

MY SELF-PORTRAIT

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Introduction

I had considered many different ideas for my College Scholars project before deciding on a creative work including poetry and photography. I knew this was the project to pursue because I felt an excitement about the idea. Photography and poetry have been interests of mine since I was very young, and an attempt to combine them was something I felt would be both interesting and challenging.

The project defined, my next step was to begin the work. I panicked. My formal education in writing poetry began my junior year in college, and my photography was limited to the past two semesters. How could I possibly put together a work of this magnitude with so little knowledge?

I tackled the poetry first. I looked through old poems to see what was salvageable but soon found poems in everything around me. Most of the poetry in this collection I have written this semester, and they reflect my current anxieties: my knee surgery, relationship complications, and the question of the future after graduation. The poems became necessary for me. A way to discover what I was feeling. What the real issue was. The poems came easy. It was the revisions that were difficult.

The photography was even more challenging. The few classes I've taken were photojournalism classes, and I knew this project would require a different approach than what I was used to. I wanted the photographs to relate to the poetry without relying on it, to be interesting in their own right. I wasn't sure how to approach the task.

It was Rob Heller's idea to do the photographic self-portraits. I mentioned this to Art

Smith, and he said that all poetry is a self-portrait in a way. There's an issue, but how the self reacts to that issue is the poem. Referring to my project as a self-portrait gave it a cohesiveness it originally lacked.

And here it is. My self-portrait. Some of the poems more closely relate to actual events than others, but they all have to do with my concerns, my thoughts. I tried my best to capture a mood or feeling in my photography, as I often attempt in my poetry. Peter Hunt Thompson, author of Self-Portrayal, said, "The self portrayal of most artists do not equal their best work, but the viewer is recompensed by pleasure in simply being allowed to see another person see themselves." I did feel a certain amount of satisfaction in viewing my photographs for the first time. I had never used a tripod before this project. In using one I had to guess at my placement, how the light would hit me. I was thrilled to see I had accomplished the desired effect despite the guessing. The pictures are often framed in an unusual manner because of this. Mr. Heller says in self-portraits he likes to see the odd framing because it is a sign that the photographer has given up the control they usually have in taking pictures. This control must be relinquished in order to produce a self-portrait.

I find it difficult to feel as if anything is truly complete. This project is no different. It's impossible to show a complete picture of myself. This is, at best, a portrait of me during my college years, particularly my senior year. The main issues and concerns that shaped this period of my life.

In closing, I would like to extend a huge thank you to both Art Smith and Rob Heller. I could not have completed this project without their help.

My Name

If you call me Chris,
I will not respond
because I will not mistake
your voice
for my parents',
and my ear knows
they are the only ones
who call me that.

If you call me Christina,
you will anger me
as my aunts do
who think
that name
is prettier
than my own.

If you call me Tine,
I will not laugh
as I do with my brother
who could not pronounce
my name
as an infant,
and I will not smile
as I once did with an old love
who now
calls me
Christine.

Attempting to Balance

My want to help those in need
is overshadowed
by my need
to have something left over.
I've never been good at math.
I cannot divide
myself.

So I pick up this pen
and try to write my way
away.

This poem is about me.
Not about that illiterate child
or the family without a home.
Their needs are greater
than my need for this pen.

But the thing inside me
refuses to be
ignored.
So I keep writing,
looking for an answer,
though I'm not sure one
exists.

Necessary

I hate this brace.
Scars and pain don't bother me.
Both will fade.
But this brace
 weighs me down.

It was made
 for me
and it still
 doesn't
 fit.

I stuff my leg into it
every
morning—
over the bruises that have formed
from the constant rubbing.
The velcro

 scratches
my skin.
I'm tired
of looking down
 and seeing
black straps
crossing my leg.
Trying to keep it
together.



Worn

Sounds That Soothe the Insomniac

My radiator sings to me
Late, late at night.
It sighs sadly through a song,
As if trying to use a forgotten voice.

Knowing He Was Right

Breaking up with me aside,
that day he criticized my career choice.
I had spent years
 searching
myself
before deciding on
advertising,
and then he asked me
how I could be a part of something
that helps
 no one.

I yelled
half-formed
thoughts
and even now,
my face flushes
when I think of the incident.
Yet I find
I cannot pursue
advertising
for the exact reason
he stated,
and I am glad to know this
for myself,
but I am still mad
at him
for having said it
so plainly.

Samson

I yelled the cat's name
in disapproval,
watching him bat
the half-dead
mouse.
"You shouldn't scold him
for doing
what comes naturally,"
my friend told me.
Later seeing my roommate
do her boyfriend's
laundry. Cooking
and cleaning
for him,
I wondered if I
should say anything.
Seeing it was
natural to her,
watching her
enjoy
folding his boxers.
The next day I saw
Samson outside,
gray body hunched
in anticipation.
I opened my mouth
to yell out,
then closed it,
turned my head
and kept walking.



Samson Content

Why I Cannot Sleep

Like gargoyles staring over outer walls of a church,
the demons on my shoulder
watch my features blend together as I edge towards sleep.
They wait until I am between worlds—
where breathing becomes loud and consuming,
taking over my being with the in
and out
of my breath.

Their gray lips speak words I cannot understand
that rip away the calm
as neatly as a mother.

Graduation (1)

Easily forgotten words
sail from a mouth
that six months ago
may have been found
pressed against mine
or saying "I love you"
to me.

A quick hug,
and we go
our separate directions.
I walk
with no clear idea
of where to go.
I talk to people
along the way
but look for others
while I speak
without ever knowing
who I am looking for.

I see him at a distance.
He walked a straight path to get to her.
As she kissed him on the cheek,
he buried his head in her hair
and did not look up.

when speaking

words
stumble over one another
lie on top of each other
form a thick opaque soup
melting together like lovers
they pay me no attention
but continue
garbled
deformed
not my own

Upon Hearing "I Love You" For the Last Time

Your words
hit my heart
like ice
with their falsity.
I attempt
to shove them
back into
your mouth,
forcing you to eat them,
but instead,
they boomerang off
your closed lips
and are flung
 into the air.

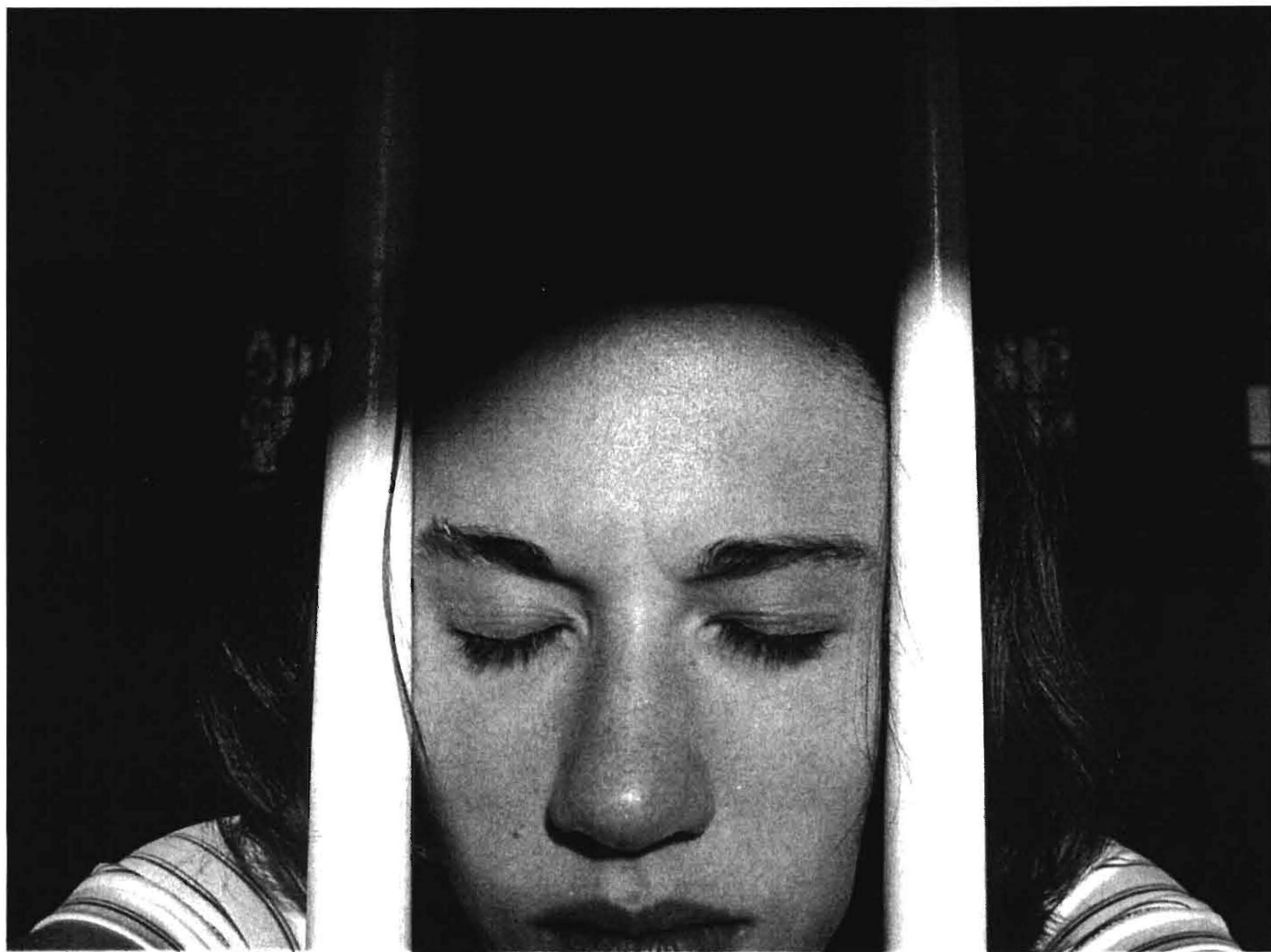
I grasp for them,
but they slip
from my fingers
as
I
fall.
They
dive,
sweep,
and dodge me
as I try to catch them,
make them real.
They laugh
and mock me
as I foolishly pursue them.

Stoplight

Too tired to sleep,
I thought about it all.

The day had
rubbed me raw.
I ran from
classes to meetings
and was worn out
from a friend
who was no longer a friend
and a love
who no longer cared.
So I cried.
And I felt foolish
for doing so,
though now
I cannot think
of a better reason
to cry than
simply because
I hurt.

I stopped at a red light
on a hill earlier today.
I felt as if I were slipping
backwards,
so I pressed the brake
with both feet.



Closed In

Death of a Friend Far-Removed

A face,
drifts in and out of my mind.
I see it in French class,
in the car she died in—
I try to picture it in heaven.

Shared friends, past jealousies,
remind me,
she was real.
She made an unnoticed exit
long before she died.
Reappearing on occasion,
I thought nothing of it.

I do not miss her,
for her absence is not abrupt,
though now permanent.

The End

Stars are stars,
and people are people.
The stars go on
endlessly.
Endlessly.
Stretching across the night,
stretching to other places,
to places where others
look upon them.
Other people
who are also
not stars,
who die
and do not smile down
on loved ones.
Stars die too.
They explode,
then flicker out.
Leaving nothing
but a black hole
of space.
Just space.

September 4th

When the package did not come,
I thought about eating Eastern food with my best friend last summer.
She told me Pedro was the most important thing in her life.
I remember her hazel eyes looking at mine, trying to gauge my response,
and I remember trying hard not to have one.
I looked at the grape leaves between us but continued the conversation about him—
because I am her friend.
She called me on my birthday from his house and left a message a package was coming.
Now it is October, and it has not arrived.

Why It Never Works

I kill plants.
Too much water
or not enough.
I can't find the medium.
They don't respond
to wet love.
Bored and wilted
by a person
who can't figure out
when something is
too much.

Blind

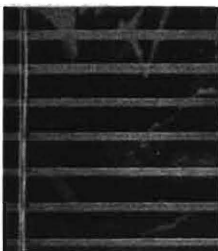
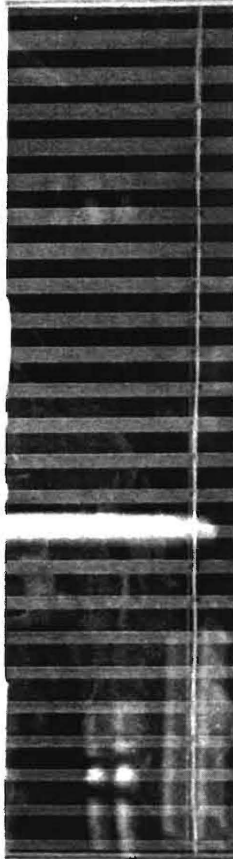
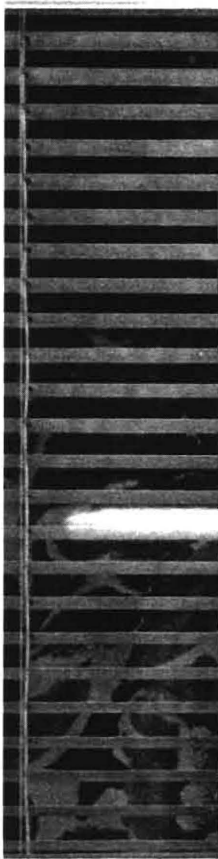
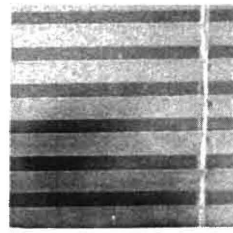
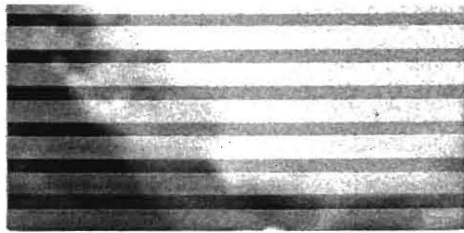
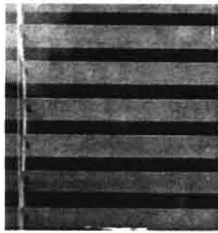
Winding film
in blackness,
I think of
the blind man
I met yesterday.
This is what
it must be like.
I listen to the
film, making sure
it sounds like a
whisper and not
like Rice Krispies.
My hands, smarter
now, move directly
to the scissors.
I neatly clip the
end of the film
and place it in
a tank with a lid.
Turning the lights on,
I walk down the
hallway to develop
and print the film,
and realize
if I were that blind man,
I would still be
in the unlit room
forever winding film
without ever seeing
the pictures.

Lesson

The spider sat
in the glistening web
spun by its needle-like legs,
fat body striped black and yellow.

My father pointed it out to my eight-year-old eyes.
I took one glance and said,
“Kill it.”

He cocked his head to the side saying
“Why? It’s pretty.”
My thin eyebrows furrowed together,
and then I looked
and saw.



Looking in at Dad

Remembering New Orleans

Graduation is in May —
no job lined up, grad school is on hold,
and among all the confusion,
this homeless man pops in my head
and refuses to leave.

I can still remember seeing him:
hands in pockets, hat on the ground,
head thrown back singing
“Amazing Grace” to the falling night.

I used to sing “Amazing Grace”
with others in the church choir,
the hollow sound of our voices
bounced off stained glass windows,
and here I am now writing this poem
in a heated house on my computer
while that man sang of being saved,
standing alone in the cold.

Looking for Warmth

You lie flat on your back,
hands under your head,
elbows out like wings.
I face you, sideways,
pressing my body closer
to yours.

Always cold,
my feet hunt down your legs
to take away the chill.
You jerk, surprised,
then move your legs
away.

I-40 (or The Road Home)

With poor vision,
I could not see
past the hazy beam
of my headlight.

The rain shot,
hard and quick,
like gunfire
from the sky,
and the slick road
gleamed
possibilities
as it tested
my tread.

I will not
be found
a broken person
in a ditch,
waiting
for someone—
especially a man —
to help me.
My tread
is not
worn,
and I drive
just fine.

Heart on a String

In Physiology class,
We pinched a frog's nerves,
rendering it painless, motionless.
We then sliced its middle.
The heart, still attached,
was strung in the air.
We dutifully rubbed nicotine on it.
Noted the reaction.

The frog,
not properly sedated,
awoke, legs wildly
kicking in the air.

Can you imagine
the horror of seeing
your heart on a string
and know you are
still alive?

walking backwards on a treadmill

the black ribbon
underneath me
moves on
not stopping
for my feet
not caring
if i misstep
it beats out
a rhythm
that was there
long before
me

i cannot control
the speed
when i face
the wrong direction
so i keep
stepping back
to avoid
landing
on my face

21

Here I am.
Looking towards
 graduation
and the
 uncertainty
 of
the future.

At least,
 I am
not
 my mother
 who
 at this age
was looking
 at
a dead
 husband.



Mom Resting and Me Nearby

Realization of a Non-Smoker

Peering through the smoke-filled bar,
I see the back of a familiar head.
I do not have to look at his face to see his blue eyes.
I watch him add to the smoke that is killing my lungs.
Cigarette in one hand
and a pretty girl in the other
with a smile as plastic as her breasts.
My eyes tear up, from the smoke,
and I think back to he and I
sitting on my porch swing
with his arm around *me*.
That night he told me how he hated girls with fake smiles
and couldn't stand the sight or smell of smoke.
That was also the night he told me he loved me.

Why I Am Proud To Be an Insomniac

Awake, in bed,
I think of homeless people,
and wonder what my role is
to them.

How a degree in college
matters.

If I am indeed,
in love.

If I will ever
understand
what I am here for.

If a job
I can believe in
exists.

Wearing Glasses

He walked right by me
and did not speak.
Two years had past
since our romance
with occasional attempts
of staying in touch.
I called out his name
and chided him for ignoring me,
with a laugh.

He said he did not recognize
me with my glasses
then asked if they were new.
I told him how
my old pair were stolen
then paused
and asked if he knew
I wore glasses at all.

He said he did not.

But I remember us in a deli,
me wearing square, wire glasses.
He told me they looked
like his grandfather's.
And now I sit
with my tortoise-shell frames
and wonder when
he stopped looking.

Triangle

My roommate yelled at me today.
She threw the silverware
in the sink and told me
she felt like the flag on the rope
in a game of tug-of-war.

I cried,
tired
from this silly game
with no winners.

Her friend walked in,
and I faced the wall,
so he could not see
my tears.
“Here,” she whispered,
taking the dish washing gloves off
and handing them
to me.

Now I find I’m caught
between the images
of her angry face
as she accused me
of hurting her friend
and her hands
as she gave me the gloves.

Christine 'n Michael

I answered the door
with vegetable in hand.
Feeling silly,
I held it up and said,
“Potato?”
“Salad,” my brother
responded.
I laughed as he
walked in the door.
Then I realized
that though
the words could stand
separately,
the meaning changed
when they were together.



Michael and I

Cycle

Around me I see
dead leaves of winter,
grass of spring,
side by side.

I think of the dead thing
inside me.
The tendon of a boy
I never knew.

The thought
made me
uneasy
at first.
But capillaries
don't know the difference.

Now
it seems
more natural,
even beautiful—
how things
go on.

I look down to see
purple pansies
thriving
among dried leaves.

I'm Sorry to Say

I do not love you anymore.
It fell out of me
like a sigh.

Your touch
glides off my shoulder
like water
dripping towards
the floor.

Murfreesboro

The white puffs
on the dandelion
are so close together,
they can hardly breathe.
Slender arms reach upwards
but feet remain attached.
Some have been blown away
by gusts of wind
 pushing
 them
 forward.

One is no longer connected
but is tangled in the others
that are.
It wiggles in the breeze,
unable to free itself.



Examining a Blown Away Dandelion

The Difference

In the rain,
we stand
watching the train
glide by,
sleek and black.
This track
is next to my house.
I curse these trains
when they wake me
at nights.

Water hangs
in droplets from our hair.
Your arms
circle my waist,
and I lean the back
of my head
against your chest.
The night air
cooler than the day's.
I stay warm.

Assumptions of an American

In Greece,
I asked a man for directions in English.
He looked at me blankly.
At first I did not realize my words
were just gibberish
falling on his ears.
I wanted to apologize
for assuming he would know my language,
but I didn't know a word of his,
so I couldn't say I'm sorry
or even thank him for his time.

Cut

During my knee surgery,
one ligament was found
cut loose.

The white cord,
wound itself around
the other ligament,
spiraling
like a
candy cane.

I thought of my first love,
when he severed
our relationship.
His love had frayed
like my ligament,
like my life
that was wrapped around
him.

The scars
on my knee
are smaller.
Purple and shiny,
they will heal quicker
than I did.

Graduation (2)

"I don't think it fits,"
I said looking
at the black gown
with its awkward pleats.
The saleswoman assured me
it did.

Too big,

I thought.

But I folded the material,
stuffed it into the bag,
and paid,
knowing I couldn't give
anymore
excuses.

Perspective

From 20,000 feet
details cannot be seen.
I watch from my
square window,
land and clouds
rolling before my eyes,
like a silent movie.
Everything
so small.

The question of May
remains unanswered,
though it's March.
I do not know
if after the cap and gown
are stuck
in the back of my closet
if I'll then board
another plane.
And right now,
it does not matter.
I am
 at peace
and far away from it all.
The world
no longer as big and frightening
with me
so far above it.



Seeing What's Underneath

Last Time

The music ends,
and you and I linger.
You do not speak,
knowing our voices
would end the moment,
as they always do.
Aware of my breathing,
the beating inside me,
I stare at you.
Wanting so much
to slide back in your arms,
I tell myself this is
just a moment.
That we can't
stand here
not speaking forever.

Therapy

Across from me,
a girl views her knee
for the first time since her surgery.
The look of horror on her face
reminds me of my own.
She whimpers in pain
as they move her leg.

I turn to the window beside me
and see my transparent figure
on the stationary bike,
knees bobbing like a needle on a sewing machine.
Pushing the pedals harder,
I test myself.
My knee screams.
I look at the girl,
now clutching her mother's arm
then quicken my pace.

Not Forgotten

"It's kind of plain,"
he told me as I examined
the watch.
"But I thought you would like that."
And I did.

The break up was painful.
I found myself careless
with his watch.
Glad to see the face
scratched.

Four years I wore it,
and today it fell off.
I retraced my steps,
not sure I still wanted
that memory.

I found it
and was happy
to have my watch
and him
again
nearby.

My First Gray Hair

I wanted to think
it was just
a blond highlight
in my brown hair.
But I singled it out
and found a black bible
to compare it to.

I twisted it around
my finger and pulled.
Holding the hair
to the light, I stared
at the sign of age,
feeling both horror
and accomplishment
at being
so far away
from my youth
and so much closer
to everything else.



Parts of Me