

Home

Current Issue

Spring/Summer
2008

Winter/Spring 2008

Autumn 2007

Summer 2007

Spring 2007

Winter 2007

Autumn 2006

Summer 2006

Spring 2006

Winter 2006

Fall 2005

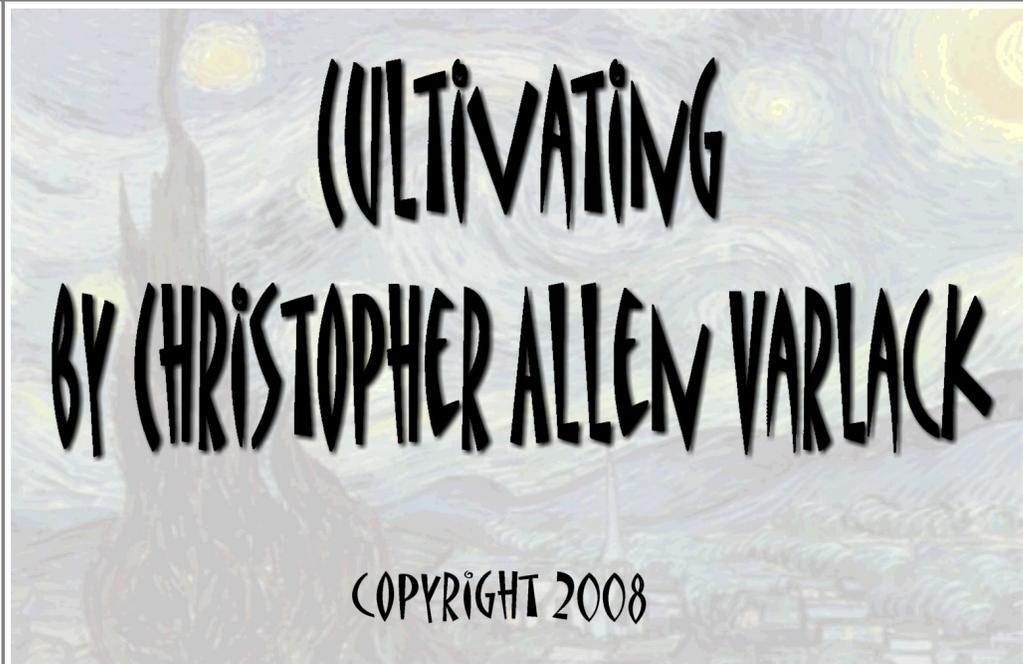
Summer 2005

Editor's Note

Guidelines

SNR's Writers

Contact



I.

I explore outside, this neighborhood of fallen leaves and dew-capped grass.

Walking along these crowded streets. Among *these* busy people.

In the early morning before school begins, there are always children playing in the empty fields of grass and stones and broken dreams.

For a while I watch a childhood I never had.

The rising and falling.

Swinging wildly across the monkey bars of the jungle gym.

Playing tag with others at the park.

But suddenly I am tossed back, pushed into a world of anomie—time slowed to echo in vast canyons^[1] where they glare at me with startled indignation.

And here, the local children race through piles of gathered leaves.

Scattering them about in a flurry of excitement.

And so, the work begins again to toil, as my father requested.

Scraping across this yard until dying grass is revealed or sweat falls, barely noticed in this biting autumn cold.

It is a time of mid-life crises.

Of re-evaluating one's condition.

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Christopher Allen Varlack is a poet and essayist writing in the lyric essay and rhizomatic forms. He holds a Bachelors of Arts cum laude from Loyola College in the field of communications and writing, and is also enrolled at the University of Southern Maine Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing program. His work has appeared in journals like *Talkin' Blues* and across the competition circuit in programs such as youngARTS, Scholastic Arts and Writing, and NAACP ACT-SO. He teaches English at Grace Bible Baptist School in Maryland where he spends his free time writing and tutoring students in language arts.