

# THE THEFT

*John E. Rosenthal*

*Writer's comment:* Our first paper assignment for Victor Squitieri's English 101 (Advanced Composition) class was to be a "reflective" essay. We were to write about an experience that affected us deeply. The essay was to reveal something about the writer, and feature a moment of self-realization. I had caught furtive glimpses at what my classmates were writing ñ simply wonderful essays about fostering experiences like finding true love or a life career. After littering the floor of my study with various stories that were either too personal or too boring, I decided out of frustration to try to relax and have some fun with the assignment. My thanks to Victor for his encouragement and sense of humor. My heart to Leah, for loving me in spite of the personal idiosyncrasies that this essay describes.

— *John E. Rosenthal*

*Instructor's comment:* I sometimes reflect back wistfully on the time before John E. Rosenthal first entered my classroom as a bygone age of lost innocence. Certainly nothing in my previous professional experience had prepared me for the peculiar configuration of literary polish, linguistic facility, playful authorial self-awareness, and unadulterated goofiness that John's writing embodies. As the first essay John wrote for my class, "The Theft" unequivocally served notice that our English 101: Advanced Composition class would henceforth never be the same. It is proudly, but not without trepidation, that *Prized Writing* unleashes the elegant lunacy of John Rosenthal upon a still unsuspecting world.

— *Victor Squitieri, English Department*

**A**round the world, across America, even here in town, there is a crime occurring—a robbery of unguessed proportions and most of us *aren't even aware of it*. It happens every week, yet we blithely aid and abet the criminals, willingly, if unconsciously, destroying the evidence of their heinous offence. These criminals are everywhere. They can usually be found working in pairs. They lurk in the dark corners of our home, or even in well-lit shops. The patrons of these storefront locations cast furtive glances at one another, feeding coins into slots as they are slowly, quietly robbed of their most prized possessions. I am talking about, of course, a theft of laundry.

The criminals are your washing machine and its shiftless partner, the dryer. Manufacturers of these devious devices paint them white in order to enhance their image of cleanliness and honesty, but behind this friendly exterior there lies a crafty heart. Laundromat models are even equipped with glass doors. Through these doors, we watch, hypnotized, as our belongings are spun away from us.

While discussing this laundry larceny, I refer not to the occasional petty pilferage of the odd argyle sock, in which every washer/dryer seems to indulge. This well-known and carefully documented occurrence is merely the tip, as it were, of the iceberg. Long misunderstood as pure coincidence, the lost-sock phenomenon was finally explained in an episode of the cartoon “Ren and Stimpy.” In this episode, the two fearless adventurers travel to an alternate universe, where they find an extremely smelly planet, which contains, amongst other sundry items, all the socks that have ever disappeared from our world.

In retrospect, this kleptomaniacal attitude toward socks should have tipped me, of all people, off a little sooner. I have come to realize that I have been granted the gift of the Virgo, which is my astrological sign. Virgos are renowned for their attention to detail, although there are a few unenlightened souls who refer to us as obsessive/compulsive at best and anal-retentive at worst. Suffice to say that my spice rack is not only alphabetized but also organized with reference to container size and frequency of usage. The only exception I have made in this otherwise perfect system is a nod to convention, with the salt and pepper shakers side by side, despite relatively little else in common. At times, I give a little private smile to the cinnamon and the cardamom, so clearly meant for each other in so many ways. I am the sort of person who can spend many a happy hour loading the dishwasher, geometrically placing each glass, dish, or article of flatware for maximum exposure to the cleaning agents.

I digress. I merely wish to explain why my extensive knowledge of household appliances, coupled with a keen sense of observation, may have rendered me uniquely qualified to make this startling discovery of laundry theft. Recently, I moved to Davis, and for the first time in my adult life, our apartment has its own washer and dryer. Initially, I was delighted. As long as I was living here, I would never again be obliged to carefully count pennies in the checkout lane so as to maximize the number of quarters I would receive in change. I envisioned a new life, filled with freshly-laundered clothes and a carefree attitude toward coins.

Shortly after I settled into my new place, I was shifting a small load of wet socks, T-shirts, and dish towels, all approximately the same shade of periwinkle (I am always careful to avoid color-bleeding), from the washer to the dryer. Consulting my handy magnetic laundry-clipboard, I noted that this was my fourteenth load since moving in to our apartment. I automatically reached for the lint screen, which is clearly labeled “CLEAN LINT SCREEN BEFORE EACH USE.” I paused for a moment, and wondered what the initial user of this machine might have had the opportunity to clean, all those years ago, when the machine was new. Then I had an epiphany.

What, really, is lint? It isn't dirt or dust. The laundry is cleaned by the washing machine, and goes to the dryer relatively dirt free. *It is the laundry itself*. This is no simple lost sock or washcloth ñ this is a minute fraction of every single thing I launder, stolen from me each and every time I hand it over to those

two voracious thieves. My favorite shirt, for example, which I've worn since grammar school, is noticeably thinner than it used to be, not to mention several sizes too small. There is also noticeably less fabric on my Howard Johnson hand towels, slipcovers, bath mats, blankets, and bedspreads.

In this defining moment, when I realized the true nature of laundry lint, I leapt from the laundry room with a shout of "Eureka!" My eyes had been opened, my ignorance obliterated, the crime exposed. During all those years of washing my clothes in laundromats, where the lint screens are locked shut with a key, I never had access to the truth. No more would the world suffer the injustice of this decadent waste of textiles.

Although I (and, as near as I can tell, everyone else I've revealed this incredible bit of insight to) still do laundry in the same benighted manner, meekly offering my weekly sacrifice to the dastardly duo outside the kitchen, I plan to take action that will soon save not only myself but all of mankind from this terrible travesty. I have undertaken a project to save all of my lint. After a careful review of my spending habits, I will mail lint to all of the stores where I buy clothes, towels, and linens, in roughly proportionate amounts. Thus, the Gap will receive four ounces, Macy's one, and so on. This should earn me discounts toward future purchases at these locations. Eventually, I hope to see an entire planet that recycles its lint. The possibilities, particularly if the project is coordinated properly, are limitless. I envision a world swelling under the robust economy of laundry lint. Joblessness would end as millions of happy workers poured into the new lint processing plants.

I realize that some people, particularly those who are less concerned with these weighty matters, may scoff. But I know that my commitment to organization, detail, and thriftiness will carry me through in my crusade to end this wanton waste of laundry. Admirable though my dedication to a properly loaded dishwasher may have been, I have always felt that my life's calling would be something far nobler.