

The Bend

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Number Four

University of Notre Dame

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Our graduate M.F.A. Creative Writing program is a two-year literary immersion. We offer workshops with nationally acclaimed writers and literature classes with a distinguished Department of English faculty. Our community is small and congenial (we admit ten writers a year), and part of a large and lively intellectual community in the larger English Department. We have a diverse group of all ages and backgrounds and offer a year-round program of visitors and readings. All students write a thesis—a collection of stories or creative nonfiction, a novel, or a collection of poetry—and work closely with a thesis advisor.

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Editor's Note

Spring in a Midwestern college town is tricky. Come April, it stops snowing, and you're meant to reconcile the new predicted highs not only with the pallor you perfected all year, but with the push to get your affairs - academic, artistic, and geographic - in order.

This spring, as Notre Dame's Creative Writing Program sets loose a particularly beautiful class, we soften the blow with this fourth issue of *The Bend*, suggesting that along with the pressures to complete and decamp, are the instincts to create and distribute.

Thanks to 2006-2007's Program directors, William O'Rourke and Cornelius Eady; to the omniscient Coleen Hoover; to alumni, faculty, and friends of the University; and to our graduating class, who inspires.

Readers of all climates, enjoy.

Veronica Fitzpatrick
Jarrett Haley
Notre Dame, Indiana, April 2007

David Ewald

Chris

I was in Sarasota to find the footage. I'd never been to Florida before and I wasn't much interested in the scene. What I really wanted was the footage. I thought a week would be enough to find it. I was wrong.

The first thing I did after getting off the plane was take a cab to my hotel. In the cab I asked my driver, "Have you heard of Christine Chubbuck?"

"¿Como?"

He was from another country and perhaps only recently relocated to America. I felt bad for him.

Christine Chubbuck had a handbag full of puppets. She had a big nose. You can see it on the Internet. Her picture's there, but the footage isn't.

I checked into my room. In the lobby I looked around expecting to see someone famous. But I didn't see anyone famous. Everyone I saw had their sunglasses off—and the sunglasses weren't the big kind either. I asked the lobbyist, "Do you get many famous people staying here?"

"Not really, bub" was his gum-smacking answer.

Then he asked, "You really from North Dakota?"

"Yes," I lied. I didn't want him to know where I was from really. "Why do you ask?"

"Just I expected an accent, that's all."

"I watch a lot of television," I replied.

He handed back my license and check card and I was off to my room on the top floor—that being the third.

In my room I felt cold. It was summer, nearing the anniversary of her death, and the rest of the hotel had been warm. I turned on the heater and set my suitcase on the bed and unzipped it. I took out and assessed all that I had brought

for my week in Sarasota. Then I went to the directory and looked up the address of the nearest police station.

At the station the cop said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't think we have that here."

"But this *is* Sarasota," I said, the words coming quicker. "And this *is* the police station closest to the television station formerly known as WXLT, where she shot herself."

"When did this happen again?"

"July 15, 1974. A Monday."

"That's a bit before my time," the cop said.

He was soon joined by another cop, this one with gray hair and yellowing teeth. "Yeah, I remember that," he admitted after I'd reiterated the situation. "I know what you're after."

"So you have it," I said.

"No we don't have it," he said. "And even if we did we wouldn't give it to the likes of you."

"But I'm a journalist."

"Let's see your press credentials then."

When it was apparent I was not going to bring out my press credentials the older cop said, "All footage of that incident has been destroyed. Can't help you."

"This is insane," the younger cop, younger than me, said.

"The god-damned Web," the older cop said. "It's bringing out the worst. You're only the fourth person to come in here asking for it this month."

"The fourth?" I said. "This month?" I said, incredulous. Impossible. I could not be the fourth. I had to be the first, the only.

"And if you don't get out of here now," the older cop told me, "I'm going to have you arrested for assaulting an officer."

I scoffed. What assault?

"The whole thing was an assault," he said.

I knew better than to say, I'm coming back. I'm coming back to get that footage from you! Instead I left. I got an order

of tacos and took them back to the room. It was night by then.

When I entered my room I noticed the lights were on, which was odd since I'd turned them off when I left for the police station.

A woman was sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at the blank television. I could only see her side profile. She did not notice me as I stepped inside. She had dark straight hair that fell to her waist and a bloody wound underneath the strands at the back of her head. Her skin was pale and she wore the dress in which she'd shot herself. It was her. It was Christine Chubbuck.

She turned her head automaton-like toward me as I approached the bed. I stopped short of sitting next to her. I was not afraid. I'd been preparing for this encounter.

For a time we watched each other. Finally I said, "How are you?"

She said nothing, only looked at me expressionless. She was in pain.

I looked down at the bag in my hand. Then I looked at her.

"Do you...want a taco?"

"No, thank you," she said. "That's kind of you but, no." Her voice sounded raspy, as if she was a heavy smoker. But the Internet had made no mention of her ever having touched a cigarette.

"Can I sit down?" I asked.

She scooted over. The definitive article on her suicide was published by Sally Quinn in The Washington Post on August 4, 1974. That too is available on the Internet. She caught me looking at her wound.

"Does it hurt, Christine?"

"Call me Chris," she said.

"Chris," I said. "Does it..."

She looked away, went back to watching the dark television. If I were to guess the three Roberta Flack songs that played at Chris Chubbuck's beachfront funeral I would guess

“Killing Me Softly (With His Song)”, “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” and “The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face”. All were released prior to 9:38 am on Monday, July 15, 1974. One of the women attending the funeral service wore a bikini.

She was my age, 29, when she shot herself live on Suncoast Digest, her morning talk-show program. She was a virgin, too.

“Chris, why did you do it?”

She began to cry, still without looking at me. She broke and her head did too. As the tears trailed down her face the blood trickled from her wound and stained the bedspread.

I went to get a towel. When I returned she was still seated in the same place only crying harder. Her sobs caught in her chest then were expelled with great gales. I was not afraid. I felt terrible for her. She had died so defensive, bloated with such rage, and now she was as fragile as a porcelain figurine.

“Why? You wanted to be famous...”

“A little,” she heaved. She did not attempt to take the towel or otherwise stop the drainage.

“I want to be famous too,” I said. I offered her the towel. She did not notice it even when it dropped in her lap. “You wanted people to know you, to know what you were feeling...”

“I was lonely,” she said.

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m here for you now.”

I reached out to put my arm around her. Instead of feeling her body I felt only air, and when I looked to find her I saw her standing against the wall opposite the bed, to the right of the television. The blood on the bedspread was gone.

She looked at me as if I had just assaulted her.

“Do you know where it is?” I said. “Do you have it? Does your brother?”

“What do you want,” she snarled. The tears and blood were gone.

“I want to see the house where you were living when you died.”

“My... house?” The word seemed foreign to her.

“I want to take pictures,” I said.

She laughed. Her laughter was violent, hysterical, the deep-throated croak of the drowning. Now I was frightened. I did not like to be laughed at.

I closed my eyes and the laughter stopped. I waited several seconds, inhaling and exhaling heavily, and when at last I opened my eyes I was alone. She had left nothing behind.

I was hungry and tired, so I ate the tacos and killed the lights without turning on my laptop.

I didn't see her for another five days. During that time I was turned away from three more police stations. At one a cop pulled a gun on me and told me to back away. I went to the television station WWSB, formerly WXLN, but no one there knew of any footage and at the end of my tour I found out it was a completely new building, far removed from the old WXLN station on Lawton Drive. I went to the old building. It looked abandoned, a vacant lot, an old man standing up against the front door with a cigarette in his mouth. There was no indication of WXLN anywhere on the building.

I went up to the old man and said, “This used to be WXLN, correct?”

He observed me coolly, drew his cig out of his mouth and blew smoke in my face. I coughed.

“What's it to you,” he said.

“I'm a reporter doing a report on old buildings in Florida.”

“Used to be a TV station, sure,” the old man said without looking at me. “It's a club now.”

“You mean a nightclub?”

“Yeah, that. The kids come, get drunk, come some more, get even more drunk. That kind of thing.”

“But this is an historic building,” I said.

The old man heeled his cigarette out on the asphalt. He looked up at the building, the sky. “What's so historic about it?”

I went to the malls and walked around. Many people I stopped to ask if they knew of Christine Chubbuck. Most didn't. One man said, "Did she win the lottery or something?" Another woman said, "Did I miss her last night? Was she supposed to be on the show?" I left without buying anything.

In the parking lot under the white wet heat I stopped a kid on a skateboard.

"Sure I heard of her," the kid said. "She's just some suburban myth."

"What?"

"She's not real, man."

"But it's all over the Internet. There was a fifteen minute special on television. What happened that day. Her picture."

"So? Doesn't make it real."

I lurched at the kid, my arms outstretched. He fell backwards off his skateboard and landed against the vehicle parked behind him. I was on him then, my fists working like jackhammers. I struck and struck and struck and held, but the kid kned me in the thigh, a sensitive spot for me, and I let go. I was bent over attending to my wound when my head burst to feel as if it had just been dropped from a thousand feet to land smack in the middle of a parking lot. I fell to my knees. The side of my face felt wet and exposed.

The kid stood over me holding his skateboard aloft. Snot was hanging out of his nose, his eyes were squinted and scared. "I was just kidding jackass of course she's real," he cried. "Christ man can't you take a joke?"

One moment he eclipsed the sun, the next he was gone and I was blinded.

Back at the hotel I was treated by the sous chef.

"You have a concussion," he said.

"Impossible. I don't feel like I have a concussion."

"That's the sign of a concussion. I should know. I was in 'Nam. You should really go to the hospital."

I went to my room and laid down with a cold compress

against my head. The room was cold too. I had to make a decision. My flight was the next day but I wasn't ready. I was banged up pretty bad and what's more I hadn't yet found the footage.

I called the airline and asked them to reschedule my flight.

"When would you like to reschedule it for?"

"How about...um, I really don't know right now. I guess just cancel it."

"You don't want to reschedule?"

"Not right now. I'll think about it."

After securing the cancellation I fell asleep. When I woke up I heard the sound of water running in the bathroom and a woman singing.

"Killing me softly with his song...killing me softly...with his song killing me softly..."

I sat up but had to take a moment because of the pain in my head. After the pain had diminished enough for me to move I got up off the bed and shuffled toward the bathroom.

"Killing me softly..."

She sounded younger, not raspy anymore, like a young girl. I opened the bathroom door to peek in. Steam fogged the mirror. She was in the shower but I couldn't see her completely because of the mist and the semi-opaque shower screen. I saw her form, though, and the healthy pink of her skin.

The gun rested on the sink. Next to the gun were the bullets and her handbag. I reached into the bag and pulled out a puppet, a frog. Its hollow eyes stared at me as if I knew a secret. She was humming the song now.

"Mom," she said. She sounded as if she'd been crying. "Mom?"

I put the frog puppet back in the handbag.

"Mom, I'm coming out. I'll be gone soon. Mom?"

She was fond of wordplay and puns: the Internet.

I retreated from the bathroom and shut the door behind

me. I laid back on the bed and waited for her to come out and talk to me. She did not appear. I waited for hours before again falling asleep.

So many days passed I could no longer tell if it was a Monday, a Tuesday, a Thursday. In all that time I kept to the hotel. I stayed by the pool. I ordered room service for each meal. I watched a lot of television and in even the individual pixels on the screen I could see her face.

I woke up. It was night again and she was standing over my bed. The blood was back. It was on her hands and in her hair.

“Chris,” I whispered.

Her face dropped toward mine. For a moment I saw her eyes glow and I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead she took my hand and led me from the bed and out of the room. I no longer felt cold and the pain in my head was gone.

Outside the night air felt like a toad’s tongue against my skin. What trees there were sagged like props on a puppet stage.

We remained holding hands the entire time we walked. Most of the houses we passed were lit with people in the windows but nobody seemed to notice us. I squeezed Chris’s hand and drew her closer to me.

“It’s balmy out,” I said.

“And palmy,” she said.

I smiled. I got it. The palm trees, her palm against my own. I got her.

I said, “Nowadays, you know, it’s okay to be 29 and single. It’s okay to be 30 and alone.”

She said nothing, face-forward.

“I’m just saying. So many women now—men and women—are waiting until they’re past 30 to get married, have children....”

She let go of my hand and stopped. Turning toward me she smiled and put her index finger to the back of her head, the same spot all those years ago. Still smiling she pulled the

trigger.

I turned away. We were on the beach now. Behind us were the houses of Siesta Key. One of those houses had been her family's the day she shot herself. She'd driven from there to the station in her yellow VW bug. Perhaps we'd passed her house on the way to the beach tonight. I wanted to know which one it was. I was afraid I would never know.

She was taking her clothes off. I watched her. When she was done she stood before me naked. Her skin was pale, as if the reports of her having a tan on the day she shot herself were false.

"I've never done this before," she said and started for the water.

"I haven't either," I lied. Soon my clothes were off too and I was wading into the ocean. We met each other far out.

"I love the water," she said.

"It's really warm," I said.

"I love the water," she repeated.

She ducked under. She was gone for some time. When at last she surfaced her mouth was full and she spat directly in my face.

"Hey!" I said.

"And now," she said, her voice taking on a hard edge, "in keeping with Channel 40's policy—"

"Don't say it."

"—of bringing you the latest in blood and guts—"

"Don't say it!"

"—and in living color, you are going to see another first—an attempted suicide."

I dove deep to drown out even the memory of her voice. But when it was time to strike for the surface I found I couldn't. I was pinned, sinking. I struggled against a great force. It couldn't be Chris, not Chris, I thought. And still I struggled. At last I could hold my breath no longer and so I released, gave in. I saw a burst like the sun on a screen and all went black.

I didn't expect to ever wake up again yet there I was, waking up on my bed back in the hotel room. It felt like early morning, before dawn. The clocks had gone cold.

Christine Chubbuck sat in a chair across from me wearing the same dress in which she'd died. Her legs were crossed, her face expressionless. She held a burnable DVD in a slender store-bought jewel case. This she placed at my feet.

"Is this..."

She nodded.

"Many people are going to be happy because of this," I said.

She smiled, stood up and drew back from the bed. I snagged the DVD and when I looked to Chris to thank her again she was gone. The chair was back in its original position under the desk.

The edges of the curtains glowed a somber orange. I turned on my laptop and sat up in bed. Popped in the DVD. Immediately I saw what I'd been searching for, color, sound and everything. She was on the screen, in the newsroom, the last morning of her life. It was the footage. As it neared the point where she pulls the gun out of her puppet handbag I switched off the sound and closed my eyes. It had been enough. I'd already seen it, and seen it, and seen it, and seen it.

When sufficient time had passed I opened my eyes. The footage was a blank blue. I took out the DVD, set it back in its case and slid the item into a media-mail envelope I'd found on the nightstand. I jotted down a quick note on a piece of scrap paper and slipped that in with the DVD. The envelope was addressed to an agent I'd worked for long ago in Beverly Hills. The note read

Dear Rick,

As promised-----

Then I sealed the envelope and placed it on top of my wallet so I wouldn't forget. I went back to my computer. I got online. I searched for other names, other faces. I waited for the check to clear.

Kathleen J. Canavan worked as a medical journalist in Washington, DC, for six years before coming to Notre Dame to earn her MFA. She currently serves as executive editor to the *Notre Dame Review*. She lives in South Bend with her husband and daughter.

Still in the classroom after all these years, **Jayne Marek** teaches literature, writing, and film studies and wishes she could write more. Her message to readers is to put your own writing first; if she says that enough, she might actually listen this year. Last year, she had a short play performed in a festival near Indianapolis; she'll read poetry at a Michigan festival this spring.

James Matthew Wilson (MFA '05) is a Sorin Research Fellow at Notre Dame. His essays appear regularly in *Contemporary Poetry Review*.

After living in the Czech Republic and traveling around Europe and the Middle East for a year, **David Ewald** (MFA 2003) returned to America and settled in San Francisco, where he teaches English to foreigners and volunteers as a writing tutor at 826 Valencia.

Alan Lindsay's recently completed speculative-adolescent novel *OzHouse* will certainly break records should he ever manage to find an agent willing to represent it. Meanwhile he's devoting himself ever more to the advancement of poetry: writing it, teaching it, and teaching the writing of it at New Hampshire Technical Institute, where, as of the writing of this sentence, his adaptation of *Macbeth* is set to begin its inexorable march toward Broadway.

S. D. Dillon is a Detroit native and received his MFA from Notre Dame in 2004. He works for Carroll & Graf Publishers and lives in New York.