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Dialogue

Staff and writers of Dialogue

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Kelly Benjamin VanderBrug says she hates coming up with cunning defining quotes. She could tell a funny story, but she lacks the room.

Lori Engbers is a junior who has an intense love-hate relationship with salsa.

holly huisman denies the logical probability of logic, and has a penchant for Price’s pimento cheese spread.

Peter LaGrand says lifeblood is the only liquid that people should imbibe on a daily basis.

jane c. knol wants to win one for Yom Kippur.

Carin Palsrok says she likes skinny dipping too.

Mike Richison likes cheese.

Greg Scholtens has been talking with a lisp lately and quite frankly, everyone’s a little worried.

Coby Sytsma is from Madison, Wisconsin and is one cheesehead with an attitude.

Kelly VanAndel is searching for a ranch in the land where it snows tortillas.

Michael VanderBrug likes naked women.

Rachel VanDuyn Vandenbroek says, “I now take classes because I love to learn things, like photography—oh, and because I can take one free class per semester! I work full time in the Alumni PR office.”

Jim Van Farowe says “I’m not as serious as I look.”

Reuben Van Til is an art major and enjoys creating tattoo designs. “Live to Ride, Ride to Live.”

Timothy J. Veltman is a senior who has an intense love-hate relationship with nudity.

John Ye is from Wuhan, China. He is a former university teacher of English and now a graduate student in education at Calvin. Says John, “Language is my best friend and my worst enemy.”

Sara Zuiderveen wishes she were Martha Stewart.

Andrew Zwart is growing up way too quickly. Someone should ask him to come out of the library and play.
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Calvin College:
Your Place

A bumper sticker of the Vietnam Era proclaimed, *America: Love It or Leave It*. It succinctly expressed the disgust and frustration many felt with “resistance from behind.” While some Americans lowered the flag to half-mast for the four student bystanders killed by the Ohio National Guard during a demonstration at Kent State University, others felt that the riotous students deserved worse. Thirty years later, the patriotic “Love It or Leave It” view of America is not uncommon.

The persuasive force of a bumper sticker lies in its capacity to convert a complex sentiment into a pithy one-liner, which in turn relies on its concentrated emotional appeal and its clever diction to demand the reader’s assent. As a six-word argument, the “America” sticker begs the questions: Whose definition of America are we dealing with? And why must one love it or leave it?

There is little consensus today on the nature of the past, present, or future of the United States. While one individual might understand American history as a gradual departure from the Christian principles of the pilgrims, another might see it in terms of continuous institutional oppression. The way you view our country’s history, current situation, and ideal all shape your idea of what it means to be American, and vice versa.

“America” is meaningful only as it is approached through particular perspectives; the United States does not have a disembodied “essence.” This is not to say that everyone’s understanding of the U.S. is equally helpful, or equally faithful to the history books. But the multiform American experience is more than the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Emancipation Proclamation; more than a series of wars, prohibitions, or tariffs; more than forty-two presidents, fifty states, or a gross national product.

So “America” can be very ambiguous. But given that you have formed your own vision of America, why would you want anyone else to “Love it or leave it”? Most of us have a desire, on some level, to be with our “own kind”—whether on the level of kinship, race, nation, religion, or politics. We may also have a complementary inclination: a reckoning of the limitations of our own
groups, a longing for the “other,” or a yearning to gain a more cosmopolitan insight into what it means to be human—as well as a sense that to do justice to your brother and sister you must understand them on their own terms. When we quip “Love it or Leave it” we subordinate human solidarity to group solidarity, and we demand to be surrounded by those who are like us.

If everyone were to be with their “own kind,” the world could seem a colorful patchwork of homogeneous segments. From a distance, this might appear to constitute a lively and fascinating variety. But as each group grew increasingly isolated from its neighbors, and increasingly short-sighted, the perennial struggle for the earth’s scarce resources would doubtless erupt into holy wars.

Let us return from internecine warfare to the bumper sticker. I have considered it for its own sake, but also to understand a sentiment widespread at Calvin College. In your journeys across campus, you may have heard statements such as, “Well, that’s the way Calvin is. If you don’t like it, you can go somewhere else.” Translated into a bumper sticker, this would read Calvin: Love It or Leave It.

If asked on an exam to give the meaning of “Calvin College,” many of us might respond as if asked to give the meaning of “America.” In our bluebooks, we could build a model of Calvin based on its foundational documents, its expanded mission statement, and its church affiliation. But when posed the same question by a friend, we would likely give a different response; we would colorfully portray Calvin as it has figured into our own experience and development.

If we think of Calvin as a set of organizational rules and practices determined by the intentions of our founders, the decrees of Synod, and current administrative policy, it is legitimate to point out, “These are the rules. If you break them, you will suffer the consequences—if you do not wish to abide by them it is best that you leave.” This perspective has much truth: we should understand the laws and mores of our community. But just as there are shortcomings to understanding the U.S. in terms of its legal system, so our static model of Calvin neglects the fact that Calvin is also a totality of living human beings. There will always be a tension between law and life.

The “Calvin experience” varies among different members of the community. Students, faculty, and staff find themselves at Calvin for many different reasons, and they have as many different routes in getting here. Sooner or later, you may find yourself asking, “What am I doing here?”

It is not my intent to offer a response, but I hope you will ask and answer earnestly. You may find that your reasons for being here, and your Calvin experience, are different from those of others. You may also find that—at least right now—you don’t love it. I hope I have demonstrated that you do not need to. Like the United States, the Christian Church, or Grand Rapids, Calvin College was built by human hands. And it can be reshaped by human hands.

This has been a long-winded welcome. Because those of us who love this community as it is do not need a welcome, the welcome is for those who wish to change the community. It is a plea to the socialist student, or the lesbian, or the professor increasingly estranged from the Christian Reformed Church—consider why you are here, but also consider staying with us and teaching us. Our founders are dead, our institutional creeds are written in ink—and you are Calvin College.

--Robert Huie
She was easily the brightest. Although not as proficient in English as some of the other students, she had been in the class for a much briefer period of time. I too had only been present there for a short while (in fact, much less than her), but there I sat trying to teach Innis idiomatic expressions that were senseless to a foreign tongue.

The events which took place in and out of that classroom between Innis and I still seem to me of the miraculous sort. Perhaps only because they directly involved me, and the events, properties connected to the self demand a greater significance; yet, perspective must be held. Subjectivity is fine, as long as it is eventually given the chance to be observed through an objective lens.

Beginning objectively, then. Innis’s English as a second language course met in a well-painted portable lying behind an old, quickly deteriorating school; one that could never have held more than five or six classrooms. I had been placed there as a tutor through a summer employment agency for university students. The program I ended up working in operated under the supervision of Ms. Dorming, a pleasant and accommodating woman. It was there I first met Sam, another tutor from a different school. Sam was shortish with a pug nose and dimples. She was slightly bitchy, but even more so, she was simply one of the dullest girls I have ever met. Humor that contained even a tinge of irony could take minutes of explication before she fully realized the joke; concepts just slightly more complex than plots of television dramas flew by her head.

How the hell did she get that job anyway? One day, driving home together, she was telling me about a recent break-up and how it was all for the best because the poor male under discussion was a Pisces and therefore simply not compatible with her (she was an Aquarius). After bashing unknowing Pisces everywhere for approximately ten minutes, she asked me what sign I was. “Pisces,” I answered, lying. After a moment, her lilliputian mind registered the lack of foresight, and she froze in silence. This anecdote still sums Sam up for me.

Thank God she has no plans to be a teacher, I often thought to myself. How dangerous she could have been. For what would happen if Innis’s lessons were to be placed in the hands of such a buffoon?

Luckily, the advanced group that Innis belonged to was under my care while
the intermediate students were Sam’s domain. My group was an odd three. There was Kiran Jhabvala, originally from Gujarat, nervous almost all of the time but also attentive and quick. And poor Pyotr Miusov, who while with a name like that should inspire the image of a husky, burly Russian, in reality occupied a slender figure with a sunken face. He was as separated from our conception of his countrymen as he was from his motherland. Lastly, Innis. I assumed she was Spanish because she was exceptionally beautiful and I often thought to myself this is the kind of woman that men fight bulls for. Innis’s skin was the perfect olive complexion blemished only by an occasional bruise. Her hair was worn pulled back in a simple fashion. Her nose rested above a faint mustache. Her eyes were bright and piercing, yet when coupled with her mouth betrayed a sense of melancholy. It had to do with her thin lips which even in the midst of a nervous smile disclosed deep reflection and unadulterated thought. Her smiles usually appeared when I was correcting her.

“No Innis. You have to think less literally, less physically.”

“Like less up here,” she said, motioning to her head.

“No, no. Actually more up there.” We both smiled at her mistake. “Listen. If I said that I ran into Kiran at the mall, it means we had a chance encounter. It means that I didn’t expect to see her, not that I actually crashed into her.”

“Okay. Right. Not like bang.” She slapped her hands together indicating a collision.

“That’s right, you’ve got it. Not like
bang.” I repeated her gesture.

It turned out that Innis was from Cuba. She had been in Canada for only nine months, and was now living in an apartment with a husband and mother-in-law. I gathered this information from various lessons we had gone through designed to help foreigners perfect their small talk on such topics. Both Pyotr and Kiran beamed while discussing their families; Pyotr was a grandfather, and Kiran had several nieces and nephews. It didn’t take me long to become familiar with the various names of these kin and I could see how this pleased both of them. Innis, on the other hand, spoke very little about relations. I still have no recollection of Innis ever mentioning her husband’s name. She, in fact, said very little. While others took every chance they had to express their opinions on various cultural matters, she remained silent. This quietness only added to the sense of sadness which I had begun to associate with her. Because of this, I was surprised when she approached me alone after class on a warm Friday afternoon.

Like all Fridays, it was a shortened day allowing both the students and teachers more time to enjoy the beautiful Southern Ontario weather. The majority of the morning had been spent with the class as a whole group discussing their intentions for the upcoming long weekend. After explaining my plans for camping, I waited with interest for Innis’s turn. Before then, Sam went on at length about dance clubs and parties and the like; eventually Sam stopped her prattle and Ms. Dorming had the opportunity to inquire after Innis’s plans.

“Nothing really,” came her response with simplicity.

“That? Surely you must have something in mind,” coaxed Ms. Dorming.

I think she thought that Innis was shy of her English. I was less convinced it was this that inspired her quiet. Ms. Dorming continued to try and cajole an expanded answer from Innis: “Perhaps you might do some gardening, or go shopping or go sit out in the sun a little?”

“Yes. Maybe. I’m not too sure.”

I entered back in the conversation saying, “Sometimes it’s much nicer not to be tied to any commitments, to just enjoy what comes our way. That often makes for the best weekend, for the most wonderful moments.” A faint, almost indecipherable smile appeared.

That afternoon, when Innis approached me for help, I confess I felt somewhat flattered. I thought she must have seen in me something lacking in either Sam or Ms. Dorming. It’s not that I needed convincing of this, though. It would be more accurate to say that I wanted to believe the beauty I saw in Innis was something that was unique within me. The others had, through some kind of shortsightedness, simply missed it. Was this then the reason Innis had come to me? She approached in a timid manner, but this did not seem to arise out of a sense of nervousness.

“I mean to ask you Thomas, I would like some more help with my speaking. I need to get better because I need to get a good job. I can pay you money for lessons?”

The way in which she asked for help was endearing. How could she afford to pay me if she needed a job?

“There is no need for that,” I assured her. “I would be happy to assist.”

Responding, my voice quivered slightly. This already seemed to me the beginning of some kind of adventure. In some way, I imagine I was just hoping to teach her something more than English phrases.
Cocoon

Kelly Benjamin VanderBrug

woodcut
I also wanted to show Innis that I had it in me to understand something of her (even though I didn’t and still don’t entirely), and in so doing I hoped to be connected to what I thought I had glimpsed; what I can only explain as a trace of the depth of her character. We agreed that we would begin the lessons at her apartment the following Tuesday evening.

I suppose this is the least awkward place to state that Innis and I made love, or slept together, or whatever terminology one prefers. While this fact had to disclose itself in the unfolding of the following events, it seems best to just say it now. I would hate to think that this event was being led up to in a cheap or sensational manner. I would also like to point out that whatever suspicions may have arisen, I had no intention of this when I agreed to tutor Innis. It was a simple, guileless event.

I arrived at her apartment shortly after five o’clock and was greeted by her at the door. It was a small place with very few decorations or ornaments. A few plants had been set amongst a table, a couch, and a television, all of which stood in what looked to be the family room. A large woven rug hid a majority of the ugly fake wooden tiles that made up the floor. The kitchen, from which a deep earthy aroma emanated, stood adjacent to this room.

Besides these two rooms, Innis didn’t bother showing me the rest of the apartment. We immediately sat down at the table to begin.

“Where is your family?” I asked to ease into the work.

“My husband is working. His mother is out playing Binko.”

“Binko? What’s Binko?”

“Umm. The game we played in class. You put dots in a row?” That’s right; we had played a modified version of the game in order to improve the students’ vocabulary. It was thrilling to observe how exhilarated students felt at a win. Soon, Ms. Dorming, Sam and I were equally as excited. The whole game seemed almost otherworldly. I suppose that’s why people go to Bingo halls; not so much out of a lust for money, but for the sensation of an instant when you are touched by something outside of your own control.

“You mean Bingo.”

“Yes. Bingo. She is out playing Bingo. It is good, more quiet here helps me to... to...”

“...to concentrate. Yes, me too.” Most of the work we did was less grammatical than it was social. She needed more help learning the quirks of English conversation than labelling the different parts of a sentence. Knowing how to respond to the question “what’s up?” seemed more important than making sure all of her verbs agreed with their subjects; that would come in time through listening. For a while we covered specific situations (things I thought she may encounter at work) but we eventually drifted into more natural conversation in which I would simply correct her mistakes, explaining the reasoning behind the correction if she required it.

“Thomas, would you like to crush Sam?” Innis asked.

“What? You mean would I like to hurt her? Well, she’s not my favorite person, but I don’t wish any harm towards her.”

“No. I’m not explaining right. Do you like her?” Innis clarified. I giggled.

“You mean do I have a crush on Sam. No definitely not.” I continued to laugh. This was fun.

It seems odd, considering what was about to happen, that she did not lead up to
it in any way. Perhaps she had as little of an idea about what was going to happen as I did. I suppose the question concerning Sam may have been some indication (although I still maintain its innocence) but besides that there were no innuendos or playful looks suggesting that a seduction was in the works. In fact, the last thing she asked before leading me to the hallway was whether I believed in God.

"I'm not sure. I think so... I'd like to," I answered.

"Yes. I think I believe too. Here, come with me."

Innis was mysterious in every way. Why did she take me into the hallway? Why could this not have taken place in the bedroom, or on the couch? But there we stood. At first I assumed that she was going to get something valuable to show me, perhaps a Bible or a cross necklace that had been in the family for several years. Even if it were just a picture she was about to show me, it would have been enough. Instead, she began undressing.

She unbuttoned and removed her blouse with perfect grace, revealing her small Easter-egg breasts. My surprise was quickly arrested by the elegance and the naturalness of her movements. She pressed herself to me and we kissed in an odd way. It was as if the shape of her mouth had been caught between a smile and the moment when a word is formed. Slowly, she brought my pants down and in my state of confusion and delirium I had barely noticed at what point she had become completely naked. It was over within a matter of seconds. "So, how is the tutoring going with Innis?" Sam asked as we stopped at a red light. She inquired about Innis as nonchalantly as she would about modifiers or gas money. I had told her that Innis asked
me for help, but had not mentioned anything since.

“It went well. She’s very bright but we’ve only had one lesson.”

“Only one? How come? Not even you could teach her everything she needs to know in one lesson.”

“Oh yes. You’d be surprised just what a genius I am,” I attempted to escape with humor.

“No, I don’t believe that. I’d sooner believe that you slept with her.”

This statement—dropped from nowhere; something beautiful and profane (the actuality and the idea of the same event) brought together by coincidence. The rear view mirror informed me that my face had gone immediately red. As dense as Sam was, she noticed this.

“Holy shit! You did, didn’t you? Did you screw her?”

“Nonsense.” I tried to keep the damage to a minimum. She knew something had happened but I hoped I could still convince her that it was nothing serious. It was too late though. The look on her face told me that she had a realization of this fact and would not be convinced otherwise. Sam just sat there shaking her head in what was either disbelief or disapproval. I couldn’t tell.

I was fired, or let go, or whatever terminology one prefers. I couldn’t expect Sam to keep quiet and when Ms. Dorming called me at home that evening I didn’t have the strength to deny it. My silence gave Ms. Dorming her answer. I was told I needn’t come to school the next day. At that point, there were only two weeks left of summer and I didn’t think it was worth it to put up any kind of fuss. For all I know, they could have done more than just fire me. I really have no idea.

Subjectively: watching kids play games here in the city park makes me feel warm. There are four days left before school starts but the unexpected, early conclusion of my employment allowed me to move back to Toronto a week ago. This place has been a comfort for me throughout my days of higher education; it has always held the power to bring me out of the unreal realm of academia to a concrete world filled with people and movement. Like glancing over to the tables set up for checkers reminds me of Binko. Diagonal or straight rows of pieces indicating wins and losses. A kid of about eleven makes a final jump with her King and as though she had just connected all the necessary points in a game of Binko cries out in joy at the realization of everything fading but the feeling of a pure and clean moment. Allowing myself a smile, I slowly turn to watch the older men play chess, an entirely disparate game. Here, they play in a different kind of time: one which is sustained and therefore complex, tense, more difficult—but also more fulfilling. One of the men moves his queen in a long glide to remove a knight; he does so with as much precision and refinement as I have observed elsewhere. I get up from my bench, approach one of the tables and am invited to sit. As I move my first pawn, I feel pleased. Still, I know that like these children, I too will not easily forget that instant, that feeling of a fleeting brushstroke of Divinity.
Cut Flowers

I want to be like cut flowers,
Stolen from a vine,
Resting in a simple vase.

I want to be like cut flowers,
Put to good use,
Displayed in a prominent place.

I want to be like cut flowers,
Knowing soon I will die,
Keeping what is expected low.

I want to be like cut flowers.

—Michael J. VanderBrug
Bound
Jim Van Farowe
graphite
WhispringWind

Contently caressing, the whispringwind against across my face, bears away behind my breath unseen and calmly. And I, I walk through the greeningwood, across the barren, intermittent sidewalkstone.

Above, the crumblingblue, broken open by the mellowwhites and churninggrays, wrestles with the warringwind that finally winning, drags them off.

Interrupting, a singling, darkling one, soon too high and soon to be swallowed in the fissureblue, in the boilinggray.

A cry, lonelyborne onaway by the whisperwind.

—Timothy J. Veltman
Secure
based on the painting The Gale by Winslow Homer

A woman presses hard
against a salty-toothed gale
on her way home
from lugging and stacking sea traps
with her husband
for a day. Child woven to her--
thick bands of cloth
dig unmercifully into her shoulders
and sear across her chest,
tight from back-weight
of the cocoon they form.
Child peers over the rim,
eyes unblinking
though salt rushes in;
licks of fire twist and leap from his head,
obedient to the wind.
His legs damp and stiff
as the morning crates
lock around wide, practical hips.

--Lori Engbers
Hello! My name is Matthew and I am a professional fashion consultant. I have imparted my wisdom upon people from all walks of life for more than thirty years. Today, I am going to show you the look you need to properly fit in at Calvin College. Enjoy!

1. The Sporty Look (For those who don’t know WHAT to wear)

- Michigan Hat
- Bowl Cut (not shown)
- Levis Polo (tight)
- Nike underwear
- Bad Boots or Ugly High Top

Recommended fragrance...
Mike Jordan cologne

2. The Abercrombie look...

- Coaster Cut
- The Sunglasses
- Earring (optional)
- Shit with overwhelming logo
- Jeans (not allowed to fit correctly)

Recommended fragrance...
any cologne with wood or forest in the name.

3. The Alternative Look...

- Blended hair
- Facial hair (optional)
- Flannel shirt tastefully chosen to give that I don’t give a shit look
- New jeans, tastefully torn and faded during excessive pot smoking sessions

Recommended fragrance...
Giorgio Armani Aqua Di Gio

Converse All Stars with grilled coffee stains on them.

Hope this helps!

*not endorsed... collection of specifically non-mainstream LPs owned at WEAL.

Matt 97
The Vigilantes of Love, based in Athens, Georgia, describe their music as “roots rock.” Discovered by REM’s Peter Buck, they have released six albums. Their most recent work, *Slow Dark Train*, came out this summer.

Bill Mallonee, the only original Vigilante still in the band, is lead singer and songwriter. This interview was conducted by Peter LaGrand the night after a performance at Four Friends Coffee House.

**Dialogue:** Who were your influences, and how did you get started?

**Mallonee:** The band started formally in 1990. I was playing guitar and writing for another band in Athens, Georgia. Athens is a small town, musically speaking. There is a lot of music there, but it is a small town, and there was what I call a “beer politic”: unless you could pull in 500 hard-drinking frat boys to a gig, you weren’t going to play a Thursday, Friday or Saturday night. About this time I was writing, but it seemed I’d write songs on an acoustic guitar at home, then bring them into the practice space and crank them up on an electric guitar. I never thought about why I was doing that. A friend of mine played the accordion, so we decided to try our hand at the quieter stuff. I had always been a big Bob Dylan and Neil Young fan, so they were obvious musical influences for me. I also like a lot of generic stuff like old country and bluegrass. The first two records have a fusion: the first one is very acoustic, a very coffeehouse Greenwich Village sort of thing. The second one is more with the band, an integration of punk and folk. Somewhere between the second record and the third one, “Killing Floor,” I found my voice and all the influences weren’t so on the sleeve. It became, “this is what I do, this is what makes me who I am, and if you want something else there’s plenty of other stuff out there.” Even stylistically you can say Vigilantes are roots rock. I think thematically we deal with more varied themes than do your basic roots rockers. We got lucky, we went to “South by Southwest” in 1992 and were signed by Capricorn Records, and since then we’ve had a love-hate relationship with them. They’ve done well for us in some ways, yet in others they’ve barely gotten us off the ground. But
including our sexuality and our hormones. In fact He’s created a way for that to be expressed in a godly and enjoyable manner. Like a lot of the gifts God gives to us, the biggest gifts are the ones that, if mishandled, can do the most harm.” That’s almost verbatim to what I tell these kids, and I say that at secular colleges too. Then I play the song, and it’s a rowdy song, celebrating sexual joy in the context of marriage.

Dialogue: Do you feel betrayed by those who banned your record when you’re trying to spread Christian thought and perspectives, and to be real . . . Basically, for trying to preach the Word?

Mallonee: To me the CCM industry and the whole bookstore situation has never been about spirituality. It’s been about truth as they define it. If you walk into your average Christian bookstore, how much is there really on the struggles of life? It’s as if we’re afraid to embrace the crosses God gives us and say “You know what? You might bear that cross your whole life, that just may be in store for you.” Instead there are books dealing with depression, etc. teaching how to escape it instantaneously. I think the Church is killing itself with this prosperity gospel linked with this hyper-experiential idea where Jesus is not the holy and risen Lord, he’s my buddy. He’s my best friend, or he’s my warm fuzzy. 90% of the stuff in Christian bookstores seems like that to me. I was joking with someone and asking when a Christian bookstore becomes an un-Christian bookstore. Well, when they fail to deal with the whole counsel of God, they’re on their way to becoming an un-Christian bookstore. My point is made with Family Christian Bookstores, which is the chain that banned Slow Dark Train; that’s fine, if you want to ban the record, great! . . . But you should take the Song of Solomon out of the Bible too, because that’s clearly where the song came from. □
Crank (Cold)  

Mike Richison  
lithograph
Lily had stood out among the young wives in the village since the day she came here and married Liu the school teacher. Their wedding was on Chongyang (Double Brightness) Festival, the ninth day of the ninth month according to the Lunar calendar. It was a time when the oppressive heat of the summer sun began to ebb, and the river around the village turned quiet and smooth and pleasantly cool. The air was suffused with the thick and pungent smell of overripe crops. Rich colors of bright red, yellow and brown adorned the fields.

When the Chongyang wind came duly along from the northwest raining down a confetti of brightly colored leaves onto the heads of the feasting crowd, the guests — intoxicated half by the wine and half by the beauty of the bountiful season — began to jump and dance around the happiest couple of the day.

Lily was the first woman in the village who flaunted her happiness by smiling openly and unabashedly in the full view of the crowd gathered in and outside her husband’s house. This defied the long-standing custom according to which the virtue of a bride was gauged by the amount of tears she shed on her wedding day. This caused quite a stir in the village. Some old men shook their heads, saying that the moral degeneration of the world was evident. But most of the men, especially unmarried men, secretly wished their wives to be like this — graceful and unaffected, or in their words, “modern type.” The women marveled and were jealous, for from her very first day in this village, Lily became the center of attention.

The women’s jealousy had more reasons than one, however. Lily’s husband Liu, despite his age, was held in great esteem by young and old alike for his profound knowledge, sound judgment, and natural friendliness. His handsome, scholarly looks and his witty, humorous remarks won him the hearts of all the unmarried women, who had pined secretly for him and exulted at the mere sight of him. Now they forced themselves into an overwrought haughtiness, seeing Liu and his bride walking hand in hand (another new thing) along the path between green fields. They were a perfect match, “put together by Heaven and Earth,” people said.

I frequently visited their home, and I often felt I was part of their family, or they were part of our family. After school, I had the habit of going directly to their house, doing my homework or listening to the stories of which Liu seemed to have no end. A typical picture of their home at night was
like this: on the big square table a burning oil lamp, Liu reading and Lily doing her needlework beside him. Sometimes Lily’s eyes strayed from her embroidery frame to her husband’s engrossed face. She would look first at him, then at the book he was reading. A smile would creep into the corners of her mouth.

Once, after looking thus for some time, as if unable to control her curiosity, she asked her husband, a little timidly, “Do you know all the words in the book?”

“Yes,” he said. “At least 99 percent of them.”

With apparent amazement and admiration she asked, “Then why are you still reading them, night after night?”

Like the majority of the women in the countryside, Lily, despite her intelligence and open-minded eagerness to learn, could not read nor write. Being one of eight children in her family, she had never had a chance to go to school. Lily’s deprivation as an illiterate grieved her husband, so he — being a school teacher — solemnly declared that he would take her as his student, and “be her life henceforth illuminated by the light of knowledge!”

This home education didn’t last long, however. One day, eight months after their wedding, the whole village was dumbfounded by the incredible news: Liu was arrested! And even more incredibly, a mere story had caused this misfortune. As a teacher of Chinese, Liu often told stories in his class, which was only natural. One of his stories was about Chairman Mao. The tale said that during the Civil War Mao was leading a small group of guerillas in a mountainous area, hotly pursued by Nationalist troops. Almost at the end of his rope, Mao dispersed his men and hid himself in the muddy water of a ditch. As a result, he escaped.
Someone reported this story to the Revolution Committee in town, saying Liu was blaspheming. How could our great leader hide himself in a ditch! At that time, the Anti-Reactionary movement was in full swing. Thousands of people had been put in jail or sent permanently to remote Education-through-labor Camps under the charge of the Counter-Revolutionaries.

It was said that when the police tried to force Liu into their car, he fought and protested, saying that he had done nothing wrong. He did tell the story, he admitted, but in the spirit of eulogizing the Great Leader for his quick wit in the face of danger. He had not tried to blacken him. What's more, he said, he didn't make up the story himself; he had read it in a book. When the police demanded that he name the book, the school teacher, who had always been proud of his superior memory, just couldn't recall in which book he had read the story. That day he was taken to the county prison.

When Lily and Liu finally met again, an iron bar separated them, like the insurmountable river which separated Buffalo Boy and Weaving Girl. The couple seemed trapped in perpetual torment, despair and inexplicable misery.

Liu said that for Lily there were two choices. She could divorce him and marry someone else, or she could help him find that book, which he said was his only hope. Lily insisted that even if she had to climb over the mount of fire and get to the end of the sky — even if she had to die — she would find the book.

“But how can you, when you hardly know how to spell your name?” Mum blurted out anxiously as she and Lily sat talking.

As if not hearing Mum's words, Lily said more to herself than anyone else, “If he says there is such a book, it must be somewhere. Sooner or later, I will find it!” Her eyes were sparkling with hope, as if in her mind’s eye she could see the book lying somewhere in a corner, just waiting for her.

She went to the libraries in different towns only to find all of them closed. She went to schools, and they told her all the books they were allowed to read were Mao's Collected Works. And nobody seemed to have read the story.

Day after day she went out hopefully; day after day she returned disappointed. After she had exhausted all the libraries and schools and bookstores where she might find the book, she began to pick up any piece of paper she ran across, as long as some words were printed on it. She would take the papers to people whom she knew could read and would beg them to tell her what was on them. Moved by her faith, the men she approached would read the words aloud, and inevitably nothing she wanted was on them.

Twice swallows came, and twice they were gone. Lily showed no sign of giving up; she was bent as ever on fulfilling her sacred mission to save her husband. Uneasiness grew among the villagers who witnessed this ongoing holy crusade of love. While a love tragedy is never short of tears on the part of its audience, if the same tragedy goes on before the same audience day after day and year after year, even the most vulnerably sympathetic hearts will be hardened, the most susceptible minds made immune, and the tragedy itself becomes trite and stale, a daily routine eventually ridiculed as a farce and even a nuisance. Some said Lily's search was sheer madness; some said the mere sight of her gave them pain; some wondered how this business would ever come to an end.

By now Lily was a changed woman. Her once full and youthful face became thin and sallow, never glowing as it had before. Her beautiful black hair lost its luster, having turned dry and yellowish and disheveled. Her clothes, once tidy and well-fitting, now seemed to remain unchanged and unwashed for a long time. But the most significant change was in her eyes. Her eyes had once always smiled, shining with hope, purity and happiness. Now they seemed glued forever to the ground. Like some
incorrigible thief who, out of sheer habit, would size up any house he entered and decide mentally which route would be the best to sneak in and what stuff would be worth stealing, Lily would instinctively look down and scan the ground wherever she went, whatever she was doing. But as she walked and gazed at the ground, she would stumble over some dead tree branch lying right under her nose or bump into people because when her eyes surveyed the ground, everything was invisible to her but one—paper. She would pounce on any piece of paper with a relish and enthusiasm which never diminished. Then, as she would turn her small, childlike face to the person who would read aloud her latest finding, she appeared always expectant, anxious, hopeful. This became a terrible strain on people's nerves, for they inevitably saw the hope which had given fleeting light to Lily's eyes and a momentary glow to her sickly face go out like a will-o'-the-wisp among the tumbled tablets in a deserted graveyard, lost forever in the eternal darkness of despair.

As time went by, Lily accumulated a huge pile of paper of all shapes and colors and sizes, in different states of filthiness and dilapidation. She had gleaned the scraps from the garbage mount near the school where Liu used to teach or from roadsides, fields, open pig sites, and even public lavatories. She hoarded the paper like a miser did his gold, and she guarded it like her life. She sorted out the unread ones, smoothing them with her hands and brushing them clean, all the time waiting for a chance when someone would reveal to her the secret in the mystery of words which might save her husband and end her misery.

Sometimes, without my parents knowing, I would sneak into her house at night to help her sort out the pieces of paper. Once, to cheer her up I sang that old children's song which she used to sing to me during the happy days when she and Liu just got married:

Wang Wang Wang Wang
Two little puppies
Wang Wang Wang Wang
Barking all night
Wang Wang Wang Wang
Fighting over a bone

But to my astonishment, instead of cheering her up, I found her crying. Tears streamed down her face, her body shaking convulsively. I was so frightened, thinking that I must have unknowingly done something wrong.

Another time she cried was two years later on the night of the Pure and Bright Festival. She went to the woods by the Grand River, and I followed behind her. We stopped at a clearing among the woods. The air was clear and chilly. Silvery moonlight slid down the glossy leaves of the camphor trees and poured soundlessly onto the ground, which was carpeted by dead leaves. From the distance came the steady, hypnotizing whisperings of the river which wound around the village, carrying its ages old suffering into the unknown.

Looking up, I saw Lily's face in the dim light, pale and tranquil and peaceful, like a virgin sacrifice before the altar. She took out a large bundle of yellow paper, which I knew was Ghost Money, and lit it. The flame smoldered slowly — just a thin red tongue at first — and ate inch by inch into the center, when, all of a sudden, it sprang into a conflagration, like a bonfire. The flames bolted into the dark, and tiny burning ashes swirled up in the smoke, rising, rising, rising, then beginning to fall, floating and drifting like a thousand elves dancing and flying in the air, celebrating the holy moment. Lily went slowly down on her knees and wept.

That night when I left her, she seemed for the first time exhausted. Four years had passed. Not a word from her husband. For four years she had been fighting alone, armed only with an illusion of hope against the ever mounting mental
stress and dark despair.

A deep grief suffused her whole body. She sat on the ground, leaning against the wall, staring at the huge pile of paper like a tomb covered with snow. She just sat there motionless, as if her soul had gone out of her body and wandered to some other place, a brighter and happier place where flowers are blooming, birds are singing, children are laughing, men and women are in love.

Towards morning, the whole village was awakened by alarming shouts of “Fire! Fire! Fire!” When we ran out with buckets and pails, Mum suddenly fell down on her knees, as if struck by an invisible club. She clutched my hand into hers, pressing it into her bosom.

“It’s Lily’s!” she shouted in dismay.

There it was, her small wooden house --only twelve yards away from ours-- crackling and snapping in the blazing flames, casting light into the dark blue sky, lending it a purple hue. Choking smoke soared upwards, carrying ashes and cinder, soared up into the air and rained them down onto our heads. I couldn’t help remembering the Ghost Money Lily and I had burnt...

Two years after Lily’s death, our country underwent dramatic changes. First, Mao died. Following that, a bitter ruthless fight over power among the people whom we never knew and never saw but who controlled out fate. Some up, some down. Same old story. Then one day, along the road through the village came a stranger. Skinheaded, terribly thin, in a tattered gray suit. A group of villagers stopped talking, watching him approaching, and wondered what he was, a tramp or an alms-begging monk. Old Wang, the village leader, standing ahead of the curious crowd, was looking at the newcomer suspiciously. Suddenly the man stepped forward, grabbed Wang’s hands, and said in a broken voice, “Don’t you recognize me? I am Liu!”

Later, by hearing bits from here and there, I managed to piece together what had happened to Liu. After he was thrown into prison, his life resembled that of a mouse living in a dark hole. Nobody gave a damn about him. Even his case never went to the court. He had no idea when he would get out, or whether he would ever get out of this infernal place at all. For six years, he saw nobody but the statue-like guards and despondent inmates. Not a word from Lily, or any friend. Pestilence spread in the overcrowded prison and people were dying every day. Often he wondered when his turn was due. Despair reigned. Day by day, his willpower was waning. Until one day he felt that he could hold on no more and that the only escape was death. Seeing nobody watching, he hung himself in the lavatory with his cloth belt. But just as the saying goes, If you have bad luck, you will have it to the end. He hung there for about half a minute, thinking the end had come at last, and then thump, the belt broke and he fell, face downwards onto the ground. For some time, he lay still on the filthy ground, his mouth bleeding and his mind thinking bitterly how this unsuccessful suicide resembled his life: a joke, nothing but a dark sickly joke Fate had played upon him. For this could not be true. His life was ruined for no reason. He and his wife suffered for no reason. This whole thing doesn’t make sense! he thought, but then he noticed something else. His eyes strayed onto a piece of paper which was lying right beside his face. It was creased and stained, but there were some words still intelligible on it, and they attracted his attention. “Chairman Mao... pursued by... hid... ditch.” Jumping up from the ground, Liu held the paper in his hand and read it once again. That was the story! Trembling with joy, he thrust his arms into the air and shouted “Thank you God! For you have come down through the air to save me!”

However, the authorities said that a piece of shit paper couldn’t prove that he was innocent. They said they must see the book. But Liu was not discouraged. For after years of the vain effort to recall the title of
Alchemy
Holly Huisman
oil on canvas
that book, even he had begun to doubt whether the book really existed, whether he made up the story himself. And the very idea chilled his bones. If that was true—that the book really was a figment of his wanton imagination—he was doomed. He would spend his whole life in the dank filthy cell, with only the company of fleas and rats. He would never see his dear wife again. But now, with this piece of paper, his confidence returned. If there is the paper, there must be the book.

For the next months, he appealed again and again to the higher court. No response. But he was determined. He kept writing and sending in his suit until, one day, he was summoned to a room in the provincial court, where a young officer was sitting at the table waiting for him. A bulging briefcase was lying before him on the table. Four armed soldiers stood solemnly in the room, two behind the officer, two at the door.

The young officer introduced himself as Zhang, army representative from the central government in charge of restoring order in the province. Then he said, “I have read your paper, and I understand you are looking for a book.”

“For six years!” Liu’s eyes misted over and his voice was shaking. After having been used to the harsh shouting in the past six years, the man’s soft kind voice suddenly brought back his memory of a remote world in which he had had dignity, respect, peace, love, a sweet home and a lovely wife. That was a time when the whole world seemed to belong to him, but now he had nothing, and was nothing except an empty number 24673, by which he was addressed occasionally. Who had robbed him of all this—the comfort of his home and his wife's love? Who was his enemy? But that didn’t really matter. He was sick of all the hatred, this vicious cycle of wrong and revenge, this suffering that men inflicted upon their fellow men. All he wanted was to find the book, clear himself, and go home.

As if reading his mind, the officer opened his briefcase, and from within he took out a thin dark-covered book. He opened the book, holding it before Liu’s eyes, and said, “Look, isn’t this the story you have been looking for in the past six years?”

My God! Liu’s eyes opened wider and wider as he scanned the pages. My God! This is the story! Plain and clear. This is the story that had ruined him and now would save him. This is the story that he had been dreaming about in the night, thinking about in the day, year in and year out; it had been to him a malicious god with a boundless power, who had played him in its palm, tortured him and dominated his whole life. But now here it was, a simple piece of writing: black and white, ordinary and harmless.

Suddenly, Liu threw himself onto the floor before the officer and knocked his head on the ground three times.

For a whole month after his arrival in the village, Liu lay in bed, feverish and delirious, repeating “book,” “story,” and “Lily.” Mum and the other neighborhood women took turns nursing him day and night. Then, one late afternoon, he got up and asked me to take him to Lily’s tomb. It was out in the wild, where weeds flourished and there was silence. Liu knelt down before the humble mount of earth, with no tablet, but a small cluster of forget-me-nots swaying lightly in the evening breeze. Slowly, Liu took out the book with dark covers, then, raising his head toward heavens above, he shouted in an unearthly voice, “Lily, peace be with your soul! The book is found.” □
The Quest

Jacoba Sytsma

charcoal
the dream library

your slumber’s the autobiography you share
but only in the camouflage pajamas, of dreams

what is it about the way you dot your i’s?
i know i’m yours, i know you die a little
with each night of sleep you get

yet everyone has his belongings:
a shoe size and blisters; a fingerprint.
a birthmark. and in a sea of comic books,
the laughing man’s heart’s almanac

in the book of your dreams, what inscription there is
is more beautiful than life, your drowsy autograph

i shall always want to awaken
you in the middle of night

—jane c. knol
from "the lunatic dream series"  Greg Scholtens  gelatin silver print
front porch

She is standing on the porch of her house,
Built on a crowded road.
She lights a cigarette with a match.
She tenderly paces and
Squints down at
Her watch through the moist,
Evening air.

The crackling of her cigarette is
The only noise she hears,
Latticed by the lull of
Fast cars and interrupted by the
Flap of a bird.

Silently a light switches on in a
Second floor window across the street.
What was a silhouette
Becomes a naked woman.
They both feel sequestered.

She peers into the window,
Concentrating on the peacefulness and elegance
That the naked woman walks with.
She wonders if she could walk that well
When naked.

The light switches off with the same
Silence and the naked woman sits down
To brush her hair, a silhouette again.

Disappointed, she looks again at her watch, and
Once more at the window. She opens the screen door,
Flicks her cigarette, Opens the door and
Walks through it consumed.

--Michael J. VanderBrug
My friend Anne and I have always spent time together living passionately, through our dreams and aspirations, if not in actuality. We have thought, felt, laughed, cursed and danced within the rhythmic and sometimes erratic pulse of friendship. Within this rhythm, the tale of the naked novices unfolds.

It was mid-October and Michigan donned the golden luster of fall. Classes at Calvin tottered on and college life appeared to be adopting methodic regularity. Being the studious, conscientious individuals we are, Anne and I held to the college routine. However, despite our academic drive—or fear, or perfectionism—we were determined not to be hemmed in by the borders of academia. Thus ensued our skinny dipping attempt in the Flat river.

Our plan for adventure, although bearing spunk, cannot entirely be attributed to spontaneity. Indeed, our trek to the Flat took some thought. The plans themselves were fueled in part by my desire to be innovative and defy conventional Friday night activity, as well as our joined wish to attempt something wild—something downright ballistic (of course ballistic is a relative term).

Since October was knocking on November’s door, Lake Michigan was not an option for our plans; all campgrounds, State Parks, etc. surrounding the lake were closed for the winter. We also tossed out the sem- pond for security as well as hygiene reasons. The only other option we could think of for our “event” was the Flat river. Telling our friend Rich that I was interested in fishing the Flat that weekend, I asked for directions to a serene locality on the river. Rich gladly obliged us with directions to a camping site. I was pleased to report to Anne that our plans were falling into place.

Friday arrived; we planned to go skinny dipping that evening after eight. The day had been cold and gray—naturally unusual for Michigan. The rain continued falling when dusk blanketed the earth. However, even frigid precipitation could not thwart our spirits or our plans. We put on layers of clothing, bore the scoff of our roommates, and headed for Anne’s car.

With directions in hand, all was well. Time wore on. The road stretched black before us. “I don’t know, Kel,” Anne said, “Are you sure this is where Rich told us to go?” “Yes,” I said, trying to exert a sense of certainty, “I believe it is. Just go a bit further.
The sign he mentioned is probably just around the bend.” We drove on...through Rockford... past lakes (holding potential for our desires)... past houses, etc. As the journey lengthened, Anne said, “We’ve been driving for about an hour, if we don’t find the campground and river soon I think we should turn around.” Just when we were about to give up hope and head home, justifying our decision by our noble attempt and the idea that we could still slide in the mud at Calvin, we saw the sign that Rich indicated would lead us to our destination on the Flat.

However, we found no campground, rather only rows of houses which lined the banks of the river making a naked decent into the water quite impossible. We stubbornly drove on, determined not to give up. After roaming through blackened woods, we crossed a bridge and found an empty pocket near a solitary house where we could park the car. Hastily, we scampered out into the rain and embarked on a clumsy tramp through forest foliage which resembled lavish lion manes, spiny tigers, and hairless bears underneath the heavy cloak of night. Finally, we met the river’s murky edge. Slime oozed between our toes.

Quickly, then, enabling us to forget how foolish we were to attempt skinny dipping at such a time and place, we stripped off our clothing and sprang into the shin-high water. As our naked silhouettes danced against the deep night, headlights suddenly emerged over the bridge. Instantly, Anne shouted, “Down! Get down!” We flattened our naked bodies in the river as if we were two combat soldiers being besieged by gun-fire in the jungles of Vietnam. Once the car passed, we scrambled to put our clothes on. I feared the car’s driver suspected Anne’s empty vehicle of mischief and would engage in a search for its occupants. However, the muted air told us that we were safe. The car had passed on.

Once assured of our safety, Anne suggested that we go back into the icy liquid, saying, “We were in the water for such a short time, and we drove all the way out here. We might as well take advantage of the opportunity.” I piped up my agreement and we lunged into the Flat for a second time letting the fresh water cleanse our laden souls. We laughed. We pranced as goddesses in a royal river. We had won.

With lighted hearts, we dressed and headed for the car. All was well. There was no ticket on the windshield—no boogie man in the bushes waiting to suffer our blows. And believe me, being graduates of Calvin’s women’s self-defense course, we did have blows to offer. We were safe.

Giving thanks that those in the nearby houses bearing open windows were deaf to our skinny dipping event, we drove home. We talked of nothing extraordinary, only of our realizations regarding relationships, of our lives and their seemingly circular struggles. Yet, on the other hand, that night our dialogue was not of academic and social frustrations. Our tales were songs of freedom. In this freedom, we redefined “good”, cast out academic and social rejection and labels, and proclaimed that indeed the naked grace of friendship can and will prevail. □
Dialogue invites you to submit a paragraph to accompany this photo. Please limit entries to 150 words or less.

Two submissions will be selected for publication and will be awarded prizes.
denouement

there are things, small as minutes,
that remind me of you; such as a pair of parentheses
around a joke, the shape of the laughlines
around your mouth) and moons the shapes
of cuticles and nail clippings;
and the otherwise unpleasant smell
of geraniums, like the spinach breath of sweat
of someone loved.

also there are other things:
the bird nests that fall down with the rain
remind me of my misgivings

—jane c. knol