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SAPL Newsletter : 1999 : 06 (Summer)

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Hope you enjoy our students' work

Although this is the 13th annual Bayboro Fiction Contest, this is the first time we have compiled all the winning stories into a special summer fiction issue. It is our answer, for the present time, to the lack of a literary magazine on this campus. Literary magazines take a huge investment of time and money and for now, the special issue will have to suffice.

SAPL has always tried to showcase students' work, but this year we wanted to do more. Some years we have had the winning story printed in the newsletter and other years we printed excerpts of the first, second and third-place stories. This year we set a precedent by publishing a special issue, as well as placing the stories on our web page at: www.nelson.usf.edu/contest.html.

Whether you pick up a copy of the newsletter or read it off the Internet, we hope you enjoy the reading.

For any student reading this issue, remember you need only be a part-time student at USF to enter the contest, and no submission fee is required. Although this year's winner is a journalism student, all majors can participate. The emphasis is on creative writing, and many talented writers have emerged from

Magazine & Feature Writing


Me, Miriam Bitner, I'm searching for release, atonement, my own voice. Almost 40 and nothing to show for it. Marriage and motherhood have eaten up my reserves, and left me filled to bursting with words. So I thought writing — writing other people's stories — would offer release.

Hard to say about the others. One woman dresses in business outfits and compiles the student newspaper articles she publishes in a portfolio. She has aspirations. Two are graduate assistants, teaching classes themselves and stringing for the local papers.

A girl, an undergrad, comes in late and yawns long and wide so her fillings show; her tongue curls against the floor of her mouth and her tonsils twitch. She declares her hunger nightly, referring to it as a hostile takeover that catches her off guard.

Then there's Wade. He's one course shy of his B.A. Toward the end of the semester, he tells me his age — 47. I would have guessed him closer to 30. He seems an oversized boy in a grown-up body. His face is enormous and round. His short, stiff, orange hair lays in whorls heavy with cowlicks. He is big, but stubby; his body, too long and dense for his limbs.

Wade's comments in class throughout the semester are off the mark. He has one of those deep, resonant voices and he speaks with complete sincerity. I have never seen him smile, although he laughs sometimes — a guffaw that jars with its volume and intensity. His voice doesn't match what he says. His grasp is limited to minor points, which he latches onto ferociously and repeats too many times.

There's no final exam in this class. The last class is just an excuse to turn in our feature stories and then assemble at the campus tavern. Dr. T. asks for volunteers to read their stories.

Nobody wants to go first. We exchange glances and shrugs. We look up, surprised, when Wade speaks up in a voice even deeper and more serious than usual: "Well, I'll start, then."
bounces an eraser against his palm. We don't look at each other's faces. Not at Wade's and not at each other's.

"Before he came, I was sitting at the round table in our kitchen. My brother sat next to me. My sister and mother were placing dishes on the table. It was what my mother called a garden supper — cuc's and onions and tomatoes soaked in vinegar, soup beans and corn bread. My mother baked cornbread in a big iron skillet and turned it upside down on a plate. The crust crunched when I bit into it and tasted of honey. I was hungry. When I heard him, my mind kept jumping between the cornbread and getting away.

When I heard the latch disengage, my mother looked at me. Her eyes said everything. My sister and brother were already gone out the back door. I slipped into the bedroom I shared with my brother just behind the kitchen.

I hid in the wardrobe. Our house had no closets, just huge, open-backed wardrobes fashioned out of oak boards and door fronts. My mother pressed our clothes and folded them and pressed down the folds so they looked like they came new from a store. She stacked them in neat piles on the wardrobe shelves, along with woolen blankets and sweaters. She had a great belief in moth balls, so the air inside the wardrobe where I hid smelled sharp and irritating. I lay myself on top of the piles of ironed clothes. The weight of my body flattened them just enough to make room for me under the next shelf.

Through the wall, which was thin, I heard the scrape and grunt of our front door, swollen with rainwater, pushing against the frame. I knew he would have almost fallen with the sudden giving way of the door. I heard his crutches jump and catch on the floor boards as he stopped his fall. He muttered, goddamn door. Then he shouted, slurring his words.

Mar-Tha (he drew it out like it was two words) what the hell kinda supper d'ya call this? My mam never wooda served a meal with nothin but beans.

I heard the plates sliding against the wood as he swept his crutch across the table. And then china shattering on the floor. My mother's voice sounded far off, Don't Prank. Please don't.

Ya crazy ugly bitch. Tits like shrunk-up peas. Whore. I seen the way ya look at other men. Think I don't know what goes on here when I'm gone. Tho why any'd want ya's beyond me. Ugly bitch whore. Stinking bitch.

I could feel the heat of my mother's body through the wall. It pressed close against me like the shelf above me and the poison air. Then the wall trembled with the thwonk, thwunck, thwunck of his crutch against it, hitting and missing her body.

And in my head I could see the cornbread, all broken up on the floor. Wade closes his notebook abruptly. He stares down at the cover of it as if the gold lettering holds some key. "I've never told about it before. I thought I had put it away where I'd never find it," he says, his voice little more than a whisper.

Even the undergrad girl stops smacking her gum. Every motion, every little release of nervous tension, stops. No one even breathes.

Dr. T. breaks the spell. "Well, thank you Wade," He stammers something about the cathartic value of journaling. Doesn't say anything about misunderstanding the assignment. Or that he's sorry Wade grew up that way. "And, um now let's get the rest of you to share your work." As if we had never heard it.

We read, two or three pages each, from stories about homeless shelters and head start programs and nursing homes and teen pregnancies. Dr. T. starts to dismiss us, thank us for a good semester, and then remembers, "Blackwell, you never did your presentation on the John Hershey rebuttal, did you?"

Blackwell is one of the TA's. "Coming up," he says.

Thinking anticlimax, we shuffle through folders to find the rebuttal. I tune out Blackwell's voice.

I think of my son, Henry, who bears my husband's first name but nothing else. I glance at my watch. 8 p.m. He will have finished eating, or
No Uncomfortable Silences
By Timothy A. Agnew

I have become a benign ritual sitting here at dusk, swatting mosquitoes and percolating past shadows through our thoughts. I imagine we do it to excavate our lost senses, keeping us vital in this passage of age we enter. Wilfred's hat hides his drowsy eyes as he swings on the porch swing. He's tired but he won't admit it. He's been in the habit of playing Scrabble with Roy Kelly till late in the morning hours, always working to build his already abundant vocabulary. I tell him we're both in his glasses.

The sun began its drop behind the trees, and we sat in a silence that two people share who have known each other all their lives. There are no uncomfortable silences, just a respect that is warranted by time, like two brothers aging across decades of life. It was time for what Wilfred likes to call the “raconteur hour” of our evening, and like clockwork he'll start up. Watch.

“Elliot, do you recall the whispering pine?” he says. Of course I remembered. “The Smoky Mountains, winter of ’34,” he continues. I stare at him, at those little gray eyes I've known most of my 74 years, like I've forgotten the entire thing. It really irks him to no end.

“Tell me how old we were so I can do the math.”

“You were 12. In chronological dog years, 7 years older than me.”

We were both in Boy Scouts then, long before the war stole our innocence. We had a good group here in the Carolinas, and leaders that used the weekend camps as a subterfuge from their domestic lives so they could show us how to cook stew and carve sticks.

It was a weekend camping trip in the Smoky Mountains. It was winter, and a thick powdery snow hugged the ground. The trees were a white velvet; the branches looked like thin pins holding a foot of white snow against the blue sky. On the way up, our troop leader, a retired plumber named Lloyd Johnson, enlightened us on the story of the whispering pines.


“And you didn’t. Sure you didn’t. We all believed it eventually. Not only that, we never questioned it for 15 years,” I say. I remember when Lloyd Johnson spoke about the psychology of the whispering pines.

“No only in these mountains can you find these rare whispering pines. They're rare, indeed. Very rare,” he told us. “You see, they are sensitive to human touch and emotions; they pick up on them. If you gently approach them and take the needles of a branch in your hand, then gently,” Lloyd had one big plumber hand in the air and he took his other and caressed it like it was a baby, a smirk on his thin lips, “gently stroke them, well, that whispering pine will respond by swaying back and forth in the moonlight like it knows you. And if you listen careful-like,” (here he whispers deep in his throat) “you can hear the whisper it makes as it sways.” I recall shooting a surprised grin at Wilfred then, and he just shook his head at me like he didn’t believe it. But he did. Later.

“Not at first,” says Wilfred, squinting into the setting sun, then looking at me and lifting his eyebrows. “I had my doubts, you understand my analyzing everything. Besides, Lloyd Johnson the plumber? He was good at whittling sticks and cooking stews and fixing leaky faucets. But he was no horticulturist!” No, Wilfred did not believe old Lloyd Johnson right then.

It was two nights later we went to find the whispering pines. A heavy snow had fallen that evening, and Lloyd Johnson gathered all 15 of us into the cabin living room to give his speech. He was a heavy man, with a thick turkey neck that shook when he spoke, burying his chin in folds of skin whenever his mouth was open. His thin lips were no match for his form, in fact we often joked that God had stuck them on by mistake. He leaned on a cane he just finished whittling, and it had (like all his sticks had) a spiral handle that spun around into a ball at the top.

“Boys, we are about to go searching for the whispering pines, certainly a most mysterious tree here in the Smoky Mountains. We will all have flashlights, but once we get to the area we must be silent and turn off all the lights or we'll frighten them.” Wilfred raised a brow at me across the room as he spun his flashlight in his hands. “The other scout leaders are already out there trying to locate the pines. Stay together!”

We walked through those silent woods on padded snow; the trees were heavy with the thick cotton fortress and their branches bent low to the ground. There were muffled sounds of low whispered conversations between us, our lights flashing over every object and into each others’ faces shining white in the blackness. Our breaths formed clouds of steam, and I am sure we resembled a sloppy, dark train trudging slowly through the forest, the steam-breath tailing behind us and twisting up to the bright night sky. When our voices were too loud, Lloyd Johnson was quick to turn his chubby face to us and wave his giant Eskimo gloves to the ground.

Finally, after a 30-minute hike, we stopped and huddled around the plumber. In front of us a gorge dipped steeply, blackness, but the other side was lit up by the moon’s aura, and I could see the shadows of the great pines weave a jagged horizon line. Lloyd hushed us all and when our chatter stopped the silence was powerful. You could hear clumps of snow falling from trees 20 miles away.
The horsefly angel

Some believe that God has the face of a man, with a beard as white as time, wrinkled eyes, and some sort of logical, calculated wisdom. They believe he has standards of good and evil, moral and immoral, beautiful and ugly and that all creatures fall into some order. Even Angels. They see Angels with feathered wings, marble lips, clean limbs, and eyes like pale-blue stars, hovering above us all, watching us, and making sure we don’t outstep our moral lines. I have different ideas about Angels because I have seen the work of one.

It was night shift in the Emergency Room of the Sebastian Beach Memorial Hospital and I was hard at work while all the nurses talked and the Doctor slept in his lounge. It didn’t matter how much I did, because there was always something more to do. I cleaned bed pans, emptied Foley catheter bags, mopped, wiped, drew blood, gave Electrocardiograms (EKGs) took out the trash, changed the oxygen tanks, stocked rooms and anything else the patients required or nurses demanded. My job as ER tech put me at the bottom of the mythological totem pole. I was the hyena face at the base of the pole and had to laugh to keep my sanity, to keep my shoulders loose.

It was four in the morning on a Saturday in December when I met my angel. The nurses were all at the station and I was wiping down the counters. Beth was telling all the other nurses about a show she had attended on Friday at her church. It was a program called Power Lords, Servants of Christ, in which huge men composed of more fat than muscle broke baseball bats, smashed wooden boards, broke concrete blocks, and exhaled into hot water bottles until they popped.

“I couldn’t believe it when the biggest one, Big John, told the audience he was still a virgin at 28
years old. What faith! My husband didn't believe him, but it doesn't really matter if he told the truth or not because what he said will be a good influence on the kids," Beth said.  

"I think that's just plain sad," replied another nurse named Ron.  

"And you know they splinter those damn bats before they break them. And they pre-crack the concrete and weaken the water bottles with a pump."

"Well the kids love the Power Lords, Servants of Christ, and they give them positive role models to look up to. None of them does drugs because they all take polygraph tests."

"What about blood tests, Beth," Ron said. "Or urinalysis. How often do you see a patient come in here and get a polygraph test to find out whether or not they just shot a spoonful of heroin in their arm?"

"They do that too, I'm sure they do that too. The Power Lords, Servants of Christ...

"Why can't you just call them the Power Lords? Why do you always have to say the whole thing. God isn't going to zap you with lightning or something if you leave off the last part," Ron said. "And what about money. How does the church pay for them?"

"People make donations into a hat. At the Friday show they got $1,700 for their flight expenses, food, hotels and whatever else."

"I think they should take that money and use it for medical research or feeding people or something more worthwhile," Ron was saying as a truck as big and black as Texas at night pulled up in the restricted zone where only ambulances are allowed.

All the nurses got up, and I put on gloves. I didn't know what was going to come in the door, but I was ready to work. We found no driver in the truck, although Ron said he heard a door slam shut. We had no time for scenarios. The security guards were woken up from the couches in the hospital lobby, the Doctor was roused, and we all went outside to take a look.

At first glance, I thought it was a small whale wrapped in a sheet, but then I saw the hooves. It was the largest horse I had ever seen. A blanket was wrapped around its ribs and someone had written "This horse was struck by lightning" in many different languages. The phrase was written in Italian, French, Spanish, English and Portuguese. The blanket was soaked with water and the ink ran. Dr. Anaison pulled back the blanket and put a stethoscope on the dark ribs of the horse. A horsefly landed on his hand but didn't sting him.

"He's got a rhythm, but it's irregular. Let's get him inside. I'll help."

"We don't have room for horses, Dr. Anaison," Beth said. "I'm the charge nurse and this is going to look really bad for me to have a dead horse in my ER."

"Don't help me then. Go smoke a cigarette like you usually do. Go talk about God. I'm going to help this horse. Move," Dr. Anaison said.

"I'll go get a bed," I volunteered.

"Bring the portable heart monitor, Xavier, the one with the de-fib."

We had the horse on the bed in about two minutes, and rushed him into the cardiac room. His legs were sticking out like trails of black ash left by bottle rockets in flight. None of the nurses came in the room because Beth had advised them against it.

"Beyond the call of duty," she said later. But we needed to start an IV to get some drugs in the horse. He was breathing too hard for his heart to keep up. Ron ran in with a razor, said something like "what the hell," shaved a patch on one of the horse's legs and put an IV in. The veins on the horse were like the Nile.

I hooked up the heart monitor as best I could and we got a rhythm, but it wasn't pretty, so Dr. Anaison grabbed the de-fibrillator pads and got ready to shock the horse.

"You're going to be a doctor, right Xavier?" he said. "I'm going to let you do this for the sake of experience. Hold the pads about a foot apart just under his legs and when I call clear hold on but don't touch any part of him with your body. He's going into ventricular fibrillation so we have to do it now."

I put the pads down and braced myself.

"Clear!" Dr. Anaison yelled. And we did it. He worked the voltage dials and I held the pads. I watched the horse stiffen each time the electricity went in. After his bout with the lightning, it seemed somehow unfair to keep shocking him.

On the third try, I say something far beyond the natural. Just as I was pressing down the pads, I saw a horsefly on the bloody IV port. The horsefly was not sitting on the port, but dancing, smiling and drinking crimson. When the shock went into the horse, the horsefly's wings lit up, an orange glow swirled around its head and unfurled like a mane between its wings, then it took off, not flying but galloping toward the ceiling of the ER like a racehorse named Lightning.

The horsefly was glowing so bright that the nurses saw and went after it with rolled newspapers. I screamed for them to let it go while Jack Anaison told me the horse was dead. As a final effort he infused the port with a heavy duty cardiac drug, but the horse only stiffened. The flat line stayed flat. Meanwhile, Ron had captured the phosphorescent horsefly in a urinalysis cup. He handed me the cup and I took it outside. I felt like a child releasing a helium balloon when I let the horsefly go. It rose up, up — like a shooting star, rewinding into stillness.

"I want to get you into med school, Xavier," Anaison said.

"Because you care about life. Have you taken your MCAT yet?"

"No."

"When will you take it?"

"In 10 days, on Aug. 17."

"Have you taken the prep course?"

"No, it's too expensive," I said. "A thousand dollars."

"What about a prep book?"

"No, I've only studied the basic sciences from textbooks."

"I'll buy you a book. Hell, I'll buy you three books. Come into the ER tomorrow night and pick them up."

The Medical College Admissions Test is the bane of beautiful souls, of creative minds, of those who think in spirals instead of lines. I dreaded it because it was designed to destroy confidence and provoke fear. The questions were written like booby
traps and the material that might be covered in those questions had no bounds. I prepared as best I could.

After working a 12-hour night in the ER, I would go home and read notes as I ate breakfast. Then I would study until I passed out, sleep a few hours, get up, and start all over again. After I got four prep books from Dr. Anaison, the last 10 days were even more traumatic. I put in at least 12 hours of studying a day. I didn't mind so much the sacrifices I made of myself, but it sometimes made me physically nauseous that I was missing my sister Lucy's childhood at a time when she really needed a big brother. Despite my lack of time for her, she even got up at six in the morning and drove the two hours to the testing site with my mother just to sit back at the test booklet, my angel was sitting on the letter C of the first question, so I marked C on the answer sheet.

The horsefly angel gave me every answer. I found out two months later that every answer was right. Right like lightning, spelled out against the sky, in all the languages of the world.

Wolff Bowden is a magnetobiology major at USF New College.

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By Andrea Greenbaum

**Novena**

We called him The Seltzerman. He lived on the ground floor of the same apartment building, and the four of us would giggle as we watched him leave for work in the morning. He wore the same outfit every day — blue coveralls, with his name embroidered in white thread on the front. The coveralls were so worn that even when Tasha, on a dare, tried to get close enough to the white name patch to read his name, she couldn't. The thread was torn, and the name faded and indistinguishable. He would climb into his seltzer truck, the large truck bed filled with crates of beautiful bottles of blue and green, the empties that he collected twice a week. The seltzer bottles were corralled by a thick rope, which kept the crates moving, but you could still hear the bottles shift, the scraping noise of glass against glass, as he would start up his engine and drive off.

Mrs. Plotinsky was the first adult to sit outside in those morning hours. She carried her ugly beach chair, reeking of urine, and positioned herself outside the front courtyard. When The Seltzerman passed her on the way to his truck, she nodded, but never spoke. "Bad man," Mrs. Plotinsky said in her Polish accent, as soon as she saw him drive the truck down the block. "You girls keep 'way," she told us every morning. And we did.

We spent the summer playing handball in the courtyard, careful not to hit Carlita Ruiz's window, since she threatened to pour hot water on us if we hit her "goddamn window one more time." It was always Teresa who said, "Let's go to Sal's." We would stop playing and follow her down the block to Sal's Luncheonette. Because she was 12 and the oldest, she led without coercion, and we — Tasha, Nancy and me — followed happily.

With Teresa in the lead, we trailed behind into Sal's Luncheonette.

Depending on how much money we could scrounge from meager allowances, or loose change from our parents' coat pockets, we would order shakes and fries and split it between us.

"When's your dad comin' out?" Fat Sal asked as he wiped the red Formica counter with his gray rag. Teresa tensed at his question, but continued to stick the french fry in her mouth.

"My mom says he has another year to serve, but with good behavior." 

"A year ain't so long." Teresa shrugged, a practiced gesture of indifference. Nancy raised her eyebrows at me — a mistake — since Teresa noticed and immediately pinched her arm. Teresa then shot me a narrow glance.

"What did I do?" I asked.

"You know what you did," she said menacingly, and stuffed the last french fry in her mouth.

It was evening, around eight last summer, when the police came for Teresa's dad. Nancy was over at my apartment and we sat together on my grandmother's fire escape. We saw the black-and-white police car pull up to the front of the building, and watched as two officers walked
past the urine-stencched Mrs. Plotinsky and Mrs. Carmine, who sat outside perpetually knitting ugly sweaters for some cousin or nephew in Italy.

A few moments later they emerged from the building.

"Oh my god!" Nancy said, instantly gripping my arm. "It's Mister R."

"It's Mister R."

Teresa's dad. He staggered between the officers.

"He's drunk," Nancy said.

"No kidding?" Teresa's dad was always drunk. When he ran out of Thunderbird and the liquor stores were closed, Teresa told us he would drink Vicks cough syrup, which, she offered, didn't taste too bad if you held your nose while you downed it.

They walked past Mrs. Plotinsky and Carmine, who even stopped knitting her ugly sweater to stare.

They roughly shoved Teresa's dad into the back seat, then drove off. Mrs. Plotinsky spit on the ground. "Good riddance," she said to Mrs. Carmine, who crossed herself and went back to her knitting.

We never asked, but it was neighborhood lore that her dad had robbed a liquor store at gunpoint in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

Now, at Sal's, Nancy looked up at the big red clock behind the counter. "It's five. I have to get home."

"Me to," Tasha said.

"See ya, dolls," Fat Sal said with a wave of his counter rag, as Nancy and Tasha walked out the door.

Fat Sal was filling up the sugar jars on the tables when he spoke to Teresa. "I hope your Mom feels better."

I saw Teresa cringe. "My mom's fine, Sal," she said.

"I didn't mean nothin' by it. Mrs. Carmine just mentioned--"

"Mrs. Carmine is an ugly, fat WOP who better learn to keep her big fuckin' mouth shut!"

Sal stormed over to the counter.

"You watch your mouth, young lady!" he shouted.

Silently, she hopped off the stool. Ignoring him, she turned to me. "You want to come for supper?"

"Sure," I answered uncertainly.

She walked out the door without turning to say good-bye to Sal.

"Bye, kiddo," Sal said to me with a wink, and he tossed me two Bazooka bubble gums.

I winked back, following Teresa outside Sal's Luncheonette, into the startling warmth of a Brooklyn summer evening.

+++ Inside the tile hall of the apartment building, Teresa pulled open the door to her apartment. "Mom?" she called out.

"Mom?" she said again, this time walking into the bedroom. I trailed. Rose, her mother, was in bed. The curtains were drawn and the room was dim, except for the candles burning on the dresser. Behind the candles stood several statuettes. Rosaries hung from the dresser mirror. Intrigued, I walked over to the dresser and picked up one of the female statuettes. "Those are saints," Teresa said.

"Oh," I answered.

"Don't Jews believe in saints?" I had no idea whether Jews believed in saints. I only knew that I had never seen those statuettes in my house. "I guess," I said.

Teresa walked over to the dresser. "That's the Virgin Mary," she said. "You pray to her when you need a miracle."

"Why don't you just ask God?"

"God's got wars and babies to worry about. The saints are like his helpers."

I nodded.

Teresa picked up a statuette, showing a man in a long robe. "This here's Saint Joseph. You pray to him for lost causes." She placed Saint Joseph down and picked up another one. "Saint Francis. When you have an animal who's sick, you pray to him." She put him down and picked up another. "Saint Christopher. You pray to him so you don't get killed on a trip."

Teresa picked up the only other female statuette. "This is Saint Teresa. My mom named me after her."

"What does she do?"

"She's the saint of flowers and children. If you're scared, you pray to Teresa and she'll save you."

"Like Wonder Woman," I offered.

"I never thought of that. She's exactly like Wonder Woman."

While Saint Teresa bore little resemblance to Lynda Carter, the buxom actress who played Wonder Woman on the television show, I could see how praying to her might make you feel safe, even if she didn't carry around a magic lasso.

"Teresa, baby?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

Rose sat up. Her face looked swollen.

"Oh, hi, Karen," Rose said.

"Hi."

"Can Karen eat over?" Teresa asked.

"Sure, but we don't got nothin' in the house. Run to the store and get spaghetti. I have sauce in the fridge. Get my purse. I got a few dollars." Rose nodded toward her closet.

"Teresa walked to the closet and pulled out a small change purse.

"You got two dollars."

"That's enough. Mother Mary my head is poundin'!" Rose said, slipping down beneath the covers.

"Your head wouldn't hurt if you didn't drink," Teresa said coldly.

"What did you just say to me?"

Rose bolted up.

"Nothin'," Teresa said.

"Who the hell do'ya think you're talking to?"

"I'll be back," Teresa said, turning her back on her mother and walking out of the bedroom, crumbling the two dollars and stuffing them into her shorts' pocket.

"You talk to me like that and I'll get the goddamn broom! Do you hear me?" Rose shouted to Teresa, but the front metal door to the apartment already slammed shut. "Christ! My head is poundin,'" Rose said again.

"Do you think you can be a dear and get me some aspirin from the medicine cabinet?"

I got Rose the aspirin, and let myself out of the apartment, wondering if I was still invited for dinner. I jumped down the stairs to the ground floor landing, and see The Seltzerman staring at me from the doorway of his apartment.

"I'd like to show you something," he said to me.

"What do you want to show me?"

I asked nervously.

"It's a secret," he said.

"I'm not allowed to go into stranger's apartments," I told him.

"Of course not," he said. "But if you want to see it, you'll have to
come inside, Karen.”
   Grandly he opened the door to his apartment.
   “You know my name?”
   “Of course,” he answered.
   It was then that I heard a small chirp, and then a high-pitched voice, which shouted, “Come in!” I peeked curiously into the apartment and
   The Seltzerman smiled.
   “That’s my secret. Do you want to see her?”
   “Who?”
   “My parrot.”
   Without answering, I entered. The Seltzerman shut the front door and bolted the lock. My heart skipped a beat.
   The apartment was almost bare. In the living room sat a ratty couch, and instead of a regular coffee table, The Seltzerman had taken a piece of wood and laid it between two seltzer crates. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a large metal bird cage. Inside, perched on a long, wooden stick, was a green parrot, who was using its curved, hooked bill to climb along the cage.
   I walked closer to the cage, and it blinked at me with its dark eyes.
   “Her name is Isabel,” he said.
   The Seltzerman went over to his couch and sat down, propping his feet on the makeshift coffee table.
   “Isabel, say ‘hi’ to my friend, Karen,” he told the bird.
   “Hi, Karen!” Isabel squawked.
   I laughed.
   “Can I get you something to drink? Would you like a glass of seltzer?” he asked.
   “No, thanks,” I said.
   “No thanks!” the bird mimicked.
   “Can I touch her?” I turned to The Seltzerman. He had one hand tossed over the back of the couch, while the other he rested in his lap.
   “Stick your finger in the cage and see if she’ll let you scratch her head.”
   I stuck my finger in the cage and the bird looked at it with disdain. Iiggled it. The bird stared. Then, to my surprise, she climbed down from the top of the cage and nuzzled her head under my finger. She let me stroke her head, and her green feathers felt smooth and soft. I don’t know how long I stroked her head before I turned to The Seltzerman. He smiled at me as he rhythmically moved his hand up and down in front of his pants. Beneath his hand, I saw a thick bulge.
   “I have to go!” I shouted, immediately withdrawing my finger from the cage. I ran to the door and struggled with the bolt. It wouldn’t open. I tugged on the door. “Let me out! I have to go!” I screamed.
   “I have to go!” squawked Isabel.
   “I have to go!”
   Calmly, The Seltzerman got up from the couch, walked over to the door, and with a single turn of his wrist, unlatched the bolt. I yanked the door open, letting it slam shut behind me, and ran into the apartment lobby and straight out the heavy doors — smack into Teresa, whom I almost knocked down.
   “Where the hell have ya been?” she asked. “I’ve been lookin’ all over for ya.”
   But before I could answer, she put her arm around my shoulder.
   “Are ya havin’ spaghetti with me or not?”
   Andrea Greenbaum is an English major at USF Tampa.

STUDENTS from page 1

disciplines outside of English. This year’s crop is a case in point as two of our finalists are science majors. We usually receive about 50 entries. I would be remiss not to give credit to the founder of the fiction contest, Niela Eliaison. As a columnist for the St. Petersburg Times and a talented fiction writer, Niela understood the importance of writers having an outlet for their creativity. She understands the time a writer spends alone sculpting each sentence. As a writer, she knows that writers, either professional or aspiring, need a market for their words, and a spot to receive recognition.

It was Niela’s foresight and verve that led her to establish this contest. In the beginning, she scurried around working on the contest alone. She later enlisted help from a few friends and the work was split up. She retired from SAPL two years ago, but I’m happy to announce that she will rejoin the SAPL board in August. Niela will chair the next fiction contest, and we are delighted to have her back.

Bayboro Harbor

The humidity sticks to the roof of your mouth like fresh peanut butter.
The grass beneath your feet is squishy and green.
The buzz of insects is lost in the harbor’s beauty.

Thirteen docked boats with names like “Elusive” and “Bullfrog” bob carelessly in the calm water under a scorching sun.

Palm trees stand brave and tall, boldly facing the blue sky swirled with randomly placed marshmallow clouds.

A neon Mountain Dew bottle drifts lifelessly in the water as fish dart near it, bubbling with curiosity.

The clanking of boats and the cawing of birds add soft noise to this quiet scene.

Seaweeds and seaplants wave their long arms at nosy kid reporters trying to get a story.

White golf carts and their drivers come in and out through the sidewalks, unaware of the life and beauty around them. Buildings look on from the edges of the water as if too good for anything so small and simple. Cars whiz by in a rush on the street.

If life could be slowed down to a crawl; Stopped and frozen,

Then edited;
The pollution and unhappiness all taken out;
This would be all that’s left.
Happiness and tranquility
in the Bayboro Harbor.

— Leann Goree, Age 12
Southside Middle School

Leann wrote this poem while attending the Poynter Institute for Media Studies’ summer writing camp held at USF St. Petersburg.

Thanks to Niela, we have a fiction contest with an honored past of more than a decade. Thanks to SAPL, there will be enough of these “literary” newsletters printed so students, not just members of SAPL, will be able to take one home and read it. They will be able to read fine stories written by their peers, and the winners will get to see themselves in print.

Last but not least, thanks to Library Director Landon Greaves and his staff for a library that the St. Petersburg campus and USF can be proud of. The fiction contest is just one of the many special ways that the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library shines in downtown St. Petersburg.
Hurricane Catfish

By Jason Carr

In ichthyology class the craziest fish we ever studied was our professor: Arlo Drummond, Ph.D. He had hair like an amateur and eyes to match; he didn't like to kill fish for research, but he did it anyway; class was inevitably an experience. Arlo, as we all called him, gave us stories instead of lectures, and liked to claim that his last name was derived from a fish, the drum.

Arlo taught us by showing us: sometimes he would come to class with a fish in each pocket, which he cunningly lined with plastic for just such a purpose. As he walked, the brine in his pockets sloshed. One day he was later than usual because a special fish had just arrived at the lab.

It was a strange Friday afternoon because a hurricane named Zoe was churning up the Gulf of Mexico and headed straight for our college on the Florida coastline. While we were in class, other people were desperately buying gallons of water, boarding their windows and evacuating.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Arlo said as he came in. "My wife wants me to do something about the hurricane, but I'm not afraid of hurricanes. My high school football team was called the Hurricanes. I was their mascot, well, not really the mascot but the kicker. I sat on the bench until it came time for kicking, then the coach would yell 'Drummond' and I had to go kick the football through the sun. I met the coach when I was fishing. He was a fisherman, too. Once I had a shark on the line and fought it all the way down the pier. When the line snapped, I was so angry that I just started kicking it. It wasn't tied down to anything and man it flew! Coach saw me and told me to come be on the team, so I did. Anyway, we got a new fish today. I couldn't bring her in because she's adjusting to her tank right now. An albino catfish from the Afro-Asian family Clariidae. Her scientific name is Clarias batrachus. Write that down, I'm going to put it on the exam. Her everyday name is Zoe. I named her after the hurricane. Write that down, too!"

"Isn't Clarias batrachus the walking catfish?" Paul asked.

"Yes. We had to put a makeshift roof on the tank so she doesn't flop out and run away. Fish of this species have been walking around Florida for years. But not albinos. They cost extra, but I used my Herkomer P. Lugwench grant to finance the catfish. I also brought two new kayaks for the lab portion of this course. Why don't we all go on a little field trip to my car and have a look at them. Then we can stop into the lab and admire Zoe."

We all got up and went outside. The pine needles were swirling in a small whirlwind; they looked like fighting dogs. Some of the students took a look at the sky. It looked utterly distinguished, like a princess of Atlantis.

"I'm not worried about it, but if the hurricane knocks out the power, the tank oxygen levels are going to drop and fish will die. Not Zoe, I hope. If a fish can walk on asphalt, you'd think a little less oxygen wouldn't hurt her," Arlo said, talking to no one in particular.

In the remains of midnight, Hurricane Zoe struck shore. She took coconut trees and smashed the windshields of trucks; telephone poles bent like Pisa; greenhouses collapsed on tomatoes and beautiful bees. Sirens were going off all over town as those who had been crazy enough to stay evacuated at last. Even a college boy from Nebraska got in his car and went North without any particular course; his college was a red bull's eye for the storm. The ceiling of the organic chemistry lab caved in and rainwater began to react with every imaginable. Jars sputtered and exploded; gases formed that were noxious enough to kill cattle; a

Everglades. We went down there last year and I got in trouble because I had some students in the water with alligators. Some of the professors here and administrators have gotten upset about that. They felt I was wrong to put students in danger. Maybe I was wrong, but I wasn't scared of alligators, I was in the water too! Next time, if anyone has a problem with alligators, they can stay in the boat and be the alligator watcher. That way, if the alligator starts to look aggressive, the other students can get warned. Damn bureaucracy!"

One of the students recommended moving the kayaks inside for the storm, but Arlo said he wanted them outside in case a flood came and he needed to get away. The weather report predicted a seven-foot storm surge and our college was less than 100 yards away from the bay.

We left the kayaks and went into the lab to look at the catfish, Zoe. She had eyes that reminded me of the Great Red Spot, the huge storm that circulates on Mars. Zoe's white, dorsal spines were like a jumbled picket fence; they rose from short to tall, then descended again. She looked utterly distinguished, like a princess of Atlantis.

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Zoe picked up a grove of palm trees somewhere on the coast and gave a terrible lesson in acupuncture to the biology complex, including the fish biology lab, whose walls were impaled at least 10 times. The only section of the building that was spared was a tiny office on whose door a bronze name-plaque read Arlo Drummond, Ph.D. In this room, the only soul left on campus, oblivious to every danger and entirely devoid of fear was Dr. Drummond. He was busy poring over a fish catalog, trying to decide what combination of fish he could afford with the remainder of the grant. If it had not been for a stray toilet seat, which began banging on his office door, Drummond would not have looked up at all.

"What's that? Damn students want to talk to me about something, again, probably fish!"

Drummond got up and opened his office door to let in the toilet seat. As soon as the door was opened, the toilet seat flew across the room and tore a hole in the far wall. Why it had not simply torn a hole in the door was beyond comprehension. Drummond peered into the hole and finally realized that something was happening. Skeletons from a thousand different organisms were rioting in the hall after having been freed from their cases in the zoology department.

"I hope the fish are doing fine," he said to himself as he returned to his desk. The fish were in the process of being smashed and scattered. Many tanks had turned to trash, and gasping gills lay everywhere. Some electric wires had even fallen into one tank and fried several Belizean eels. Zoe the catfish was busy surveying the scene with her blood-bead eyes; the lid on her tank had been fortuitously swiped away by a giant palm frond. She wasn't a stupid fish, and thought about all her options. Other fish were dying all over the room, and she knew that the power would soon be cut off. In fact the blackness came over all the buildings just as she leapt from her tank, skidded across a padded stool, and landed on the threshold of the lab entrance.

"I know there's supposed to be a hurricane, but this is ridiculous. Where are the power line guys? They could do a poor ichthyologist a favor now and then," Drummond said as he got up and lit a fish-shaped candle that sat on his desk. He then grabbed the candle and started down the hall, which ran past the labs and to an exit.

Suddenly he stopped, bent down, and held out his flaming fish to look at something that was moving along the corridor, also toward the exit. He saw at once that it was Zoe, his recent albino acquisition to the collection.

"Where you goin'?" he said point blank to Zoe.

"I need freedom," the fish said.

"Look, I don't have time to chat. The sea's rising and unlike you I'll drown. I have a plan, though, to get you clear of here. Follow me. I'm not picking you up because one of your kind once spined me and my thumb was sore for a month," Drummond said as he passed Zoe and headed out the exit door.

While the albino catfish hobbled along behind him, Drummond pulled down one of the kayaks, put on a life vest, helmet and spray skirt, all of which he kept in the back of his car. Zoe made it out of the building and went over to see what he was doing.

"If you stay around here, you'll get squashed by debris," Drummond said to the fish.

"You've got to get into deeper water. It's been a long time, fish, but I used to be a kicker on a football team. Climb on my shoe and I'll kick you toward the bay."

Zoe hesitated, then rocked on her pectoral fins like a seal and slid up onto Dr. Drummond's right shoe. He then took a few steps back, strode forward in the rainy moonlight, and kicked the catfish straight into the hurricane. Zoe went into Zoe. Then Drummond realized that the calm, the lack of heavy wind, and the fact that moon and stars were visible meant that he had kicked in the calm, in the eye of the storm.

"Lucky fish. I can't kick too well into a hundred-mile-an-hour wind. I guess all albinos are lucky. I wish I was an albino instead of a professor," he said to himself as he hoisted the kayak back onto the roof of his car, then got inside of it, careful not to roll off the side of the car and break his neck. He knew the sea like only a fish man can know her. When the storm surge came, he knew it would rise above his car.

When Hurricane Zoe hit Dr. Drummond, he was fortunate to have his helmet; a brick from a small Caribbean island bounced off his head. Still, he wasn't fazed. At worst, the hurricane would kill him; at best he would get a chance to test one of the kayaks in the field. As the bay rose and nudged him off the roof of his car, he wondered what kind of fish he might see at sunrise.

"The students are going to love this," he said of the college campus as he paddled away through the ruins of modern education.

Jason Carr is an organic chemistry major at USF New College.

SILENCES from page 2

him. Everybody thought were were out of our minds. When I stood to go, he handed me his cane. "I won't need this anymore," he told me. He up and died two weeks later."

When Wilfred finished, he looked up at me and I sat with my feet up on the railing, feigning sleep like I was not listening to the story. He shifted in his chair, annoyed, until I grinned at him.

And the silence continued like that, until the cicadas buzzed in the trees and then they, too, fell silent, respecting the space where nothing is said.

Timothy A. Agnew is an English major at USF New College.

Now taking entries for this year's S A P L fiction contest

*Submission deadline: Oct. 15*

Send your story to:

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First prize: $250
Second & Third prize: $100 each
not eating, more likely. My husband forces him to eat, can't tolerate his lack of hunger. But Thursdays, my husband plays poker and a sitter watches Henry. She'll be tucking him into bed now. I picture his head, his blond curls encircling his face on a pillow like a halo. My husband thinks his hair looks effeminate. When he was five, starting kindergarten, my husband cut it so short the ringlets couldn't curl, but within a week his head was all ringed again. Now seven, Henry insists on keeping his hair longer. He has a way of shaking his head that sends his curls flying; it infuriates his father.

When I bend over to kiss him at bedtime, I see the angel first. Until the heady mother-love feeling gives way to resentment. Henry deflates me. He holds me by force, looking deep into my eyes, insisting, "Mom, I have to tell you something." I start out listening, but he goes on and on. Maybe if I could snuggle down on the bed with him, fall asleep myself. But he has rules about that. "Don't sit on my bed. Don't touch my sheets, Mom. Just kiss me right here on my forehead." So I get impatient, shift my weight from leg to leg. I have such a short attention span when it comes to Henry. He always wants more from me than I can give. I cut him off finally, "Stop Henry. Go to sleep." Leave him in tears.

The image of Henry merges with my picture of Wade as a boy. I see him frozen at the table, his eyes locked with his mother's. The mother I picture is right out of those Dust Bowl photographs, but with my features. The look combines fear and regret and failure, all those things I feel when I can't focus my maternal feelings and can't ameliorate my husband's disappointment in Henry — in his anxiousness, his femininity. The connections remain vague, but somehow a piece of Wade's catharsis becomes my own. I am still, quiet inside my head.

I'm not listening to Blackwell's presentation, but I snap back when I hear the word "naked." Blackwell talks standing naked in front of his first class. He asks, "What is more true — the dream about my naked vulnerability or the reality of acting at ease in front of the class?"

All semester we have argued about the responsibility of the reporter to report accurate, documented events versus the need to communicate the human reality behind the events. Objectivity versus subjectivity. The possibility of objectivity drew me to journalism in the first place, but tonight I realize subjectivity has won out — Wade's and Blackwell's and my own.

In the hallway after class we mass together, heading down the east wing toward the tavern. Wade goes the other direction, without a word to anyone. I think about calling after him, but I am unwilling to break my internal silence. It never was, I realize, my voice that I sought.

Reaching the tavern with the others, I don't turn in. I walk on to the edge of the bay where I stand and listen to the barely perceptible lap of the water against the sand. I stand there for a long time without impatience or thoughts of leaving.
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