward while his entire hand trembled slightly.

We left Birmingham and headed east. The early morning sunshine slanted into the car casting our long shadows into the back seat. Setting the cruise control, I relaxed and started the conversation. "Tell me about those camel spiders."

Patrick spoke with a directness I didn't recognize. "That was the worst part of being there," he said. "The damn things were attracted to our lights. They'd get into your boots and

your bunk. Nasty things – and fast as hell."

"Ugh," I fidgeted as Patrick told me how he tried to smash one in his quarters one night with the operations manual for a Bradley tank.

"The book is this thick," he emphasized, holding his bent thumb and forefinger about three inches apart. "When I picked up the manual, the damn thing ran under my bunk, and I tore that whole room apart chasing it. Finally, it turned and lunged at me. I dodged and I stomped it with my boot. Bastard thing." He paused and said slowly, "It sounded and felt like crushing one pecan against another in your hand." Patrick saw the disturbed look on my face and shrugged, "Yeah, that was the worst part of being there, but ya get used to it – sleeping with spiders."

We rode in silence, and I became conscious of the polar personality that now dominated Patrick. In my peripheral vision, I noticed he sat cat-like and focused on some unseen target. I was

uncomfortable when he spoke, but I felt almost fear when he was quiet. Trying to stir some more small talk, I asked, "How's your momma?"

"Fine," he said.

I tried again. "Does your brother need help building his deck next weekend?"

"Nope," he replied flatly. His answers were terse with no feeling and no emphasis. These things seemed trivial to him now, and I wondered what else was lost in my friend and at what cost. I remembered two years ago the passion and excitement he had in God and being saved through Jesus. On the church pew, I watched Patrick clap his hands at Sunday singings; and he would smile and poke me with his elbow to encourage me to sing as the choir went through another chorus of "I'll Fly Away." I asked, "Did you pray much while you were there?"

"Pray?" he turned toward me, repulsed and said, "Pray? There is no God there and no Allah, either. The temples and hospitals are empty or





blown up.” The muscle twitched hard in his cheek, and I uncomfortably averted my eyes. Nausea crept in my gut with the realization that my friend had lost his faith. This pressed on me like no earthly weight could. As we passed a church on the right, I noticed a large, hill-top cross standing defiantly to the oblivious traffic. I sighed to myself, retreated back to silence, and was mindful of the diminishing cross in my mirror.

I glanced at the State Trooper in the median and verified my speedometer. Patrick nodded toward the patrol car and said, “That’s how the Iraqis ambushed our convoys. They’d bury a football-field length of C-4 in a daisy chain series next to the guardrail on the right shoulder.” He said that a decoy vehicle was placed in the median and set on fire; when the American troops merged to the right lane away from the burning car, someone detonated the chain of explosives with a garage door opener from a nearby ditch. “I learned the sound of a bullet passing beside my ear that day; but my gunner – he heard the crack of a closer

round.” I comprehended this scene with bizarre intensity as I envisioned the man; he flinched suddenly, as if struck by a bludgeon. He faltered, and then became motionless, save for his quivering knees.

We stopped for gas at a Chevron in Atlanta, and while the tank filled, I sat sideways in my seat with the door open. With my elbows on my knees and my hands loosely folded together, thoughts of this war connected and kaleidoscoped in slanting patterns. Frustrated and angered about the malicious crime and shame of 9/11, I struggled with my Christian ideas of right and wrong and knowing both sides believed it a war for liberty and humanity, if there ever was one. I became bereft of focus.

Out of an adjacent garbage can, a red wasp flew into my car and startled me. I froze and watched it pop angrily against the windshield attempting to escape. It faltered, fell, and righted itself near the defrost vent. With its purple-black wings high in agitation, it walked across the dash, antennae twitching. Suddenly, with lightning

speed and accuracy, Patrick smashed the wasp with his open right palm. My mouth dropped as I gawked at him over my shoulder. Without looking at me and holding pressure with his hand, he twisted his wrist a quarter turn and said, “It’s that easy to take a life.” He then turned toward the window, brushed the crumpled insect from his palm, and said without a change of tone in his voice, “Tank’s full. How ‘bout some lunch?”

After the Burger King drive-thru, we headed toward home, but the salty French fries tasted like dried leather as Patrick talked about two teenage Iraqi boys who had somehow gotten into their compound on a motorcycle. “I popped the driver right off his wheels with a .50 Cal,” he stated. “But his buddy almost got back over the barbed wire before I took him out.” He told me they let the bodies lay for two days before they threw them over the ten-foot high south wall. He asked, “Do you know what 145 degree heat does to a body in two days?” We passed a bloated deer carcass on the shoulder, and I wanted to put my hand to my mouth; but I gripped the steering wheel and glanced at his cold eyes. Disturbed deeper, I forced my concentration on the highway again. Patrick must have read my thoughts; he chuckled and said, “The signal light on that damn motorcycle blinked for two weeks before the battery finally died.” I tried to smile, but the bile in my throat threatened to betray me.

At the rest area, a rusted green truck backfired behind us. Patrick jumped hard against his seatbelt. He shouted at me to take cover and get into my Kevlar before the next mortar hit. Confused, I asked if he was okay. His brown eyes were distant but searching frantically. Patrick looked at his watch and told me not to stop at the checkpoint near Fallujah. “They’ll

be all over us, and we've got to get to Bagdad. If they're in the road, just run 'em down." After a moment, his posture relaxed, and his shoulders slumped. Embarrassed, Patrick turned his head toward the window and mumbled apologies. Unnerved and astounded by his mental displacement, I asked again if he was all right. Shaking his head slowly, he said, "I have these dreams- these nightmares." At that instant, I recognized an old friend, but then he opened the car door and disappeared into the men's room. In a moment, Patrick returned to the car with broad and even strides. Ever alert again, he sized up each person he passed. "While we're parked," he said firmly, "let me show you something." I muttered an okay, and he retrieved a silver and blue laptop computer from his duffel bag in the back seat. As the computer hummed its startup, I curiously watched Patrick pick through several DVDs in the bag. "Watch carefully," he said as he loaded a disc. "This is a nighttime reconnaissance video of enemy weapons exchange recorded from the belly-cam of an Apache helicopter flying under stealth mode." His emotionless words were measured off like a rhythmic report, "Our men have orders to destroy all identified enemies, weapons, and transport vehicles." Although in night-vision green, the images on the screen were impeccably detailed. On a road in the desert, a three-axle transport truck stopped near a man on a tractor. The door opened, and the man in the truck jumped to the ground and walked to the rear of the truck. He pulled two rifles from under a tarp, handed the rifles to the man on the tractor, and started back to the tarp. I jumped slightly as the computer squawked, "Delta-base, Delta-base. Weapons identified and enemy targeted." A small pause followed, and the computer answered itself in a different

tone. "Roger that, Alpha-three. Fire on target. Over?"

"Roger that. Firing." From an unseen origin, a series of twenty or more small yellow-green lights, curving slightly to the left, dotted the trail of rapid-firing grenades to the chest of the first man and exploded on contact. The man on the tractor jumped off and dove under the truck.

"Watching for movement," the computer squelched. The man's hand moved slightly from behind the tire, and the computer said, "Enemy identified. Firing." Six or seven RPG's struck the man's hand and exploded the tire. In obvious agony, the man rolled unknowingly from under the truck and writhed on the ground in blinded pain, clutching the mangled stump below the elbow. He twisted himself up to his knees just before a final dozen deadly fireflies detonated him from abdomen to chest. The truck and tractor were similarly destroyed before the computer squelched affirmative and the screen went blank. The ejected rainbow-silver disc had no label on it, but its images from the screen burned in my mind. I didn't know what to say, so I started the car and asked, "You ready?"

The afternoon sun glared as I fumbled for my sunglasses on the dash. Patrick asked, "Did I show you my night vision scope? It's for a German-made rifle." He reached over to the back seat and pulled out a ten-inch metal cylinder from his bag. It tapered slightly in the middle with dials on either side; the convex lens at the slightly larger end was sea-grass green.

"German made?" I asked, "Is that blood on it?" He absently scratched at the crimson spot on the army green scope with his fingernail. I gritted my teeth at the sound and forced my attention to the traffic around me. Patrick claimed the scope was a sort of "victory scalp" that he took from the Iraqi

sniper surprised near his base close to Najaf. With stone-set eyes, Patrick said he struggled and wrestled with the man before ultimately killing him with his sharpened shovel. "I was out of ammo," he said as he deliberately turned his head, looked at me, and replied with uncomfortable candor, "I had to use something." He explained Iraq as a place of three intensities: sun, blood, and sand. I wondered what other wretched things came back with Patrick in that bag. Deep inside, I shuddered and understood the source of Patrick's demons. My friend was lost – half buried in a bunker of rubble – pulled down and drowned in the sand dunes of bullet and bone. I didn't know this man, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to.

Soldiers learn three things in battle: complete selflessness, undiscerning obedience, and soldiers die. But death (not just physical death) is more than the purloined release of a man's soul. And the soldiers who do return are not the soldiers that left; they are twisted, scarred, or destroyed with a sharpened shovel.

Evelyn Houston  
Theta Beta Chapter

2006 Personal Narrative Award Winner



## Stars, Stripes, and the Pacific Ocean

My father served in the U.S. Army Special Forces for 22 years; consequently, my family frequently moved from one coast to the other. When I was a child, we lived in Monterey, California, and Key West, Florida, and I have lived within an hour of a beach ever since. As a result, I am endlessly fascinated by the beach – especially the Pacific coast. My family and I often visited the beach together, and I spent hours exploring the craggy coast and native sea life.

One aspect of that rocky coast stands out as I reflect upon those outings: the tide pools. Tide pools have always captured my imagination; the little crabs, periwinkles, starfish, anemones, and shells keep me mesmerized for hours. A tide pool is a pool of water collected in a rocky hollow at low tide. It provides a home to microscopic organisms, invertebrates, and small fish. Serene, quiet, and still at the surface, it teems with constant variation. Every aspect of the tide pool creates its own special atmosphere. The salinity, temperature, and level of tides are constantly changing, and the animals living within it influence everything from levels of oxygen to survival of other species in the pool, but the elements of the tide pools are oblivious to their symbiotic connection to the pool.

Certain experiences in my life, especially Veterans' Day, remind me of my days out on the beach, discovering tide pools. Veterans' Day serves as a reminder of just how interdependent my life is with everyone else's in the way the brilliance of the night sky depends on each star or the way every starfish in the tide pool survives because of a multitude of circumstances surrounding it. By analogy, think of the old man standing behind you in the grocery line: you don't think

twice about the ways his life has intertwined with yours - you would never guess that he has a cousin who tutored you in high school math or that he returned a can of tuna which you later picked up and placed into your basket without a second thought.

Sigma Kappa Delta created a channel for my love of literature when I joined, but "Books for Baghdad," my chapter's Veterans' Day book drive, has provided an outlet for me to experience it in my own unique way. Veterans' Day is a special holiday to the daughter of soldiers, and the past two Veterans' Days have been especially important to me. Since my father passed away two years ago, Veterans' Day dresses in a more somber mood; however, experiencing it through the filter of our book drive, I am learning to catch glimpses of the still surface of a regular holiday riddled with the undercurrent of so many lives touching one other, oblivious to the intricacies of the situation. I think of my father on November 11, and I have been able to honor him in a very special way through "Books for Baghdad."

The idea started on a cold September afternoon last year in the cafeteria by two wives heartbroken over the year-long Middle East deployments of their husbands. That chilly September day last year was just a few days after the first year anniversary of my father's death. Fierce emotion swept me at the idea of holding a book drive on Veterans' Day - the first holiday following his death - and I could think of no greater tribute to our soldiers and my own father than a book drive for our soldiers serving overseas. I also felt that nothing could embody the spirit of a book drive for soldiers more than holding it on Veterans' Day. When I volunteered to help, I had no idea how

important the whole experience of the book drive would be for me.

Two years of experiences grace my memory since that first book drive. Countless kind citizens and veterans attended the past two book drives, but four specific memories stand out: They echo in my mind periodically, especially when I hear of a fierce battle in Falluja or a particularly brave soldier.

Last year was an emotionally wrought one for me. I was still battling grief from the loss of my father, and each veteran I met served as a reminder of his service, for which I am eternally grateful. Their experiences in war echoed my own past, and the delicate web of coincidence is both melancholy and soothing.

The first of my two memories from last year was of a Vietnam vet in his fifties, riding up on his Harley with a U.S. flag bandana under a helmet full of military patches. As he dismounted his "steed," he pulled out a small bag of books from the seat of his Hog and, without a second thought, dropped a ten dollar bill into the donation jar. He then turned to me with the books, and I saw his face. The deep lines on his face and the "mist" in the corners of his eyes communicated his gratitude more than his money and his copy of *Band of Brothers*. Suddenly, the essence of why I was there hit me full force: The heat and the crowds and the blaring music from the radio washed away, and all I registered was his eyes. He had served his country, seen his friends die, saved countless lives, nursed terrible wounds, and come home to a country that hated him for his sacrifice. The aura of war wrapped around him like a tattered black cloak, its fringe dripping of confusion and loss, flashbacks, and an unnamed pain. He barely whispered a quick thank you in my direction and

then said, “We didn’t have anything like this in Nam.” I grasped his hand as hard as I could and stumbled out some awkward gratitude for his service—tears brimming my eyes. All I could see was my father, telling me stories of how soldiers never walked alone in the States during the Vietnam War for fear of encountering fights with war-protesting civilians. Now that I look back, I was also thinking of our soldiers serving now; the possibility of one of them coming home feeling as ostracized as the man in front of me stirred in me a strength that I had never felt before.

The second memory emerged from an incident later that evening at a book signing by Medal of Honor winners. I was tired, sweaty, and dirty, but the spark of patriotism made me endure the day until the very last person left.

While I was waiting for the patrons to exit the store, I overheard stories of the brave and crippled Korean and Vietnam Vets signing inside. I looked at the men through the glass and tried to place the stories with the backs of their heads. There was one particular gentleman who caught my eye, a man who stood out in stark contrast to the gnarled, silver-haired men he sat with. For some reason, I felt a connection to him. Near the end of the night, a well-dressed young woman walked up to me and asked me what the donations in the jar that I held were for. I explained that we were collecting money to buy books for the drive, and she told me that her father was one of the Medal of Honor winners inside. We swapped the general small talk of soldiers’ daughters—where we had been stationed and which units our fathers had served in—when a fellow chapter member asked if the woman could donate one of the Medal of Honor books to our chapter. At that point, she disappeared; a while

later, she returned and told us that her father would personally donate a book to our organization.

When the last patron left around 9:00 p.m., we had been campaigning outside for about eleven hours. We went inside to have our donated book signed by the tired men behind the table, and as a keepsake of the day, I bought a book for myself. While we waited, I paid close attention to the bent Korean-era vet who had undergone brain surgery only a few weeks before but insisted on being there that day despite his condition. His oxygen tube and tank were quite visible, and his wife lovingly cared for him as she held tight to the grips on his wheelchair. My heart went out to him. I glanced at the pages of my new book about to be signed by the men in front of me. There, on page 182, was the picture of the vet who had donated our book—the man who had caught my attention earlier. His name was there, Gordon R. Roberts, and beside it was the title “Battle for Hamburger Hill.” Without a thought, I blurted out, “Hamburger

Hill!”—partly in shock and partly in amazement. The young woman looked my way and smiled broadly. A wail opened up from the pit of my stomach, and I could no longer contain the emotion of the day. I wept right there, my head buried in the shoulder of my chapter president.

Hamburger Hill was a battle I will never forget; my father spoke of it often and made me watch the whole vivid, torturous battle in its movie form a hundred times, if not more. In fact, one very special memory for my father and me was a trip to Bermuda when I was thirteen. My father found a video of *Hamburger Hill* in the hotel lobby the first morning of our vacation, and he had to watch it. I spent the first six hours of my vacation awaiting the beautiful black beaches and a rainbow of Caribbean flowers—but watching the horrors of war in the vividly graphic movie. Now, in front of me, sat a man I had spent most of my life idolizing, and he had graciously offered *Medal of Honor* to my chapter.

This year’s book drive was no dif-



ferent. The emotion of this Veterans' Day hasn't quite sunk in yet, but its detail is still fresh in my mind. I met so many elderly men wearing baseball caps, each a rainbow of brightly colored patches with insignias from armored divisions, special operations units, and aviation detachments – with bold yellow letters spelling out the words “Vietnam,” “Korea,” and even “WWII.” Men walked up to me in fatigues and old flight jackets, handing me bags and boxes, their only compensation a small flag, a pin, and the undivided attention of a 26-year-old woman. Being the recipient of their stories makes me feel like an alchemist – I have created an outlet of eternal life for these men. I now know innumerable strangers. I might not know their names, but I know where they have served, how many tours they had, how long they were in the military - even the heart-breaking knowledge of the countless buddies they lost. They told me proudly of such things as old war wounds or where their twin brothers had served, and every single one of them expressed a thank you in a way that told of where

they had been and what they had sacrificed.

This year, a veteran dressed in green fatigues from WWII and Korea drove his prized, authentic Korean War-era Jeep to the drive. We all hollered at the sight of the Jeep. I waded through the sea of people and cars to greet him with a flag and a pin. As I listened to his story and how he had obtained his Jeep, I noticed his license plate: SF7thUSA. I told him that my own father had served in 7th Group, and as he wrapped up his story, I gripped his hand even tighter - the thought of my own father being his age and meeting a young woman fumbling with words of gratitude the way I was fumbling pierced my imagination.

Later, another man, this time from the Vietnam War, told me, as I took his parcel, that he had spent countless hours, out of boredom, repeatedly reading the ingredients from his K-rations and that he knew them so well he could rattle them off to this day. I had a flashback to the summers of my youth, when my father would bring home a box full of these dreaded rations, and

my friends and I gleefully played soldier with the aid of the enclosed Dutch oven and water from the hose, fighting over who would get the precious pack of gum inside. To think that a brown plastic package which had provided us with so much entertainment on balmy summer afternoons once served as the only entertainment for this soldier made me appreciate more fully all the sacrifices he had made for me.

I can't help but think of how these men, these strangers, provided a living link to my father, to each other, and to the friends they had lost. Maybe one of them had provided ground cover from a bunker miles away to another man standing just inches away from him now, neither one comprehending how they were connected, but a knowing kinship was evident between them. I watched so many of them meet as strangers, grasp hands, pat backs, tell war stories, and part friends. Much like the tide pool, a bookstore experience on Veterans' Day in a military town is just a common, everyday experience. But to those people who have experienced a keener sense of the day's true meaning, it is a coming together of many things, making an exquisite tapestry - the colors and textures woven with bittersweet thread. John Steinbeck embodies my tide pool theory in his book *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*: “... look from the tide pool to the stars, and then back to the tide pool again.” Each person touches another life on Veterans' Day: the vets touch ours; ours touch the soldiers serving now; those soldiers touch countless lives in their hometowns; finally, all of us create a larger-than-life scene that only God can truly observe.

Megan McEwan  
Rho Beta Chapter



## Jealousy

I'm a pizza boy. It's not a bad job. I waste a couple nights every week driving around, listening to the stereo and swapping dirty jokes with Dawn, the cute girl at work with the pierced tongue and a country twang. I get paid \$5.25 an hour plus tips, which I can stretch to cover rent and tuition. I'm doing all right. The only problem is I'm a pizza boy.

Friends I graduated high school with are engineers now. My sister-in-law is a year away from the bar exam, and my cousin is an architect in Edinburgh. I wear a name tag to work and drain rancid cheese-water out of the make line. If you're a twenty-four year old pizza boy, it's hard not to look into the mirror and think, "Oh, yeah. You've made some bad life decisions, haven't you?"

One day, I made a delivery to an address in Point Mallard Estates. Point Mallard is the wealthiest neighborhood in Decatur, AL, with houses so big they look like rows of Catholic churches lining the streets.

Pulling into the driveway behind an SUV a little smaller than my apartment, I walked up and rang the doorbell. The man who answered was a few years older than me, maybe in his early thirties.

"Hey there," I said. "How are y—"

"How much?"

"Um, eighteen thirty-four."

He dropped a twenty on top of the warmer bag. "Keep it."

"Thanks." I pulled his dinner out of the bag while he stood two feet in front of me, staring off to the side at nothing. "There you go. Have a nice night, all right?"

"Yeah." Vanishing back inside and yet to have actually looked at me, he shut the door and flipped off the porch light.

Walking back to my truck, I adjusted my name tag and eyed the shiny gray SUV in his driveway. I was getting off work at one. He'd be asleep then. I thought about coming back. I thought about the lug wrench behind my driver's side seat, and I thought about him finding his rear windshield smashed out in the morning.

I didn't do it. I probably never would, but that guy and his dismissive tone chewed at me the rest of the night. Mopping the prep floor, listening to the squeal in my brakes that I didn't have the money to fix, thinking about having to work late, then get up early for school, I couldn't stop thinking about his nice house, his nice car, and the fact that whatever his job was, it didn't involve buckets of rancid cheese-water.

I wanted what he had and twisted my guts into a knot thinking about it. Hanging out with Dawn, the cute girl with the pierced tongue and country twang, didn't help. Seeing a fat guy pedaling a bicycle down Eleventh Street didn't help. The only thing that felt good was mulling over my nihilistic daydreams— smashing up his car or playing some mailbox baseball. I imagined spinning doughnuts across his crisp green lawn. Mud splashing everywhere, running over his garden statues - just picturing it made me smile.

It's hard admitting you're jealous, even to yourself. By admitting you're jealous of somebody, you admit *ipso facto* that he's better than you. That's too much for most people to stomach, so jealousy becomes a parasite. It attaches itself to other emotions and rides them to the surface to feed. Pride makes a good host, so do righteous indignation, prejudice, and any type of ideology. Even anger is more palatable

than jealousy. At least you can say you hate somebody without insulting yourself in the same breath.

The truth is, none of my fantasies that night ended with that guy looking at the tire tracks in his flowerbed and resolving to treat everyone, even the pizza boy, with more respect. They were about destruction and avenging my bruised ego. They were about not being happy where I was and simmering at the fact that he wasn't there, too. He'd acted like he was better than me; what I couldn't stand was thinking maybe he was right.

The deeper you dig into your miseries, the more you'll always find. By the end of my shift, standing on the sidewalk while Dawn locked up the store, I couldn't see anything except the doubts, worries, and passed-up chances. The rent was due. My brakes were going bad. Why hadn't I gone to college right out of high school? When was it going to be my turn?

"Ever notice Orion has a dick?"

Dawn asked.

"What?"



## *Hedera helix*

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Looking up at the sky, she pointed to the constellation with her cigarette. “Look. There’s his shoulders and legs, right? There’s his belt. And right below them, see those two stars? He’s got a wang.”

I looked up. Sure enough, Orion is anatomically correct.

“So, why’s he wearing a belt, then?” I asked. “Since he’s not wearing any pants, what’s the belt for?”

Dawn thought for a second. “Must be chaps.”

The conversation got progressively worse, so I won’t get into it. The main thing is that, afterwards, I didn’t go to the man’s house with a baseball bat. I laughed until my sides hurt and forgot all about him.

There was no great change in fortune. I still have to hold my breath when I empty out the cheese-water bucket. My brakes are still making an awful squealing noise, and that guy is still a jackass. I just found something better to think about.

Life isn’t fair. I’ll rot away if I dwell on it too much. My only protection is to laugh at it, to outright ridicule it sometimes, and I hope that’s enough to get me through. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, I may be in the gutter, but I can still look up at the stars.

Kris Reisz  
Theta Beta Chapter



# *Short Fiction*



## Baptism by the Sword

Published in the 2004 edition of *Microcosm*, on pages 22 to 27 as second place short story winner.

The screams sounded over and over again in his head. No matter how hard he tried to think of something else, that resonance echoed and re-echoed off the insides of his skull eternally. Many times he had heard the sounds of abuse, of a man yelling at a woman prior to a beating – and whenever he could, he had put a stop to it. Yet those were dirty, weak peasant men, uncoiling their frustrations on their wives. Things were different now.

He had seen the beggar girl being led to the castle. Her features were exceptionally clear for a person of her social class and she was adorned with hair the very color of the ascending sun. She had been told by the attendant guiding her that the baron wished to meet her. While harlots being called by the baron was hardly a rare phenomenon, he could tell by the expression on her radiant face as she crossed over the drawbridge that all in her heart was pure. No thought of evil occurred to her – she, so naively, rejoiced that a person of such nobility had any interest in her. Pity thrust deep into his heart.

He endeavored mightily to wipe this one glimpse from his memory, but all chance of that disappeared during his appointed hours of guard duty. Usually the baron's promiscuous ways were accepted, even gladly accepted, by his Excellency's selected subject of entertainment for that evening. Yet this girl refused and incurred the baron's ungodly wrath. Regardless of how he wished he hadn't, he heard the shouts, the curses – the beatings. And he, the baron's loyal guardsman, had stood at his post and done nothing.

He made himself scarce when the girl was dragged down to the dungeon by two of his fellow guards, men the likes of which took sick pleasure in even a woman's suffering. He could not bring

himself to look upon the results of the baron's anger. He spared himself that burden, yet the screams continued unabated in his brain. The next day, he tried to sleep and cast everything away to the oblivion of forgetfulness, just like the faces of every man he'd killed. His dreams were terrible and haunting yet unmemorable; he felt as though he'd walked the breadth of Europe with the sins of a thousand men on his back.

Now, he stood on his night watch with all sounds wiped away, all crimes brushed under a cloak of apathy and away from view – except to him. He asked himself why he had just stood there like everyone else. Because it was none of his business, he thought, because it was the will of a baron, because...

It was because he was afraid. To go against the heavy hand of authority and established society meant certain, agonizing death. There was nothing he could do but uselessly die for that girl. Even so – “What's eating you, Bayard?” The voice of Armand, his watch partner, wretched him from his torturous reverie. He looked nervously over at the man he considered in some ways a friend (in whatever sense a conscripted warrior could have a friend); Armand returned his gaze, looking more suspicious than concerned. “Eh, just tired,” replied Bayard with a shrug. “Didn't get much sleep earlier.” Armand, who had been at the mercenary trade a lot longer than Bayard, frowned. “I know fatigue when I see it, and it doesn't make such a stir in men's eyes. Quit being so gloomy; it's strange.” Bayard lowered his eyes to the ground and was silent a moment. Feeling a push inside, he glanced towards Armand and asked, “Would you mind if I took a walk for a few minutes? I really need to clear my head, and standing here's not going to help.” Armand looked

forward indignantly and tersely said, “Do whatever you've got to do.”

Bayard nodded slowly and began to wander away. As he walked the halls of the castle, wrestling with his emotions, he became more and more withdrawn into his soulful contemplations. He wondered what first drove him to pick up a sword. He remembered sitting on his grandfather's knee unknowably long ago. “Who are the men who live in the castles, grandpa?” he'd asked, as innocent as that girl. His grandfather's answer rang in his heart as it did the first time he heard it.

Grandfather smiled fondly at him and spoke in a deeply reverent tone: “They are Knights. They are God's warriors, my boy, sworn by heavenly law to uphold the Code of Chivalry.” Young Bayard was fascinated. “Oh! Chivalry! What is it, grandpa?” He replied, “A man is made a Knight by God's ordained King, and before he may be Knighted, the King has him pledge the many oaths which make up the Code.” The child was endlessly enthusiastic: “Tell me; tell me!” Grandfather looked away, his eyes a little distant, and said softly, “Oh, I don't



remember all of them—but here are a few.” The old man suddenly locked eyes with his grandson, placing his ancient and scarred hand on the tiny shoulder. His voice quietly boomed with a profound verity the child would never wholly forget: “Thou shalt respect all weaknesses and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them. Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy and shalt make war against the Infidel without mercy and without cessation. Thou shalt everywhere and always be the Champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil.” Bayard sat in awe, and after a long silence, thusly spoke, “I want to be a Knight.” Grandfather smiled again, this time knowingly of a commoner’s life; he patted the little one on the head and said, “It’s good to have dreams.”

The peasant girl lay in her cell, beaten and battered; her cracked ribs ached with every breath. She had been locked in darkness for at least a day, though it felt like eternity. The smell of death enveloped her. As she wept, her soul cried out to God, wanting to know why she deserved this fate. She’d been faithful all her life – could the world truly be so unthinkably cruel? After a time, she could not tell how long, her cell door swung open, and blinding light shattered the darkness of her prison. A tall man stood in the doorway. He had long, coarse brown hair, a full beard, wore dirty chain mail, and gripped firmly in his left hand the hilt of a three-foot long sword whose broad blade was wet with blood. “Please, no more,” she pleaded, weak and afraid. The man held out his hand and spoke in a bold voice: “My Lady, I cometh not to grieve thee further; take ye mine hand and, by my word, so long as the Lord runneth blood through these veins, I shalt delivereth thee to salvation.”

Shocked, she timidly took the man’s

hand; he helped her stand. His gentle brown eyes gazed deep into hers, and he said, “I wouldst have the honor of knowing thy name if thou wouldst so grant it me, my Lady.” The girl trembled and stuttered out, “Candace. You don’t have to do this.” The man smiled reassuringly and said sincerely, “My name is Bayard. And yea, ‘twould not be such a privilege if this were not by my own will.”

Wordlessly, Candace embraced her mysterious champion and sobbed her gratitude into his shoulder. He returned the embrace briefly but genuinely and whispered, “Let us go.” Taking her again by the hand, he led her out of the dungeon, stepping over two bodies, both deeply lacerated by the fatal swoop of a large blade.

In silence, the two hurried through the castle in the dead of night. With her every step, Candace prayed thanks that someone had cared enough to come to her aid. As for Bayard, he felt clean and free – sensations he had not known for a long time. Yet even as he used his knowledge of patrol routes to avoid the guards, he knew a battle, one in which the odds would be heavily against him, was inevitable. He looked forward to it.

They reached the drawbridge, which was fully raised. Bayard released Candace’s hand and strode toward the two men attending it. “Bayard? By God, he’s gone mad!” they cried; they drew steel and rushed towards him as Candace watched in horror. As though divine strength flowed through him, Bayard unflinchingly parried the first slash that came at him; with a fencer’s quickness, he made a riposte, thrusting his hand-and-a-half sword straight through his foe’s chest, shattering mail, ribcage, and heart all at once. In one smooth motion, he wrenched the blade free of its first victim and swung it in a wide arc that crashed through the second

guard’s defense and cleanly decapitated him.

He immediately sheathed his sword and took to the crank that operated the drawbridge. With the vigor of a man reborn, Bayard began to lower the bridge single-handedly; a great creaking resounded through the castle, and he knew the time drew near. Candace looked upon him sorrowfully and pleaded, “Please, surrender yourself! I am just a commoner – no one should die for me!” Bayard looked up as he labored. “Thou’rt a Lady; never let any soul tell ye differently! Our true King loveth all, and knoweth not class or wealth.” Candace stood awed. No one had ever said such things to her.

Just as Bayard’s task achieved completion, a contingent of soldiers flooded into the area, led by Armand. He cried, “I knew it! I’ve always known there was something wrong with you, Bayard! You’ve the devil in you!” His former comrades advanced, thirsty for his blood. As Bayard steeled himself and drew his sword once more, Candace took one last look upon him and said, “I’ll never forget you, Sir Bayard—never!” With the countenance and bearing of one at peace with himself, Bayard spoke unto her, “Nor I thou, my Lady! Now flee – flee and tell all the world thou wert saved by a Knight!”

Sir Bayard met the charge with legendary ferocity and without regret. He cut down scores of men, contesting so long against overwhelming odds that his Lady was given time to escape into the night without a trace.

And with his last breath, Sir Bayard rendered thanks unto God.

Craig D. Case  
Delta Alpha Chapter  
2005 Short Fiction Award Winner

## The Inside

I walked into the subway car and looked around at all the blank faces. Some pretended to read; others talked loudly on phones. Each face stared off as if no one else existed there. But I could see inside them. I knew what they thought and what they had done.

Sylvia, a woman in a long charcoal trench coat made of leather or vinyl, I'm not sure which, sat in the far right of the car. She turned, and, for a brief moment, met my glance. Quickly she hid her face in hopes of masking the lie that glowed brightly on her face. Had I been someone else, she would have disguised her secret well, but I knew everything she held inside. I could see the love, the affair, the baby that grew within her. She had a wife at home, Martha, who waited all day for her favorite moment, Sylvia's arrival. Sylvia thought of Martha, so loyal, so loving, and wanted to cry. She held it in so that no one could see. I saw; I could feel her pain growing with her thoughts, and I wanted to cry for her. She had cheated on Martha for three months now with her secretary, Mark. "I need to run away," thought Sylvia,

but she knew of no place she could run that would let her escape the guilt, the sin, the lies. "I hate myself," she whispered to no one. The man next to her gave a quick look. I knew he had not actually heard what she had said, but Sylvia wasn't sure. Her face, already flushed, grew a deeper shade of crimson. She felt even more ashamed now and was certain he could smell sex on her skin. Sylvia's sadness became too much for my heart. I turned my head and saw a young couple in the corner sweetly staring in each other's eyes.

"I hope he loves me as much as I love him," Maria thought, her golden hair rustling from the breeze of the air vent.

"I hope she doesn't want to meet my mother yet," thought Jason, as he tried to think of anything other than Maria's breasts.

At this I laughed to myself, "Kids." I turned my head and left the two lovers to themselves. I gave my attention to the man straight ahead. Light cerulean eyes stared back at me, so cool and calm that a chill ran from my

hair to my toes. He seemed totally content. Not a thought crossed his mind. I began to wonder; could he have the same talent that I do? Does he know what I'm thinking right now? A silence came from him that I did not understand, a silence more real than any I had ever heard while all the voices around me were clamoring on about bills, lunch, love, everything else running through their brains. Finally, an image flashed through his mind and mine. He was remembering his day's events. A scarlet river ran through his thoughts and wrapped around everything, carrying with it a kind of melancholy beauty. In his memory, I saw him dressed in black, creeping in through an upstairs window, and sitting, smiling, waiting quietly. A woman with long raven hair entered the room, her arms full of freshly washed laundry. His knife ran smoothly across her throat. Her body fell onto the bed, spilling blood over the clean laundry and her dark hair. I looked away. I needed to block him out; his was a mind I had no desire to see inside, but the woman's face made me look back. There was something so familiar about her. How did I know her? Frantically, I glanced back to Sylvia and saw Martha's open face, pale skin, dark eyes, and I knew. I looked back to the man who sat before me. Carl, that was his name; I could see it clearly now. His eyes were glazed over with satisfaction. At this instant, I could see everything. Out of jealousy, Mark had chosen Carl to do what he wished he had the strength to do. Carl had been hired to kill Martha.

I looked over to Sylvia who was replaying the happenings of the day in her head. "I just can't do it to her anymore, Mark," Sylvia screamed across her desk. "I refuse to go on living a lie.



I love Martha.”

“Don’t you dare say her name to me! You know I despise it,” he shouted in return. As she turned to leave, he began to beg, “Please, please. I love you; don’t you feel the same for me?”

The truth was she didn’t. Sylvia was aware of this fact throughout the affair. She was only looking for a fling, something different from her monotonous routine. “No, I don’t love you,” she replied, her voice filled with cold distaste. Unbeknownst to Sylvia, all of this, the entire conversation, had been too late. Earlier in the week, Mark had phoned an old friend, an unstable man with light cerulean eyes, to end his obstacles to Sylvia once and for all.

Now Sylvia was on her way home, excited for the first time in months to see Martha. Knowing what she had in store when she reached their bedroom, I felt terribly sorry for her. T-shirts and underwear, stained with her own sin, awaited Sylvia. I looked back to Carl. A rerun-nightmare looped in his head. He watched Martha die over and over again. It turned my stomach, and I wanted to hate him. How could I judge him? After all, I had sold my soul to have the ability to see inside him. How could I judge anyone when I had given up that which makes us human?

My own memory began to play in my head, something that I hate. I could see that day so clearly. Silver clouds blanketed the skyline, letting little light shine down on me. I cried tears of mourning and hummed a dirge for our lost love. “If only,” I mouthed. If only I could have seen the problems, if only I could have heard his thoughts, I would have known of his misery with me. I could have stopped it; I could have changed.

“I would give anything, anything at all, to be able to read others’ minds,”

I said aloud, knowing if I could only have that power, I could be everything I was supposed to be.

Then it appeared - a bright ginger light that blinded and enthralled me at the same time. No words were spoken, but I heard every line and every clause of the contract. There would be a trade: my soul in exchange for the ability to see inside everyone around me. Thoughts, cloudy with grief, swirled wildly through my mind. At that moment, I made a decision, maybe not the right one, but the one that seemed right for me at the moment. A quill pen with a razor sharp tip stabbed violently into my flesh. Ruby red ink dripped from my vein as I signed away my soul.

I awoke to bright sunshine. Everything felt fresh and new. I hummed a new song in my head, something peppy and upbeat, and felt more alive than I ever knew I could. I wondered if this could have all been a dream. Looking down at my shirt, I saw dried blood on the sleeve. As days went by, I began to feel hollow.

Something was missing inside of me, something I could never get back. I could hear the thoughts of all the people around me, but it was hard to hear my own.

I began to understand. My soul, that which I had given away so easily, housed my love for myself, my love for the people who were most important to me, and any other feelings that make people normal and human, with the exception of empathy. I could feel others’ pain and sorrow, and that was all that made me feel alive.

All day long, for the rest of my life, I ride the subway, back and forth, taking what I can from the riders who surround me.

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# *Literary Analysis*



## Explication of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

In T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Prufrock has spent his life admiring a lady from afar, never being able to gather the courage to speak to her. Through Prufrock’s conversation with himself, which is written in stream of consciousness and filled with similes and allusions, Eliot indicates that Prufrock’s life is filled with fear of what other people think about him and the fear of being rejected. Thinking that he has plenty of time, Prufrock realizes that he has let the perfect opportunity to meet the lady of his dreams go by, and now it is too late.

As the poem opens, a conversation is going on in Prufrock’s head as he tries to prepare himself to go to a party where the lady will be. His philosophy has always been that there will be plenty of time:

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides  
along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the win-  
dowpanes;  
There will be time, there will be  
time  
To prepare a face to meet the  
faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder  
and create,  
And time for all the works and  
days of hands  
That lift and drop a question of  
your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred inde-  
cisions,  
And for a hundred visions and  
revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and  
tea. (ll. 23-34)

While spending his time trying to convince himself that it is okay to wait to seize an opportunity, he comes to realize that because he has waited, those golden opportunities have passed him by, and he is now old. He is no longer the youthful, handsome specimen of a man he once was, but now his hair is growing thin, and his arms and legs are no longer muscular.

Throughout the poem, Prufrock uses creatures to describe himself and his situation. While he is making his way through London on an October night, the fog reminds Prufrock of a purring cat as it rubs against objects, content just to be, until finally it curls up and goes to sleep. Although he realizes he is no longer the youthful man he once was, he still delays meeting this lady for fear of being dissected under a microscope like some science experiment. He feels so insignificant that he compares himself to a crab at the bottom of the ocean floor.

As the poem continues, Prufrock alludes to characters from the Bible and from literature. Prufrock feels that he has been handed his head on a platter, just as John the Baptist was, when he says, “Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, / I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter;” (ll. 82-83). He also refers to Lazarus, Odysseus, and Prince Hamlet. He knows that his problem is insignificant compared to others who have lived through greater problems.

Prufrock learns too late that even with the chance of being turned down and laughed at, it would have been better to have taken advantage of the opportunities to meet the woman

whom he admired so much. Life offers no promise that other opportunities will ever come along, so we must learn to grasp dreams when we can. As Prufrock learns the hard way, the best thing to do is to seize the chance while the chance is there.

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## The Importance of Book XXIV in Homer's *The Odyssey*

Some critics, including ancient Greek critics Aristophanes and Arsitarchus, believe that Homer should have ended his epic poem on the lines "so they came / into that bed so steadfast, loved of old, / opening glad arms to one another" (23.298-300). They believe that Book XXIV is unnecessary. Whereas the final book of the poem does seem anticlimactic, it serves the purpose of tying up three loose ends. Book XXIV of *The Odyssey* manages to finish the Agamemnon/Odysseus parallel begun in Book XI, reunite Odysseus with his father Laertes, and explain how Odysseus can regain his kingship without a civil war erupting over the slaughter of so many high ranking sons of the city.

The first task of Book XXIV is to conclude the parallel between Agamemnon and Odysseus. In Book XI, Agamemnon's shade reveals to Odysseus that he was killed by his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover. He tells Odysseus "It was Aigisthos who designed my death, / he and my heartless wife, and killed me, after / feeding me, like an ox felled at the trough" (11.450-52). He goes on to say that Penelope, Odysseus' wife, is not like his own wife. This does not keep him from cautioning Odysseus to return home in secret so that he may check on his wife before appearing to her. "Land your ship / in secret on your island; give no warning. / The day of faithful wives is gone forever" (11.502-04). Odysseus fulfills this foreshadowing and is rewarded by finding his wife still faithful. He is reunited with her after all of the suitors have been killed. Book XXIV begins with Hermes leading the suitors' ghosts to the underworld. Here, Agamemnon makes his last appearance to sing Penelope's praises. "The girl you brought home made a

valiant wife! / True to her husband's honor and her own" (24.204-05). Agamemnon fulfills his place in the story of Odysseus by being his antithesis in love.

The second important part of Book XXIV is the reunion between Odysseus and his father Laertes. Odysseus learns in Book XI that Laertes has suffered from his son's absence. The shade of his mother tells him "He owns no bedding, rugs, or fleecy mantles, / but lies down, winter nights, among the slaves" (11.202-03). She also tells him that "He lies now even so, with aching heart, / and longs for your return, while age comes on him" (11.208-09). Book XXIV has Odysseus find his father and effectively bring him back to the land of the living. Once Laertes accepts that Odysseus has truly returned, "Athena, / standing by, filled out his limbs again, / gave girth and stature to the old field captain" (24.379-81). This gives Laertes back the dignity that his sorrow has sapped from him over the years.

The last subplot that Book XXIV ties up is the slaughter of the suitors. More than one hundred young men from powerful families on Ithaca have died, and there has to be some form of resolution. Odysseus knew that an attempt at revenge would come and thus has instructed Telemachus to stage a fake wedding feast at the castle to delay any knowledge of the slaughter of the suitors. In Book XXIV, the ruse is discovered as Eupheithes, father of Penelope's chief suitor Antinoos, calls for revenge. Eupheithes rallies a great number of men to go and meet Odysseus before he can flee. He believes that "Vengeance would be his, / he thought, for his son's murder; but that day / held bloody death for him and no return" (24.483-85). These

lines foreshadow the final battle of *The Odyssey*. Athena, in the guise of Mentor, gives Laertes the strength to throw his spear directly through Eupheithes' helmet. With the death of Odysseus' chief naysayer, Athena calls for an end to the fighting, "Now hold! / she cried, 'Break off this bitter skirmish; / end your bloodshed, Ithakans, and make peace'" (24.549-51). With her declaration and a bolt of lightning from the sky, the battle was ended.

Critics will continue to debate the purpose and validity of the last book of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. The truth is that it may never be known. The consensus in the learned world, however, is that Book XXIV completes the subplots of the poem. Without the final book, Agamemnon's antithesis of Odysseus might remain cloaked, Laertes might die waiting for his son to return, and Ithaca might be torn apart by civil war. Because Book XXIV explains all of these things, Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan War is complete, and he is free to pursue the adventures that await him.

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## Strategic-inflection Points

*We count our joys not by the things we have,*

*But by what kept us from the perfect thing.*

-Paul Laurence Dunbar

There are few moments in our lives that are characterized as defining moments. We are all born; we all die. The moments that pass between those two milestones are for the most part nondescript, meaning people can not recall these moments at the drop of a hat. However, there are those moments that we can remember in an instant. These moments are strategic-inflection points. Mundane classes like economics and math teach students about intersecting lines on graphs. If the lines run parallel, there is little meaning. However, if these lines ever cross on the chart, it is notable and usually provides the answer to a question. Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Arthur Miller use strategic-inflection points in their stories to examine these explosive and life-changing moments that forever alter the future.

In the story *The Second Choice* by Theodore Dreiser, Shirley has two notable strategic-inflection points. Mabel Gove invites Shirley to her house for Thanksgiving. She sees Arthur immediately and is infatuated by him. As the night proceeds, she gets the opportunity to dance with Arthur. "Do you like me?" is the question that brings about the strategic-inflection point. Shirley's reaction is momentous: "and from that moment she was almost mad over him, could think of nothing else but his hair and eyes and his smile and his graceful figure." Shirley begins a torturous time in her life at this very moment, throwing Barton and caution

to the wind. She begins lying to Barton because she has to find time to get to know the elusive Arthur. Shirley soon learns that the mirror has two faces. Arthur is a deceiving person as he never has any serious intentions toward her. Shirley realizes that she has thrown the faithful Barton aside for Arthur, who will never stand up and be the person that she desires in her life. Shirley approaches the second strategic-inflection point. She is going to repair the relationship with Barton the faithful. He is thrilled at the sight of Shirley, and she extends an invitation for Barton to come visit her. Shirley knows that if she lets Barton come to her home, the relationship will begin again immediately. Suddenly, she remembers the beautiful and exciting Arthur and compares him to the predictable Barton. Barton can see her emotions: "As she meditated, these various moods racing to and fro in her mind, Barton seemed to notice, and now it occurred to him that perhaps he had not pursued her enough—was too easily put off." He decides to take the bull by the horns and press her to set a date for their meeting. Her moment of indecision fades as she makes the final decision to repair the broken relationship with Barton. Her fate is sealed along with her unrequited heart. These strategic-inflection points come so quickly that decisions have to be made without the luxury of time.

In the story *Roman Fever* by Edith Wharton, there are several strategic-

inflection points. Alida Slade and Grace Ansley meet by coincidence in Rome "at the same hotel, each of them the modest appendage of a salient daughter." The women have come separately to Rome with their daughters who have become friends. As Alida and Grace sit in the evening sun, they have a view of the Colosseum, which is symbolic to both women. Their conversation drifts to stories from the past, including the Great-aunt Harriet story. This opens the door for the second strategic-inflection point. As Alida becomes agitated, she unleashes her anger by saying to Grace, "—and I can repeat every word of the letter that took you there." Alida reveals to Grace that she is the one responsible for writing the letter that tricks Grace into coming to the Colosseum so many years ago. That becomes a fateful night for all three characters. Delphin, Alida's betrothed, meets Grace in the Colosseum that night. Alida is confused when Grace leaves the country. Not until this very minute does she understand how fate tricks her. She receives the final blow when Grace informs her that in one meeting, which is one of the most powerful strategic-inflection points in Grace's life, Barbara was conceived. The conception of a child is truly one of the most life altering situations that a person can be involved in. These moments come so quickly that passion can overrule good judgment and change the course of a life.

In the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, strategic-inflection points appear again. Willy Loman is toying with the idea of going to Alaska to find his father and settle there when he meets a salesman in the Parker House named Dave Singleman. At the age of eighty-four, Dave is still making a living. Willy changes his life course here: "And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want." This chance meeting puts Willy on the life-long adventure of trying to be the best salesman ever born. Throughout Willy's life, selling overrides everything. Willy's wife and children are alone much of the time. This tragic choice of becoming a salesman costs Willy the respect of his son Biff. Biff fails his math final in high school. He finds his father in a hotel room, and they are making plans to persuade the teacher to raise Biff's score. He has to pass this math class so he can claim his football scholarship. Just as Willy convinces Biff to go to the car, a noise comes from the bathroom. Eventually, a partially nude woman comes out of Willy's bathroom. Biff is devastated. Willy tells him, "Now look, Biff, when you grow up you'll understand about these things." However, the damage is done, and the relationship is not repaired until just before Willy dies.

In all three stories lives are changed in a few moments. These moments can be recaptured in the mind just like watching a video. These moments are so powerful, yet sometimes they happen without fanfare, and they produce an occasion for a decision that will put people's lives on a totally separate road than they were on before. Shirley's dance with Arthur starts her on a journey that will leave her dissatisfied for the rest of her life. She and Barton could have been happy without the memories of Arthur. Alida's envy over Grace's meekness and good looks cata-

pults her decision to toy with Grace's emotions. This brings about a backlash that makes truth stranger than fiction. And finally, Willy's chance encounter with Dave Singleman starts him on a path that finally destroys him. The Bible states that time and chance happens to us all, and this is true. These three authors use strategic-inflection points to take the fictional characters down paths that alter their lives forever.

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