

# WITH A CIVIL TONGUE

VOLUME 8 - SPRING 2013

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Photo by Michael Knapik

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# “WITH A CIVIL TONGUE”

A publication of *The Catalyst*  
Volume 8 - Spring 2013

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WHAT WE ARE:

*The Catalyst* is a student-run creative journal of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse English Club publishing prose, poetry, photography, art, music, and all other creative works by the students and faculty of UW-L. Each semester, the student editors pick a new theme and accept submissions about and outside the chosen theme.

## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Hello readers! First of all, we would like to greatly apologize for the delay in getting this volume published. We hit some unforeseen speed bumps that set us back. We hope to get Volume 9 started earlier so that this doesn't happen again.

That said, we had some amazing submissions this semester. A big thank you goes out to everyone who submitted; without you, we wouldn't be able to do this publication! Also, thank you to everyone who has supported us in the process this semester and has helped us overcome our obstacles. All your support and aid is greatly appreciated!

This semester we chose to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by asking for submissions involving and/or inspired by the brave civil rights activists of the past and present. We hope you enjoy the pieces as much as we have.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this or any other volume of *The Catalyst*, please feel free to email us at [catalyst@uwlax.edu](mailto:catalyst@uwlax.edu). We would love to hear any and all feedback you have for us. We are always looking for areas in which to improve.

Best,  
The Editors

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## Old Garbage

*Andy Davis*

Nothing in the world smells like garbage, especially old garbage; it hangs in the air. It is a combination of rotting sweetness and bitter decay. I was in Birmingham, Alabama, during a garbage strike. It was during the Carter years and the important garbage strikes were long over. We had waged that war and won; America was in one of its a post-racial periods. This was just a plain old quality-of-life, working-conditions, competitive-wage kind of strike.

It really didn't matter. The garbage still stank.

Some smells you get used to. Your nose grows familiar with the odor and you forget it is even there; but not garbage. The smell grows from the mountains of waste; of dirty diapers, of spoiled food, of moldy paper and of everything rotten and ripe. A week's worth of it sit in ripped plastic bags, soggy brown grocery sacks, torn and twisted cardboard boxes or is just piled in the streets and alleys. It blends together to make a complicated and interesting bouquet. It's an odor that changes with each step and with each tiny change in the breeze. You can never grow used to it.

It is also impossible to ignore it. It fills every nook and cranny. It seeps around every window and under every door. It clings to your clothes and to all your worldly possessions. It flavors everything you eat.

The bus station sandwich I was eating tasted like the garbage that surrounded the building. The thin sliced ham and processed cheese food on the dry white bread tasted like weeks of old garbage. In another time and another place I wouldn't have eaten it. I was trying to get from Ocean Springs, Mississippi, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on less than seventy-five dollars. A bus ticket cost sixty-three dollars and eighty-seven cents. The trip, if everything went right, took a minimum of seventy-three and a half hours. That left me with eleven dollars and thirteen cents to eat for just over three days. I had very little flexibility in both schedule and finances. I was eating a vending sandwich in the downtown Birmingham bus station at eleven thirty on a Tuesday night. The bus that was to take me farther north was leaving at 11:45. I took the last bite, savoring the taste of rotting trash, and pushed open the back door of the station.

The smell was worse in the alley. The struggling air conditioner in the station hadn't been able to lower the temperature much but it had softened the rankness of the air. In the dark, hot

alley there was no softness. The air slammed into me, stopped me, held me in the doorway. I would still be there if not for the sounds of a driver testing his air brakes. The hiss broke my trance.

Six buses lined the opposite side of the alley. I looked at my ticket and looked at the buses. Mine was the last in line, furthest from the door and where I stood. "Figures," I muttered. I shifted, adjusted my backpack, and headed down the alley. I had believed that nothing could smell worse than the garbage. I was wrong. The diesel fumes from the idling buses added a mechanical and metallic element to the stench, a bite that it had lacked. I coughed, fought back the urge to bring the sandwich back, but pushed on.

The driver glanced at my ticket and motioned me on board. I climbed the three steps and holding my backpack in front of me side-stepped down the aisle. Somewhere towards the back of the bus I threw the bag into an overhead compartment and flopped into an open aisle seat. I squirmed a little, settling as best I could into the vinyl. I heard another hiss of brakes and the bus jerked. Perfectly timed, we were moving and I had spent no extra time, not one minute, on board.

The bus wound its way through the streets of Birmingham. I couldn't see much from my seat; just flashes and blurs. I still tried. I stretched and craned my neck, but I couldn't see anything outside the bus. I could see pretty well inside the bus and it became clear to me, rather quickly, that I was the only Caucasian person on the bus. Seventy-two people, according to the sign above the driver, and I was the lone person with pale skin. Seventy-three people, actually. Couldn't forget the driver. What were the odds, I wondered.

I am not a bigot. I grew up in Illinois and Wisconsin. In Illinois I encountered a lot of dark skinned human beings. In Wisconsin there were very few, almost none. Didn't matter, I prided myself on being progressive and open minded. I did not judge people on the color of their skin. I did not, until right then.

I sat still, unconsciously trying to make myself smaller and unnoticeable. Two hours and twenty minutes left until the next stop; we were traveling on an express. I was trapped on the bus, a lonely face in a dark crowd. I was contemplating my situation; my imagination running wild, when the man sitting next to me said something. I was too preoccupied to hear him clearly.

"Excuse me," I said.

"I said," he said, "You know you're the only white boy on this bus?"

I turned a little in my seat and looked at him. He was a black man. No one used the term African-American back then. He looked middle aged, in his mid-forties. His hair was cut short, a little gray highlighting the curls. His skin was wrinkled, especially around the eyes. There was no smile. There was no frown. There was no expression at all. His face was solid.

"Excuse me," I said again. I had heard him, but the direct nature of his question surprised me.

He didn't smile. "You know you're the only white boy on this bus?"

No point in lying. "Yeah, I noticed."

I looked at the back of the seat in front of me. I was working very hard to keep my imagination in check.

"Make you nervous?" he asked.

Of course not, I thought. Why should it? "Yeah, a little," I said. Sometime honesty sneaks up on you.

He snickered a little. I looked at him. He was smiling. Suddenly he didn't look like a black man, he just looked like a man. "Welcome to my life," he said.

"Your life?"

"Imagine, young man, always being the only white boy on the bus, or the only black man in the break room, or the only negro in line at the bank, or the first nigger at the lunch counter. Imagine that."

"I can't," I said. And I still can't.

He was working at an oil refinery on the Gulf Coast. His wife and three kids lived in Chicago. He had lost his job to the recession. He was going home for a week. Instantly and simply, we were traveling together. There's not much to do on a bus, so we talked.

I never met his family. We rolled into Chicago in the middle of the night. No one came to meet him because he hadn't told them what time he was arriving. They all had school the next day and they needed their sleep. No one was there to meet me because I had to catch another bus.

We shook hands and never saw each other again.

Sometimes, to this day, I'll hear or see something that upsets me. Someone will act out of ignorance or hatred. I close my eyes and picture my traveling companion, the man I met leaving Birmingham in the middle of the night, and I remember that bigotry and racial intolerance smells like garbage, old garbage.

**Abandon**  
*Kacey Harasimowicz*





**Untitled Photography**  
*Michael Knapik*









## **Dreaming Awake**

*Mariah Maras*

Focused on more than what lay before:

A body full, ready for darkness, hypnosis, and passing enthusiasts.

Solid look and steady eyes of assurance are shared with a quintessential mind.

Equal to one's own?

Humankind immersed in thought; connected--

Another badgering mind lost in translation between lines overlooked.

Thoughts: rigid, enslaved.

A victim like one to a vampire: dark, angry, red, black, power.

Particular patterns are aligned with uneasiness in effort to escape human turmoil:

Turn in order to face an existence not seen by others.

Dreaming awake presently, no fear though.

Take a breath; steadfast, easy.

Channel quick – time is elusive. Pleasure is right with one passerby!

A channel between two, as one, no words spoken.

Release flows through tingling feet, up tingling knees, to tingling tongue.

We have a single understanding. Sharing thought beyond thought beyond thought.

Empowered by control like a god of seduction;

Barrier breaking, thought sucking, let go, free this soul.

A day as one; that day will come.

## Poem with Judas and the Brewers

*William Stobb*

The slighter the inauthenticity  
the more it seems to register these days.  
Whole contexts of significance might be  
blighted with fuckery, pastel  
flowers on the rosary, the whole  
cosmogony a minty fresh blasphemy,  
but if a fake beard buckles  
down to the parted lips of the passion  
play Judas watch the calls come in.  
Check the sky. Check the ocean.  
The whole thing's gone monstrous  
as Frankenstein gonorrhoea  
but that's a good idea at parties I enjoy.  
If the manufacturing history of everything  
were emotionally true, me passed out  
in the orange chair  
wouldn't be nature. Would be?  
Wouldn't. But it isn't. Is it?

I live in this  
house that was built by a karate master  
yet I have no furious serpent kick.  
I live in this era of gilded excuses  
yet the disaster's notserious  
if you believe Confucius.  
The Christmas butcher  
stops me at the fish case. He's bothered.  
The weather's a little too  
meaningful for skiing  
so he spends all day watching  
old Brewer games on cable.  
The Brewers. The Brewers.  
This is the year. You wait. This time they're seriously for real.

## Movies in the Wire Bins at Truck Stops

*William Stobb*

Instead of trying to trump up some interest  
in the unlikely plot, drift into the imaginary  
present of the actors, many of whom  
have a charming quality of well-intentioned  
second-rated-ness and have gone on  
to become failed. For instance while watching  
*I Love You Beth Cooper*  
it works best if I imagine myself  
behind the cab curtain of my Freightliner.  
I close my eyes and float from there  
into the living room of Hayden Panettiere.  
She's alone, and willing  
to reminisce with a trucker  
about those happy days on the set  
with Paul Rust as Denis Cooverman.  
He embarrasses her Beth Cooper  
but in a cute way, so she allows him and only him  
to live. And somehow this is enough  
to start her thinking about what might've been  
had she taken that role she let fall  
to Gwyneth Paltrow and I know  
in life it's natural to slip and falter.  
Mini-vans pass westbound toward Des Moines  
and children on the verge of sleep  
watch the stream of headlights through  
rain-streaked windows and slip  
into their own distances  
while in the back of my Freightliner  
the sadness of time is mine to share  
with my new friend Hayden Panettiere.

**Untitled Photography**  
*Megan Kunstman*











## **It's Probably OK**

*David Briggs*

That summer, Angie let her boyfriend move in with us. I had few objections to it, since he slept in her room. He was clean, quiet, and helped with the rent. Our paths did not cross often; his job took him most of the day, and I was still working the overnight janitor job. Most mornings, he'd leave just as I'd come in.

One Saturday morning I finished early, happy to return early and sleep as soon as possible. It had been a difficult week, and I was tiredly ecstatic that this night had proved an exception. As I came in, Angie's boyfriend was still in the shower. Angie was peeling an orange carefully over the sink.

When I greeted her, I could tell she was nervous. I asked her if something was wrong, but she shook her head.

"No, not really," she said, and she tore off a portion of the rind and put it in her mouth, chewing it.

"Are you sure?" I asked her, but she said nothing. She just spit the rind piece into the sink and started chewing another.

Her boyfriend came out of the bathroom fully dressed. "You're home early," he said.

"Yeah, it was an easy night."

"I bet you're glad."

"I am," I said. "I've got to sleep. Have a good day."

"You too," he said. Angie said that too, but quieter.

I stepped over the laundry bag in front of my room, shut my door and let myself fall ungracefully onto my bed. But I didn't fall asleep, not right away. I wondered what was wrong with Angie. Our walls were thin plywood, which made our house a frozen hellscape in the winters. I could hear everything they said in the kitchen, and I listened to the two of them talk and stayed awake.

"I had a dream about you this morning," I heard Angie say faintly.

Her boyfriend's clear tenor carried through better. "Did you? What sort of dream?" He was closer to my room, probably sitting at the table. I could even hear the sound his coffee cup made when he set it down.

"It was the sort of dream where you're half awake and half asleep and occasionally wake up during it only to fall asleep again

and continue." There was a slight ring as she spit another chewed bit into the cheap aluminum sink. "You know that sort of dream, right?"

"No, no no. I mean, what sort of dream nudge wink."

"No, it was not that sort of dream," she said with full mouth.

There was a pause as she finished. "A one track mind, I tell you."

"Mm, that's a pity." He slurped his coffee. It was the only thing I took issue with. "Well then, what was this dream about?"

"I don't recall."

"You don't recall?"

"No, I don't recall."

"Uh huh."

There was some silence, and I started to feel myself relax into sleep.

His voice shook me out of that. "Well this has been an enlightening conversation and I am better for having it."

"Well, bits and pieces here and there," she said, before pausing to presumably eat more of the orange.

"Go on," he said in warm, low tone.

"Well," she said. The water ran and the knife thumped into the dishpan. "There's not much. There might have been police. Or a building, maybe a house? The color blue."

"You're right, that's not much."

"But I think I remember this bit with a photograph. You were showing me this photograph, and I asked you who was in it. And you said you were in it, but I couldn't see you, or really anyone in it. Then you showed me another and said you were in it, but there were two people in it, and I couldn't figure out who either of them were, but I was too embarrassed to ask which was you." I was much more awake now, and I waited for his response.

"I see," he said. "Wonder what it means."

"I don't know. I've been thinking about that. Maybe it means that I really don't know a single thing about you."

Neither of them said anything for a while. I wondered what was going on. His coffee slurped and ticked against the table.

"Everyone puts too much stock in dreams and their meanings. Don't think too much about that."

"You asked."

His chair scraped against the floor. "You love me, don't you?"

I couldn't hear what she said after that over the sound of keys jangling.

"Then that's all that matters," I heard him say. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Yeah," she said, and I heard her put a plate in the dishpan.

"Hey, smile! You could stop traffic with that smile, you know. I'll see you tonight."

The door opened and shut. The floor creaked.

"Are you still awake?" she asked me through my door. I climbed over the footboard and let her into my room.

She sat on my bed and looked at the titles on my bookshelf.

"Did you hear that?" she asked me without looking over.

I tried to lie, but I was too tired to do it right.

"It's okay if you did," she said.

I asked her what the matter was, but she just shook her head.

"You wouldn't get it," she said.

I almost said something, but she stopped me. "I don't really know," she corrected herself. "But it sucks."

I looked at her, my mind swimming against molasses to say something comforting. She could tell, and she thanked me. "It doesn't really matter," she added.

"Maybe not," I finally said.

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe not."

**ButterPinned**  
*Avery Stenso Velo*



## **Kismet**

*James Groh*

Embraced by my thoughts  
I cannot escape  
Nor wish to as ponders  
Wander afar, beyond  
Actuality  
Reveling in impossibilities  
Forcing fate  
To a destiny  
Unknown  
Unsteady and  
Uncertain.

## **Map**

*James Groh*

A map may guide,  
A map may hide,  
But in the end we all will die.  
Treasures are caught,  
Secrets are sought,  
A resting soul cannot but watch.  
Open air,  
A costly fare,  
A long journey not a man can bare.  
For courtly love,  
Or a lone dove,  
A persistent pursuit may rise above.  
Dark needs light,  
Moon by night,  
All we can do is put up a fight.



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