

# **25 Lives**

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Creative Writing at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Spring 2006

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## Carl

Carl waxed the floors, swept  
under pews, dusted the kneeling  
wooden figure, its praying hands  
like spires.

Carl came home to a  
dusty kitchen, to the  
sleeping doors of  
rooms never entered.

Wednesdays, Carl  
vacuumed the  
traces of AA  
meetings.

Thursdays, the  
Boy Scouts.

Fridays,  
Carl polished a golden cross,  
stained glass windows painting  
the floor with their watery  
pigments.

Sundays,  
Carl kneeled in a smaller church,  
his black hands clean and open  
to the Lord.

## Richard

Richard came home in 71.

The stores were brighter, the  
children were older,  
the drive-in theatre was a  
cinder block landfill beside  
a cracking highway.

Richard got a job. He sold real-estate  
to young families, to  
fresh men who had never fired  
a gun, who had never seen the  
horrible contrast of red on green.

Richard married. He had three boys, a  
girl, and a silver flask  
in the pocket of his tweed blazer. He  
sailed a thin river  
of booze into the 80<sup>f</sup>s.

Richard started taking insuline  
in 1983. His nerves cried.  
His fingernails split in two  
like dry bamboo shoots.

Richard's kept drinking.  
He drank with vigor, with  
spite, with the last few hours  
before he drank away his wife.

Richard lost his  
legs in '99.

His wheelchair sounds hollow as  
it bangs against the  
bathroom's narrow door.

## Henry

Late Saturday afternoons,  
the sun oozing  
over downtown benches,  
we'd go see Henry.

Bowed and mumbling,  
a dirty smile curving under the  
brim of his cap, he'd shake our hands.

With crumpled dollars and  
criminal facelifts, we'd linger behind  
Fleeman's convenience store.

*Two Newports, One Camel.*

He'd nod, sifting the bills  
through his hands like an  
aging carnival worker.

Minutes later, our minds buzzing with  
anticipation, he'd return with our bounty.

Virginia Slims, some Basics,  
and three dollars gone missing  
into the shallow grasp of  
Henry's back pocket.

## **Chris**

The day was transparent.

Chris ran barefoot through his back yard,  
grass clippings clinging to his feet like  
papier-mache.

He swung a bamboo pole. It  
whistled, blurring like a giant  
green fan.

Beyond his lawn, a  
creek cut slow into  
the earth.

Chris's feet pressed  
shallow prints into its  
muddy bank.

Below him, each  
catching the sun like  
a tiny mirror, a  
thousand dead fish  
floated narrow and  
cold.

## **Betsy**

I dreamt of rivers, green  
hills, flowers and creatures.

I dreamt of pillows and  
beds, of a softness  
impossible and refined.

I dreamt of Michael, a  
little squash in his crib.

I awoke under covers,  
thirsty like summer gravel.

My hands traced the black  
hall to the bathroom. The  
water splashed in my cup,  
echoing over porcelain tile.

I crept to  
Michael's room.

I saw him  
between bars,  
silent, still.

I dream of bruises.

I dream of Michael, his  
face like a rotten apple, his  
breathless form like a bag  
of spoiled marrow.

## Ginny

Ginny sweeps the floor after  
hours, while perverts fill booths  
and cops perch paired on  
lacerated vinyl stools.

She jams napkins and packets of  
jelly into shiny metal cages, her  
fingernails cracked beneath their  
garish enamel.

There's a dull coffee stain for  
every smoke she puts in her dry  
mouth, a subtle wrinkle for  
every joyless midnight.

At home, with her children just rising  
in the first sheaths of the sun<sup>f</sup>'s distant  
fire, Ginny pulls a blanket over each  
dusty window.

## David

There isn't much on a Tuesday  
except a mute jukebox and David  
James.

His elbows sink into the bar. His  
left hand cradles his beer hand, his  
beer hand already numb with cold.

In the dark light, David studies the  
scars on his hands. He traces  
hours with the bald scratches, the  
tiny reminders.

He remembers a bow saw, a  
kitchen knife, a fist through  
the window behind his wife's  
head.

There are burns,  
slick patches where  
hair never grows.

There are documents of nails  
and splinters, a lifetime of  
sharp things in the meat of  
David's hands.

He drains his bottle like  
a winded runner.

There isn't much on a Tuesday.



## Edward

Edward watched.

He saw people. He saw  
his neighbors through  
TV windows, throwing  
arms, scattering muffled  
words across their  
spotless kitchen.

He saw children. He  
saw old men  
gasping for air, bent  
over their canes like  
carrion statues.

He saw the homeless. He  
saw teenage girls go  
bouncing by, their cherry  
shorts screaming off  
milky thighs.

Edward watched.

He saw mothers. He saw  
garbage men clinging to  
their trucks like cavalier  
deckhands.

He saw babies. He  
saw couples in the  
park, held to one  
another like  
flightless birds.

He saw lawyers. He  
saw prisoners on the  
highway, picking up  
trash beneath the  
smiling barrel of a  
twenty gauge  
shotgun.

Edward watched.

## **Matt**

Who'd imagine saintly Matt, a surgical mask and latex gloves, an apron and a cap, white running shoes on a floor caked in pet dander.

Who'd imagine the carts, filled to the brim with little mummies, patches of fur poking through the wrappings.

Who'd imagine the flames, the heat, the stink of burning hair, the steady swing of Matt's arms in the rhythm of work.

Who'd imagine Fluffy, once the joy of old Mrs. Finklestein's heart, careening into her blazing last home with the arc of Matt's elbow.

Who'd imagine Dakota, proud in his life and swift on the trail, now a sorry pile of ashes in the back of the oven.

How do you do it, Matt?  
How do you swallow the embers  
we shudder to see?

## Lou

Lou wore  
his sister's underwear.

On nights alone, parents  
at dinner, sis out sucking  
some boy's lamprey  
tongue, Lou got naked.

He slid through the house, the  
calm air like a sponge across  
his liberated lap mates.

He cooked popcorn, watched TV,  
mixed staggering drinks from the  
unlocked liquor cabinet.

Then, with the house muted and the  
blinds like closed eyelids, he crept  
into her room.

Everything was soft, the  
light, the covers, the  
animals stuffed in their  
innocuous watch.

Her panties were the perfect skin.

Her bras cradled his chest like tiny arms.

He watched himself  
in the mirror, his sinewy body  
from his sibling's mold.

Lou fell back, the bed catching him  
like a giant Maxi-pad; with he, the  
red spot of life within.

But always, before the crank of the garage or  
the snap of the front door lock, he was  
reverted, busy in his room like a teenage boy.

## Lea

Lea repeats the motion:  
channel up, channel up,  
channel up. No scene is  
ever the same.

The colors, hard edged  
and static, glare out their  
lives in full-framed  
seconds.

The telephone, plaintive  
on the floor like a dog  
who is close to death, does  
not ring. Lea's eyes lock  
on it with jittery confusion.

Eight red pills dance, Lea's  
swollen hand fumbling to  
lead.

There was a time  
when this was fun,  
when the moments came easier,  
when the blood seemed thicker.

## **Paul**

Those were close times.

Sharp lines of floss  
sent crimson rivers  
over bracketed teeth.

My face was unfired clay. It  
filled my mirror like a  
ruined mosaic.

Recent memories rolled  
around the back yard,  
playing with small dogs  
in the October sun.

We ticked off minutes of  
school with stolen cigarettes,  
smoking them in the forest  
like daydream outlaws.

Those were close times.

I know those evenings of  
two wheeled triumph, when  
we cut the corpulent night air  
like mangled children of  
glass.

## **Hunter**

Hunter runs to the bus stop,  
his backpack bouncing like  
a fledgling jockey.

He waits, watching the bees bury  
their fat bodies in the azaleas.

Children gather.  
They swarm and  
mill like insects.

The bus arrives. Bunches of fiber  
force their way through the ripped  
plastic seats as Hunter sits down.

Three boys board.  
They scan him  
like famished hyenas.

They attack, filling all sides,  
squeezing him like a rusty vise. He  
thinks of the bees. He thinks of  
their soft petaled fortresses.

## **Mattie**

*Look Mommy!*

The child is not  
sitting down.

She pummels the  
floor like a kid  
show extra.

The child is not  
sitting down.

Her bulbous cheeks  
stretch with impatience,  
her curly hair pampered  
like the ears of a spaniel.

The child is not  
sitting down.

She dances Shirley  
Temple waltzes in  
cut time by the  
door.

The child is not  
sitting down.

She stands  
sentry on stools,  
her shoulders slumped,  
her balance like a bottle  
on the surface of a stone.

The child is not  
sitting down.

She weaves circles  
around her mother with  
her baby fat pudge.

The child is not  
sitting down.

She is a mystery to her  
mother and her master  
all the same.



## **Gary**

### *Scene 16:*

Nine scotches into it,  
Gary sways in the  
dance floor's splintered  
light.

Thirteen year olds swarm  
awkwardly like upright  
iguanas in heat, casually  
avoiding this unlikely uncle.

### *Scene 17:*

Mozzeltoff!

Ten down, the eleventh only  
seconds away.

Gary staggers, blind to the  
worried glances of the giant,  
booze slinging penguins  
behind the bar.

### *Scene 18:*

Twelve scotches into it,  
Gary nearly shirtless,  
flailing. Juvenile eyes circle  
him with wonder.

### *Scene 19:*

Unclear as to how many  
scotches into it,  
Gary palms the skull  
of a confused adolescent,  
his fingers tapping time with  
Kool and the Gang.

*Scene 20:* Gary is  
missing.

*Scene 21:*

Gary emerges from  
the bathroom, his pants  
pulled over his head,  
his fists full of toilet paper.

*Scene 22:* Gary  
collapses, his urine  
barely visible as it  
pools on the dance  
floor.

## Alex

It's glorious, the fire  
and glow, the  
orange flame  
whispering smoke,  
burning green into  
ashen white crags.

Night cannot conceal.  
    Light breaks shadow.  
        Nightmares  
        dance in the  
        siren's high  
        drone.

        Steel cages crawl  
            hungry, slow,  
strobing red,  
        strobing blue.

My vision is muddled. The radio is buzzing.

## **Johnny**

Music, sweet music  
binds young Johnny to his pipe.

Ten o'clock, his parents pulse like sedated pistons  
on the pillows below, pushing and pulling dry  
filtered air in blissful withdraw.

Johnny lights again, the flame a hook,  
the chilled smoke a serpentine elixir,  
the clandestine chorus of bubbles like  
a skin diver screaming in a small child's drink.

Outside, the street steams with spilled rain  
and abandoned summer heat. Legions of  
mist wind into the blackness like ghosts of  
the missing.

Inside, Jimi tears a screeching infant from the  
womb of his incinerated stratocaster.

Johnny lights again, his mind flashing  
like a field full of razors.

## **Kurt**

I pass hours. I walk along fields  
and wonder at the alabaster moon,  
the gathering morning.

Houses file silently together,  
their windows extinguished.

On the main road, street lights  
form a luminous spine. The  
sidewalk gazes up in electric  
surrender.

A gas station is open.  
I trigger the door's feeble bell.  
The cashier strays from  
his filthy magazine, his filtered cigarette.

He pulls a long drag. The smoke crawls over  
fake tits and little hairless hideaways. It rises  
into the stringent lights.

We lock eyes, lost in brief puzzlement. I  
buy a lighter, some Salems, a magazine  
like his.

At home, I cut out the faces and set  
them in a row. Someday, I will  
know what happened.

**Kathy**

The irony of her

doctor's word:

positive.

## **Levon**

Caned in the darkness like a  
dishonest merchant, his lines  
never connected.

The invisible machine strung  
him from every tree. It  
softened his bones. It  
weakened his will.

He circled  
granite buildings like  
a child fingering a loose tooth.

He slept in the beds of jaded  
women, scanning their  
morning bodies, their  
disheveled hair, their eyes set  
to the corner of the room.

Mid-afternoon, passing cars  
blurring his vision, he  
mastered the sidewalk, its  
single squares, its requisite  
lines.

## **Jason**

It is not a rare boy,  
who pisses on a dog,  
who swings a cat by  
its narrow tail.

It is not a desperate boy,  
who spies the thin line of a  
budding girl's bra strap,  
who snaps it back with  
viperish pleasure.

It is not a violent boy, who  
pushes and throws, who  
finds red ecstasy in  
bringing terror to the weak.

It is not a servile boy, who  
becomes the flunky, who  
breaks bottles over the face  
of his own altar.

He is not a strong boy,  
but he is a real boy.



## Tom

His basement is  
finished with work  
benches, racks and  
safes, powder, shot,  
casings and primers.

A rounded beetle, his hands  
white under the incendiary  
gleam of a desk lamp,  
Tom doctors and  
shines. He  
coddles his  
weapon  
like an  
elderly  
nurse.

Sweat  
beads huddle beneath his  
scant rows of thinning hair.  
His fingers become slick  
with oil and burnt grit.

As a top forty station blares  
out the hits of today, Tom  
considers the hits of  
tomorrow.

## **Lisa**

Her face is a note,  
a white piano in  
an empty room.

## **Kaye**

Dusk delivers us.

The moon tongues the sky, swollen and lost.  
Rusty machinery scrapes out a quiet rhythm.

Crickets grind out warnings, their hind legs  
sawing through the smell of white winter.

A shuffling of leaves, a murmur of life,  
the clang of fallen cans, this pasture,  
they lie down together and mix in the snow.

It swallows our bodies, this industrial field.

## **Bill**

After that,  
she  
could not recall.

After that,  
he  
bought the groceries.

After that,  
he  
could not leave  
her.

After that,  
he  
helped  
her  
bathe.

After that,  
they  
moved into the home.

After that,  
she  
stopped reading books.

After that,  
her  
bed was a hazard.

After that,  
she  
lived under nurses.

After that,  
she  
lost all her  
words.

After that,  
the silence was white.