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**FOREWORD**

Welcome to the Spring/Summer 2002 issue of The Promethean. In addition to thoughtful work by the poets and fiction writers of the Concordia University community, we also feature the winners of our second annual Best Freshman Essay contest. Judged by Professor of Education, Dr. Jan Albrecht, this contest showcases work written by students for their English 121 classes.

With this issue, we also announce the terms of our annual prize in creative writing. Each year we will ask a distinguished writer from the community to read the contributions to the Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer issues of the journal and make a first and second place selection from among the fiction and poetry entries. There are no requirements that the reader pick one of each, simply that he or she choose the two entries that best demonstrate literary excellence.

This year poet and writer Kim Stafford, who also directs the Northwest Writing Institute, will evaluate the works in the two published issues and announce his selection in the Fall/Winter 2003 issue. We are grateful to our two contest judges for their expertise and support of the literary arts at Concordia University.

We hope you enjoy our contribution to summer reading!

Lynnell Edwards  
Faculty advisor, PROMETHEAN
IN RUSELL, MINNESOTA
KAREN MORRIS

At midafternoon in Russell, Minnesota, the four alcoholics drink coffee in the cafe, which is closed. On the opposite corner, twenty-three cars nose up to the bar like pigs at a trough.

Ed tells the story about his nephew and the roof, and the other three smile, although Ed’s been telling the same story for seventeen years and they heard it last on Tuesday.

It is better than watching the fields turn silver, better than worrying about the water rising south of the barn.

The rain drums against the glass. And Ed measures water for another pot.

PASSAGE
KAREN MORRIS

from me but not of me, like the paper boats we launched at girl scout camp, each bearing its own candle on the dark Mississippi:

my children, harbors no matter how the stones are piled upon the breakwater,

change; frail ships— I wish you fair weather.
hands smudged charcoal black, i rubbed
his face out on the page and began again
to draw a circle and a line to denote
the sunken shape of his body frame.
looking up i realized the line looked
nothing like his figure.

i ripped out the page.

i should know this body, this mind
so tightly woven into mine, i should grasp
his emotion laden bones, muscles, skin, hidden
under a layer of clothing. i should touch
and feel the body beneath all that and then
draw with this hand upon this page.

i blotted out another botched form and looked at him.
"i can't draw, i'm a poet not an artist." he smiled and i drew
his face with words, the shade underneath his brown eyes.
hidden under ridged eyebrows and settled in this face
i cannot fail to grasp the essence of their being;

so brown.

somewhere between the crown and the chin i find
him hiding, and almost done i can't decide if it is poetry
or charcoal.

and his head is hung in shadows and deep, dark
lines of thought and disquietude. his lips and teeth and tongue
hide somewhere beneath his nose, and the shadows.
i cannot forgo the many suggestions of deep slumber.
i long to hide in them on bright, burning days.

THE TREES LIKE LUNGS FILLING WITH AIR
My sister, the mean one, oulling my hair
- Cecilia Lisbon in her diary, from The Virgin Suicides

As a ghost I know more than you.
I move through the air like a cloud of fish-flies
in June, and watch you in your sleep.

You know nothing but me in the grass
in my hemmed wedding gown, bleeding
in the bath, run through
on the spike of the fence, drained grey
and frail in the casket.

Do not turn your eyes away but instead
to where you have always turned them:
the dark house with the dark panes
behind which I move
and every so often dive through.
I AM A RIB
PJ Bentley

I said yes to the snake wound in the tree like a question mark, not my nodding partner, but he will get all the credit. The bastard—if I hadn't let him have a bite he would have remained a naked, brainless monkey tromping through the bush and dropping names, not the first romantic hero, not the spirited individual who wanted to be God, the man with guts. Yet, since my thin hands passed the fruit to his thick hands, young lovers will forever bless his name in damp sheets as they try to keep quiet. And when a man under oath grins at the genius of his lie, the credit will go to my husband, wrapped in a goat's skin outside and flirting with our wifely daughters on the grass, as I touch my tight belly that holds a murderous seed, forming the mold for my particular role.

Unlike most of the other boys he knew, Dillon had never wanted a gun before. He had never liked Westerns or war movies or cop shows—he tolerated G.I. Joe cartoons simply because there was nothing else on at four o'clock in the afternoon. To him there was nothing fantastic or heroic about shooting someone. A solid punch to the jaw, a kick to the midsection, a judo throw, these things were heroic, requiring a special kind of skill and bravery that Dillon didn't possess. He knew that anyone, including himself, could point a gun and pinch the trigger, and there was a serious, ugly finality to this, far removed from the clean angles of a striking fist or foot, that had always frightened and repelled him.

But that December morning, shivering in the thirty-degree sunshine, Dillon ignored the old cop standing before him and stared hungrily at the policeman's neatly holstered revolver. He wondered what it would feel like to hold the weapon. He knew it would be heavy.

Still, the gun's rubbery black grips and easy silver curves told him that it was meant to be handled, that it possessed the reassuring weight of a baseball bat or an axe.

Dillon watched the revolver gradually sink out of sight as the old cop squatted down in front of him, his knees popping and cracking like muffled firecrackers. The gun disappeared, burrowing into the thick folds of the policeman's coat. The old cop grimaced as he settled his weight onto the balls of his feet and exhaled sharply through his nostrils, covering Dillon's face in warm mist. He was a big man; resting on his haunches he still towered over Dillon.

"What's your name son?" he asked, searching for Dillon's eyes.

"Dillon Foster," he said, mumbling into the zipper of his jacket. He tried to concentrate on the zipper's nail gray teeth but the old cop put a gloved knuckle under his chin and gently tilted his eyes up.

The first thing Dillon noticed about the big man's face was his nose, jutting out like a clenched fist. It was a villain's nose, hard and straight, with a tip that abruptly curled in towards the upper lip, framed by wide nostrils streaked with purple gin blossoms. But a weak chin, a Christmas white mustache, and moist brown eyes softened the menace of that beak. There was something bittersweet about the old cop's face that he immediately recognized and wanted to trust.

The old cop favored him with a tight smile. "He looks like a bull, like a tired old bull," Dillon thought, as he watched the big man blow another jet of steam out of his broad nostrils.

"And who's that over there?" the old cop asked. He pointed over Dillon's shoulder to a small figure wearing an orange and blue stocking cap and a bulky dark blue coat that extended down past the knees and resembled an old sleeping bag.
Dillon answered with a distracted swing of his arm. “That’s my little brother, Danny,” he said.

The old cop waved. “Hi there, Danny.”

Danny cautiously waved back, shy and silent. A cluster of white goose feathers escaped from his coat, whirled in the still winter air, and dropped to the ground like exhausted snowflakes.

“How old are you Dillon?” the old cop asked.

“Twelve,” he said. Dillon scanned the dark creases of the coat for another glimpse of the revolver but it remained hidden.

“And how old is your brother?”

“He’s six.”

Danny’s light voice broke in. “I’m almost seven,” he said. There was an indisputable pride in those quick words that enlarged the old cop’s smile, and he held up his hands and bowed his head in mock apology.

“Okay, okay, sorry about that Danny,” he said. “Anyway, the reason I stopped by to talk to you boys is because the security guard at Safeway told me that someone had stolen some pallets off of their loading dock this morning. Now what I need to know—and you boys need to tell me the truth, okay—is where those pallets over there came from?”

The old cop rolled his bovine eyes over his shoulder at the sleeping oak tree behind him. Four wooden pallets were leaning against the trunk of the big tree, heavy and awkward, like drunken soldiers trying to stand at attention.

An hour ago, the old cop had listened impatiently as the store security guard meticulously described a crime he hadn’t witnessed by starting each sentence with a slice of military time and fitting the words “patrolling,” “perpetrator,” and “theft” into each sentence. The old cop had passed the interview doodling in his notebook with a thoughtful look on his face. The security guard, his plump cheeks glistening with excitement, had assured him that the store would press charges against the perpetrators.

And that was the end of it as far as the old cop was concerned; he had better things to do. Still, he was curious. He had spent five years working in a cabinet shop before joining the police force; he knew wood. He knew that the tree behind him was an oak and that the pallets propped against it were worthless, that the pale yellow wood—raw with sticky amber sap and scarred with little knotholes the color of scorched paper—was “shit-wood,” rejected board-stock, too ugly to season and too wet to burn. So why would anyone bother stealing freight pallets? It was this question that had propelled him out of the warm comfort of his car and into the cold to talk to the two boys.

The lie came quickly but the old cop’s unexpected friendliness made Dillon hesitate. “I found them,” he finally mumbled into his chest.

“Where’d you find them?”

“Across the street...in a shopping cart. Danny and me dragged them over here.”

That sounded reasonable to the old cop. Dillon was small—he doubted that the boy could lift the bulky weight of a single pallet, let alone grab four of them off of a loading dock.

For the first time, he noticed that an old framing hammer was dangling from one of Dillon’s belt loops, hanging gawkily from the little boy’s waist like a misshappen stone, and a romantic spasm coursed through his body. He knew that these boys, like most of the people in his precinct, were poor. The exterior of their little gray house looked diseased: the clapboard siding was swollen with moisture and dotted with splotches of brown mold—a broken window had been bandaged with a piece of cardboard wrapped in a white plastic bag with the word “Safeway” running diagonally in faded red cursive. Yet, the old cop imagined that these two boys, standing in the ugly shadow of their poverty, dreamed of building a fort or maybe even a tree house with those four worthless pallets.

The old cop smiled. “Okay, fair enough, fair enough,” he said, reaching out and playfully tousling Dillon’s hair.

Dillon started at the initial contact but the old cop’s hand felt gentle and good, like a warm blessing. A glittering fantasy rushed over him and in its wake the seductive image of the old cop’s revolver flickered and faded into oblivion.

The old cop asked him and Danny if they wanted him to be their Father and they both said yes and ran to him. He gathered the boys into his big arms and told them that he loved them and would take care of them. He took his new cows shopping and bought them Levi’s and Nike’s and bikes and comic books. Then he took them out for pancakes and orange juice before the long drive out to the country where the three of them would live in a big log cabin and Danny and him would have their own rooms. And the old cop would teach him how to box and wrestle and he would grow strong and tall and he would protect Danny and the other kids at school from the bullies.

The old cop stood up, his knees protesting with another salvo of fireworks.

“I’m going to let you boys keep the pallets this time,” he said generously. “You know with some help from your dad you boys could use those pallets to build yourselves a really nice platform in that tree of yours—

“We don’t have a dad,” Dillon said quickly, hoping that a father’s absence would be enough, and the old cop would adopt them right there.

“Oh,” the big man said. He studied the ground for a moment, methodically scratching the hard gray stubble on his chin. “Well,” he said, patting Dillon on the shoulder affectionately, “there’s nothing wrong with that son, nothing at all. I’m sure your mom could give you boys a hand, right?”

Drunk with expectation, Dillon wanted to tell the old cop everything. He wanted to tell him about mom’s broken promises: that she had stopped going to work and started shooting up again; that she had locked her bedroom door and he and Danny hadn’t seen her in three days. He wanted to tell him that there was no oil in the furnace and he and Danny had to drag their mattresses down into the oil in the furnace and he and Danny had to drag their mattresses down into the living room, so they could sleep in front of the fireplace. And that was why he had stolen the pallets off the loading dock at Safeway. He had done it several times before. His back bending like green wood, he had dragged and shoved the pallets...
into the shopping cart, not to build a fort with them, but to destroy them, to smash them apart with the heavy framing hammer and burn the ramshackle wood in the fireplace.

He looked up at the old cop—the big man was smiling down at him, one of his big hands was perched lightly on Dillon's shoulder—and the secret words of his life filled his mind. He felt dizzy and winded. *Tell him, he thought, just tell him everything and he'll save us.*

A female voice, heavy with static, intruded from the old cop's belt. "ALL NON-EMERGENCY TRAFFIC OFF THE AIR AT THIS TIME. ALL UNITS STAND BY FOR TONE."

The old cop bowed his head in concentration and fiddled with a black knob on the top of his radio. The radio jumped back to life with a high-pitched squeal and the female voice returned. "ALL AVAILABLE UNITS, 27-ADAM AT THE U.S. BANK ON THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF KILLINGSWORTH AND MLK BLVD. NO FURTHER INFORMATION AT THIS TIME."

"Damn it all to hell, that's the third god damned time this week," the old cop muttered in disgust. He yanked the radio off of his belt, exhaling slowly before speaking into it. "881," he said impatiently.

There was something different now about the old cop that troubled Dillon. His placid amiability had disappeared; he sounded tired and serious and his big body looked heavy and brittle. But, more than anything, it was the loss of the big man's attention that made Dillon's lungs clench and ache with panic: the old cop hadn't looked at him once since the radio's intrusion.

"GO AHEAD 881."

"I'm just a couple of blocks away from that call. I'm leaving from 9th and Jessup right now." The old cop lumbered off in the direction of his police car, plodding past the stolen pallets with the reckless agility of an angry old bull.

"Wait!" Dillon yelled at the retreating figure. "I need to tell you something, something important!"

The old cop was at his car now. "Sorry boys, I've got to go. You two have fun with those pallets!"

He clutched the frame of the car door, gingerly lowering his big body into the vehicle. Sunlight caught the polished silver handle of his revolver and the hard light flashed against Dillon's eyes, flickering like a malicious wink.

Dillon blinked and the old cop was gone. The tight pressure that had been building in his throat settled heavily on his chest and stomach.

And he realized that there was something cruel about the winter sunlight, so distant and cold, but bright, so bright there were no shadows to hide the garbage, sprinkled through the yard like fallen leaves: white and yellow cigarette butts, scraps of silver and gold foil, wisps of cellophane and sinewy twine, even a couple of bleached chicken bones. Amidst the garbage random tufts of leaden grass mixed with stubborn weeds, tiny shards of yellow wood and long twisted staples littered the earth around the big tree.
I.

eyes frozen
hands unmoving
my being
stone
stiff
still
to capture
This
NOW
As a photograph
My
heart
has
stopped
HERE.

II.

I catch
the shadows
of
leaves
wind-dancing
on the
white washed
doorway

III.

Your image
escapes me
Still
you are not.
A fury of freedom,
Gust of his glory,
Blow
the dark clouds
away.

IV.

Oh restless soul,
listen . . .
Be still and know
that He, God,
is always, evermore
beckoning-
calling you to find
peaceful rest.
Alas, lonely roaming
tires a quick beating heart.
So collapse.
Inhale His beauty.
Breathe in Life in His
embrace.
Children were without a father for
Three months.
It may have been longer, but I'm not
At liberty to add up the moments for
Two weeks.
Soon, it will be finished.
Two clicks on the clock
Never more than two seasons.
My boy says three minutes
He doesn't understand the journey yet
I don't want him to feel
Two clicks on the clock.
It will be done,
Soon.

"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."
--Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or: A Fragment of Life

The universe according to Stephen Hawking
might be different if not for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. The Unified Field Theory
might still be lurking in his brain
behind a grocery list
and the directions to his girlfriend's apartment.
Had his nerves not revolted and severed
brain from body
would he formulate a different cause and consequence;
an un-divine spark
that would create a cacophony
of pulpit-pounding denials?

ALS is Lou Gehrig's Disease,
but Lou wasn't one to take credit for things.
He left baseball because of it
and despite it
he was, "...the luckiest man alive."
Perhaps. What did he know?
He was the Iron Horse
and played and played
until he played himself out
of a game, a livelihood, a life.
Nevertheless, he passed his own Socratic examination. Satisfied, his understanding, complete.
my son stumbled on his way to third base
trying to extend a stand-up double.
Rooster tails of native clay and immigrant top soil
sprayed the opponent shortstop
as planted right foot launched him
off of second and into an arm wheeling,
tip-toeing slave to his own inertia
and his ten-year old bravura.

Flailing body overtook ambition
in a collapsing bow to the goggle-eyed
third-base coach whose arms
were still mutely raised, fingers extended,
frozen in coach-sign-speak for Stop.
Knowledgeable fathers and step-dads
screamed conflicting commands from the stands
and he levitated.

He rose to a sprinter's crouch
and sprang, arms pumping at the bag
and the unfortunate boy playing third base,
who was a soccer player with his hopeful father's
too large fielder's glove
and sudden questions about the decision
to try baseball.

And he fled.

The ball, thrown perfectly
from deep in the wet, marshy turf
of a spring baseball outfield, bulleted
into my son's back as he dropped
into cleat-footed contact with the unguarded base
and effortlessly popped up to see
the ball spinning lazily away, untended.

And he ran for home.

I became a pacifist when I was three years old and marched into a
group of my uncles huddled with my Dad around the back end of our '41 Nash,
my Dad's foot carefully balanced on the rear fender. They were talking
feverishly—until I entered the group when the conversation stopped cold. I am
certain they were talking about their war experiences. And I am equally sure
they knew what they were saying was not fit for the consumption of three year
olds. My Mother told me later how her brothers had changed in the war. I
watched them my whole life: dark, withdrawn, drinking too much, mean. (Of
course, not all soldiers are affected in this way; but we must find a way to stop
feeding our young to the monsters of war!) During the Viet Nam War, my
Father exploded one day at the TV when somebody referred to World War II as
the “last good war.” “No such thing!” he told me. People who fight wars know
better. I believe them.

Finally, the issue of war comes down to our ability to imagine
alternatives. All of us find it too easy to see people we perceive as different as
“The Other.” To update Stephen Spender in The God That Failed, we find it as
convenient to kill “them” as to erase a botched sentence with a click of our
mouse. “Do not kill kin,” the early Greek code of justice announced. In The
Oresteia, Aeschylus forces us to ask again, “Who is our kin?” Athena expands
the notion to include anybody in our society: “my curse on civil war.” In the
Global Village, all wars are civil wars, wars among neighbors. A Pacific
Northwest Indian legend helps us understand.

One day five brothers, traveling
West across the ocean, meet some strangers, who kill four of the young men.
The fifth flees—and eventually returns to the land of the strangers, avenging the
death of his brothers by kidnapping the daughter of their Chief. She becomes
his wife, and while pregnant with their child, she escapes back to her people.
She finds a way to break the cycle of revenge by establishing the following
principle with their son. She tells him: “The man you see from the other side of
the ocean may be your father. Be kind to strangers.”

I once had a poster that said, “War is not healthy for children and other
living beings.” That's the dainty view. That irascible World War I pacifist
Randolph Bourne put some teeth into it. “War is the health of the state.” War
is good for business; it builds the egos of nation-states. On a deeper level,
Bourne is saying that we go to war because we fear complexity. There is
something about us that loves to wave flags, to send packages to “our boys,”
to stand united in a common cause.

Our language betrays our innocence: initially we were on a “crusade”;
now we are fighting against the “axis of evil,” comfortably evoking that last
“good war”—and simplistic notions of our own innocence. Even “war on
terrorism” is problematic: Who are the terrorists? Osama bin-Laden? The
Palestinians? The Israelis? Us? We must examine our conscience; as the
Christian doctrine of sin says, we are all sinners. In the last 20 years, we have bombed Libya, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sudan, and now Afghanistan. Most victims were poor, dark skinned, and/or “heretics.” Too often, we prop up right wing governments and fund their death squads (in Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala among others). This is not to forget our more admirable traits: our kindness, openness to diversity, generosity, willingness to live in community. But with Albert Camus, I “love my country too much not to question it.”

We must realize, as Virginia Woolf reminds us, that “It is dangerous to be alive even one day.” John Locke once wrote that “all the world is America.” He may have meant that, as happened to European Americans when they came West, we are all orphans and aliens, far from home. We suffer the pain of our isolation. We fear the absence of meaning. We can understand what the Italian Missile defense shields, warships, land mines, and military bases around the violence. Living together in community is the archetypal human story. We find not enough goodness (so we create barriers to protect ourselves). Americans world do not—and will never—provide us adequate security. Must we continue ways to get along—tenuously—in our neighborhoods; our challenge is to find ways to avoid killing each other. Can we export first what is perhaps the most admirable American dream: democracy. America has always been a nation of cooperating and disputing voices. Democracy is not pretty. It requires us to live in complexity. In dialogue, we trust that everything will turn out—not necessarily well, but better than it was. Democracy requires faith that people are good enough to live in community, intelligent enough to see the value of diversity, hopeful enough to recognize that there is enough to go around.

I reject war because I am a pacifist. My answer is Luther’s answer: “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Beyond that, there are alternatives to violence. Living together in community is the archetypal human story. We find ways to get along—tenuously—in our neighborhoods; our challenge is to see the rest of humanity as our neighbors. We don’t have to like each other; we have to find ways to avoid killing each other. We can export first what is perhaps the most admirable American dream: democracy. America has always been a nation of cooperating and disputing voices. Democracy is not pretty. It requires us to live in complexity. In dialogue, we trust that everything will turn out—not necessarily well, but better than it was. Democracy requires faith that people are good enough to live in community, intelligent enough to see the value of diversity, hopeful enough to recognize that there is enough to go around.

I reject war because I am a democrat. I reject war because I believe in this world together with the mission to “spread the wealth,” i.e., to work against racism and economic and political exploitation. The U. S. can in fact be a moral leader, especially if we see ourselves ecologically as part of a community of nations, working with our neighbors to create a more just world. I reject war because I have HOPE that this can happen. And as Vaclav Havel reminds us, hope is not the same thing as optimism that things will turn out well. Hope is rather the certainty that certain principles are worth working for, regardless of how they turn out. Peace is one of them.

Once a person sees the possibility of peace and justice, the only issue becomes how to translate the vision into reality. We have choices in the current crisis. We could invoke the power of the global village (convene the U. N. Security Council). We could empower an international police force to capture those responsible for the raid on the World Trade Center (since the attack was essentially a crime against humanity). We could remove U. S. forces from Saudi Arabia, which Muslims see as “sacred ground” (and which would remove one of the major reasons “why they hate us”). We could employ currently available environmental-friendly energy sources that will wean us from our addiction to oil and other fossil fuels. Perhaps most of all, we can promote options to war and violence: Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel and many others have shown us ways to create better human communities. As one practical alternative, we could fund national peace colleges, putting our best minds to work finding strategies to resolve conflicts. Our goal is to work for justice, the most enduring path to peace and security. We can pray, hope and imagine. But we must also work. In the words of the old Civil Rights anthem, “I ain’t gonna study war no more.”
REFLECTIONS OF THE EVALUATOR OF THE ESSAYS

Evaluating the written work of others is never an easy task. One looks at the presented materials, and knows that long hours and hours of editing have gone into the final product. Good writing is a form of art. Just as painting, sculpting, or dancing, can be appreciated, so too can good writing.

There are very specific steps taken in an appraisal of this kind. First, the essays are read “for pleasure.” One looks for a delicious introduction that “draws” you into the paper, a certain flow of the wording that is creatively appropriate, and a dynamite ending that leaves you wanting more. Notes are taken as one reflects on what has just been read. Next, a simple scale for adjudication of each of the common criteria for essay writing is developed. After waiting several hours or even a day, the essays are read once again - this time with the aid of the evaluation piece. Final notes are taken, and the determination is made.

Selecting an ultimate winner from among winners is not an easy task. It is, however, quite satisfying – the only thing missing was a hammock to swing on and a tall glass of lemonade for refreshment.

Selecting an ultimate winner from among winners is not an easy task. It is, however, quite satisfying – the only thing missing was a hammock to swing on and a tall glass of lemonade for refreshment.

Congratulations, essayists. Your work is appreciated.

Dr. Jan Albrecht
Professor of Education

CUTE AND COUNTING: THE BODY IMAGE LOW DOWN
AMANDA LARSEN
1ST PLACE WINNER

Picture this: a 5’4”, 120-pound teen girl with an hourglass figure and who is a walking Abercrombie model. What young girl wouldn’t want to look this way? There are many factors that have helped shape the gender role for girls, such as the media and entertainment industry, who have formed a stereotype for the adolescent girl, and many girls will go to extremes to reach that Barbie-girl ideal. Also, peer influence has intensified the issue of body image for female adolescents and has caused problematic outcomes when this perfection is not reached. Like it or not, in today’s society, girls are expected to have a certain look.

When contemplating the components of body image, two immediately come to mind: clothing and body physique. For most teen girls, the issue of clothing surfaces from the time the sun rises until the time it sets. Let’s use a typical Friday in October as an example. Before school, the perfect outfit must be chosen, and it usually takes numerous attempts before that is accomplished. Let’s begin with a cream sweater and jeans. That’s fine for the moment, but maybe jeans would look better with something more casual, like a three-quarter sleeve shirt and fleece vest, perfect for a fall day. But this outfit is much too “scrubby,” so the sweater goes back on with a pair of khaki pants. Now for shoes, there is a choice between black boots, brown Doc Martin’s, or white Sketchers. The boots sound pretty good, especially if the ground is wet. Is it perfect now? Well, for the time being, yes, but choosing outfits for a workout, the football game, and the after-game dance is a completely different story.

Being trendy can be an obsession. Brand name clothing is a hot item for teen girls, and they will pay almost anything just to have “GAP” embroidered onto the front of their t-shirt. Having the right look is very important, and the “in” styles become obvious as every girl sports a short skirt and skinny top or capri pants and flip-flops. Girls get ready for school as if it was a fashion show, and the hallways are the aisles where the girls model the hottest styles and latest fads. Those that choose this “profession” usually group together and form the popular cliques in schools. Those that don’t choose the life of style are usually left out and are often isolated from the attention gained by popularity. It is for this reason that many schools have decided on uniforms as the dress code. When everyone is dressed the same, there is no visual wealth or style disparity, and theoretically, students will be deemed popular by their personality rather than their dress. But a person’s image is not based solely on their choice of clothing. The other component of body image is physical looks, and this may be the most crucial component of all.

If it appears that adolescent girls obsess about their clothes, they may obsess over their bodies even more. Physical attractiveness is a top concern in the life of young girls because it is associated with popularity. Consequently,
peers have a huge influence on how girls view their bodies. Physical looks go way beyond hair and makeup. Let's rephrase that: physical looks go below hair and makeup. Society is fascinated with a large chest, tiny waist, cute butt, and small thighs. This beauty ideal has become almost impossible for women to achieve (Tiggemann, 2001), and has become the source for many problems that result when girls don't have the right figure. Though these perceived imperfect bodies are usually at the fault of genetics, girls are often teased and isolated by those born with the ideal figure. Dr. Kris Gowen, from the Stanford Center on Adolescence, presented her study in 1998 that girls who are ridiculed and isolated by peers, or lack receiving kind acts by peers, have a lower body satisfaction, regardless of their actual weights or pubertal status ("Body Image", 1998). Female teens blame themselves for their "flaws" and suffer through the consequences.

By age thirteen, 58% of American girls are unhappy with their bodies. By age seventeen, that percentage increases to 78% of girls ("New Book", 1998). This body dissatisfaction can lead to lowered self-esteem, diet obsessions and eating disorders, bad grades in school, and poor or fewer relationships. Though self-esteem is paramount to the development of adolescents, it teeters on the body image perception. Much of self-confidence comes from a person's looks, and when society and peers deem that look as the wrong one, confidence and self-esteem both go down the tube. A 1990 report issued by the American Association of University Women documented that the typical White female has a 33% decline in self-esteem during her adolescence (Pesa, 1999). Even with a positive and supportive home environment, self-esteem can plummet due to today's ideals that have influenced these young girls. The pedestal of perfection keeps rising, and most teens just can't hold on.

A low sense of self-esteem concerning body image almost always leads to dieting. It is a typical scene where a girl looks in the mirror and complains of her big hips and love handles and immediately proclaims that she is going on a diet. This is a daily routine for most teens who never feel their bodies are quite right. Even female athletes who exercise and are in shape may complain about having too broad of shoulders or too big of arms and calves, and they view dieting as the answer to even these problems. Dieting has become very common among adolescents, even when there is no medical need for weight loss. Data from a 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey has indicated the extensiveness of female adolescent dieting behaviors. Those attempting to lose weight were 59.7%, and those actually dieting were 45.7% (Pesa, 1999). Dieting has become an obsession to young girls. They strive for the perfect body, and 15% of teen girls diet in an attempt to look like the icons portrayed by the media ("New Book", 1998). How far will girls go to look like today's hot stars? Well, to some, the idea of looking like Britney Spears or Tyra Banks is a bit far-fetched, but for many girls, these celebrities are the models of perfection that must be emulated. Unfortunately, many girls will go beyond the limits of dieting, which lead to eating disorders. These eventuate from continuous body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. No matter how thin a young girl may be or become, she keeps on viewing herself as overweight. The thought of binging and purging begins to sound more appealing than having to look at her "fat" body in a mirror. Eating disorders have been the cause of hospitalizations and even death. This has occurred because of a distorted reality of body image in the eyes of teen girls.

The obsession with body image may also lead to insufficiency in school. Sometimes the loss in self-esteem from body dissatisfaction causes grades to drop. There doesn't seem to be a purpose to motivate the student in her studies. She becomes listless and doesn't seem to care about school at all. The power of mind over body is not at work, for her perceived physical faults cease attempts at accepting who she is and what she looks like. Success in school may also suffer because many adolescent girls would rather be skinny than get good grades, plain and simple. They focus mainly on their looks and popularity and how far they can climb up the social ladder. The only test they want to succeed at is who has the best clothes, who wears the lowest dress size, and who can attract the most boys. This assertiveness to physical appearance goes beyond the boundaries of "looking nice" and greatly affects a student's school performance.

Body image can also greatly affect relationships. When a young girl feels pushed aside by peers for not having the ideal body image, she will most likely make friends with other isolated girls. But what's the good of a group of girls with low self-esteem having a pity-party? Can they really help each other, or would they even know where to start? These relationships would be bound by a shared sentiment, and though there is a common ground, it is not a strong foundation. In other situations, the craving for popularity binds many girls in a friendship, which actually takes the shape of a strict social contract. There are high standards that must be kept to remain in the group of "friends." If you gain a little weight over the summer, accidentally get a bad haircut, or break out with your own version of a pizza face, you might be kicked out of this popular clique. As for the quality of these friendships, there is not much to be said, except that they are quite unstable. At one moment, girls are hugging and laughing, and at the next they are bitching and crying. Gossip seems to connect the tangled web, and yet pulls it apart at the same time. Girls who choose friends based on looks will most likely experience a false sense of belonging and must sort out their true friends after adolescence, when the obsession over body image calms down.

So back to our Abercrombie model, what does she have that most girls don't? Answer: the perfect body image, clothes and looks. She is the epitome of our greatest ideal, the present-day Marilyn Monroe, the American Princess Diana. Yet in reality, she is also the cause for confusion and suffering amongst adolescent girls. From spending many hours and dollars on the perfect outfit, to never eating breakfast to save a few extra calories, to having peers that critique every flaw, this ideal body image has been much more of a problem than a benchmark for adolescent girls. They have been pressured into sacrificing a part of their self to obtain the look they are expected to have.
I sometimes watch the water while I canoe across a lake. I plunge my paddle in, straining to push it behind me (kind of like regrets), and pull the dripping paddle out as I watch the lake bottom float by. In that moment of ascension, where the paddle ceases its intrusion on the lake, two tiny whirlpools are left behind. They go careening through the glassy surface, confident and crazy in their finite swirling. I feel like that sometimes.

My companions and I are only beginning to dry ourselves from the hormone bath that is adolescence. We have this vague sense that somewhere in ourselves we contain an essence, the very core of who we are. It still feels soft and unformed; it's our eighteen-year embryo, and if only we could define it — feel its boundaries — we'd really know ourselves.

We sit alone on our dorm-room floors, staring blankly at a catalogue of classes. We don't understand how we're expected to anticipate our future when we are only beginning to understand ourselves. In our frustration we pick rashly. History, English, art, and photography — one of each sounds good.

We're overcome with frustration. We have life; we feel and we sigh. We see people in movies, on the street, in buses, all living with a confidence, a recklessness, an intensity we envy. They seem to have defined themselves; we have not. We're still timid and hesitant. We know we're made of the same stuff as those we admire, but how can we live our essence if we cannot define it? Such are our thoughts as we fling ourselves into our beds. We sigh as we fall asleep discontent. Then something happens. We go to our classes on myriad subjects. Some classes we adore, others we loathe, and in the end we're left with the very thing we could not find — the beginnings of a deeper identity. The edges of our essence are felt by our likes and dislikes, our passions good and bad. The way we respond to our classes illuminates the veiled characteristics we never knew we had. Maybe we're nothing more than we ever were, but we see more clearly.

We are not yet the twisting, dancing, careening souls we wish to be. The paddle is still in the water and we are not ready to live crazy, glorious lives. But we revel in this exploration, this process of defining ourselves. Like children who've grown to peer over kitchen countertops, we grab and chew each subject and concept we can. We feel more defined, we see ourselves for what we want to be. This is merely a beginning.

I want to careen through a placid world with turbulence. I want to spin until I no longer can. But now are the moments for explorations and definition. Only when I know the essence that is me can I leave swirling.
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