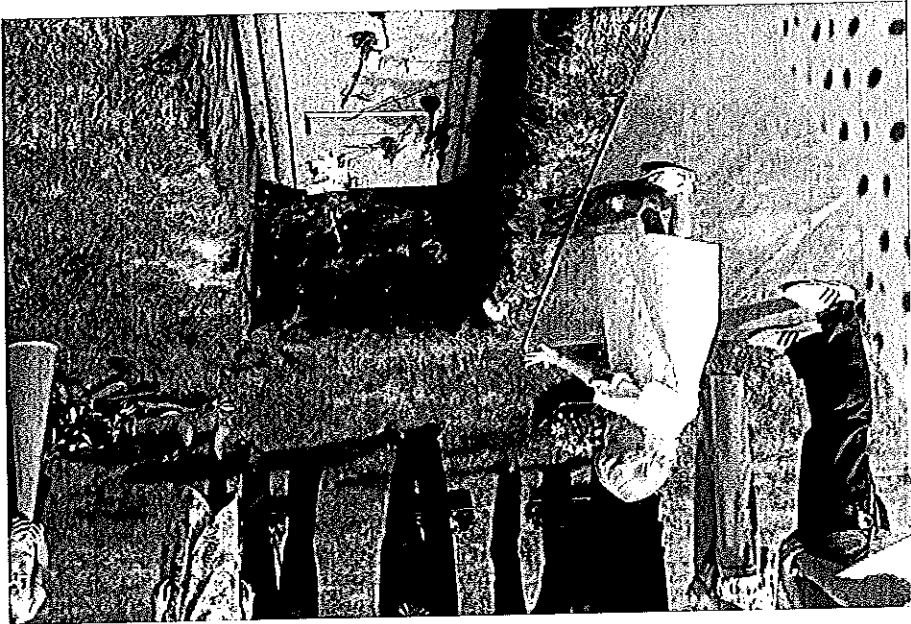


Dreaming Up a Past

The 2011 VLP Magazine
University of South Dakota

Dreaming Up a Past



The VLP Magazine
2011

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Untitled cover photograph by John Banasiak

A note on the text: Throughout this edition of the VLP Magazine, Lucida Sans and Myriad Pro fonts are used. The magazine was designed on a Dell Inspiron 14R using Adobe InDesign CS5.

When possible, all attempts have been made to present poems and stories with the unique tabs, spacing, punctuation, and stylistic spelling as the authors intended. In some cases, however, the editors have decided to alter spellings when needed to ensure clarity and adjust spacing to better fit the layout of the page. In some instances, we have added or altered punctuation if the lack of, or misuse, appeared to clearly be a typographical error rather than a stylistic concern.

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University of South Dakota
Vermillion, South Dakota

The Vermillion Literary Project (VLP) is an award-winning student literary organization of the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota. The VLP publishes this annual literary journal and hosts literary events throughout the academic year. These include the annual Short Story Contest, annual Sorcerer's Apprentice Creative Writing Camp for high school students (in collaboration with the Dakota Writing project — <http://orgs.usd.edu/dwp>), annual Poetry Festival, monthly VLP Reading & Poetry SLAM, and many other events.

For more information about the VLP, visit <http://orgs.usd.edu/projlit>

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION

The VLP is printed each year in April, and the submission deadline is December 15 of the previous year. The magazine features previously unpublished works by authors and artists who have some connection to South Dakota, however esoteric. For submission guidelines, visit:

<http://orgs.usd.edu/projlit/submityourwork.html>

Copies of the VLP Magazine are \$10 each for the current year and \$5 each for past years, plus \$1 per copy for shipping/handling. To purchase copies, send a check and the year(s) requested to the address above.

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Throughout the whole ordeal, we kept reading her this same story over and over. From the look on her face, you'd have thought she was hearing it for the first time, even after I read the last line for the ninetieth time. She was a rare kid—not one of those snot-nosed punks you might see walking down the street and smacking her gum. I never had to worry about her too much.

Best of all, I never heard her say she was bored. Not once.

She still had that look of awe and wonder in her visage, in those oxtail brown eyes. You should have seen her smiling with those ridiculous dimples. What can you do when a little girl like that is looking up from her bed, asking you to read the story again? It wasn't like there was anything else to read to her that wasn't either a hackneyed children's book about some spooky animal, or a gossip rag with some celebrity wearing caked-on makeup on the cover, a fitness magazine with an impossibly sculpted blonde woman smiling, or even one of those lame pop-up books. The God-forsaken place didn't have much in the way of good stuffed animals, either. Their fur was all blotchy and faded; they looked like they belonged in a retirement home. For a Children's Hospital, you'd have thought they'd be prepared. I guess the "team" doctors were too busy patting themselves on the back and the nurses had to make sure their fat asses got the required seat time.

Union rules, you know.

All in all, I'm not so bitter about the whole experience. I know it *sounds* like I'm as sour as can be, but time has a way of encrusting grievous moments. Case in point: forty years later and I still remember when my brother Phil pulled the ultimate prank on me. We were at camp up in Lake Hayworth, Maine. I was in the top bunk; he was in the bottom. Like most nights, I slept through the coughs, sneezing, snoring, wheezing and whimpering of the other boys in the cabin. That August night, without any provocation and with a searing methodology, Phil broke out his mini-chemistry set and poured a vial of hydrochloric acid on my toes. I'll never forget my dream: my foot was on fire. When I awoke, squealing in pain, he was laughing and two of my toes were forever fused together.

He tried to make it up to me the whole week I was in the infirmary, but I never forgave him. Predictably, he became a scientist and when he got hitched I secretly prayed the marriage would fall apart. I feel kind of bad about that. First of all, *he* was the one who knew the Mishnah inside and out, and I was a non-observant Jew. So I had no business asking for favors, particularly ones that resulted in suffering. When he got divorced three years later I felt a little guiltier. A year after that he remarried to a beautiful yet eternally quarrelsome blonde. Then when his daughter got sick, I finally called him, after decades of silence, and we patched things up.

But I still don't look down when I'm at the beach or in the shower.

Corrine had a large room to herself at the hospital, with a new bed surrounded by a colorful mural on the wall. She never complained about the digs, though her mother found them "juvenile." That was so preposterous it made me laugh. I asked her what she expected, quotes from the Iliad? She just looked at me with that familiar condescending tone, shaking her head. I guess I missed the lesson in what is "appropriate" décor within the cancer ward in a children's hospital. Must have been playing the air guitar with my nephew, or rolling on the floor with his beagle.

The room had a large plasma TV attached to the wall, but she rarely watched it. That's not to say it wasn't on, someone seemed to have deemed it a great location to have frenetic cartoons perpetually pumped through like animated crack to the patients. I tried to turn it off once, but there were no buttons on the unit and the God damn remote was nowhere to be found.

Then Corrine asked me to read again so I was back at her side.

The Million Dollar Sneeze is about a young boy, Geoff Hammerschlag, who lives among relative squalor with his mom and dad in London. Before it gets too Dickensian, we learn his family is actually quite happy. His father works in a lighthouse and his mother in a button factory. They do alright, with enough food to go around and a roof over their heads, until a string of bad luck comes about. First there's a bad storm that brings down a tree onto part of their house, then their beloved dog Beauford runs away.

Geoff and the family make due by patching up the roof with rickety planks from a nearby shipyard. Meals become table scraps, and his father works longer hours. He brings home a bit more money along with a hacking, wet cough. Geoff's birthday comes around in September. He may be young, but he's wise enough to know that the nights seem darker when black rain drips into your bedroom and your mother is crying herself to sleep. Geoff wants nothing more for his birthday than to go to the Palladium, where the world famous tightrope walker Frank Gary Dodge will perform. But he's afraid to say anything to his parents, because he knows the money is tight.

Now, about a week before the big show, he writes this wish in his diary. I don't think he had any magical thoughts about the action, as the illustration shows him frowning, huddled by the musty window with the light from a candle illuminating his tattered notebook. He goes to sleep that night with a sore throat and a growling stomach.

The next morning he remembers his dream. He tells his mom he dreamt of a man with gold teeth. She smiles, washes his face, and off to school he goes.

When he comes home, his father is at work, as usual. He has dinner—a piece of boiled chicken—and then goes to bed. Under his pillow he feels something. It's an envelope. In it is a ticket to the Palladium. He howls in joy and nearly gives his mother a heart attack, who's unaware of the surprise gift her husband planted.

My favorite part of the book is when Geoff gets ready to go to the show. The night before, his mother washes his only pants and tattered shirt until her hands are pruned. Then she combs his hair carefully with this horsehair brush. Corrine always asked me about that part. I told her horsehair is soft, though the picture in the book makes it look like barbed wire. Anyway, Geoff heads off to the West End with his mother, claspng his ticket in his hands. She sees him into the stadium and waves goodbye.

Inside, he's dumbstruck. Surrounded by the intricate paintings of Muses on the ceiling, the ornate golden inlays and mirrored halls, Geoff's clearly out of his depth. The plush red carpet feels like pillows under his feet, and he's led into the main theater by a tall, mustached usher. The revolving stage to the front, aquatic displays to the right, and the wax statuettes embedded in the walls all make him dizzy with anticipation. As he eyes the tightrope high in the air, what looks like mere feet from the ceiling, his stomach turns.

Before he knows it, the lights dim and the show begins. It's a full house and we see Geoff is sitting behind a fat, bald man with a monocle. When the indomitable tightrope artist Frank Gary Dodge makes his entrance 500 ft above the captivated audience, the crowd goes wild.

About nine steps into his act, the unthinkable happens.

Geoff feels a sneeze coming on. It must have been due to the wet bed he slept on, or perhaps the heavy dust in the living area. Whatever the culprit, he can't suppress it.

Although he covers his mouth, it's a monster of a convulsion, and turns not a few heads. One is the fat man in front of him. Geoff's expulsion grazed his neck, and the man isn't too happy. Corrine always got a kick out of the picture of the man's irritated, contorted expression.

Geoff apologizes, but it's no use. The man seems to have forgotten about it soon enough. He's already wiped his neck with an embroidered handkerchief and waves him away magnanimously, transfixed on the show. But Dodge hears the sneeze, too. Anyone who knows the subtle art of funambulism, commonly called tightrope walking, is aware of the great concentration needed to maintain both internal and external balance. Alas, Dodge misses a beat in his prescribed steps and nearly plummets to his death halfway through. The crowd gasps and

at this point in the book I usually had Corrine clinging to my side. She smelled of baby powder and watermelon bubblegum and was always shivering.

Dodge completes his show, bows and points down to Geoff. The boy thinks he's in trouble, and sinks in his seat. He can't hide, though, because a great spotlight appears and the next thing he knows he's backstage with his hero. The fat bald man turns out to be Stuart E. Ferguson, Dodge's manager, who takes a liking to Geoff. The boy sees a chocolate cupcake with a candle in it, and Dodge gives him his leather-soled slippers. Surprisingly, they fit him. At that point I feign my expertise and tell Corrine, before she asks, that all tightrope walkers have small feet. Geoff comes home beaming, no longer sick, and wears his shoes every day, always reminded of the greatest birthday he ever had, all because of one sneeze.

I loved reading Corrine the story because like I said, she never tired of it. Her mother would groan and say, "again?" under her breath, and that made me smile even wider. Corrine made me smile. She was the only bright force in that dismal place, and throughout the sixteen grueling months of surgery and treatment both of our teetering minds hinged on that creased brown hardcover book.

The last night Corrine was alive, she slept with it. I thought she might prefer the downy bear her mother purchased, but Corrine never cared much for all that FAO Schwartz fanfare. She was a literary gal, imaginative and mischievous.

I don't think once in her nine years of life she ever looked down.

COFFEE /

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Acknowledgments

The VLP Magazine is the crowning achievement of the VLP student literary organization each year and is made possible only through the dedication and hard work of a wide range of people and organizations. We are especially grateful for the generous support—time, energy, and financial support—of the following friends:

John Dudley, Chair, Department of English
Debra Harding, Senior Secretary, Department of English
College of Arts & Sciences with special thanks to Matt Moen, Dean
Emily Haddad, Associate Dean, College of Arts & Sciences
USD Student Government Association
USD Technology Fellow, Molly O'Connor
USD Photography Professor, John Banasiak
Dakota Writing Project
Lied Bookstore
South Dakota Humanities Council
USD Office of Marketing & U. Relations

Our Short Story Contest Judges:

Ed Allen, Brian Bedard, Melinda Obach, Lee Ann Roripaugh, Dennis Sjolie

Our Contributors:

The VLP received around 165 submissions in 2010-11, representing seven U.S. states, as well as Canada, India, and Zimbabwe. We offer a special thanks to these talented people for submitting their work to the VLP Magazine.