

Literary Excellence Presented With Style

Art
Humor
Poetry
Recipes
Fiction
Nonfiction

DualCoastMagazine.com

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Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air.
~Carl Sandburg

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.
~Robert Frost

A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language.
~W.H. Auden

Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.
~Leonard Cohen

Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.
~W.B. Yeats

True poets are those who have received from God, together with the gift of expression, the power of penetrating further than others into the things of the heart and the life.
~Alexandre Vinet

It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things.
~Stephen Mallarme



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YELLOW PAGES

You arrive at the third loading dock on the mountain side of the plant, itself a huge, blue, aluminum-sided mountain. You are there at 8 o'clock, as you were told. You are the only one there. The loading dock is closed, the big aluminum door pulled down. It faces a parking lot, empty, except for a huge dumpster, pushed up against the fourth loading dock. And there is a car, parked alone, across the lot. There is a man in the car. The man sits with his head down, leafing through a pile of yellow forms in his lap. He doesn't look up at you. You stand there, staring up at the hazy mountains on the horizon, pretending you are enjoying looking at them.

What you really want to be looking at right now is a cigarette. You ran out of cigarettes the night before, and you are itching for a smoke. You normally keep a pack by the mattress and light one first thing in the morning, before you unwrap yourself from your surplus sleeping bag. You can't afford heat or food, but you always came up with a buck thirty-five for cigarettes—until last night.

Standing here on the loading dock, you are very cold. You can see that the man in the car is smoking. That bastard, you think. He is filling that car up with smoke. You consider banging on his window and asking for one. But then, suddenly, the man jumps out of the car, the cloud of smoke evaporating into the snowy mountain air behind him.

The man walks up to the platform and passes by you. He pulls out a long ring of keys. He rattles them into the padlock and pulls the steel door up. "Come on," he says, waving a fat arm at you.

You follow him into a huge, cavernous plant. Piles of yellow phone books, towering, sit in stacks eight feet high, and at least a hundred yards deep.
"Where's the other guy?" the man asks.
"What other guy?"
"Goddamn it! The other guy I'm paying the agency for! Where is he?"
The pack of cigarettes in his short pocket makes you itchy again. They look like they might pop out, and he might not notice.
"I don't know," you answer.
"What did the agency tell you?"
"They told me to report here at eight o'clock."
"Well, I don't care how many of you people they send. I need an empty warehouse, not a warehouse filled with last year's phone books. I need you to get these phonebooks out of here and loaded into the trucks. I'm coming back here at five o'clock, and they better be gone. Trucks, and phonebooks, and you. If not, I'm calling that goddamned agency and getting my money back, and you'll be out on your ass with the rest of those hippies living up in those caves in the mountains."
The man waves a fat arm up at the mountains, looks at them for a moment, and shutters. "I got to go now. You got your orders?"
"Where are the trucks?"
"Oh, they're coming. Two big cowboys. And they don't like hippies, so you better watch your ass. Anything else?" he asks rhetorically.

The man climbs off the platform and walks toward his car, putting a new cigarette in his mouth.
"Can I have a cigarette?" You ask him.
"Sure you can," the man yells back. "Anybody can have a cigarette." He climbs into his car and drives away, leaving you alone with the phone books. You sit on the edge of the dock, staring up at the mountains. You're beginning to enjoy looking at them now. The snow looks like powdered sugar. The sun climbs above them and they take shape, each mountain with its own lines and patterns. I suppose I can make a run for it, you think, before the trucks get here.

But then two big trucks pull into the lot, one behind the other. The driver of the first nods at you. He has a huge bushy beard and a vest. He turns and backs into the loading dock, the second driver close behind him. The first driver climbs onto the dock.
"Them there the phone books?" he asks.
"That's them," you say.

Yellow Pages...

The driver pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, shakes one out for you and one for him. He offers you a light. The smoke heats everything inside you.
"Well then, we better get started," the driver says to you. "Thanks so much for helping out."
"What do you want me to do?" you ask.
"Oh, don't sweat it buddy," he says. "We got it covered." He pulls a palette jack out of his truck; the other driver has one as well. They load the full-stacked palettes onto the trucks, filling them quickly with phone books.

You follow them around, occasionally picking up a couple of phone books that fall of the stacks. "Hey, thanks a lot buddy," they say, and offer you another cigarette. In an hour they are finished.
"You need a ride back to town?" One of the drivers asks you after they are finished.
"No thanks," you say. "I think I'm supposed to wait for the man to come back at five."
"Okay then buddy, thanks for your help," the driver says.
He throws you a full pack of smokes from the cab of his truck and they drive back off toward the mountains.

Frank Haberle

TOGETHER

I awaken to an empty house, save for our chocolate-lab-beagle-mix, Lolly, who pushes her way into our bedroom. She opens the door with her large, brown muzzle, excited to wake me up. It's nearly seven o'clock when she begins nuzzling and licking my face. With her hind legs on the floor, and wet nose anxious to reach my silent, half-awake form on the edge of our bed, sleeping in is not an option. She does this almost every morning. It's not unlike having a toddler.

I scratch behind her big, floppy ears and talk to her like a child. "Good morning, Honey. How are you?" I bring my face close but just out of reach of her long, moist tongue. "Lolly, you and I are both mutts, aren't we?" She wags her tail in response. I reach down and aggressively scratch her back and rub her exposed belly the way she likes. "Maybe that's why I love you so much," I say. She nods in agreement, drops back down on all fours and points herself toward the door, directing me to follow. The other side of the queen bed is empty and cold. My wife, Tricia, rises every morning before I awake, silently prepares for work, and heads out before I ever realize she's gone.

I slide my legs off the bed, pat Lolly, and scratch her one last time in the spot where her foreleg connects to her chest, a place hard to reach on her own. She lifts her leg slightly, balancing on the other three to give me better access. When I stop, she groans as if to say, *is that all there is*? I slip on soft-leather moccasins, walk into my home office, and sit in front of the computer. Lolly eagerly follows. She camps under the desk at my feet and curls into a large mound of dog, her tail completing a circle near her head. Thirty minutes later, I carefully move my chair back so as not to wake her. She gently snores and occasionally kicks in hot pursuit of a dreamy rabbit.

During the day, my communications with Tricia are sparse and mostly meaningless. There is the occasional text, call, or email that I do not immediately answer. Invariably, the messages are brief and all business. Is the meat thawing for dinner? Do either of us have a commitment that evening? Have I heard about the tragedy in the news that somehow might be closer to us than we realize?

In my office, I try to block out any vestiges of home. The walls of my space are plain. Only a wood desk, file cabinets, and shelving fill the room so I am not distracted as I work on my consulting business. If I am lucky, my day flies by quickly from self-imposed busyness. I operate under a self-induced state of urgency, constantly nagged by thoughts of utter chaos and abject failure.

In the evening, Tricia arrives home flushed and tired, anxious to shed her briefcase and change out of her dress clothes. In the backyard, she tends to different varieties of heirloom tomatoes, zucchini, and squash, carefully watering and fertilizing, trimming and harvesting. We take turns cooking for each other, but more often than not, we consume our meals at different times or eat at the same time but in separate places, each retreating to our respective hidey-holes and comfort-spaces.

Sometimes we do things with friends, read books, or go to movies, but they are not the same friends, books, or movies. It occurs to me one day that we have been operating this way for most of our twenty years together. In odd corners of the house, we occasionally encounter one another and chuckle about the chance meeting. Other times we catch each coming from or going to some more important task and briefly speak. We are surprised to discover there are serendipitous and superficial things we both like, as if one of us finds and scratches a winning ten-dollar lotto ticket that we forgot we purchased.

Together...

There are many deeply held ideals we share, loyalty, compassion for others, dedication to family, a belief in things beyond us. But those ideals get lost in the drone of our daily lives and annoyance with one another. In the absence of a crisis or sharpened point to rally around, we drown any potential conflagration by pouring water over the tenuous thread between us.

Sometimes she looks at me and I sense that she might want to say something important, but she catches herself and the pointedness in her eyes fades back to an apathy that I will not pursue. In the polite hours of the evening, we return to our respective corners and watch television programs, never together. Sometimes the news or a comedy will strike me as poignant or especially funny, so I run up two flights of stairs to share it with her, only to discover that she is watching the same program or that she has dozed off early. I don't repeat what she already knows or wake her from peaceful sleep.

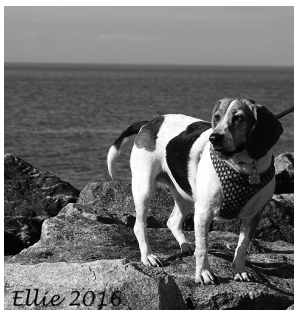
Occasionally we discuss making changes, but the conversation never gets very far before annoyance or acrimony emerges. We each retreat to neutral territory and hold our positions like a competitive dancing couple that keeps precisely the same space between them as they move across a vast ballroom.

I usually end my day and come to bed after Tricia is already asleep. Lolly trails close behind. I fit under the sheets and blanket, careful not to wake the light-sleeping-early-riser that peacefully slumbers beside me. A recurring thought makes its way into my brain. *It is the very least I can do.*

Jim Doering

Ellie's Favorite Puppy Biscuits

Ingredients:
1 cup pumpkin puree
3 tbsps. peanut butter
2 eggs
2 cups whole wheat flour
1 cup quick oats
1 tsp. ground cinnamon



Preheat oven to 325°F

* Combine all ingredients using a stand mixer (or wooden spoon). Dough will be stiff.
* Lightly flour your work surface and roll dough out to ¼ inch thickness.
* Cut dough into ½ inch pieces or use your favorite cookie cutter.
* Bake until dry and crisp, turning the biscuits once, 40 minutes or until done.
* Cool completely and store in an airtight container.

Ellie's Tip: Make a big batch and freeze some of the dough for another batch of fresh, wholesome dog biscuits later!

A GLASS OF SCOTCH

The basement air was thick and clammy. A hunter-green Formica bar stretched along the back wall, beneath well windows long since claimed by spiders whose webs hung like stained lace curtains. Mirrored shelves support-ed countless bottles of liquor—clear, amber, and deep brown. Cassie's fingers left tracks in the caked-on dust as she trailed her hand along the bar. She'd urged her friend Tracy to remodel her basement for the last three years.
Brett hedged his way down the creaking steps. "I'll have three fingers of scotch."
Cassie shushed him. "You'll wake Tracy's kids." The bar stood between them, a blockade of pressboard cabinetry. "I thought you weren't going to drink anymore."
Brett shrugged, sinking onto a cracked vinyl barstool; the seat hissed a dying breath. "Given the circumstances, I'm making an exception tonight."

Turning her back to him, Cassie walked her fingers from bottle to bottle. Her press-on nails clinked against their glass necks, playing a broken-toy-piano tune. She pulled bottle of scotch off of the shelf and stared into her own dark eyes, which reigned over dark circles. "Fine, just the one glass. There's no ice, though. I know you like it on the rocks."

As she unscrewed the cap, it slipped from her fingers and fell onto the stained linoleum floor. The stinging aroma pierced her nose, like tiny needles hooking into her nostrils and climbing down her throat. "I don't know how you drink this crap."
"The ice usually helps." His eyes locked onto the fallen cap, leaning over the bar to point. "Are you going to get that?"
Cassie rested the bottle on her hip, her arm wrapped around it as though holding a toddler. "Do you want your drink or do you want me to pick up the cap?"
"Sorry." Brett straightened, and scratched at the side of his head. His thin-ning hair silvered at his temples. A three-day-old, patchy scruff grew in along his jaw, his stubble like remnants of a forest fire.
"You need to shave," Cassie muttered, turning her attention to the tumbler she'd set out on the bar. She tilted the bottle, and the booze swayed, like surf, lapping at the bottle's neck.
Brett threw his hands up, letting them fall onto his legs, slapping his jeans. "I've been a little busy, Cass. Going to the house to meet the claims adjuster, going to the insurance company, picking up the report from the fire depart-ment… what have you been doing, exactly?"
"Me? I found us someplace to stay, didn't I? Tracy is *my* friend, and if you don't keep quiet, you're going to wake the whole house."
Brett snatched the glass out from under her and knocked back several gulps. Coughing, he let the glass fall back onto the counter with a high-pitched *thud*. "You're the one who got us into this mess with those candles of yours. How many times have I told you, I don't like open flames burning in the house?"

Cassie stooped to retrieve the bottle cap. She started to screw it onto the bottle, but stopped when it jammed on the threaded glass. "You lost the dog. I wouldn't have left candles unattended in the house if we didn't have to go chasing after your mutt. And stop raising your voice—you'll wake them."
"You're the one going on like a banshee," Brett snapped back. "And don't blame my dog."
"I apologize. You're right—it's not the dog's fault. But you never even asked me about adopting him." She replaced the bottle on the shelf. "Now we are homeless, Brett. Homeless." Cassie punctuated each word with a forced breath through her quivering lips.
"Don't start crying again; it'll be alright. We have a place to crash for now."
"I'm not crying," she insisted. Her hands landed on her hips. "I'm going to bed. Don't you dare have more than one, Brett. I mean it. We're not going back to that."
He finished his scotch in one more gulp. "I know." That gruff affirmation was all she needed. Cassie ascended the steps barefoot, her shoes swinging from the ankle strap she held in one hand.

The guest room was silent and dark, save for the jingle of Rufus' tags when he lifted his head within his crate. "Not a word out of you," Cassie whispered to the dog. The last thing she needed was for him to start barking. The frown melted off of her face when he rested his heavy head on his blanket again. In a way, she felt bad for Rufus. Brett had rescued the pit bull from the kill shelter one day before his designated destruction. Two months later, the dog was once again without a home. She crouched beside his crate, salvaged because it'd been in the van already from a vet visit when the fire started, and reached between the bars to scratch between Rufus' eyes. He let out a deep sigh and relaxed.

She pushed herself up from the shag carpet and changed, climbing beneath the blankets. Cassie stared at up at the ceiling. The door opened, spilling light into the room.
"Did you brush your teeth? I hate the way your breath smells after you drink."
"I did." Brett approached the bed, looming over her, expecting, she guessed, a kiss.
Cassie leaned away. "Did you drink anymore then?"

A Glass of Scotch...

"No. I said I wouldn't." He straightened and walked around the bed, sitting on the edge. Actually, you never did say that. You just said, 'I know,' and that was the end of the conversation. You always end the conversation. But we're not doing that again. You hear me? I don't want to see you down in that basement the rest of the time we're here."

Brett said nothing. He swung his legs into the bed and pulled the blankets up to his waist. "You say that, but you're the one who poured me a drink."
"Like you wouldn't have poured it yourself? I figured one is better than the whole bottle." Silence nestled between them, like a child between parents after a nightmare. Only Cassie took no comfort and gave no comfort. She turned onto her side, burying her hands beneath her pillow.

Cassie shivered as she woke the next morning. Brett had stolen the blankets. Both Rufus and her husband remained asleep, snoring softly. The stereo-sawing hurried her out of bed. She pulled her robe off of the chair and put it on, tying the sash as she slid her feet into what used to be plush slippers, the fleece inside tamped down by years of wear.

The house was silent in the pre-dawn hours. Cassie opened the door to the basement. There was a television across from a small couch—the same couch that Cassie and Tracy had in college—and the squishy cushions were always good for a nap. Before she sat down, Cassie glanced toward the bar, frowned, and then walked behind it to stare at the shelves of bottles.
There were two bottles missing. Scanning the labels, she couldn't find any scotch.

She spun on her heel and yanked the trash pail out from beneath the bar. There were two bottles—the one she'd opened for Brett the night before and another. Her vision blurred as tears flooded her eyes. Cassie tugged her wedding band off of her finger and flung it into the trash. She stomped up the steps. Cassie threw open the door to the guest room. Rufus growled low and Brett stirred, reaching up to rub his eyes.
"You liar," Cassie breathed, stalking toward the bed. "We're through, Brett. I mean it this time. You and Rufus can leave today."
"What are--"
"You drank way more than one drink!"
"Keep your voice down." Brett pushed himself up to a sitting position and Rufus quieted.
Hands perched on her hips, Cassie shook her head. "Don't tell me what to do."
"Well, then, I guess there's nothing left to say."
"You aren't even going to fight for us?"
Brett laughed. "Why, do you want to fight? I think we've argued enough. I'm just tired of it. I'm tired of it always being my fault."
"You're the one who blamed me for our house burning down." He stood and threw his hands up in the air. "I didn't mean to, okay? But I'm not going to fight you on this. I'll go grab a shower and then Rufus and I will leave. I know you never wanted him to begin with."
"It's not that I never wanted a dog. You never asked—you just came home with him one day and--"
"I rescued him from a kill shelter. There wasn't exactly time to stop and consider for weeks and weeks. You're not known for your decisiveness."
"Oh, so it's my fault—my fault that the house burned down, my fault that someone was going to kill the dog, and my fault that you drink. And it's my fault that our marriage is over and--"
"Cass?" Tracy stood in the doorway, eyes only half open. "You guys are shouting. It's not even six in the morning."
"Yeah? I was just sleeping peacefully; it's Cassie who started yelling."
Cassie glared at Brett. "I'm sorry, Tracy. It won't happen again. Brett is leaving today." She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "You know what? I'm tired too. Go and shower, Brett, and then take Rufus and go somewhere else."

Margaret McNellis

The Wedding Toast

Here's to your coffins
May they be made of hundred-year-old oaks
Which we shall plant tomorrow.
May you both live as long as you want,
and never want as long as you live
May the best of your yesterdays be the worst
of your tomorrows.

NONEXISTENT

"You have got to be kidding me," I said.

"Nope," the lady at the desk replied, "No one by the name you gave me, sorry."

She rudely turned her back and proceeded to ignore me.

I was in quite a predicament! In the process of planning a trip to Caracas, Venezuela, I had overlooked the fact that I did not have a copy of my birth certificate. Since I had put off obtaining one until the last minute, I had to make a special trip to the office of Vital Statistics to acquire one. When I arrived there, I was told that no one in Marshall County bearing the birth date or my name existed in the records.

"As you can very well see, I most certainly exist." I said emphatically.

I was feeling frustrated and it reflected in my voice.

Miss I'm-Not-Going-To-Cooperate-If-I-Can-Help-It looked up, shot daggers at me with her beady eyes, and emphasized each word as she said, "I will look one more place."

"I would appreciate it." I retorted.

My attitude was deteriorating with every hostile glance she tossed my way. While she was searching, a disturbing question was running through my mind; how was I going to prove that I really did exist? Old-Happy-Face returned from her search, and said she had found an unnamed person born on the right date, in the right county, having the correct last name—the names I gave her for the parents and attending physician matched those on the document. While standing there in my nonexistent state, I found it unsettling that my parents had failed to give me a name. My mother had mentioned that she was never able to obtain a certificate of birth for me when my father went to serve in World War II, but it was never an issue because I had never needed it for anything.

"What am I going to do?" I ask pitifully. "I need my birth certificate to acquire a passport, and I took the day off from work to come here. Isn't there something we can do today? I have a driver's license and credit cards. If I don't get this done today, my birth certificate will not get to me in time to obtain a passport."

"Is your mother alive?" Happy-Face growled.

"Yes."

"What about the Doctor," She asked.

"Yes," I meekly replied.

Old-Happy-Face lilted her mean-spirited voice, "Well then, we might be able to make this work, and get it done today."

Happy-Face was delighted to inform me that Marshall County was close by, and time was short, as the Statistics Office closed at four o'clock sharp. She gave me some forms that had to be signed, witnessed, and notarized. I felt defeated. It was a long trip to my hometown, and all I had to do was find my mother and Doctor Connors, round up a notary and witness, have everyone sign, and get back to Nashville before the office closed. It was not improbable; it was impossible!

Jane, one of my close friends, worked for the Governor. Her office was in the same building as the Statistics Office. I decided to drop by and ask her if she could do anything to expedite the red tape. She said she didn't think so. Dejected, I started to leave, but Jane asked me to wait a minute.

Nonexistent...

"There might be a way to pull this off." She said mischievously.

"What do you mean?" I asked cautiously.

"Did they give you forms?"

"Yes."

"Good, fill them out."

"Why should I fill them out?"

"Just go ahead and fill them out, and we'll see what we can do." Jane replied.

"OK," I said.

I was feeling so desperate and frustrated with the treatment I had received from Old-Happy-Face that I was willing to try just about anything. After the paperwork was filled out, Jane tried to look dignified and asked if she looked a little like my mother. I nodded my head and grinned. She signed the papers and left the room, returning a short time later with signed and notarized affidavits. I didn't ask any questions.

I waited until three-fifteen before returning to the Statistics Office. Making a fast trip was one thing, but it still had to be believable. I tried my best to look exhausted and stressed out as I walked in. Since I was at my wits end, it wasn't much of a stretch. Old-Happy-Face eyed me suspiciously. Her demeanor made me extremely nervous. If I was caught with these forged papers, would I be charged with fraud, or something worse? I had to play this straight, so I assumed my most innocent expression. Happy-Face's voice penetrated my fears and brought me back to reality.

"That was an awfully quick trip!" She noted sourly.

I just nodded my head and thought, "Here it comes; I am going to get busted." Nevertheless, to my surprise, she viewed the paperwork and proceeded to issue the birth certificate.

With a sarcastic snort, she exclaimed, "It would be an almost impossible trip, if you ask me!"

I stood there, looking as blank as last year's Easter egg. Happy-Face handed me the birth certificate, and with a superior wave of her hand, she dismissed me.

I didn't hesitate. I turned and almost ran out the door. When I got outside and could finally breathe, I thought, "At least I have a name!" On the heels of that thought came another one, "… albeit an illegal name." All of a sudden, it became urgent to find my car, and get far away from there. I was shaking like a rock star when I jumped behind the wheel. I locked my doors immediately and cranked the engine. On the freeway, it occurred to me that I might be nonexistent and a criminal, but without a doubt, I was going to thoroughly enjoy Venezuela!

Nells Wasilewski

Bon Voyage!

Spring

Spring brings blossoms new
New life and new beginnings
Birds chirping happily
Kaleidoscopic colours everywhere
Poetry in flowers
Season of
---- Immortality ----
Of seasons
Flowers in poetry
Everywhere colours kaleidoscopic
Happily chirping birds
Beginnings new and new life
New blossoms brings spring.

Shetu Mitra

Old Wine

Old wine in a bottle
on a shelf in the cellar
lasts forever
keeps the promise of
new fruit on the vine

No failure, no regret
no bitter dregs of desire
never ever
if the spirits stay
suspended in time

Jackie Maugh Robinson

After the Party

From the upstairs window I can see
across the street where the party was.
They are packing stacks of dishes
and folding up tablecloths
while the fountain in the courtyard
makes its little sipping sounds.

There's a man standing on the steps
with a woman in a long ruffled sweater.
I can see his back and her face,
scrunched up like she's trying to read fine print
written on him somewhere.

Maybe they have met before today.
Maybe they saw each other at the party
after many years.
Is that you?
she might have said as he laughed.
Would you look at that.

Now he leans closer to her
and her hand reaches out for his waist
and they kiss
only half-hidden by the iron railing.

Until she pulls away,
a storm on her face,
and flees into the house
where perhaps her husband is waiting.

She leaves the door flapping open behind her,
but the man doesn't move to close it.

He stands on the steps,
his jacket draped over a chair in the courtyard
and forgotten.
The wind picks up a sleeve and lets it drop,
a wave undone
as soon as it starts.

Heather Adams

Real Presence

Buttons are popping out and everyone
Claims they need my knickknacks
As my head is filled with bric-a-brac,
The year is landing down into holidays,
Where days slide into one another.

People strain for a spot at the table,
Once seated, they soon leave for shopping,
Then come back and continue eating,
Through every course, they complain
I have been selfish with the wine.

Feathers and wrapping paper populate
The homestead, a touch of snow
And football will occupy the backyard,
If anyone tells me my holiday cracker
Is spent at both ends, I will explode.

Benjamin Nardolilli

Barrens

The hills are as green as okra,
A rare color these days.
Fresh okra too,
Even rarer as well.
Someone disappointed in the season
Dyed the dead grass.
We walk together in coats
Black as coal, hoping
Some warm power between us
Melts away this weather
And peels away the landscape
To reveal spring underneath.

Benjamin Nardolilli

Potential

"Is this a killing animal?" a child says
"So beautiful!" says the adult

Long, brown and tawny patterned neck
Stretches, with a curve
And munches on grass

Separating the hunched over crowd
Are (potential) killer bees
Tasting daisies

So, could they kill me or kill me not?

Linda Sacco

Underground Prince

I am aware
Any snake seems charming
With the right music

It doesn't matter where
This might lead

Underground prince will disappear
If I could find the switch

It doesn't matter what
This might feed

My heart is an atom
It cannot be broken

Together we become
Underground royalty
Rulers of dark mistakes

Linda Sacco

Heated Reverie

Ashen storm clouds brew between furrows on his brow.
Catastrophe awaits luminous tears well,
yet again, in her oval eyes.

Mania mounts his visage; her son's brow creases.
Cringing, she collapses to the sidewalk
leans against the cold glass of the sky scraper.

The wind's shrill whistle carries away
turbulent inflections of anger.
The injustice of it all
hammers at the crown of his head,
preaching to the choir of her, he trembles.
Bent and brazen, relentless in his mania, words spew,
creating a tumult of sorrow upon her waiting ears;
reviving past images of other foolish martyrs and the flames.

Spent now, the orderly disorder of
angst relieved on wind, and womb,
in the ear of ever forgiving love; he sighs.
The sea calls through the salt of her tears,
untwining the hyper-vigilance,
focusing the pip in a caring core.

Harbor views sooth with gull cries,
summer soundings, gentle heated revelries,
love rises like a forgotten lullaby
on the cockles of their hearts.

Deborah Guzzi

PRINCE OF NORTH VIETNAM

Every day at 9 pm, the Vietnamese fisherman steps off of his quaint vessel. He crosses the decaying deck and walks across the small strip of beach nestled between my Wal-Mart lawn chair and the crest of the Gulf, clothes caked in dried mud-water. The inch thick slice of skin at the top of his brow is golden brown, holy flesh that remained uncovered from his mesh hat. From what I've gathered, he has no family, nor means of transportation to ferry him about town.

He exists solely in his apartment, on the water, and on the runway between land and sea. His skin is taut over a lived-in handsomeness, fit from the lifting and pulling. His diminutive size does not detract from his stature, nor do his humble clothes. It only adds to his mystique. In my eight months in this chair, snug amidst the odd backdrop of industry and nature, I have yet to see him utter a single word. In fact, his mouth remains frozen at a constant mid-point, never twitching, frowning, or smiling.

At every opportunity, I try to uncover anything I can about this mute son of a bitch. His lack of substance is a constant reminder that I cannot muster a back story befitting this Asian prince. He is an empty vessel, just waiting to be filled with motivation and coming of age—I cannot, for the life of me, think of anything satisfying enough to stick. I have my favorites, but nothing to save to the hard drive.

Of course, I would never think of approaching him to fill in the holes. It makes it too real. Nor could I, if a sudden bout of spontaneity befell me, because Catfish over there speaks absolutely no English. So every chance I get to subtly interrogate the other tenants of our humbly crumbling apartment complex, I go digging for the good stuff. And if they have no answer, I'll try to rewrite his story.

Karen, the elderly proprietor from 4C who likes to show me her *paintings*, had me vacuum her couch this afternoon, to rid the plaid beast of dog hair. I decided to probe her for the details on our mystery man.
"Mr. Tran?" she asked. "Oh, he's a sweetheart.
"Is that so?"

"Well, he's not much of a talker, if you know what I mean," she offered, elbowing me as she chuckled. "But he pays his rent on the first, and he always waves. When he first moved to the building, I brought him a plate of chocolate chip cookies. He didn't seem to understand anything I was saying, so his niece translated for us—but he seemed to appreciate the gesture."

Aha! A niece. I knew it. A link to the outside world. I pressed her for more details, but because she's so old, her stories are always jumbled with equal parts accuracy and bullshit. This seems as good a time as any to test out a Catfish back story, and Karen was the perfect person to try it on.

Her general lack of knowledge on any subject not covered by Judge Joe Brown or the Bible ensured that even if I did not get all of the details right, it wouldn't matter. In fact, sometimes I throw my own inaccuracies right back at her. Partly to test her current understanding of the world and partly to mess with her.

But details aren't as important in this important stage of development. I was concerned with the overall story arc. I've been kicking this one around for a few days. So let's see how the Prince of North Vietnam flies with Karen.
"Do you know what Jen told me about Mr. Tran?"
Karen's eyes grew wide, and her head comically pivoted side to side. Once she determine the coast was clear, she leaned in.
"What'd she say?" she whispered dramatically. This would be too easy.
"Well--" I said, offering the appropriate theatrical pause before launching into the epic tale of Catfish. "Apparently, Mr. Tran was the Prince of North Vietnam before the war broke out."
"Whaaaaat?" Her body contorted oddly, as if the information was actually coursing through her torso and limbs, slowly spreading throughout her. The embryo of a sly smile crackled around her mouth. I had her on the line.
"It's true," I began soberly. "He was born into wealth, but he wasn't affected by it. He was completely humble. Everyone in the Peking villages adored him, but the war started suddenly with a coup, and his family was ousted from power. The communist uprising burned down the royal palace, the Tran palace, and murdered over a thousand servants."
"Oh my God! Over a thousand?"
"Yeah, it was terrible. They made Mr. Tran watch his father's murder. Poor guy was only ten years old."
"How did they kill his father?" she demanded. "How did they kill the king?"
"They shoved hot coals down his throat!"
"Oh, Jesus!" Karen gasped, as Choco the unimaginatively named Chocolate lab barked in the background. "Oh God Almighty!"

She kept invoking the Holy Trinity, in all variations you can think of. *As swimmingly as this is going, I might have to wrap this up faster than I'd like. The poor woman is going to run out of biblical references.*
"Yeah, but Mr. Tran was smart enough to escape," I whisper, reshaping our tragedy into an espionage thriller. "And you know, this one Southern Vietnamese guard, he saw Mr. Tran and felt sorry for him. He decided to show him mercy and let him sneak out a side door. The others were too busy killing people to notice him. He snuck out of the palace, and ran across the courtyard to the imperial gates, where there were even more usurpers, killing stragglers in the palace. He slid down the hill into the moat—and the moat is a huge drop from the land, maybe thirty feet—he stayed in the water for three days."
"Three days? He just sat there?"
"Yep. No food or water. This was all before the American retribution. Finally, these Southern Vietnamese, they gained control of the kingdom. So the Prince, he swam down the moat to find a place where he can climb out...and he climbed out of the moat and walked across the entirety of North Vietnam to the coast. The whole time he's hiding in the shadows, because he's a wanted man. The prince, you know; so he only travelled at night, right?"
"Of course."
"And he found a fishing boat on its way to Thailand. He hides on the boat, and by the time the Thai guys figured out he's on the boat, it's too late to turn back. So they took him in as a protégé. And he's been a fisherman ever since."
"Wow." Karen sighs. Her right hand, the one rested gently on her chest, finally felt safe to drop down to her side. She shakes her head in disbelief. "That is incredible. I cannot even imagine how terrified he was."
"Yeah, I mean, think about that. How conflicting would it be to be a fisherman for the rest of your life? On one hand, he's lived his whole life on the water. On the other hand, the trauma from those three days in freezing moat water? It's crazy. He only does it because it's the only job he could get, what with his not speaking English and all."

Prince of North Vietnam...

"And you said Jen told you all of this?"
"Yeah, we hung out a few times right after I moved in. I guess she was visiting Mr. Tran for a few weeks or something."
"Poor Mr. Tran."
"I know. He has amazing strength to be able to go through that."

Okay, admittedly, Karen is not the most discernible audience. She's old, lonely, and a little mentally frail—and she has shockingly little understanding of world geography and history. But the best performers know you have to shift your material to the crowd. Play to your audience, you know? This woman wanted heroics, theatrics, she wanted fucking phantasmagoria! And I delivered it. I was really putting on a show, fists gripping a phantom sword slicing through the air to illustrate the slaughter, and hands miming the shoving of hot coals down the poor King's throat.

Next time might not be so simple. I think I'm going to present my neighbor across the hall with my new one. It's all about how Catfish works 20 hours a day to save money for his wife, who still lives in Vietnam. He sends over half of his paycheck home every month to help pay for his wife's medicine, which is super expensive because they don't have insurance, and that's why he lives a frugal life. I don't know. I still haven't worked out the details yet. I think she's going have cancer. It may even be terminal.

Stephen Reynolds

NEVER OUT OF SEASON

I was wiping the dust off an old snow globe in the upstairs attic, when a mop of honey-blonde hair suddenly appeared through the wooden flooring.

"I thought I'd find you here," said the voice, warm and feminine. It was a lovely contrast to the thoughts that bloomed inside my head. The little red Santa smiling gaily, his gloved hand forever frozen in a wave. Truth be told, it was over a hundred degrees outside, and up here in this cobweb-ridden place (by God) was practically unbearable. But as I lightly shook the fragile keepsake, I found myself *dashing through the snow* like I once did so many years ago. I heard the sound of high pitched laughter from afar, out in the sultry day (most likely the neighbor kids playing tag through a sprinkler-soaked lawn). But there, at that precise moment, I was *taking the road before me, and singing a chorus or two*.

"You miss him don't ya?" the voice broke me out of my thoughts, and for a moment I just stared at her as if she had a left over piece of spinach in her teeth. I nodded quietly in the silence, and rubbed the smooth curvature of the glass with my thumb. It somehow felt cold, as if winter wonderland was still trapped inside.

I knew I hadn't stayed too long, though I knew my wife would be patient throughout this ordeal, however long it took. She didn't need to recite any famous sayings to pick me up, just her being there was enough. It was the unspoken truth between us, and it was always enough.

"Cody and Angie will be downstairs when you're ready to head out."
"I'm ready now. I was just doing a little cleaning up." It wasn't quite a lie. It was one of those statements we use to say one thing and mean the other. The attic was "okay," but I knew of more dire things in need of some organization.

My wife went down the ladder first, naturally. Then it was me, a bit awkwardly, still holding the snow globe. We both came into the living room, where our children sat waiting. Cody was playing some handheld video-game in his Hawaiian swimming trunks. Angie was quietly giggling at something her friend said, via text. Her blue bathing suit was barely more than a strap, and I knew I was *this* close from losing it. But this was a happy day, so I let it slide, just this once.

"Are you still not ready?" asked Angie.
I looked down at my blue work jeans and buttoned-up t-shirt. My wife gave her a fierce look, as if willing her to take back what she said. It didn't really matter though; my emotions were spent.
"I was gonna change when we got there," I said, a bit defeated.
"Whatever." She rolled her eyes and plopped her phone right there on the couch. I just stood there like a lifeless statue, while my family got everything ready to head to the local pool. My wife was as patient as a snail, but the kids bustled about as if they've been down here a lifetime. Cody was mad when Beth took the game-boy from his hand, just before some big important checkpoint. Angie was calling Beth "completely unfair" for not letting her invite Tom over to come swim as well. My wife told her, "This is a family event. No exceptions!—and for Pete's sake, listen to me for just this once!"

PRELUDE TO AN AMERICAN WEDDING

The incandescent atmosphere blinded Will into a contradictory stupor of visual delight and dismay. He stood, luggage in hand, outside of a hotel, his eyes fixed on a chapel twenty yards away. He turned his back and walked inside, leaving behind a wedding ceremony taking place within perdition.

In his king suite off of the Strip, Will relaxed in front of a television with commentators making predictions about the upcoming program. It was a Sunday in mid-October. Will had spent the last few months on the road and this was the first football game he had the chance to watch all season. He stretched out in a computer chair with his feet propped up on the hotel bed. He moved the nightstand next to the chair to serve as a table—a half-empty six pack of Rebel IPA sat on top. Will removed the fourth bottle and pried the top off with his multi-tool. The smell of hops from the first bottle had tantalized his senses. The first swig from the fourth further compounded the perceived euphoric sensation. He was about to order some wings, when his cell phone rang.

"So Mark isn't going to make it I guess," Kody said.
"Serious?" Will said.
"Yeah, to my wedding. I just received his decline in the mail," Kody said.
"Fuck. Sorry to hear man." Will said.
"I know I'm just a step-brother, but we grew up together. I haven't seen him for years. It's almost like he's trying to kill off this side of the family."

Will set the take-out menu down and stood up, scanning the room for his travel bag. He found it and withdrew a pack of American Spirit Cigarettes.

"I didn't think that it would go this far. We shared so many good times during childhood. I thought he would set aside any adult grievances for this occasion," Will said. "Sorry to hear that he's bringing you into it now."
"You think this is about what happened with dad?" Kody asked.
"It's got to be. I don't think that Mark ever forgave him for it. Since Mark's marriage, they've only spoken a couple of times."
"Pretty lousy that Dad being honest could wreck our whole history together," Kody said.
"A few simple words changed the course of it."
"You ever talk to Mark about it?"
"I've tried to bring it up, but he just skirts around the topic. Talks like there's nothing wrong. It boggles my mind."
"You think everything is okay with him?" Kody asked.

Will stepped outside of the hotel room and walked around the corner of the building, out of view of the chapel. He lit a cigarette.

"I think that he still has some maturing to do," Will said.
"I wouldn't know. I haven't seen him since his wedding five years ago."
"He's still the same, but it's sad. He just turned thirty and while he's got a decent job and a family now, he's still the same."
"How do you mean?" Kody asked.

The smoke burned Will's windpipe and clogged his lungs. He exhaled.

Never Out of Season...

I just stood there, in quiet grief. Their voices were mere sounds, plastic and surreal, and I went along with it as if everything was alright. But it wasn't alright. The world was falling apart all around me, miraculously still turning, and I just stood there! Finally, I reached for the doorknob, when I realized I still had the snow globe in my hand.

I looked at it longingly, with affection, and it came to me. A slightly crazy idea. Not the kind where it's life or death, but the fact that it was a spur of the moment decision—it felt totally crazy. I placed the snow globe on the mantel above the fireplace, where the glass caught the sun just right, and the jolly Santa shone a brilliant red.

Allow me this simple pleasure, I asked God in silence. Let the neighbors gawk and smirk all they want. Let the kids think their father's going senile, thinking it's December and not August. I didn't care. I just watched the little flakes twinkle throughout the water-filled dome.

I displayed it proudly, knowing that goodwill, kindness, and love were *never* out of season. So I picked myself up and out of my gloomy state, got inside the car, and slid into the driver's seat. "Alright, let's go!" I said cheerfully, and everyone looked surprised.

"Dad, is everything … okay?" asked Cody, from behind. But no answer was necessary. I just smiled, and looked across at Beth without a care in the world.

And since we've no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

Timothy Hicks

Prelude to an American Wedding...

"By his age, most people become aware of *who* they are, *what* they believe in. I think that he is still influenced by those around him too much," Will said as he exhaled the foreign particles. "My sister-in-law doesn't like our Dad, so Mark avoids him."
"That's a shame."
"Also, the military is making its mark. Last Christmas Mark presented me with his extensive gun collection--with pride. He's planning on teaching gun classes at the local NRA chapter."
"He's turning into one of those guys?" Kody said.
"Yeah, but it's not him. And it's starting to show - he's not happy. The last few times we've gotten together, which has been like once a year, they've been smorgasbords of drunken oblivion. Sadly, that's the only bond left between us. During the last get-together, he drank too much and Catherine kicked him out of the bedroom. He passed out on a couch in the basement with a half-empty beer can in his hand, and woke up in a pool of piss."
"Jesus."
"You know, the more I think about it, the more it pisses me off," Will added as he took another drag. He paused and exhaled, then continued. "Because frankly, I'm largely to blame. I haven't been the best role model in his life. And to make up for this lack of guidance, I feel that he's still playing the role of younger brother to any outside influence that passes by. I don't think that he's become fully conscious of his own needs and desires. I'm afraid he's about to reach the breaking point," Will said.
"Maybe you should talk to him."

Will placed the phone in his pocket. He withdrew another cigarette and struck a match. He dragged it down in four inhales. He paused, thinking deeply. *Maybe I should call. No, I'll just screw it up. Mark still talks to me a couple of times a year at least.*

Will returned to the hotel room and glanced toward the television as he cracked open the last bottle. The game was tied at halftime. He drained the beer, grabbed his wallet, and then walked to the hotel lobby. A balding middle-aged man stood behind the desk. Traces of mascara surrounded the clerk's eyes.

Continued on page 20...

DROP OUT

The bearded, homeless man yanked down on his ill-fitting sweater. It was a hot August afternoon on Tremont Street near the Boston Commons. He shivered briefly.
"Buddy. Can you spare some change?" he called out to a pedestrian.
"I don't think so. Sorry."
The respondent, a well dressed and groomed man proceeded to walk by, but then paused. He looked at the man with the cup. A brief flicker of recognition crossed his face.
He said to the beggar, "Do you mind if I talk to you for a moment?"
"You're not a preacher, are you? 'Cause if you are, I'm not interested in what you're selling."
"No, no I'm not a preacher," he chuckled. "I'm a lawyer, actually. I work at a firm on Beacon Street."
"I used to be one," replied the homeless man.
"A lawyer? Really? What's your name?"
"Bill."
"Nice to meet you, Bill," replied the lawyer. He seemed to warm up to the dirty, unshaven fellow upon hearing of his former occupation. "How is it that you ended up out on the streets?"
"Oh, you know. One thing led to another. The wife and I split up about 15 years ago. I began spending more time at the bar than at home. And somewhere along the way I just stopped caring about it."
"It?"
"You know," Bill replied, bitterly. "'It.' Life. Everything. The practice, the car, the boat, the time-share, the toys, the condo. My marriage. All that crap."
The man was silent for a moment. "My name is William. Where do you sleep? Around here?"
"Yeah. I got a bench staked out over in the Commons. A couple of us: Joe, Petey, Howard, and Susie--we stick together. It's a sort of communal living arrangement. We look out for one another. The Commons isn't safe like it used to be."
Bill continued. "Last year, some young punks ganged up on Howard after he'd gone on a bender. They tried to set his clothes on fire. Luckily, a cop happened to be nearby or ole' Howard would have ended up a French fry. Imagine that? Kids setting fire to a harmless old drunken bum."
"That's pretty barbaric behavior," said William.
An MBTA bus roared by. The conversation paused for a moment.
How do you eat?"
"There are a couple of food pantries nearby. And Joe and Petey know one of the chefs in a restaurant over on Arlington. On Thursdays we get great leftovers after midnight."
A woman passed by, dropping a quarter in Bill's cup. She gave Bill an odd look as she continued by.
"What do you do for money—besides panhandling?" asked William.

April's Impossibly Easy PB Cookies

Ingredients:

1 cup creamy peanut butter
1 cup white sugar
1 egg
½ tsp. vanilla extract

Topping:
3 tbsps. white sugar
½ tbsp. ground cinnamon

Directions:

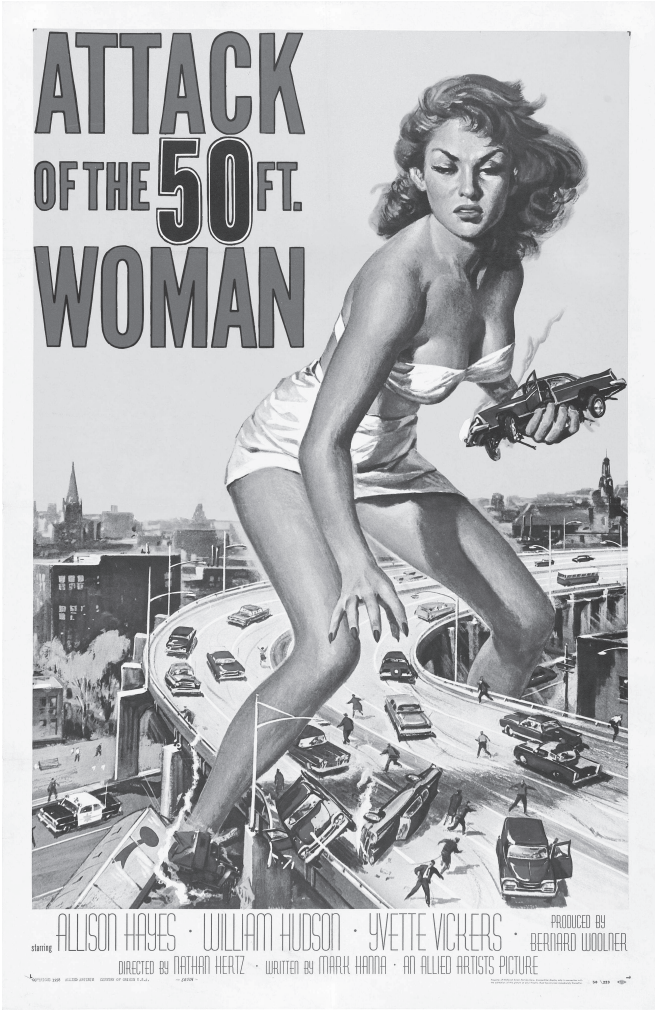
1. Preheat oven to 350°F
2. Mix ingredients until creamy and smooth.
3. Combine topping ingredients in separate dish.
4. Form 1 inch balls of dough.
5. Roll balls in topping mixture.
6. On a baking sheet, flatten cookies with a fork.
5. Bake for 12-14 minutes.

(Hide cookies from Ellie!)

Drop Out...

"I don't really need it. Not a lot of it, anyway. Two years ago I tried selling *Spare Change* out near the Park Street station. That's hard work, man! You think lawyering is hard. Try hawking newspapers all day long. People spitting at you, cussing you out, calling you all sorts of names. No sir, the money just wasn't worth it."
Bill continued, "Last year I worked briefly at a restaurant doing kitchen clean up. They knew 'who and what' I was. But they was--" Bill corrected his grammar. "They were willing to take a chance on me. I think it might have worked out, except that I didn't have a phone or permanent address. One of the managers took a disliking to me. He got on my case when I showed up late a couple of times. I was late because I sat up with Susie all night long when she caught pneumonia. Winters living outside can be a bitch, you know. Anyway, I told him to stick it."
"What about family? Your 'ex'?"
"I lost track of the old lady and my little boy. She split and headed west with Bobby. He was four at the time. I suspect Bobby is in college now. Perhaps he's even thinking about a career in law, too. God help him if he does."
Bill sighed.
"I'm sure Helen told him I was dead."
"Does it ever bother you? I mean--falling from the upper class, a respected pillar of the community--all the way to the bottom?
"I didn't fall. I dropped out. And this isn't the bottom. It's not even close! I've got my friends. And my time is my own. Nobody's putting demands on me, I don't have to contend with appointments, billable hours, upset clients and the bullshit that goes along with wearing a suit and tie."
He continued. "I see it all out here. I see the best of humanity, and the worst of humanity. Occasionally, some small act of kindness shown towards my friends and me restores my faith in my fellow man ever so briefly. I lost that faith a long time ago, dealing with the petty, backstabbing, litigious segment of the population that you call the 'upper class.'"
Bill paused to take in another quarter. He nodded his thanks, and continued answering the lawyer.
"You talk about respect. I've got respect. My friends think the world of me. They depend on me. And I depend on them. And you know what? I love them. I wouldn't trade them for all of the stuck up 'blue blood' in Wellesley Hills. Hey, you know—you ought'a drop out of the rat race."
Bill paused for a moment, glaring back at two teenagers who slowed to snicker at him. They quickly moved away.
"Mister, what did you say your name was again?"
A woman who had been standing nearby approached at that moment. She reached into her purse, pulled out a crisp dollar bill and stuffed it in his cup. Bill nodded in appreciation.
As the woman departed, she shook her head sadly, thinking of the homeless man in the Red Sox sweatshirt, conducting a very civil conversation with an imaginary person whose name he had apparently forgotten.

Phil Temples



DOWN TO SIZE

I hate tall women. Well, maybe hate is too strong. Begrudge or even envy might be more accurate. I first felt this way in High School while watching Mother bend over her Singer, sewing dresses for my sisters and me. The tall, slender, size 2 beauties pictured on the Vogue patterns looked like outer space aliens compared to my five-foot gnomish body. The only thing I had on those gals was ample cleavage. And I suppose the guys got a pretty good look from their wuthering heights. I like tall men, have been married to one for more than sixty years.

It's hard to be chic when the women in my family are all shorties, damn eastern European stock. And in later life, gravity and my propensity to eat rather than exercise required major engineering efforts to maintain a presentable figure. Tall, slender women didn't have that problem, just one of the reasons why I admired and envied my good friend, Georgia.

She'd graduated from Swarthmore smack in the middle of World War II, followed her family west to Santa Barbara, and worked at Security Bank, became their youngest loan officer before marrying a successful realtor. They moved to the Riviera, the city's most hoity-toity neighborhood. Meanwhile, Frank and I raised three kids and pinched pennies from our West Side bungalow. But for some reason, Georgia's love of books and our shared hometown of Philadelphia brought us together, along with another improbable couple, Larry and Amanda. Us ladies would meet once a month to talk about books and of course gossip, and the whole gang would go out for dinner and dancing every chance we got.

It was on one such outing in the early 1960s that the incident happened. I laugh about it now, can appreciate the humor. But for a while, I felt cold toward Georgia, and even colder toward my husband.

Ted and Georgia were celebrating their fifteenth anniversary and she had made reservations at the Talk of the Town for the six of us. The Talk was a high-priced club located near the beach, with low lighting, wonderful food, and a ballroom for after-dinner dancing. Ted drove us to the club in their Cadillac de Ville. We climbed out into a warm spring night. He handed over the keys to the valet who whisked the car away.

Inside, the restaurant's foyer smelled of smoke filtering in from the bar. At the maitre-d' stand, a tall tuxedoed man with slicked-back hair and a sad smile welcomed us.

Ted stepped forward. "We have reservations for seven-thirty. The name is O'Neal."

The maitre-d' scanned his ledger, found Ted's name and made a quick check with a gold ballpoint. He lifted his head and stared at our group. His smile faded and he cleared his throat.

"I…I'm sorry sir, but we will not be able to seat you."
"Why the hell not?" Ted puffed himself up, an impressive man built like a football player.
"I must apologize for my indelicacy, but your wife does not meet our establishment's dress code."

I think all of our mouths must have dropped open. Seeing our reaction, the maitre-d' hurried on. "We require that all ladies wear dresses or skirts. Your…your wife is not properly attired."

Georgia wore a mist-blue long blouse and matching pants. The top had a plunging V-neck framing exquisite strings of pearls. The pants were bell-bottomed and nearly covered her silver stilettos. When she walked, the soft rustle of the filmy material accompanied the clack of her heels. I bit back hard on my jealousy. She looked like a blue heron, standing there for all to admire, and I knew my husband appreciated her efforts.

Georgia spoke up first. "Do you know how much I paid for this outfit? We had to drive to LA to pick it out. How dare you–"
"I'm sorry, but our dress code is very clear. Cost has nothing to–"
"We want to speak with the manager," Ted growled.
"Of course, sir. Just one moment. Would you step over here while we–"
"We're not going anywhere until the manager gets out here."
"Yes, sir. I understand."

The maitre-d' stepped from behind his podium, scooted down a side passage, and ducked through a doorway. By that time, other restaurant patrons had crowded into the reception area. The hubbub of their voices rivaled the noise from the bar. Some stared at us angrily, at least at Ted and Georgia; they patently ignored me.

In a few minutes the maitre-d' returned with a manager who was my height. I figured Georgia would make short work of that pipsqueak. I expected apologies and maybe even offers of complimentary cocktails.

The manager straightened his tie. "Mr. and Mrs. O'Neal, I am truly sorry for the inconvenience. But we must insist that you honor our dress code. It's a matter of principle and precedent."

Our little group stood in stunned silence. The room quieted. I guess they wanted to hear every last word of the confrontation. Ted stepped forward and filled his chest to speak. But Georgia placed a hand on his arm and gently moved him aside. She turned toward the crowd, handed me her silver clutch purse, then removed her shoes. She raised the blouse to expose a flat midriff, hooked her thumbs through the top of the pants and pulled downward. The crowd gasped.

Georgia stood before us, smiling, wearing only the blouse, her long legs encased in sheer pantyhose. In the early '60s, gals wore dresses at or below the knee and the mini skirt was years away from hitting the fashion scene. But even by later standards, Georgia's blouse was short, way way short, its bottom button positioned directly over her private parts. Whenever she shifted her legs, the flap below the button would open, exposing even more. She slipped on her shoes, folded her pants and gave them to me to store in my huge purse.

Georgia turned to face the maitre-d', her improvised dress barely covering her backside. I glanced at my husband. Frank's face wore a broad leer, his gaze fixed on Georgia's derriere. I gave him an elbow in the ribs and he grunted. I wasn't blind to his attraction to Georgia, and her to him. Maybe I'd have to insist that we cut ourselves loose from their friendship.

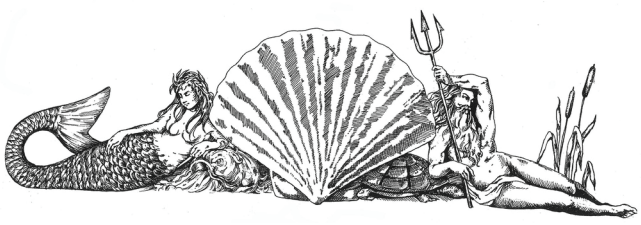
"We are ready to be seated," Georgia said in her no-nonsense voice.
The maitre-d's face flushed and he stammered. "Yes, well…well, right this way." A low cheer went up from the crowd.

The evening proceeded as if nothing had happened, although the winter chill between Frank and I continued. But by the time we hit the ballroom, everyone had downed enough highballs to enjoy themselves. And the other male patrons seemed to enjoy watching Georgia glide across the dance floor, especially when Ted guided her into dramatic dips, twirls, and other

Taken By Mermaids

The bright guitar playing city lights clipped the wings
Of a beach that seemed to be made of beer cans
And so it never really spawned any delicious songs
And its coastal gardens were changed forever
As the wetlands became a dim sweet memory
And now slightly sad is its only coin of the realm
Beneath a moon that is now a ballroom made of gas lit silk
That calls out to me from this sapphire Mecca's prayer towers
To atone for my part in all this guilt

Ken L. Jones



Down to Size...

and other gymnastic flares. Frank wisely refrained from dancing with her.

I remained friends with Georgia, even though her willowy appearance sometimes bugged the hell out of me. She died in her sleep several years back, having never fully recovered from a bad tumble. I guess it's true that *the taller they are, the farther they fall.* She'd outlived Ted by a decade. I miss her dearly, but feel smug as I stare at Frank sitting in the wheelchair next to mine on the veranda of the nursing home. We're all short now, even my husband – and anybody standing looks like a giant.

Terry Sanville

A Box of Diamonds

The leaves let go and explode
Like a Chinese paper umbrella twirling
As the wind tears them from their trees
And sets their hobo feet to moving
Autumn has endless trains to ride
Its tracks go on forever
And coagulate in the round house of winter's depths
On a December dark and somber
When hours seem so frozen and so preset
As all becomes a veritable icicle hymn
In the frozen rays of a rising dawn
That has the rhythms of a grandfather clock's
Rusty innards as they connect and grind
With a sound like Brunhilde's battle cry
Echoing in the Wagnerian forever
With notes red-hot and tough as leather

Ken L. Jones

THE JOKE

Evening cooled the air and purpled the sky. On our second date, we strolled through a pedestrian mall paved with brick, not holding hands. It was lined with restaurants, bars, clothing stores, bookshops. Her hair was long and straight, her face round and youthful, her eyes blue and clear. We passed older couples and groups of young people gathered on and around benches of iron and wood.
We found an empty bench and sat and talked. She told me about living with her parents in a cabin in Alaska as a girl.
A man with a wild beard and more layers of clothing than the weather warranted approached. "Any change?" he asked. I could smell stale sweat on him. I never gave money directly to the homeless, but he must have aroused her sympathy; she gave him a dollar from her purse.
"Thanks. Wanna hear a joke?"
She smiled. "Sure."
"How many dead babies does it take to paint a house?"
I glanced at her. Her smile was still there, but it had stiffened, like bread become stale. We said nothing.
"Depends on how hard you throw them." He waited for laughter that did not come. "Wanna hear another one?"
"No, thank you," she said, sweetly.

Daniel Wilmoth

DENOMINATION

"What religion is this again?"
"Lutheran, I think."

We sat there, Claudia and me, watching the activity on the altar. I could tell the guy doing the talking was cool because he wore a short-sleeved black shirt with his clerical collar. He was animated and funny. He held up a gold coin like the ones I got at Circus Circus in Vegas when I was 10; either that or he had the waxy chocolate ones with Menorahs on them we got in our Christmas stockings.

"See this? This is a Round Tuit. You get this when you take ACTION! You want a Round Tuit of your own? I'll give you one! I just have to catch you doing something ACTIVE to show God's love! On the playground, in your class, in the church parking lot. … You know why? Because when it comes to showing love to one another, you should hurry up and get around to it. Get it? Around to it? A Round Tuit?"

Prepubescent laughter erupted in the pews.

"The priest is pretty funny." I commented.

"You're such a dumbass, Lauren. He's not a priest. He's a minister." Claudia said in a way that made me want answers and feel like a class-A moron at the same time.

"What's the difference?"

"Check it out." She said, nodding toward a group of 14-year-old boys on the opposite side of the aisle. "That's his son. Blue shirt."

"Shut the hell up." I replied. "They're allowed to have kids? Oh my God, he is totally hot!"

"I know! His name is Matt. I met him on the way in. He's cool, but he's like, the preacher's son. No thanks. Too weird."

Continued on page 24...

Prelude to an American Wedding...

"Handle of Beam," Will said.
"Crazy night ahead?" the hotel desk clerk asked, shadowed eyes open wide.
"Sure, something like that," Will said as he handed over the cash.
"It could be crazier," the clerk said with curled lips as he passed a business card across the counter.
"Uh. Thanks," Will murmured as he pocketed the card.

Will returned to his suite and banged the bottle to rest on the nightstand. He propped his legs up onto the bed, grasped the bottle, and twisted the cap, releasing the toxic vapors within. Drinking straight from the bottle, the first swig burned his throat. The second less.

In the dark room, the second half of the game resumed. The more Will drank, the more his team floundered. Within the first four minutes the coach had wasted all three timeouts on challenges not worth pursuing. Key players were out due to injuries.

Will removed the card from his pocket the clerk had slipped him. Turning it under the glow of the television set he read, "What happens . . ." It was accompanied by a Photoshopped picture of a woman with fake DD breasts and an 800 number. Will then pulled the nightstand drawer open and removed a book left by the Gideons. He placed the card inside at Mark 10:9. Will took another swig from the bottle.

Will grabbed his phone and scrolled to his brother's number, then he set the phone back down. He picked up the bottle and took a swig, then kept it in his lap. On the television, the opponent furthered the lead with ease.
At the two minute warning, Will turned off the television. He staggered across the dark room, parted the curtains, and watched another wedding party go through the motions. The bride's smile revealed teeth whiter than her dress.

Will glanced at his phone.

Darren Young

BENNIE

I met Bennie in 1978. Right after I started selling real estate. She lived in a small, Tudor-style cottage. It had been her home for fifty-seven years. When she answered my knock at her door I thought I was looking at a half deaf, rheumy eyed, snaggletooth, not very alert, little old lady.

I pasted on my glad-to-meetcha smile and introduced myself and my company. They taught us how to do that in the three-day real estate orientation class. We also learned to ask next-door-to-dishonest questions when we were canvassing neighborhoods for listings. So I was ready with one of the best ones.

"Do you know anybody in your neighborhood who wants to sell their home?"

She growled, "If you want to list my house, come on in". Well, THAT wasn't what I expected and neither was Bennie.

Wish I'd kept a journal of our friendship and the stories she regaled me with over the next six years. Her generosity put her at risk of stripping her house down to a tea pot, her bed and the pillow under which she kept a 1930-something .44 Colt revolver. I knew she'd use it because I saw the bullet hole that, at eighty, she'd put in her bedroom wall by the glass door that the burglar with really good judgment hadn't come through.

My husband spent two years in the Navy and another 20 as a fighter and C130 pilot in the Air Force and he conceeded

Bennie...

she could out-swear, out-shoot and out-drink most soldiers he'd met. No wonder. She'd been one of the first five women to join the inaugural Women's Army Corps. I loved hearing her and Rob swap "war" stories. They adored each other and given her blatant flirting and frequent propositions, I'm not sure they wouldn't have run off together if I'd let my guard down.



Bennie loved to try to shock me with her creative cursing and bawdy expressions. One of my favorite moments happened one afternoon after she had an argument with her daughter-in-law. When she hung up the phone she swore and said, "I don't know what my son sees in that woman. But, hell, love lights on a turd, it'll stick."

She wasn't particularly close to her son and didn't like his wife at all. Selling her home was their idea, not hers.

"You're getting too old to live by yourself, Mom. Sell the house and come live with us."

"I'm not sure they wouldn't have run off together if I'd let my guard down."

Bennie may have been 87 but "old" she wasn't. She still climbed ladders, repaired screen doors, cleaned out cupboards, walked a mile a day and was a damn fine cook.

However, during the two months that her house was on the market, I watched her become an anxious, spent shadow of her true self. When she finally told me to tear up the listing contract, she immediately regained her vitality and feisty independence in full measure and then some.

Despite all her eccentricities and profane bombast, my dear friend was noble, compassionate, wise, and humble. She stayed in her house until she was 93, when she died in bed with her pistol under her pillow.

Before I closed the door of her empty cottage for the last time, I think I heard another one open and a voice from the threshold happily salute, "Love lights on a life, it'll endure forever."

Jackie Maugh Robinson

Plowing Another Field

The farmer drove by again,
louder this time.
His tractor tearing the ground up.
Planting another harvest,
I wonder if he knows,
it is his last.

That is the funny thing about death,
most men never know they are dying.
Some do nothing but run straight towards it.
His lines just get slightly less straight,
breathing a bit harder,
thinking becomes a chore.

He turns the tractor like he's a done million times.
Maybe a million and one time is too many.
The tractor keeps going straight,
the old man isn't turning.
He's heading straight for the cliff.

He turns at last.

I guess he had one more left in him.

I wonder what I have left in me,
what you have.

Donald Buhl-Brown

That Single Orange Light

One single orange light,
is shining through my window.
It continuously keeps me awake.
But when I am walking home from work…
Exhausted, covered in dirt,
just wanting to fall asleep.
You'd think I would hate that single orange light,
which is still shining through my window.
It guides me home though,
tired,
covered in dirt,
still just wanting to sleep.

Donald Buhl-Brown

A Planted Seed

A woman doesn't have to be around long,
or even be around a lot,
for the seed to be planted in a man.
Time after time that seed rots away.
Leaving a husk,
filling a tiny space.
The space needed for another seed.
We all carry around the husks of our former loves,
garbage we can never empty.
So be careful out there,
be careful when you let a woman plant that seed.
Or not, I guess.
I never am.

Donald Buhl-Brown

Not Today Demons

It sits in the shadows of my living room,

he just sits and waits for me.

Just waiting for the chance to pounce.

Not tonight I say again. Not tonight.

This demon cannot pounce on me tonight.

He just sits and waits for me.

Not today demon I call.

Not today.

Donald Buhl-Brown

Cling

A pale flag
that emerges from the soil,
hovers
stifled with dirt,
and cries,
it's sweet whiskey
snap
and you,
the ligaments of a chorus, dry,
split.

Erin Vance

Charlotte

a china girl sleeps
in a matchbox bed;
frozen
her tender bones tumbled smooth
by flesh-round stumps

Erin Vance

Constant

the acne scars on your back
are dark braille,
three-dimensional tattoos without images

your body is a soaking book.

you are coffee beans and low blood pressure
and the craters dug from your skin by adolescence
that ripen and swell soft
are sugar cubes and apple cores;
sweet

so we spill like acid onto the linoleum of our high school
and sleep, cycling the same mountain breaths
the nights we lie on our backs
nightmares filter in through our nostrils

the pockmarks on your back are epsom salt mines
and in the world's asymmetry
they are rough
they are blank diamonds in coffee cups

you are a medical text in a dead language
vandalized with water-colour

your fingers are uneven carrots from my garden,
they are white with drought

but you are unclipped toenails
and espresso with a pinch of salt
so we snore through the night
and slip in the shower

we are moth-surgeons
radiating red

Erin Vance

Denomination...

Despite average looks, Claudia managed to meet the coolest guys wherever we went--Disneyland, the beach, church camp--I was never jealous because she was smart as hell, funny as shit, and could handle herself like a pro. I was happy just to be part of her universe.

It wasn't easy, but we made it through the week at Lutheran Vacation Bible School. Claudia hooked up with Matt at least three times on the playground and I never got the damn gold coin I wanted. The music was tolerable and the people were really nice.

The following week was Methodist week. We lived in Southern California so a lot of the characters at the Methodist place were similar to the kids at the Lutheran camp, just more socioeconomically challenged. Attendees were surfers, skaters, and mall walkers. All in all, it was a good time. Except for the music.

Dear God, the music hurt.

"This is what's really cool about Vacation Bible School camp; we practice all week then on the final day we put on a choir show just for the parents! It is super fun and a great way to show how much you learned about Jesus this week!"

Clearly Jill, the perky college student in charge of my group, did not know my mom—or me—very well.

She turned her attention to the dusty cassette player on the Formica wood-grained table around which we were gathered. Claudia kicked me in the shin underneath the table and glared with eyes that said, "Kill me."

The lyrics that spilled forth from Jill's contraption were the most painful pablum I've ever experienced. The saccharin white bread bible tunes made my teeth ache like a dental drill. In fact, the Methodist camp was the first place I ever actually sat around a fire while somebody strummed Kumbaya on an acoustic guitar, the soft voices of the campers singing reluctantly along.

Friday, the final day of Methodist VBS, Mom dutifully attended the big "show." It was awkward as hell but we enjoyed our mother-daughter doughnut and punch after the caterwauling, and then we escaped out a side door and made a break for the car.

The following week was Baptist week and Holy Mary, Mother-of-God, was that some fun stuff.

The junior high kids like Claudia and me were lumped in with the high school types. The entire week was basically a chaste, adult-sanctioned orgy. Don't get me wrong, I don't think there was any actual sex in public areas, but it was eye-opening for an innocent observer like me.

We went to the beach and amusement parks; we sat in a darkened room and listened to Christian rock bands while 8th grade girls were felt up for the first time by high school guys. The sexual tension was heady and intense.

I'll always have a special place in my heart for those Baptists.

I think the following week was a Buddhist-inspired ceramics class where I met my life-long friend Christine.

Each summer, I was farmed out to as many different religious camps as possible so Mom could work and I was not left to my own devices at home. Still, by the next year, she decided it was too much of a pain driving me hither and yon and she was fine leaving me home. That was fine; I was able to entertain myself. As it turns out, my denomination was more MTV than Methodist. Besides, we only got a four-week break before classes began at the Catholic high school.

Carolyn Smuts

TOBACCO ROAD

I have taken the liberty of borrowing the title of Erskine Caldwell's epic novel about childhood memories of tobacco growing. The tobacco cycle is a long one, lasting perhaps fourteen or fifteen months, and my father always grew tobacco, at least for as long as I could remember. These are my memories—what growing a crop of tobacco entailed amidst the days when family members, who did most of the work by hand, worked without pay.

A tobacco seed is a tiny speck about the size of a single grain of finely ground pepper. Even so, they were very expensive—farmers used as few of them as possible. Preparation for the new crop began in mid to late fall when a place was chosen to construct a "bed" in which to raise the seedlings. I later came to realize that the term was slang for what is now called a "cold frame"—used to extend the growing season of vegetables and other plants.

Herbicides were almost unknown at that time, and that fact played an intricate part of how tobacco plants were cultivated and grown. The location was usually remote. The structure could be located near the edge of a wooded area or where the soil had never been tilled. The width was usually six to eight feet wide, and the length would vary, depending on the number of seedlings needed to plant the new crop. The width restraint was tied to what widths of specialty cheesecloths were available—used both to shelter the crop and prevent unwanted seeds from invading.

Once the location was chosen, the area was completely cleared of underbrush, roots, and other vegetation—these byproducts were piled high in a designated area. If needed, additional combustible material was hauled in, whatever was sufficient to create a large, roaring fire. This might even include gathering unusable tires from around the farm or from local service stations. The process would be completed in the fall or winter, weeks in advance of the actual bed construction. Then it became a game of waiting for the opportune time to light the fire.

Timing was everything for the farmer. A day or two could be critical. These decisions were based on guesswork about the weather, derived from experience of the past and a variety of other factors, most of which were out of the control of the farmer. At the time, I never knew anything about what determined the timeline for the things my father did—I assisted in implementing his instructions when I was told what we were going to do.

Sometime, in the early spring, there would come the announcement. "We are going to burn the bed tonight." The weather on that evening must be favorable, no precipitation or windy conditions that would impact kindling a hot fire or risk starting a wildfire that might endanger surrounding areas. Also, the weather for the next day or so must also be favorable to allow the immediate construction of the bed before weeds or other debris could contaminate the area.

Those were the short-term considerations, but there were also longer-term factors that somehow had to be taken into account. The seeds would be planted immediately and begin the germination process. To plant them too early was to risk frost. Wait too long and the plants would not be ready for optimal transplanting. It was truly juggling with nature.

After supper was finished, the fire was lit. For a boy, and even as I grew older, the sight of a roaring bond fire was a festive occasion. Once the roaring fire was fully ablaze, it was impossible to approach—the heat was tremendous. In advance of that evening chore, my father would cut an abundance of cedar boughs and piled them nearby. The job of every family member was to encircle the fire on watchful standby, with those cedar limbs ready in case the sparks should ignite anything in the surrounding area. Even as the fire began to diminish, after an hour or so of vigorously burning, the sparks continued to soar upward against the night sky, caught by wind currents, carried away like fireflies until they finally died and drifted back to earth.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, the entire family participated in dangerous work. There were no fire trucks standing by to douse the flames, no neighbors to assist if there were an emergency, just the family—ready to do whatever was necessary to complete the task. The fire would begin to die, leaving hot glowing coals beneath white ash. At some point, my father would decide that the additional family members were no longer needed, and we would retire while he remained to the end, insuring the danger of a wildfire was over—sometimes all night, returning just in time for breakfast.

The next day would be a flurry of activity. Just as soon as the burned area had cooled, the process of removing the unburned material from the bed began. The reinforcement wires from the tires, still hot and smoldering, were dragged out, along with any unburned wood and brush. At some point, my father would take a shovel and carefully remove some of the clean white ashes, placing them in a metal bucket. Eventually, an area about ten feet wide by whatever length had been completely cleared of debris—only the ashes and parched, sterilized soil remained. This was the bed area, where the tobacco seed would be planted.

Logs had already been assembled just outside the area. They would be carefully trimmed and fit together, becoming a protective framework around the bed—providing a support to attach lengths of cheesecloth that would cover the entire area. This operation could require a day or more to complete, and speed was essential to preventing contamination of the sterile soil.

Assume that the bed was eight feet in width and about one hundred feet long (eight-hundred-square-feet). That would require about a tablespoon of seed for the entire area. The question is, how do you evenly distribute the tiny seeds over such a large area? That's where the wood ashes came into play.

My father was a patient man, and patience is a characteristic of a good farmer—there was only one chance to do something right. The white ashes father had collected in the metal bucket would be carefully sifted and cleaned until it had the consistency of flour. The tobacco seed would be thoroughly mixed into the ashes, stirred carefully by hand to insure even distribution. The area inside the bed had been raked and smoothed until the dark soil also had the consistency of flour, and with enough loose soil for the seeds to be covered just barely below the surface.

Now came the tedious process of sowing the seeds—"broadcasting" was the term used for planting by hand. This was something only my father did—he would not allow anyone else to do the task. With seeded white ashes, he very slowly and carefully spread the mixture over the dark surface of the soil. It could take more than an hour to complete—patiently making sure that the seeds were distributed evenly—there were no bare areas, nor were there too many seeds in one spot. The contrast of the white ash-seed mixture, applied to the smooth dark soil, was his guide. When the small plants were ready to be replanted, it would be too late to rectify any mistakes in the sowing.

Finally, with the sowing complete, cheesecloth was stretched across the top, fastened to the log framework by driving nails through metal eyelets in the cloth. With that phase of the job done, it was a matter of waiting for Mother Nature to provide suitable weather for the germination—tiny dots of green when the first two leaves would eventually emerge from the soil.

~~~OOO~~~

The long process of waiting and watching for something to happen in the weeks to follow began—always questioning how well the seeds germinated. Were they planted evenly without being bunched together? Are there any insects to deal with? Do the plants need watering? A whole list of things could go wrong.

If the young plants did need water, that was a problem. With plants so tiny, anything stronger than a misty fog would knock them out of the soil—it took care and skill to nurture them toward maturity. All the while, they were tucked safely into the protective cold frame—a shade of thin fabric above them and hand-lain logs on the sides to break any cold wind that might threaten them.

Meanwhile, the field was being prepared for transplanting the young tobacco plants, called tobacco slips. My father was a stickler (a good southern term) for straight rows, and he often resorted to stretching a string, attached to stakes at each end, to serve as a planting guide. His brother had no such interest, and his crooked rows aggravated my father to no end. It didn't help when his brother would remind him, "You can get more plants in a crooked row than you can in a straight one." Regardless, planting the bare-rooted tobacco slips was backbreaking work.
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A small hole was punched into the soil using a sharpened stick, often a broom handle. Then the roots and stem were carefully lowered into the hole, and dirt was pressed around the newly relocated plant. Tobacco slips could not survive without immediate watering because they possessed almost no root system. So a second person needed to follow behind the planter, and immediately water each plant.

Later, a metallic planter was developed that had a handle across the top and a trigger to open the jaws of the tapered end that was hand-punched into the soil. There was a water reservoir built into the contraption. A single plant was dropped into a tube and slid to the bottom. The tool was punched into the soil and the trigger was pulled, prompting the jaws at the bottom to open and let the plant drop into the ground along with water for the roots. The operator managed the tool with one arm. Of course, it took an additional person to drop the individual plants into the tube, and someone had to refill the water reservoir on a regular basis—a very labor-intensive crop to say the least, and that is why family members were almost always deeply involved in growing the crop.

The tobacco plant must be one of the most fragile plants in nature. With the least amount of pressure, the stalk or leaves snap off. That adds to the difficulty of growing tobacco. The process, which began with careful planning, timing, and sowing, moved to gently pulling the slips from the soil in the bed, carrying them gingerly to some cool shade adjacent to the field where they would be replanted, individually placing them softly into small holes, covering lightly with soil, taking care not to damage them with the water for their roots…every step an essential and risky act designed to ensure that the plants not only survived, but thrived and grew into mature specimens that could exceed six feet tall. But even at that mature stage, and during the harvesting process, plants remained just as brittle and susceptible to damage by rough handling.

As the plants took root and began to grow, it was an amazing process to observe—the speed at which the plants grew in height as broad leaves began to develop on the stalks. Some early cultivation was possible with a tractor while the plants were still small, but the leaves grew so quickly that they spread out between the rows where a tractor wheel would snap them off. The farmer had to resort to a plow pulled by a single horse or mule. Father walked behind, holding the plow-handles, guiding the animal carefully between the rows on each side. Again, stumble or misstep and plant damage would result. Eventually, it came down to manually cultivating the crop with a gooseneck hoe. Weeds weren't all farmers had to contend with.

Pests ate crops—and one of the worst were hornworms, sometimes called tomato worms. These worms eat 24/7 and grow at an amazing rate. In fact, I have stood in the quiet of our fields, listening to the unmistakable munching of countless large worms. If an infestation is not stopped, hornworms will result in the leaves being stripped down to only stems—the crop could be a total loss.

Today, some might cringe to learn that the two most common insecticides we used to combat pests were arsenic and DDT, both long since banned. DDT was applied with a portable sprayer that I carried on my shoulder. It sprayed a fine mist onto the leaves of the plants. Arsenic was mixed with lime and applied with a hand tool called a dust-gun—it was pumped by hand to produce a fog of dust out the front. In both cases, the operator was fully exposed. Respirators were non-existent and there were no health concerns that I ever heard of. The chemicals were applied and remained active until there was a rain, which washed them from the plant—then reapplication began.

The natural maturity of tobacco plants brings further labor-intensive duties. As the plant grows taller, the junction of each leaf produces a small growth, think of it as a miniature tobacco plant just above the leaf. This is called a sucker. If left to grow naturally, it would develop and grow several feet in length. It saps the strength and vigor of the plant, diverting energy and nutrients from the primary leaf structure to the useless suckers. If allowed to grow unchecked, damage to the primary leaf structure occurs. The leaves must be protected, as they are the only reason the plant is being cultivated in the first place. How do you combat the suckers? There was only one way that I knew of.

It is the laborious job of walking down each row and physically breaking the suckers off, taking care not to damage the leaf growing just below. However, the suckers immediately begin to grow back, so in a week or so you are right back doing the same thing all over again. And remember, you are working with plants that have been sprayed with either arsenic or DDT. It is a miserable job, hot to begin with and the heavy leaves block out any breeze that might be stirring. Work during the cool early morning hours and your clothing will quickly be completely wet from the dew. Wait till the dew dries and then the burning sun and heat is something to endure. It is a personal choice between which misery you wish to contend with.

The tobacco plant has a natural wax that accumulates on the exterior. Perhaps there is nicotine as well—I never knew or asked. But while working in the field, this wax begins to

accumulate on the skin. A layer builds up to the point that fingers won't bend anymore, and hands stick to the plant making it almost impossible to effectively break off the suckers. Soap and water has little effect on removing the wax. The solution was home-cured pork. I would carry a piece in my pocket, and occasionally wipe the greasy piece of pork on my hands and arms, coating myself with a thin layer of pork fat. The fat prevents the wax from sticking to skin. Get the picture?

Tobacco plants, like all plants, do what nature designed them to do—grow tall, reaching toward the sun. Unrestrained, they become topped by a spray of blooms that are beautiful—pink blossoms with ribs of white segmenting the petals. If the plant is allowed to grow naturally tall, the leaves it produces are small and not worth much on the market. The solution is to cut the top off and prevent additional vertical growth. However, this also stimulates additional sucker growth, further increasing the pace of the manual labor needed to care for the crop.

Imagine walking down endless rows of tobacco plants, carefully avoiding breaking the broad leaves that now overlap each other in the row, trying to breathe in the sultry heat while reaching up as high as you can to cut the top off each plant with a pocket knife—pork-fat smeared shoulders ache until you think you can't reach up again—fatigue all but ensures you will eventually cut yourself as every act becomes a herculean effort, and then there is the burning sting as tobacco juice penetrates the wound. It was a character-building, miserable experience—one that I shall never forget as long as I live.

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As the plants mature into late summer and early fall, one might imagine that most of the labor is over. Not so. It is only the beginning of the second tobacco cycle, which includes harvest and final preparations for sale. During this time, the tobacco leaves ripen and turn from deep green to a beautiful yellow, beginning at the base of the stalk and gradually progressing upward. The stalk has matured, entering the ripening or dormant state, almost ready for harvest in Mid-August. This is a critical time because even after all the hard work, the quality of the leaves harvested isn't determined until these last few days. Before we get into all that, there is the matter of Uncle Sam.

Tobacco had the benefit of government price supports for many years. In fact, price supports didn't end until 2014, with a crop valued at some $1.5 billion dollars. The supports functioned as a minimum price that the grower would receive. If the market price fell below that minimum, the government provided the difference in a subsidy paid to the farmer. As a method to control the volume of tobacco being produced, farmers received an "allotment"—a cap on the maximum amount of land on which tobacco could be grown. For a small farmer, it might be something like .431 acres, or less than ½ acre of land. The allotment program did not end until 2004 when the government offered a buy-out with payments to the farmer over a ten-year period.

Allotment controls restricted the amount of land on which tobacco was grown, not the number of pounds produced. This became an incentive for farmers to find ways of producing the maximum amount of tobacco per acre. New plant varieties, better farming methods, and other means helped to substantially increase yields. To monitor and control the amount of land being used, Uncle Sam sent agents to each farm. They physically measured the amount of tobacco land being farmed, and then reported whether the farmer was in compliance. If not, the farmer would lose price supports and would have to sell crops at lower market prices.

Many farmers dreaded visits from agricultural agents, especially those farmers that intentionally overplanted. The agents might visit in June, when the crops were just beginning to grow, or as late as November, when the crop had long since been harvested. I observed the whole gamut of times when the audit was conducted, and some of the quirks that this system spawned.

The inspection was usually conducted by a two-man team, but sometimes by only one person. The measuring was accomplished by pulling a measuring "chain" around the perimeter of the field. With two-man teams, a flag on a metal peg would be placed at the starting point, and the chain would be stretched and marked in however many increments it took to reach the end of that side of the field. A flag was placed at the end of each length of chain, and agents counted the flags to know the total length of the field. The same thing was done for each side of the field—the total of all four sides were used to calculate the area.

Now, what happened if only one person arrived to complete the audit? He would have to begin the process at the starting point, affixing the chain to a post before walking the length of the chain where he would mark the spot with a flag. Then he would retrace his steps to release the chain from the previous point, and then go back where he had been, whereupon he would affix the chain to the next point and advance again. Measuring in this way was both time
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consuming and a lot of walking, so why not ask the farmer to help?

This was a welcome request and certainly complied with by some designated family member who would man one end of the chain. Here's how it worked. Let's say that the actual length of one side of the field was 500 feet, and the chain was 100 feet long. If the farmer were pulling the chain forward, he always placed the flag 10 feet beyond the end of the chain, resulting in the overall measurement being 10% less than it actually was. If he were assigned to the back of the chain, he edged 10 feet forward while the agent pulling the chain advanced, resulting in the same 10% reduction. I can't say the agents didn't know what was happening—they were usually locally contracted and known in the community. It was in their best interests to have temporary blindness.

If the agents calculated the amount of area was in excess, a portion of the crops would need to be destroyed to bring the farmer into compliance. All the work that went into the excess crops was for nothing—heartbreaking, even if the farmer knew he had overplanted.

The farmer chose the area of the field that had the poorest quality plants. The agents defined the excess area and waited while the farmer cut down / destroyed that portion of his crop, or the agents told the farmer to leave the stalks of the destroyed plants visible so that they could return later to verify that they had been destroyed. If the plants were young and immature, their leaves were of no value so the farmer would destroy the crop as directed. If mature enough that the leaves could be marketed, the leaves were stripped and taken to some discrete barn for curing, and then marketed with the remainder of the crop. The stalks remained in the field as "evidence" that the overage wasn't harvested.

One year the measurements were not made until after the crop was harvested, in the barn, and almost ready for market. The agent did the measurement, counted the stubs of the stalks remaining in the ground in the overage area, and my father had to take that many stalks of tobacco out of the barn and destroy it in the agent's presence. Again, heartbreaking any way you view it.

Now back to the tobacco crop. Insects have been managed, weeds controlled, suckers removed regularly to allow full growth of the plant, blooms on top of the plant removed, and the deep green leaves, some of which are 30 or more inches long and 18 inches wide are turning from a deep-dark green to varying shades of yellow. Harvest time approaches rapidly and a new flurry of activity is about to begin.

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The dangers of tobacco production are not limited to insecticides, nicotine exposure, or extreme weather. There were other dangers from harvest onward. Burley tobacco is an air-cured tobacco, meaning that after it was harvested, it was hung in an open-air curing barn for several weeks until all of the green leaves had dried to a golden brown color. But first we needed to get the plants to the curing barn for drying.

Remember, a prime tobacco plant is upwards of six feet tall and loaded with broad leaves. The base of the stalk could be 2-3 inches in diameter, depending on the size of the plant. That is a lot of weight, which must be handled delicately throughout the harvest process. When a stalk was cut (harvested), there had to be some method to get it to the barn for curing. "Sticking" is the method that I am most familiar with. Precut strips of wood, about an inch in diameter and 5-6 feet long, are scattered between the rows of plants in advance of harvest. An instrument called a "spear" (some 6-8 inches long) is a hollow cone of metal with an open base a little wider than the wooden stick that tapers to a needle sharp point on the other end. The tobacco "stick" is either driven into the ground in advance or picked up and held in one hand by the harvester doing the spearing. The metal spear is placed over the upper end of the stick to receive the harvested tobacco stalk.

There may be either one or two harvesters, depending on the method. Where there is one, the harvester jabs the stick (with spear on top) upright into the ground, then cuts the plant at the base. The stalk is heavy. The harvester uses leverage and the weight of the plant to gently swing it into the air, allowing the base to fall downward, eventually resting it on the tip of the spear and stick. This is an artful process—
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one smooth motion—and an experienced harvester will then press the stalk downward so that the spear splits the middle of the stalk, allowing it to slide down the stick, half of the stalk on each side. If the plant is too close to the cut end of the stalk, it will split and interrupt the motion. The plant then has to be manhandled and forced onto the spear a second time. If done correctly, the stalk will only split a few inches and, with the base intact, remain skewered on the stick. Depending on the size of the plant, this may be repeated till there are 4-6 plants evenly spaced on the stick—the balanced arrangement of the plants holding the entire skewer upright. Like I said, it's an art.

With two harvesters, the process was slightly different and certainly more dangerous. One harvester wielded one of the sticks, jabbing it into the ground while his partner's stick remained half finished—ready for more stalks. One harvester cut plants at the base and handed them to the person doing the spearing—the receiver must, in such a manner, swing each plant up and then downward onto a spear as before. If one harvester's motions were an art, two in tandem was a symphony of skillful beauty. Most commonly, the same team would always work together as they were experienced in each other's motions.

The person doing the spearing was always at risk. Each time a stalk was speared, his body made a downward motion within inches of the sharp end of the spear. One mistake could be fatal if the spear penetrated the throat. The necessary force needed to press the plant through the spear and onto the stick meant that any injury would likely be severe.

Most experienced workers placed the spear on the stick and held it until the plant was secured. But there was always room for a mistake, a careless slipup due to fatigue, inattention, or a reflex movement in response to stinging insects. Family members and casual labor from the surrounding community performed this very dangerous work.

There was a short window of time to move the product to the curing barn before damage occurred—in the form of blistering caused by sun exposure. If blistering occurred, the price of the finished product was reduced accordingly. Depending on the day, there might be as little as an hour to move the plants into the shade. A second or third team would haul the cut stalks to the curing barn, allowing a little time for the plants to wilt and become less brittle before hanging the inverted stalks on previously constructed rows of poles, which began at the roof of the barn and were layered down to the last row (about 8 feet from the ground).

The load of tobacco, still attached to the harvesting sticks, was pulled into position within the barn. Someone would climb to the top layer of poles near the roof (25' high in our barn). A second person stood on the layer of poles just below, and so forth, until each layer of poles were manned by someone without any safety gear. The process began—each helper handing each weighty stick upward to the next person, filling each vertical layer from the top down. The workers walked backwards on the extended poles during this process so that the plants were always handed upward. One slip, or rotted pole could result in one or more workers falling into a wagon filled with sharpened sticks—being impaled was a real concern. Then the process began again in another section, proceeding this way until the wagon was empty and ready to be reloaded.

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Once the crop was in the barn, it was a matter of waiting for Mother Nature to cure the tobacco as it dried in the open air. This took several weeks, and the unmistakable smell of curing tobacco was always evident downwind.

The tobacco leaves may be brittle during the growing season, but they can be very pliable and resilient after curing—if there is sufficient moisture in the air. When the atmosphere is dry, so are the leaves, and their rustling as breezes passed through the barn could be heard for some distance. But on humid days, the barn was silent—the leaves hung motionless and limp.

Eventually the leaves all turned a deep amber brown. The stems and leaf veins were the last to completely dry. Father would decide when the process was finished. If the leaves weren't completely cured, mold would develop on them, and buyers would pay very little for the crop. The judgment and experience of the farmer was critical—it was imperative to know exactly when the crop was ready for processing.

Now a word about processing tobacco for market. Remember, the stalks were filled with leaves, and they hung on sticks from the vertical racks in our barn. Only the leaves were sold—the stalks were of no value as far as the tobacco market was concerned. We had to get the leaves to market in some organized manner. The tobacco plants needed to be removed from the high racks of the barn and then separated from the sticks that pierced each plant before leaf removal could begin. We removed the sticks of tobacco from the poles in the barn, beginning with the lower sections and proceeding upward. The method was simple, remove each one from the rack and carefully drop it to the ground, making sure no one below is skewered by the falling projectiles. At this point, moisture in the air is critical—too dry and the leaves shatter when they hit the ground, re-
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sulting in a loss. Father chose a humid day, when the leaves were resilient and would remain undamaged.

The danger of falling while removing tobacco from the barn racks was just as real as it was while precariously hanging the weighty plants. I am somewhat chagrinned, while writing this section, about something that happened during my early school years. I must have been in the 5th or 6th grade, and one of my classmates was doing just what I described, standing high on the barn poles, dropping tobacco to the ground below. Tragically, he slipped and fell onto one of the sharpened sticks, which penetrated his neck and killed him instantly. I attended the funeral, along with my parents. But try as I might, I cannot recall any warnings or extra precautions after his death. Nothing changed. It was just something that was accepted, and life moved on.

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Once the plants were removed from the sticks, a worker striped the leaves from the stalk and separated them onto a table—each type of leaf had its own value. The stalk was discarded. The long table was piled with segregated leaves—and someone working behind the table would tie the tobacco leaves into hands.

The value of each leaf was based on its position on the plant. My father segregated the leaves into four categories: The Lugs, sometimes-called Flyings, which are on the section of the plant closest to the ground. They are premium quality, thin and light tan but often ragged and small compared to the other leaves—even so, they carry a premium price and are always treated with extra care. The next category (leaves just above the lugs) he called Brights. These leaves were full sized and, as the name implied, were a lighter color of medium tan. The next section he called Reds, and true to his naming technique, they were a dark-red color, also with large leaves. The final category were Tips (the very uppermost leaves on the plant). They were also dark-red in color, but shorter in length, and they generally carried the lowest price.

When tobacco buyers purchased tobacco, it was by lots. A "lot" was a quantity of tobacco separated into a shallow basket constructed of narrow wooden slats called a "flat." A lot might be only a few pounds of tobacco, or it might be hundreds of pounds. It wasn't a matter of piling a specific quantity of tobacco leaves on the flat and then sending to market.

Creating hands of tobacco was achieved using a very old method called "handing"—gathering tobacco leaves in one hand with the stems evenly spaced. The stem ends were bound securely with another tobacco leaf that held the bundle together. The size of the hand depended upon the person constructing the bundle. There was no standard size.

While the process of stripping leaves and creating hands of tobacco might seem like an easy, mundane process, it wasn't, especially when taking the working conditions into consideration. By the time the leaves were ready for processing, it was well into November—the temperature became a factor, especially since ideal processing was done when the air was humid. Add a little breeze blowing through the open hallways of the barn, and it didn't take long before the chill permeated my bones. It was as physically tiring as working in the hot field when the crop was being harvested.

By the way, remember that arsenic and lime and DDT that was used to kill the hornworms? If it didn't rain between the last application and the harvest, the residue remained on the plants. Once the leaves were removed, visual evidence of the powder resided on the leaves, but also drifted in the air around the workers. The drifting dust caught stray sunrays through the slats in the barn as the leaves were fanned by the stripping and tying motions. The residue remained on the leaves when the tobacco was sold and taken for processing. We breathed it all, and I imagine the consumers did too.

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After all the tobacco was tied into hands, and packed on flats with the tied ends facing outward, the crop was ready to sell. The next step was to haul it all to market.



Tobacco Road...

This is worth a brief explanation as it was an unusual system to say the least. There were privately owned tobacco warehouses scattered around the area, serving as storage sites. They facilitated the buying and selling of the crop in exchange for a percentage of the sale. Tobacco companies sent their purchasing agents to these warehouses during pre-scheduled sales. There were often thousands of flats of tobacco lined up for sale, all grouped together by farmer or owner. The sale began with an auctioneer walking down the line of flats, announcing the owner and type of leaves in each lot. Buyers trailed, inspecting the quality of the crop by pulling out one or more hands from the flat, visually inspecting the quality of the leaves and making offers on whatever flats or type of leaves that were of interest. It was up to the owner to either accept or decline the offer. If the offer was declined, then the tobacco had to be removed from the warehouse and the process repeated another day.

With hundreds of long rows of pallets, the sale proceeded down one row and up the next. Most farmers were eager to have their crops at the early sales, which supposedly brought higher prices, so the warehouses filled up quickly. The buying would end after a few hours, and there would still be plenty of tobacco remaining. It would remain until the next sale, when the procession would begin from where they ended previously.

There was one aspect of the "sale day" that I didn't understand and was too young or uninterested to inquire about. Most of the farmers arrived for the sale a day ahead of time. It was not a matter of security—no one could have stolen flats of tobacco. I believe it was more of an annual social occasion—they had an excuse to get away from family, eat restaurant hamburgers, and generally socialize with each other—swapping stories, or lies as the case may be. I was never invited. It was an adult occasion, a celebration of sorts, and my father always attended. He seemed to have had a good time in the process.

So the tobacco had been sold and the precious cash payment received. Plenty of new work had already begun—new labor devoted to the next crop—the tobacco beds, or cold frames, had to be moved to a new location, brush and combustible material piled high, ready to burn in the approaching spring. This was our road—the road that our tobacco took to get to market, a long and arduous route filled with gallons of sweat and pockmarked with dangerous backbreaking labor. It was as much a family road as a tobacco road, as much a cherished memory of my father as it was an art form that nourished us all.

Bill W. Melton



HOPPING A FREIGHT TRAIN…

To get on, go to where trains stop. Choose a "side out" (where parallel tracks converge), or anywhere trains are known to slow down to a crawl. Obviously, you ought to know where your train is going. Not all trains make frequent stops. Going "west" might mean you go further west than you intended. Knowing where your train is headed might require a phone call to the railroad. There's no sense getting on a train if you don't know where it's going.

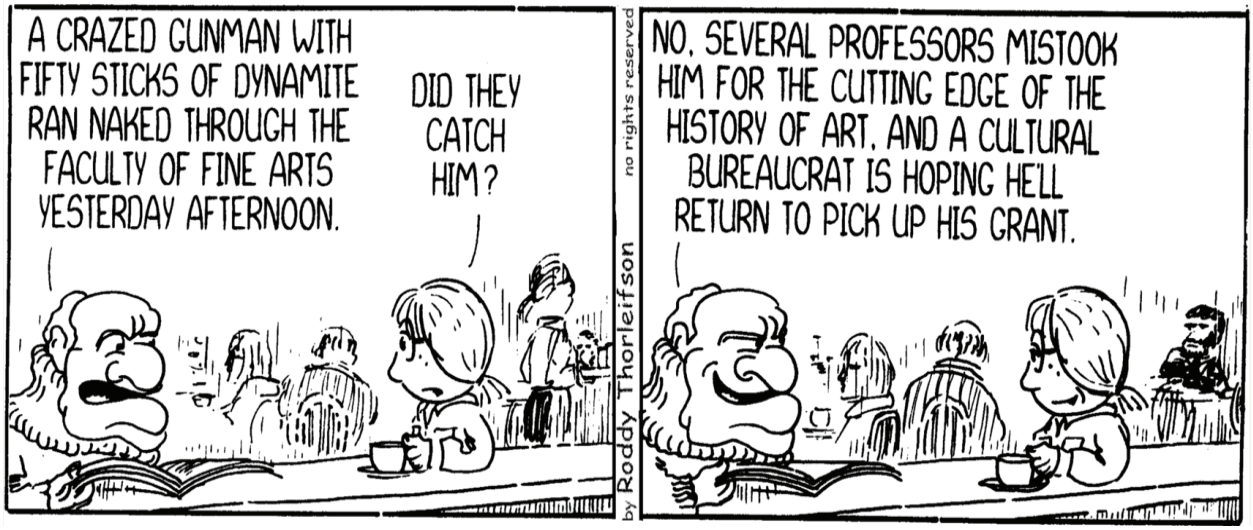
Hide, of course, and then make a break for the car you want. If your target car is moving, then you are "catching it on the fly" which is always more dangerous.

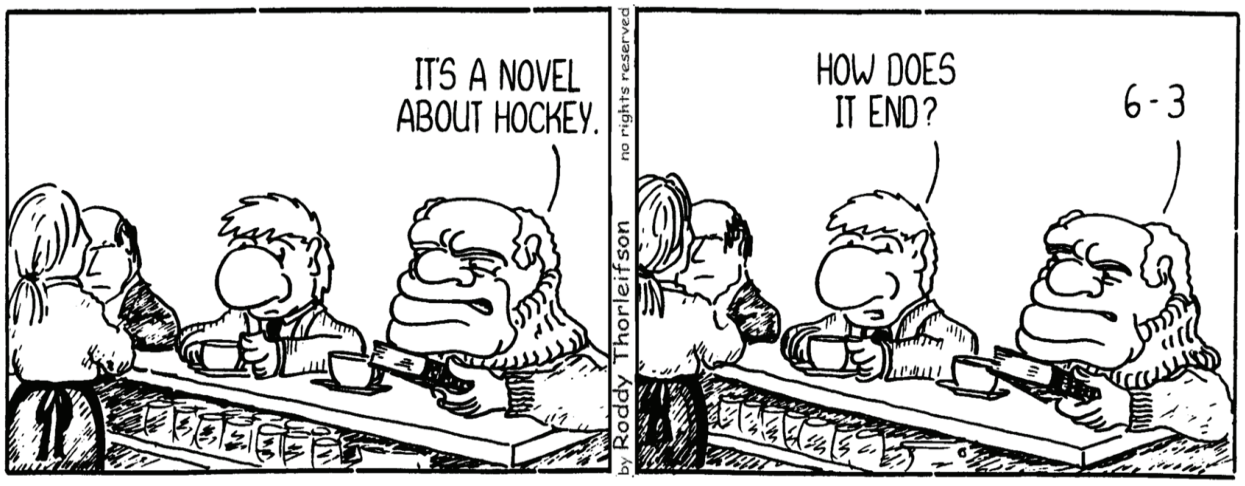
It's better to choose a boxcar than any other. You can usually find one with an open door--and you can see if it's occupied before you jump in; and boxcars usually have a handle to help you step up into the car. Whatever you do, don't ride suicide (on open tankers in plain sight). Stay concealed.

When the train begins to slow down, look around. Get a good idea of what you're dealing with. Railroad cops will probably be waiting around to check the cars. They have to for insurance purposes. Most of the time they have no interest is arresting you, but stay away from them anyway. Hop off as soon as you can safely do so, and run to the second best hiding spot. The best hiding spot might have a cop waiting to harass you. Get off railroad property as fast as you can--that's the main idea.

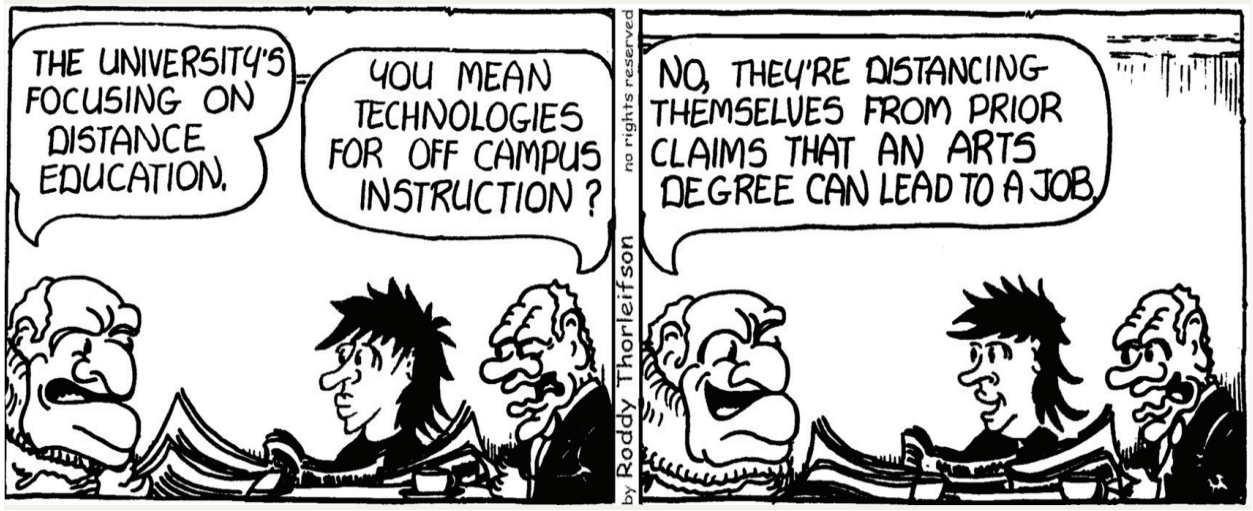
~Anonymous

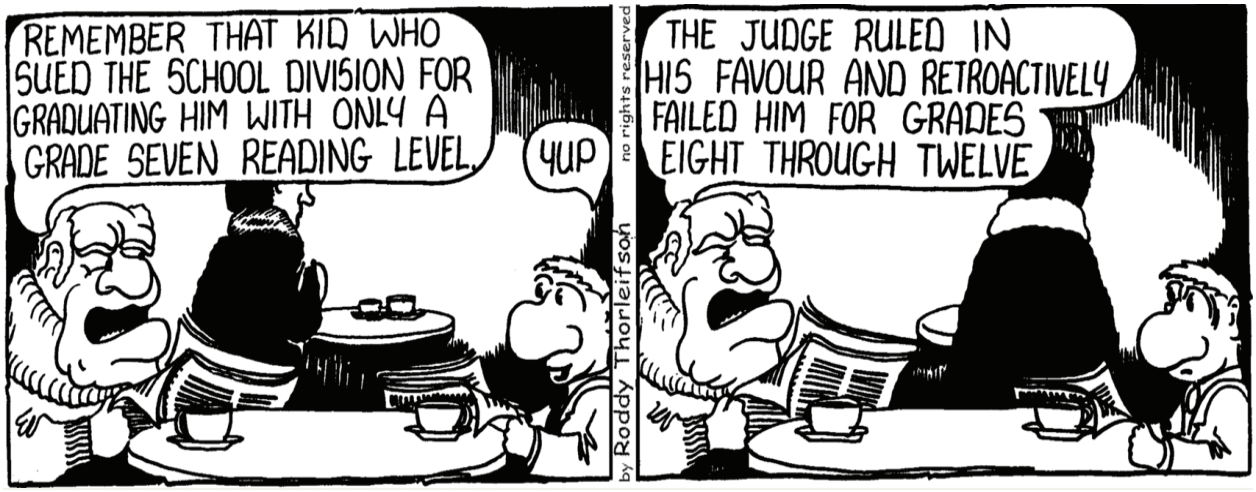

IT'S A BOOK ABOUT JOY AND SORROW. THE JOY OF HAVING A SON WHO'S MUSICALLY GIFTED,
AND THE SORROW OF LEARNING HE PLANS ON PERSUING IT AS A CAREER.
by Roddy Thorleifson
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A CRAZED GUNMAN WITH FIFTY STICKS OF DYNAMITE RAN NAKED THROUGH THE FACULTY OF FINE ARTS YESTERDAY AFTERNOON.
DID THEY CATCH HIM?
NO, SEVERAL PROFESSORS MISTOOK HIM FOR THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE HISTORY OF ART. AND A CULTURAL BUREAUCRAT IS HOPING HE'LL RETURN TO PICK UP HIS GRANT.
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IT'S A NOVEL ABOUT HOCKEY.
HOW DOES IT END?
6-3
by Roddy Thorleifson
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I DON'T KNOW, THERE'S SOMETHING THAT JUST ISN'T RIGHT ABOUT A POST-MODERN TOTEM POLE.
by Roddy Thorleifson
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THE UNIVERSITY'S FOCUSING ON DISTANCE EDUCATION.
YOU MEAN TECHNOLOGIES FOR OFF CAMPUS INSTRUCTION?
NO, THEY'RE DISTANCING THEMSELVES FROM PRIOR CLAIMS THAT AN ARTS DEGREE CAN LEAD TO A JOB.
by Roddy Thorleifson
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REMEMBER THAT KID WHO SUED THE SCHOOL DIVISION FOR GRADUATING HIM WITH ONLY A GRADE SEVEN READING LEVEL.
YUP
THE JUDGE RULED IN HIS FAVOUR AND RETROACTIVELY FAILED HIM FOR GRADES EIGHT THROUGH TWELVE
by Roddy Thorleifson
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LEAVENED WITH BUTTER

On a dull Wednesday afternoon, Rachel Benson, tired after teaching all day, tired from driving home on an Indy-like freeway, even more tired of the maze she was forced to negotiate daily to enter her own house, turned toward the driveway, heard the gravel chink at her new tires, and uncharacteristically slammed her brakes, then her door.

Born into a heritage whose women knew their place, and whose men were skilled at keeping them there, Rachel, the oldest of eleven children, learned quickly the debit side of the first-born child. She was destined to become the default mother as her mother's health deteriorated after years of pregnancies, childbirths, diapers, a husband's instant expectations, more babies, and religious impositions.

Rachel began college in her hometown. Finished out-of-state, then entered graduate school. Became friends with Leah, her roommate from Denver, grew into close friends. They experimented. Rachel graduated with double Master's degrees. During her first full-time teaching job, she lived alone, dated rarely. Traveled in the summer.

As the only unmarried sibling at extended family gatherings, Rachel felt the pressure of generations. Then her friend, Vivian, called; she had a neighbor, and he was single. "Rachel, you'll like him. He lives in this delightful little dollhouse. Drives an Audi and a motorcycle. It'll be fun for you."

Flashes from their early dating period. A cold Saturday evening on the back of Merle's Harley, Rachel absorbed the engine's distinct purr, felt the winter wind against her black leather jacket, her first gift from Merle. She relished his outlaw persona. Felt warmth and excitement when they stopped at a motel. Breakfast in the room. Intoxicated by promises of distant cities, interesting people. Expected repeated experiences and emotions. Rachel committed.

Her future husband, Merle Rector, born into a family with daily interactions like ricocheting torpedoes, had been a strident child, a trait he would carry into adulthood. In and out of hospitals without physical ailments, something hidden, buried. Shots administered by multiple medical staff, their brusque manners raised to an art form, who saw their job as dispensing medications, not in dealing with a disoriented, angry boy.

Merle sought solace through reading. Found friends inside the past. Developed an early attraction to Nazi history, Hitler biographies, and G. Gordon Liddy's triumph through toughness, a man's path. He became a man of one book; assumed a cloak of supremacy. Felt safe and in control when he displayed aggressive behaviors. Learned "What others can't see, they can't take."

A few months later, Merle presented Rachel with his home-drawn pre-nuptial agreement. More polemic than document, it detailed his view that marriage superseded the laws of state and man, followed by his version of Old Testament marriages. Added a vague description of property each brought into the marriage.

"Does this mean you're proposing?"

Merle nodded.

"Then, yes, I will marry you." Sensed that she was entering into a marriage with a quirky man she knew she could help.

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Two years into their marriage, during their first dinner with Rachel's married friends, Merle handed his cell phone across the table to the husband, pointed at the screen - a photo of an underage blond, bound in black leather pants, exposed breasts, black whip at her side. The husband's sole statement to Merle, "Buddy, you are in so much trouble."

Before the husband could hand the phone back, Rachel grabbed it. "I know you like that kind of thing, Merle, but I asked you not to show it to anyone." Stressed the last six words.

Merle swiped his hand toward the husband, "But it's just him". When he saw Rachel's face and body harden, he slumped, shot the practiced glance of a petulant child.

One month later, Rachel tried again with another couple. Merle cornered the dinner conversation with meandering, extended monologues, "The War Powers act was used to authorize the war on poverty and the war against cancer," sprinkled in "Texas can divide itself into six different states, and secede from the Union anytime it wants. It's in their constitution." Overlooked the War Between the States, the 14th and 15th amendments, and the actual wording of the Texas constitution. They listened in silence as Merle presented his most forceful argument, "You won't see any Greenpeace ships now that the CIA has pulled its funding." The guests remained mute; their separate, but mutual decisions made.

In her attempts to settle into the marriage, Rachel revived her mother's tradition – large meals with ever-increasing
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amounts of butter, salt, and sugar. She injected vegetables with butter, meats with more butter. Prepared rich desserts heavy with butter and sugar. Defended it as if a family religion. Their portions grew. Rachel's waistline grew as her femininity shrank. Merle's waistline out-paced hers. His blood pressure increased, he hid his chest pains and signs of arthritis, both avoided doctors. They grew into reflections of each other – scowls and all. He complained about Rachel's weight gain, "I need more eye candy in this house."

Rachel looked at his size forty-six waistline, and silently echoed his comments word-for-word, then regretted it.

~~~OOO~~~

Two summers later, Rachel searched for a geographic cure, planned a trip to Italy. Told others it was for sightseeing and to see her sister. She endured months of Merle's turmoil about foreign threats and terrorists, "But, Rachel," he said with increasing emphasis, "the Egyptian outbreaks will devalue the exchange rate in Italy. We'll have to go some other time."

Tired of his sermons and tired of her struggle, Rachel told Merle she was going with or without him. He relented. Communicated only to waiters and sommeliers. In Italy, he claimed business interests in San Marino, left Rachel with her sister. He neglected cathedrals, seashores, museums, his wife and her family.

Upon their return, he spoke only of meals eaten, gelato consumed. Answered questions with a well-rehearsed, "That was an experience," self-responded, "Yes, it was". Invited neither discussion nor questions.

~~~OOO~~~

Three Sundays after their return, Rachel had dared to joke about his mother's driving. Without looking at her, Merle said, "If you want this relationship to continue, you will shut up now." He stood in their kitchen, and continued to shout.

Rachel, fueled by years of his pounding, and her attempts to walk the middle path, refused to listen to his litany of her failures to live-up to his expectations, said, "Get some help or-" Did not need to finish the sentence.

After weeks of procrastination, Merle entered a psychologist's office. Inside the office, in response to Merle's complaints, the psychologist asked, "Merle, when that happened," referring to the Sunday scene, "how did you choose to feel?"

Merle answered, "Angry".

"You chose to become angry?"

"No," his voice separated each word with his arrogance, "Rachel made me angry."

"She made you? Your wife did what – placed a gun to your head and forced you? Just tell me what you chose to feel?" Handed him an alphabetized feelings sheet.

Merle glanced at the sheet, then let it fall to the floor, "Those are women's emotions." He leaned forward, eyes preoccupied with the wall, pulled out a letter from a district attorney in Idaho, read aloud, "'your letter fails to state an appropriate cause of action for this office to proceed.' Now, what the hell does that mean?"

The psychologist listened – eager to learn Merle's communication patterns. "My step-father and mother kidnapped me and robbed me of my real father." His voice rose, hands jutted forward as if delivering punches – his eyes concentrated on the far wall. Merle explained his attempt to institute kidnapping charges against his mother and stepfather.

The psychologist observed, took notes, said, "It would have been easy for your real father try to find you. He and your mother were both in the military." He noted the uncontested divorce decree from the state of Idaho, his mother granted sole custody, then remarried and moved out-of-state with her three year-old son. Forty-two years later, Merle wrote the letter.

Merle ignored that subject, and told the psychologist his recurring dream. Ended with, "I wake-up, go to the kitchen, and beat on the counter." Without a breath, continued, "I was put in a hospital when I was six," presented his version, "and given shots by some stupid, fat nurse; the orderlies held me down. My mother told me I had asthma, and had to be treated." He could not remember any difficulty breathing.

After the session, his body tight, he walked to his car, tossed the appointment reminder, never returned. Told Rachel they met weekly. She knew he didn't.

Days repeated days. Evenings the same. His lectures, her withdrawal.

~~~OOO~~~

Rachel laughed less each year. Adopted a wary stance - tilted back and to one side, as if ready to dodge whatever Merle threw. Suppressed vague ideas of independence and retribution. Wondered if, once again, she had become a substitute mother. Then, determined not to shrink herself further...
~~~

into this marriage, expanded her circle of friends, revived dormant ones. She interspersed her home life with family gatherings from which Merle excluded himself. During one of these visits, she called her former grad school roommate, Leah. They exchanged weekend visits, then longer visits.

During an extended weekend at Leah's house in Denver, Rachel, drink in hand, dressed in her newly acquired jeans with a colorful cuff and newly-purchased sweater, disgorged, "Sometimes he just talks, like a dull sound. It's easier for me to make the appropriate noises, than to respond and hear him tell me how wrong I am."

She outlined a decade of humiliation, secrets, denial, anger, his diatribes tightened toward malicious sex, big breasts, and oriental women, his demands that she dress like an island girl. She blurted out that Merle wanted her to have breast implants. "It's as if I'm not enough, not what he wants." She revealed his secret Bahamian and San Marino bank accounts, unknown business partners and clients, his frequent flights into paranoia. Told Leah that her hopes grew until four months after their wedding. When, cuddled beside Merle, she told him about her day. He listened, interrupted, "If all you want to do is talk, you'd better talk to your friends. I can tell you what to do, but I can't just sit and listen to mindless gossip. We're both too educated for that."

Leah, freshly divorced for the second time, said, "How long do you plan to tolerate his crap?" Flipped her hair out of her eyes and ran her finger along Rachel's arm, "You look and act abused."

Rachel exhaled exhaustion, "But he tries. You don't know him the way I do."

"No, and I won't. I wouldn't. If he started any of that crap with me, he'd be out of the house." Leah exhaled anger, finished her drink. "Hell, he's the one who insisted on separate last names." Inhaled, "For what? Security reasons? Bull crap, for paranoid reasons."

Rachel, second drink in hand, said, "But he's got-"

"He's got nothin'." Leah interrupted, "Except his resentment at something that may or may not have happened decades ago. He chooses to relive it, and hit you with it whenever he thinks you get out of line. Reminds me of our grandfathers. Do what's necessary; be a dutiful wife." Referred to their shared heritage four generations deep, and the inbred legacy of their families – don't talk, don't trust, don't make mistakes, there's nothing wrong here, and don't you dare tell anyone about it. "Do what you're told, Sister Rachel. Tow the line, woman."

During dinner, they reviewed their plans for Houston, followed by spring break in Cabo. Rachel sampled. They revived experiences.

~~~OOO~~~

During an oft-postponed dinner with Rachel's new friends, Merle sat hunched at the table, dressed in his expando black pants, swollen black sweater and black leather jacket, and finished yet another harangue.

After dinner, while standing inside a yogurt shop with the couple, Merle, in a theatrical whisper, repeatedly asked Rachel how she would feel if they were driven to the yogurt shop in a Bentley, and he sent his chauffer for the dessert while they waited in the car. Ended his monologue with, "I hate waiting in line. We're too educated for this", then placed his yogurt and coffee order.

"We don't serve coffee," replied the clerk.

"No coffee?" Merle's voice rose. "No coffee? I refuse to eat yogurt at a place that doesn't serve coffee." Left the shop, turned an immediate right, plunked himself into a metal chair on the sidewalk, stood, pulled the chair into a doorway between the yogurt shop and an office building, sat, crossed his right leg over his left, folded his arms, smiled, and glared at the street.

Rachel's friends looked at her. She said nothing, sat calmly with the couple at an indoor table. As if in a foreign country, knowing neither customs nor idioms, Rachel heard echoes of commands from religious texts proscribing female behaviors. Silence fogged the air.

When they finished their yogurt, Rachel said, "I'll meet you two in the car."

~~~OOO~~~

On that dull Wednesday afternoon, Rachel opened the back door, stomped into the kitchen, grabbed a plastic bag, threw together her chicken sandwich for the evening. Their cat, who remained outside as much as possible, circled toward her dish, careful to avoid being grabbed by Merle. Without making eye contact, Merle walked past Rachel, sliced some beef, ladled it into a pita half, spread pats of butter, squirted horseradish, added more butter, microwaved it to a melted state, added jalapeños, and ate. Neither talked. Rachel drove off without a word.

Two hours later, Merle collapsed into his chair. Gray, wet, and slack-eyed, his speech slurred; minutes later, he drove himself to the hospital.

While in the hospital, Merle refused to take his medications, tossed aside the hospital's educational materials. He de

Leavened with Butter...

demanded that Rachel tell no one about his cardiac procedure. Developed rationales to avoid his heart medications, "What if there's an earthquake, and I can't renew my prescription for thirty days." Told his doctor, "I don't want to get addicted to the pills. I know addiction. I saw my grandfather die from alcoholism."

Days later, Merle, for the fourth time, tapped his speed dial. His call went to Rachel's voice mail. "I'm getting out tomorrow. Call me."
During class, Rachel, her barber-cut hair complimented thick shoulders, heavy legs, wide ankles, a waistline that camouflaged any hints of femininity, heard the military march ring tone Merle insisted she install. She shoved back her hair, squinted, shuddered. Walked the walk of an injured middle-linebacker toward her desk, pressed the mute button, returned to her students.

After a solitary dinner, Rachel listened to her voice mail for the first time, "I'm getting out tomorrow. Call me." Angry at Merle for calling, angry with herself for ignoring his earlier calls, she dialed. Felt relief when the call went to voice mail.

As she cleared the table, Rachel saw her future. Plans, friends, and travel subsumed by her life as Merle's personal attendant. He would become even more of a little boy - at his age, akin to senile dementia. She decided to visit Merle in the hospital that evening, endure his blather, then make her announcement.

She stopped at the hospital entrance, then walked through the main hallway to the elevators. Stopped, rehearsed again. Rediscovered a spirit preserved from a past long abandoned. *Now all I have to do is-*

She advanced into the hospital room, looked at Merle, and, for a moment, listened to his recurring bellowing. Cleared her throat, "I'm going to Oregon. I bought the ticket last month. They're non-refundable. You'll need to get your own ride home. Call Vivian." Looked at him, "I'm going now."

Rachel Benson walked straight down the Denver airport concourse. She had not gone to Oregon. Leah ran toward her, hugged her, smiled, then said, "It's all set-up. Our house is ready. We'll like it."

With Vivian, in late afternoon traffic, Merle Rector's memories seared, he pointed to his right, "You know what Rachel said when I was in that hospital?" Told the same story yet again, "That she was going to Oregon instead of bringing me home from the hospital, what could I say?"

Well, what could he say? His wife had said everything any husband needed to know. His life inverted. Further questions would have been redundant. To Merle, it was as unpredicted as he was blameless. The primary cause as hidden as his own culpability.

Thomas Elson

A QUALITY GEM

The popular phrase in my family these days is, "We don't know how much longer Gemmy's going to be around." Gemmy is what we call my 84-year-old grandmother (when we were little my sister and I couldn't pronounce her chosen abbreviation, so GM became "Gem" and then "Gemmy"). What we mean is: We don't know how much longer she's going to remember who we are.

Gemmy is in the early stages of dementia.

Mostly she spends a lot of time asking where everybody is. My mom's older sister and her two sons—ages eight and eleven—live with my grandmother in her apartment, and my mom's younger sister, husband, and their two sons—four-year-old twins—stay across the hall, and my grandmother always wants to know, "Where are the kids?"

"They're at school, Gemmy," I'll tell her. Or they're at a play date, or soccer practice, or on their way home.

She'll nod and return to straightening out their toys. Five minutes later: "Where are the kids?"

She also forgets to eat.

Once, she forgot my name.

A Quality Gem...

She often says, "You know my memory isn't what it…" and trails off, leaving out "used to be" as if to prove her point.

Most of the time I try not to think about it. Getting old scares me, especially because the condition is hereditary. My mother won't talk about it, but my dad told me about when he accompanied her to visit her aging grandmother, and how she didn't know who my mom was, and my mom cried, and my dad felt so helpless. I used to think I'd rather my brain go than my body. What must it be like, trapped in an aging shell with a sharp mind? But now I wonder what it's like to have only holes where memories should be; to search for something that should be there, that once was, but now is fleeting; and, worse, to be aware that your mind can no longer do what it used to be so capable of.

When I was little, I was terrified of my grandfather and felt my grandmother was a slave to his illness and demanding nature: she rushed around their apartment to get him things, brewed funny Chinese medicines in strange teas, and took him to his doctor's appointments and, later, dialysis. She did nothing for herself.

My most salient memory of my childhood time with them is one afternoon, when I was in the backseat of their car, and my grandmother asked me if I wanted ice cream.

Since my grandfather had always met any expression of emotion or excitement with disapproval, if not outright reprimand, I tried to be casual. I shrugged and said, "I don't care."

He swerved to the curb, slammed on the brakes, and turned around in his seat to yell at me. "How dare you say 'I don't care' to your grandmother. How dare you show such disrespect."

My grandmother sat, silent, pressing her lips together and staring into her lap. He returned to driving while tears streamed down my cheeks and I tried to muffle my sobs. Since when was "I don't care" disrespectful? Was this a generational gap? Was it because he was Chinese, and I was only half-Chinese, half-Caucasian and identified more with Judaism than Catholicism? These questions came later. At the time I merely felt I had done something horrible—and somehow hurt my grandmother.

Needless to say, no ice cream. And I felt my grandmother was as much a victim as I.

Then my grandfather died when I was a preteen and I felt like my grandmother got to be her own person, finally. I discovered she had her own sense of style and we had conversations about fashion—about platform shoes! (Forgive us; this was the 90s)—about boys, college, dreams. I realized she had personality, as well as love and wisdom, in plenty.

These days, sometimes it's like my aunts each have three kids instead of two. Occasionally postcards for nursing homes arrive in the mail and we recycle them.

I like to think we're making my grandmother's last years good ones. The kids keep her young, and the rest of us make sure she reads things other than *People* magazine. We pit her cherries, take her to McDonald's for senior coffee with no sugar and three creams, and bring her half a sesame bagel with cream cheese and lox and four large sliced cubes of cantaloupe for breakfast. We know she loves pistachio ice cream, sleeping in late, and framed family photos. We make sure she eats and goes to exercise class and doesn't lie in bed watching "Judge Judy" all day. Though I can understand why she likes it—you can jump in at any point and the drama is fresh and potent.

I lost her once. We stopped at a CVS and I stationed her in the magazine section—usually she stayed put—but when I returned she was gone. Panic rose as I asked people if they'd seen an elderly Chinese lady in a brown sweater set and they shook their heads, their eyes judging. I checked the bathroom, surrounding stores, had the manager page her, berated myself. When I found her, finally—the second time I knocked on the CVS bathroom door she must have heard the panic in my voice, decided to forgo her privacy, and answered—my relief was all-encompassing.

Later, on the phone with my sister, I worried about what would happen if Gemmy died on my watch.

"She probably will," my sister said. "You're the one who takes her out."

Actually, that kind of swift severance is unlikely. I'm losing my grandmother the same way she's losing her mind: slowly.

A friend of mine, whose father died after a long, slow battle in which my friend visited him several days per week, told me, "It doesn't matter how much time you spend with them. When someone you love dies, it will never have been enough."

My relationship with Gemmy now is simple. Once a week, I take her to get her hair washed at Fantastic Sam's—one of her two major extravagances, the other being a fridge well-stocked with See's dark chocolate—and we do lunch. Mostly she asks after my mom and sister and I repeat the same things every few minutes. I talk about my life or ask about hers. She often tells me she never thought she'd end up in LA, but you can't beat the weather.

Sometimes, after lunch, we go out for ice cream.

Taylor Lauren Ross

THE PARABLE OF THE VENGEFUL MAN

Kevin hunched over the keyboard, shirtsleeves rolled past his elbows, squinting at the screen as he typed his final message to those who would soon be former coworkers. A closed door prevented interruption. His personal possessions were packed in a white cardboard box on his desk.

It would not have been wrong to call it his masterpiece. In recent years, he had devoted more attention to the faults of his coworkers than to his duties. Much of his life had been spent with the firm; as his career had stalled, he had become frustrated, and the stress had damaged both his heart and his personal relationships. But he was paid too well to leave, and so he had hoarded his resentment, waiting until it could be released without consequence. Waiting for his last day.

He had, in hours spent brooding over the wreckage of his career, noted phrases and anecdotes that might serve him well. The ambiguous compliment. The kind remark concerning a project better forgotten. The jocular reminder of misadventures that readers, if they paused to consider, would recall his having warned against.

Sweat showed in dark circles under his arms and in beads on his forehead. He scowled and smirked and barked bitter laughter as he composed.

He mentioned names. His supervisor, fifteen years his junior. The Vice President with whom he had shared an office when their careers were only beginning. The founder, long retired and nearly forgotten.

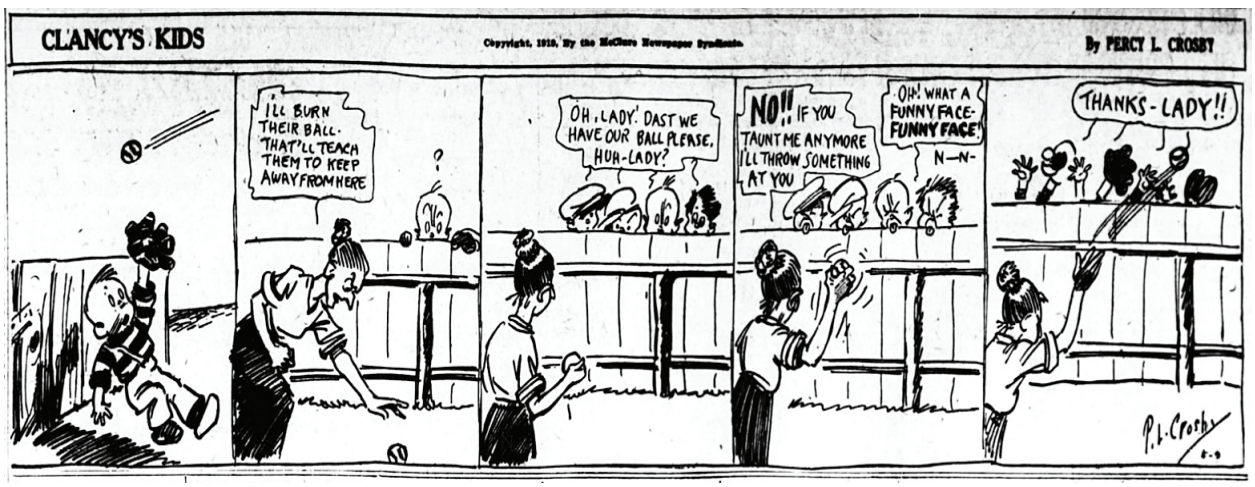
Kevin savored the choice of closing. An ironic thanks? A sneering promise that he would remember them all? Perhaps a simple and, given the message, vicious, "Sincerely."

He never chose. A sudden discomfort in his chest rapidly grew into a sensation of intense pressure, as if someone were standing on his sternum. He recognized another heart attack. He began to stand, but, as he rose, the world dimmed.

He collapsed backward into his chair, unconscious. The chair rolled only inches on the carpeted floor. He was still in it the next day when the janitor found him, dead, his eyes open and his head lolled forward.

Having long been idle, the computer had shut itself down, message unsent. A few days later, the computer was carried away by a technician, and, in accordance with company policy, reformatted to prepare it for the next employee. The message, the masterpiece to which Kevin had unknowingly devoted his final years, was destroyed unseen.

Daniel Wilmoth



BEETHOVEN, LOVED AND LOST

It is during the second show of our town musical, waiting backstage for my solo in my red polyester dress, that I can't ignore it anymore. It hurts, no, breaks my neck to keep my head upright. Shatter—shatter—scream the bones—are there even bones there?

The chorus is on the stage, holding up their construction paper posters over their bonneted and scarved heads, not singing yet, and I hope they don't for a few seconds at least because if they do my head will break. The sophomore girl at the piano is playing the same note over and over. It crashes, collapses into my ears. Shatter—shatter—scream. The chorus begins and—crack of pain, and I think my neck might be ripping itself apart.

I wonder who I should call. Mom, maybe. It hurts to even look at my phone. I squint my eyes shut and call her so she can call 911 for me. I forget my backstage voice and bark into the phone, "Mom. Mom." But she doesn't pick up, and I remember vaguely telling her to shut it off before the show, because I didn't want it to ring in front of all the other moms and little siblings out there.

I move the cold cell phone off of my ear and everything feels over-warm, hot, wrong.

Don. If he's here, my brother will be on his phone, tucked neatly into a balled-up sweatshirt on his lap so that Dad can't see the light off the screen. I tell myself that I have to tell Don.

I am a young Beethoven and a Tennyson too—I have loved and lost my hearing at the age of seventeen. Not lost to poor people's pewter like him, but lost after I had a two-week headache and woke up halfway through with fuzziness in my ears instead of sound. Used to hear. Sounds gone. Screen in front of me. Can't play songs. Just movies, with subtitles.

I watch movies most days. Silent movies, like it's the 1920s. I am stuck a century in the past.

I have not left home since I got back (the ride home silent, oddly bumpy, but quiet. Perfectly quiet.)

Thoughts don't come complete anymore. Don't have to. No one will hear unless I write.

I think I remember the last sound I heard. It was the tapping on the hospital ceiling. I'd grabbed my pillow viciously and prayed it would go away, because whoever was walking above was irritating me with their rhythm. I wondered if they walked loud on purpose to make themselves seem bigger. God, the arrogance.

I want that moment back now. Right now it is painless, but it is also everything-less.

I, unlike Beethoven, cannot imagine notes and pitches inside my head, but my family has suddenly become very musical. I want everyone else to stop. My brother, my twin, smiles at the keyboard while he practices for the first time in probably three weeks. I tell him to stop playing, feeling the air start and stop through my mouth instead of hearing my voice probably over-loud (but I don't care if it is.) He looks at me weird and shakes his head, but he stops. He sits there, looking down at his music. There is no sound to stop, no change in anything I hear.

I walk away. I wonder if he starts playing again. I can't tell if he does or not.

I wish I could hear, and not just feel my feet stamping up the stairs.
My mother comes into my room holding my Algebra II textbook and a pencil, three weeks after the day it all stopped. My mother works for an accountant's office. She hates math. She used to do imitations of her boss and his voice, which sounded like it had been through a deep fryer—greasy, crackly.

I open the math textbook so fast that I rumple the previously clean-cut corners. I scribble on page 122—exercises in exponential functions—and hold it up so that she can see.

Could you get me my guitar.

She sits in the chair in the corner of my room while I sit on the bed, place my hands on my guitar and try to shift from chord to chord. My mother does not even have good pitch, but she will not look at me.

I pluck, harder. She looks away, harder—stares down my stuffed tiger, Stripey, who has been deaf and mute for seven years, since my tenth birthday, when I stopped singing Mary Poppins duets with him.

Stripey knows what it's like, I think. He's getting older, dustier, limper. More invisible. His voice suddenly shut up, just like my singing.

I can't tell what I'm playing. I feel the slight rumble of the guitar against my stomach but it's useless because I can't tell. I can't hear.

"Damn it!" I yell, enunciating the "n" carefully, projecting it clearly. I think I yell, at least. I feel myself talking again, just a buzzing feeling somewhere in my face.

I rip the strap off of my shoulder.

It would have been better if I had been born with this, I think. I wouldn't have known anything different.

Madeleine Joung

It's Time For Silent Movies



Thrift

Flowers that dream in a seascape;
an inquisitive stillness when the curious

gaze at starlight, completed characters
glimmering in a focus of sky, notes at mid-night

sprinkled like comet's dust
falling spectral on a sea-pink face,

thriving exhibits on a peninsula's menu of cliffs,
heathland, dunes and salt-marsh blending.

Air, the earth's marquee,
the moving shadow of the water's eye.

Byron Beynon

Separate Song

Four a.m. again, and you're
bursting into beautiful melody.
Chirping cheerily from the gutter,
awake, and not tired, yet
sometimes I wish you'd shut up.
Misty glass separates joy and sorrow
the cruellest division made possible.
Lying restless on the guilty mattress,
admiring spiders in dark corners,
lengthening shadows on damp walls.
Light creeps stealthily under the curtains
fingers of a forlorn hope, so uncertain.
One morning you will quietly vanish,
never to return to an empty home.
Perhaps one day fledglings will arrive
but I'll be gone, nothing can survive.

Tim Gardiner

Visit to Fern Hill

I walked there,
following the road
three miles or so
out of Llansteffan's reach.
That unhurried summer
the tranquil Tywi flowed
through high August country
as the abundant sun made salt,
soon the river disappeared from view,
I was alone
before a private house,
where amongst the dark
conifers and lattice of dizzy pylons
a childhood world
was one recalled.

His words of celebration and praise
brought me here,
a boyhood recreated
unaware that innocence
would end;
outside that day
a sign warned
Beware Guard Dogs
In Operation,
presented no clue
to his untethered wordscape
where a green fraction of fern
was placed on the mindful page,
an abiding calligraphy,
nature's reading
by the filigree of strong leaves.

Byron Beynon

Robin Had No Speed Limit

You needed to see him
in concert with a group
to tell each other later
what was so funny
your ears couldn't keep up
your mind couldn't keep up
your breath couldn't keep up
your laughter couldn't keep up
his wit bypassed all barriers
and went right to the place
that makes you feel joy
(I hope you feel joy, Robin)
he was so far ahead
he was alone
so he took on speed for
companionship and competition
but even speed couldn't keep up
he went too fast.

Michael Mark

The Purpose of a Flower

is not to attract a bee
or praise,

or decorate the bride,

or say what words
can't.

As it is,
in its own seed,
beneath the dirt,
about to bloom,
after its petals fall,
leaving the vase empty -

remembering.

Michael Mark

Grumpy April Morning

Go back!

I have no
response to your
warmth, your
nearly bursting buds,
hundred-legged crawlies.

Can't you quiet the birds?

My words have
turned dormant in your
joy.

Michael Mark

Blind George

old george is blind and he walks north
on passyunk avenue not counting his steps,
just brailing the sidewalk with his feet.
he's got years in on this job, he hears his foottaps echo
off the glass of mr. martino's restaurant,
he feels the breezy emptiness
of the city parking lot, the tilt of its driveway.
george doesn't need your arm, your hand,
your eyes, your sense of being blessed,
but he takes them all anyway
lending you his senses, proferring
the feel of his dry warm hand
turning, flexing a nostril by gary's deli
purring 'good dog' at the sound of
a shaking tag. he has so much to show you,
and there are not so many blocks,
don't you see?

Lynn Hoffman

Unreachable

Do we assign human traits to animals and wax rhapsodic about the miracles of nature because somewhere deep within ourselves we remember when the world was unformed and lonely…

When I touch the foot of the ancient cedar
Grown majestically wide and tall
I'm touching the sapling that sprouted
The day my great, great, great grandfather was born

Yet I can't reach,
nor ever touch
its topmost branch
that began to grow this morning

The tree's old spirit has a lesson for me:
I'll always be connected to the past
But I can never reach the future
And that's how it should be

I've been charged by my Maker
to work as a faithful steward
of tomorrow's promise
While never seeing the fruits of that labor

Yesterday is my story
Today will always be my last day
I'll never stand in the shade of the someday tall tree
That has sprouted at my feet this morning

Jackie Maugh Robinson





Night Escape

dreams forgotten
play out truth moments
unchronicled
lost to consciousness
joining parting

Lasers of day light
pry under lids
to burn away the residue
of insight and night escape
All that's left are
ashes of darkness
borne on the outsighing
of waking breath
Tunnel vision filters white
light that would otherwise
prism every knowing color
A sudden flash reflects
sun off the windows
of a coroner's van
In a negative image
too brief to register
déjà vu riddles...
dream or truth?

long late shadows
wrap inigma
in blind amnesia

Jackie Maugh Robinson

Haying

Sometimes my mind will wander back
To those not so distant early years
And recall so many things
Full of work, play, happiness and tears.

Sometimes when August heat is blazing
And the heat seems to be almost white
And not a breath of air is stirring
My mind will recall in brief respite.

It is then I sometimes think of haying
Just what does that word mean
But certainly to someone who doesn't know
They will hold it in no esteem.

I still remember rich lush clover
As it fell beneath the mower blade
Tall green foliage no longer undulating
As on the ground it was laid.

Days later, as it began to dry
Wind-rows would begin to snake
As if by magic they would appear
Behind the tractor and rake.

Then hear the rumble of the baler
As it slurped the hay inside
To be pounded into long square bales
Then with two strings it was tied.

Then came the trucks and wagons
And across the field to sweep
Picking up each and every bale
As if to keep the field clean and neat.

How I loved to haul it in
For that was my favorite part
And I always think of it fondly
As I remember it in my heart.

From the ground to pick them up
With fingers soon red and sore
Then throw them to the very top
And immediately reach for one more.

The dust that covered the body
Which with rivulets of sweat did streak
Hauling hay was for the strong
Certainly not a job for the weak.

Skin long browned by the summer sun
Glistened like bronze in sunshine bright
For although the work was hard and heavy
It's never hard when the heart is light.

And a long cool drink of water
As your back you begin to arch
Drinking deeply from a gallon jug
To wet a throat, dry and parched.

And the table that seemed to groan
From the weight of the food it bore
While ravenous appetites ate and ate
And then they ate some more.

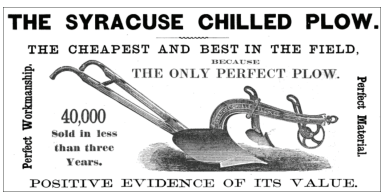
Hands and arms that burned like fire
From the cuts given by the stubble
As exhaustion captured the body
And bathing seemed to be too much trouble.

Sleep at night sometimes fitful
As tired muscles twitched and ached
But the fatigue of all the body
Would not allow you to lie awake.

So why then, did I enjoy it
What would seem a thankless task?
And I have, on many occasions
Myself this same question asked.

And my one and only conclusion
Is against myself I did compete
A test of both strength and endurance
Which for some reason I had to meet.

Bill Melton



Plain Rides

Big metal cutting through the air
The lion of the sky
I am impenetrable in its womb
I soar
Palm to hard Plexiglas
Floating through the atmosphere

When I was little I would stare at the sky
In a way I don't now,
Fuck, I miss the little things

I would lie on my trampoline
And wave at all the passengers on the plane
Knowing at least one would see me

I would change their life

They'd remember this girl on the trampoline
Trying to bounce ever closer to the big blue
They'd come rescue me from this place
They would uproot me
An unsatisfied weed waiting to bloom

Now here I am way up here
As the pressure builds and my ears pop in my skull

The person in front of me leaning their seat back another inch
Me pushing back rudely
Everyone knows you shouldn't put the seat down
That two-inch luxury is reserved for first class

As I sip my nine dollar mini bottle of wine
Stilling the stress of playing God
Looking down at all the houses
Brown hats, beige bodies
Growing grey legs and arms
Stretched out all over the Earth
Square patches for plotted food
Cars like beetles I could squash
It didn't seem real
I used to want this, to fly away

But there is no more appeal to being up so high
I cannot breathe
I cannot move
I cannot even touch the sky

Nicole Hampton

GOODBYE TO GALAXY GIRL

My Dearest Laura,

It kills me to have to write this letter, but I feel like I'm out of options. We've had an incredible decade together, full of laughs and love. We've traveled the world, and seen things most people have never seen. And every time I look into our children's eyes, my heart grows twice in size. Just like their favorite bedtime story. But our communication has completely fallen apart.

When I proposed to "Galaxy Girl" that dewy April evening so many years ago, I was too young and arrogant to see the heartbreak we would go through together. I was blinded by the midnight missions, and the Sunday picnics into the stratosphere.

Back then, I knew no one could love you more than I could, and our relationship felt so important, you know? I think you can admit now how much you, as a burgeoning superhero, needed a rock to lean. I was ecstatic to be the one you chose for the job. It's a decision I would make all over again. But lately, Laura…

Lately, you have just not been here at all, mentally or physically. I understand the importance of your work, but our home life is just as important to me and the kids. When you disappear for hours or days, they're confused. They'll be old enough to understand one day, and when that day comes we can discuss it as a family. We explain why things happened the way they did. But until then, the only thing they understand is they don't have a full-time mommy.

I have tried to discuss my feelings with you in person, but something always comes up. If it's not evil scientists concocting mind-control potions or Zanos attacking downtown again, it's your mother seeking revenge for you foiling her world domination plans last summer. At the end of the day, the layoffs at my accounting firm or our kids' Track Day

Goodbye to Galaxy Girl...

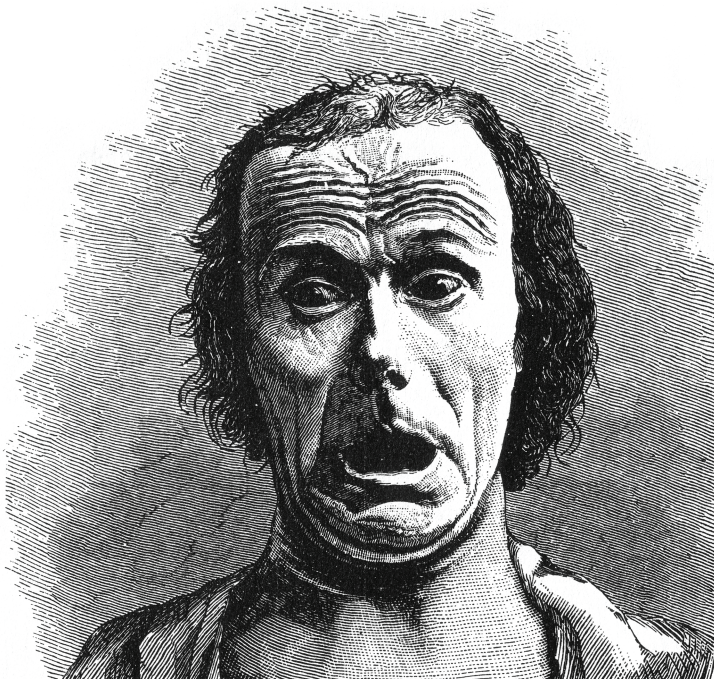
will never capture your attention like an industrial fire will. I can understand and accept it, but I'm unable to live with it anymore. This doesn't mean I don't love you, Laura. And it doesn't mean I don't need you. It simply means the world needs you more.

With Love,

Stan

P.S. I'm at my brother's with the kids. Movers will be by next week for the rest of my things. Please don't do the thing you always do and fly it over here. It's emasculating.

Stephen Reynolds



TRAIN PLATFORM BESTIARY

There's Sad Mister Ponytail. Hairline beating a middle-aged retreat in front, sorry graying squiggle in the back. Every day, in all weathers, he wears a leather vest and cowboy boots for the trip downtown. What kind of job might he have?

Miss Pink Pen Sudoku occupies the station's sole bench, her feet neatly side-by-side. Once aboard the train, she will pull out pen and puzzle as soon as she is situated in her seat. The pensive manner in which she bites her bottom lip can appear quite fetching if one is in the right mood.

Already on the train, having boarded a stop earlier, is Flippy the Newspaper Man. If one has no choice but to sit next to him, be prepared for a continually intruding elbow in your personal space as he opens, crinkles, creases, flips, folds, and reads, then repeats the actions for each newspaper page.

Miss Bubonic Plague 1956 wears her silver hair in a blunt helmet cut. She's the first to shush any occasional rider who unknowingly speaks in the Quiet Ride car, but will often regale her fellow passengers afterward with loud coughing jags that have been timed for as long as nine minutes.

But the one I worry about most is the tall melancholic fellow who each day averts his eyes as the train (which is an express) rushes past the station where you told him your last big lie. What name, I wonder, should we give to him?

James Morris

ILLUSIONS

He never faced me; it was like he was afraid of looking in to my eyes. In my office, I had a mirror along one wall, and he used to stand there, facing the mirror, and look at my reflection. I got used to it.

I suppose we would've looked very odd, talking to each other's reflections. But somehow it didn't feel strange. By the time he trusted me, it had become a habit. At one point, I moved my desk closer to the mirror, so that I could write while I talked to him – or rather, talked to the image of him.

He was a gentle man, and rarely spoke unless I asked him a question. He would sometimes turn his head and gaze out of the window for ten minutes or so. When I first knew him, I tried to repeat whatever question I had asked. Later, I learned to let him gaze; he would come back and talk when he was ready. He always gave me the impression of being on the verge of tears, but he never cried. The only time I saw a single tear escape him was when it was too late.

I've had many men stand in my office and tell me they're innocent, over the years. Some I believe, some I don't. It doesn't matter, really. It didn't take me long to work out that my job consisted much more of telling stories about the guilty than truths about the innocent. But somehow I believed this one. It was his manner, his softness. Men who have committed a crime either sit there and take what the system deals to them, because they know they deserve it, or protest loudly and brutally. He didn't do either of those. He was quiet and mild, but firmly attested that he had not done anything wrong.

Like most of my clients, he was assigned to me, rather than seeking me out. We met at the police station, inside his cell where there was no mirror to guide us. When I first walked in, he turned away from me and muttered that he didn't want a lawyer, that he had loved Sadie, and that he was innocent. I asked him to sit down, and he shook his head, still facing away. I knew then that it was going to be a difficult case. Bail was set at some ridiculous amount – over a million, if I remember correctly – but someone paid it. He was rich and handsome. Not particularly charismatic, but in other circumstances I may have found him charming.

Over the following weeks, I sat in front of the mirror in my office and gained his trust. I wish I hadn't.

He was affronted when I suggested an insanity plea.

"I'm not mad," he said, looking horrified. I explained that it was just a plea, a way out, and much easier to work with than simply "not guilty". Half an hour later, he was still flatly refusing, insisting that he wasn't insane. I gave up. His breakup with Sadie was painful and far too coincidental; there were no other suspects for a murder. I'm not a cop. My job isn't necessarily to find the right answer; it's just to find another answer. Suicide was the only thing left, so that's the story I worked with. But gradually, I began to believe it.

He spoke to me, through that mirror, day in and day out for months. I asked the questions I needed to know and he gave me the answers he wanted me to have. He preferred to talk about his life with Sadie and his love for her, rather than her death. How could a man who loved like that be guilty of such a heinous crime? He couldn't.

Court cases always take much longer than people believe. And falling in love always takes less time than people believe. So when he laid his hand on my shoulder for the first time, in thanks, I was surprised to feel a tingle down my spine and the settling of my stomach. I told myself that he was a client and a possible criminal. I told myself that it was impossible to fall for someone who you only spoke business with. I told myself it was impossible to fall for someone whose face you had never looked directly into.

Many weeks later, his lips brushed mine. He was leaving my office and I held out a hand for him to shake, watching in the mirror as though we were characters in a film. I was outside my body, just observing, as the man's face bent toward the woman's and she held her breath.

Weeks later still, I kissed him properly. I was in a bar down the road, one I frequented after work. It was jazz night. I saw the back of his head leaning over a drink and I cautiously skimmed my fingers across his shoulders as I sat down beside him. Automatically, we both looked at the shiny metal of the bar taps and smiled at each other's distorted face. I didn't try to look at him. This was our thing, what made us special. *One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)* was playing in the background and I laughed as I tasted his lips fully. Grape juice. The man wasn't even drinking a beer.

And then there was that night… that Wednesday night in November, when I watched in my bedroom mirror as he undressed me. It was exhilarating. I woke up on Thursday with the mirror still in front of me, and the warmth of his body heat still clinging to mine. He had left.

At two o' clock in the afternoon, he walked into my office with his head down, and glanced at the mirror. I looked at it too, our mutual security blanket, and saw his eyes flicker from side to side.
Illusions...

"Don't worry about tomorrow. We'll be fine," I reassured him.

He struggled to say anything, and paced the room. Every now and again he would look at the mirror and reach toward me, then think better of it. I tried to calm him, but he barely heard a word I spoke as he paced frantically. Finally he forced the words out.

"I loved her," he said, desperately.
"I understand," I said, again, trying to calm him.
"That's why I had to kill her."

I looked up, to the image of him staring at me in the mirror, chest heaving, eyes flickering in agitation.

"What?"
"I had to, I had to do it," he repeated. His hand closed over mine.
"She needed to die."

He had moved behind me, crushing me to his chest, and his breath was warm as it flowed over my neck and chin. It was the breath I recognized, breath that belonged to a sweet and gentle man. It was sexy breath, breath filled with warmth and laughter and passion – and somewhere in there, madness.

I pulled back, and turned away from the mirror to face him. There was so much I hadn't seen. At the corners of his smile – revenge. Just behind his ear – darkness. And there – there it was, clinging to his eyelashes. Madness. The face I was now seeing for the first time was the face of a madman.

"No," I managed, stumbling backwards. I needed to get out of this room, away from this man who I'd never met before. What if he killed me, too?

"I won't hurt you, baby," he murmured, that first tear trickling down his cheek. He laid a hand on my arm and I flinched. I'd felt his touch so many times before. But every embrace and every kiss and that night – it had all been an illusion. I'd had a relationship with somebody's reflection, somebody I don't even know.

"We go to court tomorrow," I said, refusing to look into his face. I glanced at the mirror. It was so easy, to fall back into this habit. I could converse with a murderer through the safety of a looking glass. I could smile and laugh and fall in love as long as I had the illusion I so desperately needed.

"I'll see you then," I whispered, watching myself plant a kiss on his cheek and walk out.

I couldn't sleep. Only last night I had lain in this same bed and fallen asleep curled into a man who I now knew had killed Sadie Edgecombe. I was supposed to walk into court in the morning and convince a jury that it had been suicide.

I was plagued by memories. The feel of his breath on my neck. The smell of grape juice and spearmint tic-tacs. The mirror showing him bite his pinky finger as he tried not to smile. The photographs of Sadie's body.

When you're a defense lawyer, you build entire relationships on crimes that people might have committed. When you stop being a lawyer and become a person, those crimes break down entire relationships you have built on trust or love or other inadequacies of human judgement. I could defend hundreds of guilty men, and win without a second thought, but I had believed him to be innocent – and that made all the difference.

The dawn broke silently, birds fighting for the first food somewhere else today. The clouds were soft and swept over the horizon a few steps behind the night, leaving a clear and sunny day. It felt wrong; it was the kind of day reserved for a wedding, undeserving of the most difficult court date of my career. My sheets were twisted and sweaty from a night of apprehension. I forced myself to get dressed.

"My client," I began, with every intention of finishing him. But I stopped. Flashing in the judge's glasses was me. Except it wasn't me, it was just an image, an illusion, a reflection. There was no revenge at the corner of my smile, or darkness behind my ear or madness clinging to my eyelashes. Yet I knew all those features were there. It was just that this image didn't reveal it.

I looked past the glasses, into the judge's face. It was the face of a human, just like mine. Just like the face of the man sitting behind me. It had madness caught on the eyelashes. It had wisdom caught in the lines, and beauty caught in the pupils. It had life caught in it.
"My client," I began again, "Is not a killer."

The judge looked at me, expectantly. I turned to the jury and said what I'd known all along.

"He's just like you and me."

Gabrielle Reid

LEVIATHAN

I've never flown before. Although I told her that I have once, when I was younger. I didn't know what to expect outside of things I've seen in movies: drink carts, long-legged stewardesses, a grainy inflight showing of an Adam Sandler film. I wondered about all of this as we killed time at the airport bar, waiting for our flight to allow boarding.

I pushed around the leaves of a salad and absently studied a man in a suit while he placed his briefcase on the floor before bending over to tie his shoe. My girlfriend – fiancée, was concentrating on her phone as she finished off her second Bloody Mary. She seemed happy; the veins in her ruddy cheeks were broken, and whatever she had been reading caused her to chuckle lightly. I took another sip of my own beer before offering her what was left out of the half-finished glass. She asked me if I was sure, said that it would help calm my nerves, but I shook my head and told her I was fine.

"I'm fine," I said. My leg bounced anxiously beneath the table as I tore a napkin into pieces, scattered it, put it back together like a jigsaw puzzle.

"You're going to love Arizona," she told me before listing off all the different reasons why I'll love Arizona. "Just imagine – no more Chicago winters," she almost sighed in relief before resigning, once again, to her phone.

I reminded her that I enjoyed Chicago winters – or just weather in general. I was mumbling. She placed her phone on the table and smiled at me before taking a long, slow drink of the beer; she grabbed my hand gently and stroked it with her fingers. Her eyes were dark and appeared soothing amidst the frantic bustle of the airport.

When the beer was finished, I flagged down the girl working the bar and paid the check before we took our seats over by the gate. I glanced at my ticket and then looked around. Most of the other seats were vacant as it was still pretty early, and I watched from the window as plane after plane landed and emptied. Workers, buried from the cold in thick neon coats, rushed about dragging hoses, driving carts around the runway. Some scurried to refuel while others heaved suitcases and bags on top of conveyor belts. One of them kept on tossing luggage behind him without looking. He must have missed three, four bags, and I considered those bags as the passengers boarded. Eventually, the massive tires began to churn and pick up speed. The window rattled faintly as the plane trundled from the ground and disappeared into the crisp, full sky. Beside me, my fiancée was nodding off. Her breathing grew heavy and she slumped in her seat.

Feeling queasy, I turned away from the window and stared at a spot on the carpet. I cupped my hands over my kneecaps and held them there. Slowly, the empty seats began to fill as people trickled over to the gate. I glanced at my watch and adjusted it upon my wrist. My fiancée, whose head rested on my shoulder while she napped, stirred and stroked my forearm. I saw her neatly kept nails, the smooth cuticles. I kissed the top of her head and gently stood up; she mumbled in protest and blindly swiped at a few errant strands of hair from her sweating forehead. I removed my sweatshirt and bunched it under her like a pillow and made my way over to the bathroom, stopping once or twice to observe new and unrelated cancellations or delays posted next to some flight times.

On my way back, I was searching a vending machine when I noticed this couple, this man and a younger woman, sitting closely together on the floor. They didn't appear as though they belonged together, though the printed tickets gathered between them suggested they were on the same flight; I saw the flight number and vaguely remembered it being one of those that had been cancelled, maybe.

The man was thirty something and somewhat chubby. His hair was thin and brown, and on his face was a friendly, exhausted expression. But when he smiled at the woman he did so with his eyes as well as his mouth. I took my time deliberating between Sun Chips or Reece's Cups, staring sideways at the two of them over on the floor. The guy was fidgeting with his wedding ring when he looked nervously toward the woman. I noticed that she wasn't wearing a ring before deciding on M&M's. He said something and she laughed. The woman, who was somewhat younger than him, was attractive and lean. She threw her hair back and exposed the deep grooves of her collar bones; he mimicked the movement of her head with his own. A jacket that she had drawn over her legs like a blanket slipped over onto the floor and her knees bent together. She leaned forward, covered her teeth with a hand, and laughed harder. I punched in the code for the M&M's, but wasn't paying attention and mistyped.

That was when I saw him slip the ring into the pocket of his slacks.

The vending machine groaned before releasing a bag of sunflower seeds. I reached down into the tray and pulled out my bag. I tore open the packaging and stuffed a few seeds in my mouth when the two on the floor seemed to come to some kind of an agreement. The man stood and stretched out his hand before helping her to her feet. Then, two of them went off together before disappearing through the rushing knots of travelers. I stood staring dumbly in the direction they went off

Leviathan...

in and ate some more seeds – spitting the spent shells into a trashcan nearby.

It was nearly time to board when I returned to where my fiancée was sitting over by the gate. Now, the seats were almost completely filled, and there was a bristle of conversations crossing over one another in the excited lobby. I shook my fiancée awake. She looked up at me and smiled, stretching. I looked around the place and started to sort of work my thumb in its socket till there was a slight popping – a nervous habit. My fiancée noticed and grabbed my hand. She whispered something to me that I couldn't make out over the growing buzz, so I smiled and she kissed my fingers.

We gathered our carry-ons and prepared to walk over to the standing line. I patted my back pocket to check for my wallet. I went over our things two or three times to make sure it was all there. Then, we walked together over to the little podium by the gate.

We were first in line for boarding. I had insisted on paying extra so our positions in line got bumped up, that we could sit together and choose exactly where to sit. Once on the plane, I struggled fitting my carry-on within the overhead compartment, and took my seat by the window just overlooking the wing. One by one, my eyes groped every passenger that walked in in search for some kind of vague threat. When everybody was settled in, the pilot introduced himself and the crew. Then the attendants gave a quick demonstration of the different safety measures: how to fasten a seatbelt, that your cushion doubles as a floatation device, to secure your own mask first before helping others.

A sudden tenseness seized my chest as I watched the attendants fix the masks to their faces and flourish their hands as if they were hosting an infomercial. I saw my fiancée look at me sympathetically.

I gave her a weak look.

"I'm not nervous," I said, but she knew.

I turned towards the window. A light snow was dusting the tarmac. At once there was a great start, and the plane jerked forward. The wings began a crazed twitching of panels and I watched wildly as the strips of yellow paint marking the runway started to pass by faster, faster. Just then the engines flared. A violent, vacuous howling split the cabin and I was cemented into my seat. My hand clawed at the arm rest as the aisle appeared to lengthen and stretch. I fumbled with the safety belt, shaking, pulling it tighter and tighter against my waist until it grew difficult to breathe. I drew in a sharp breath and worked on the buckle. A small soft hand, unashamed, embraced my own sweating fingers as the plane, great leviathan, tore away from the ground, and what little I knew of Earth disappeared behind me at increasingly distant lengths.

P.J. McCain

CATCH MATCH. COM

Maybe I should have worn the blue top instead of the black. It shows off my purple rose tattoo. Hmmm, too late now. Hope I put enough deodorant on. Oh well, the Shalimar should diffuse any odor. Six minutes to seven. Why did I get here so early? This mirror is so damn small I can hardly see my eyeliner. And my eyes are so itchy, but I can't rub. Did I bring liner with me? Yeah, here it is. Yes, that's better. And my hair-- oh god, it's frizzed already. Was my mother's hair this frizzy? Can't remember. Died so long ago. Yes, I think it was. Must have come from a long line of Hasidic. Anyway, it look's better like this—pinned up with this butterfly clip I picked up in Macys. Imagine— sixteen dollars for a hair clip? Good thing I had a coupon.

Oh, I just can't believe I'm actually doing this—again! Though it's been over a year. A year on that loser site: *CATCH MATCH*. I think I've been on them all. Anyway, he did sound nice on the phone. Although he didn't ask any questions. Talked mostly about himself. What was his name again? *Motor59*. What the hell does that mean? Oh shit, I've got a chipped nail. Just did them this afternoon and didn't bring the polish with me. Look at this—my hands are shaking. Calm down, girl. It's only a freakin' blind date. Probably a big bore. That's how it usually goes. "Oh, how long were you married? Any children? Two--boys and a girl, how nice." And then a pause. "Oh, by the way, I'm divorced too—with twin girls in college." And I wait. Aren't you going to ask something—anything? Don't you want to know about my divorce, how my beloved almost killed me, trying to strangle me with his tie? How I had a breakdown and walked around

on Valium and Prosac for almost six months? Oh, you don't really need that much information? Want to know if it's going to rain tomorrow or if I saw the new cell phone ad from Verizon? Oh, stop it now! You don't really know how it's going to go…always the pessimist. *Calamity Jane!* Yeah, that's what my grandma always called me. Should I let him pay for dinner? No, not on the first date. Pay for it myself—like a woman who takes out the garbage, fixes the stopped up toilet, even kills the bugs.

Oh shit, I think I've got an eyelash in my eye. I can't see anything in this damn mirror. It's five after seven. If I go to the ladies room, I'll probably miss him coming in. Just keep blinking. There, I think it's gone. Can't rub because I'll smudge my liner. Well, 7:15. Looks like he's not the punctual type. Well, that's good, probably means he's an Aries or Sagittarius. They're sort of free-spirited. Not like that Taurus I was married to. Used to check the garbage just to see if I threw away something that might, god forbid, still be good—like an old sock with only one hole, a milk container with one gulp. Oh, here comes the waiter. Hmmm, not bad looking. A bit on the young side, though.

"Yes, I will have another drink, thank you. The same and no ice, please." Why do they always put ice in when you say no ice? Well, it's almost 7:25. Maybe he forgot, but we just spoke this morning, said he couldn't wait to meet me. Guess I'll wait until 7:40 before I admit I've been stood up on a blind date. I suppose that's not the worst—not like he knew me and then didn't come.

Oh wait, someone's coming in. Well, if that's him he's certainly not six foot. More like five foot six. A little on the paunchy side too, but he does have dirty blonde hair. And that sweater. I don't believe it—emerald green. What the f— it's not St. Patty's day is it? Look at the jeans—charcoal gray and white sneakers. Oh god, he's coming over.

"Hi, are you Jeanette—you know from Catch Match?"

"Oh, no, you must be mistaken. My name's Carol and I've never been on Catch Match."

"Really, you sort of look like her but pictures can be deceiving."

"Yes, definitely so. Well, I was just leaving. Hope you find who you're looking for."

Looking puzzled, he waves.

Whew, am I glad to get the hell outta there. Maybe I can catch a movie I haven't seen yet on one of the 300+ cable channels. Maybe I can bring this stupid clip back if I can find the receipt. Shit, I never paid the check. *Oh well, Mr. Motor59, thanks for the drinks.*

Gloria g. Murray

AFTER SWIMMING PRACTICE

Jill Morgenstern stared at the catchment pond full of dark brown runoff from the streets, a pond that the neighborhood kids called Peat's Moss. She was observing a family of mallard ducks paddling serenely on its surface. Peat's Moss filled up during the rainy season, and it also grew dense with aquatic grasses and reeds that somehow thrived in the ethyl gasoline and spent motor oil-contaminated waters. Jill sat on a concrete platform at the edge of the depression that surrounded the catchment pond, beside a sagging chain-link fence full of holes that boys used to gain access to the steep clay walls of the depression. They would burrow into the clay, hollowing out shallow cave "forts." Jill had been told that the year before one of the "forts" had collapsed and buried a kid named Keith, who was dead by the time emergency rescuers got to him.

Jill was twelve-and-a-half, and had been on a swim team that practiced at the community pool across the street from the pond for almost five years. She wore a blue baseball cap and had a bright sunburned nose. Her tawny skin and wet, curly hair smelled like chlorine and cocoa butter. She was waiting for her mom to pick her up after practice. Her mom was always running late. Jill popped a wintergreen lifesaver in her mouth from a shiny roll that one of the coaches had given her

as a reward for an outstanding effort in the pool that afternoon. She had eaten a sardine and tomato sandwich for lunch, and was hoping the lifesaver would hide her sardine breath if any of the boys on the swim team stopped to talk with her.

The ducks were having a good time in the water. Eating, floating and quacking. She was always meaning to bring them bread crusts, but it would slip her mind by the time she got home from swimming and into her nightly routine. Back at the house there was dinner and homework and writing in her diary and TV and bed. No time to think of ducks or bread crusts. She would be half-asleep when she left the house in the morning for swimming practice, school, and more practice. She figured she spent as much time in the water as the ducks. Could have saved the crusts from her sardine sandwich, but she was always ravenous by lunchtime.

None of the boys from swimming came by and spoke to her as she sat watching the ducks and waiting for her mom, but one of her schoolmates, Sisa Dizon, crossed the street and said hi. Sisa only swam once a day. She was with the afterschool team, and wasn't all that serious about swimming. She was a Science Kid, a kid who made explosives with her chemistry set and had shelves of starfish and frogs and pig fetuses in jars of formaldehyde for dissection; who owned a microscope and telescope and spinthariscope and had made a homemade Geiger counter that would absolutely freak-out in the presence of anybody's radium dial watch. Sisa was the only female Science Kid in their school, and her gender, in 1966, meant that most of the teachers refused to acknowledge her aptitude for research and analysis and empirical reasoning and explosions. It was always some random boy, not Sisa, who was allowed to take the class hamster home for the holidays, and who got to wash out the test tubes after science class and pass out the slide rules during math, even though Sisa had been using a slide rule since she was six and had raised the class hamster from the time it was born until her mother made her get rid of it.

"Hey Jill."
"Hey Sisa."
"Waitin' for your mom?"
"Yeah. You?"
"My brother. Man, I'm so hungry I'm gonna scarf when I get home."
"Me too. Which of your brothers is picking you up?"
"Ray."
"Oh man, he's cute."
"Couldn't say. He's my *brother*."

Jill was tall and thin and awkward out of the water, and her tangled hair and oversized baseball cap and large, thick glasses made her look like a stereotypical Science Kid herself. None of the boys on the swim team ever talked to her.

Her mom showed up before Sisa's brother did.

"Jill, ask your mom if you can come over. Ray'll drive you home in a little while."
"Mom, can I go over to Sisa's?" Jill asked.
"For how long?"
"For jus' like an hour. Please?"
"Okay, but if you're not home in an hour I'm coming to get you."
"Okay. Her brother'll be here in just a second."

Jill hadn't been to Sisa's in a while. Her house was in a new development just south of the one where Jill lived in far east El Paso. The place had shag carpeting in all the rooms and Danish Modern furniture and a huge color TV. Sisa's room was like a museum. Every surface was stacked with bottled animal specimens and paw print casts and textbooks and fossils. She had a closet full of chemicals and lab equipment. Most of the kids Jill knew had posters of the Beatles or Elvis or Herman's Hermits on their bedroom walls. Sisa had pictures of John Glenn and Miss Baker, the first monkey in space (who survived the trip). She was one of those kids who actually believed that astronauts would one day walk on the moon.

Sisa's mom and dad weren't home, and her brother was outside working on his '62 Tempest. Sisa made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for herself and Jill, along with a bowl of popcorn and two large glasses of orange juice. They ate in front of the TV, watching an episode of *Bewitched*. Jill thought of saving her crusts for the ducks, but was too embarrassed to put them in her satchel in front of Sisa. When they were done eating, Sisa dumped their dishes in the sink and asked Jill if she wanted to do a volcano.

"Sure. But I gotta get home pretty soon."

Sisa fetched a can filled with homemade "volcano powder" out of her closet. Potassium permanganate, sulfur and iron filings. She took Jill outside and poured a small mound of powder on the flat edge of a brick barbeque pit. It was almost dark. She lit a sparkler on the stove and carefully carried it outside, using it to ignite the mixture. It took forever to catch, but when it did the pile emitted bright orange and yellow flames and a shower of golden sparks, ending with a lot of white smoke. It lasted for only a moment. The two girls danced around it, their faces illuminated by the fitful blaze. After the flames died down the "volcano powder" residue that was left on the bricks glowed livid red.

After Swimming Practice...

Sisa went back to her room to fetch an oily chemical enclosed in a glass capsule that would bubble when it was heated up, and eventually explode. By the time she found it and brought it out the powder was no longer red. Figuring it was still hot, she laid the glass capsule filled with amber liquid on top of the ashes of the dead "volcano." The capsule stayed inert. The oily liquid inside didn't boil or explode.

Sisa started telling Jill about excitonics, a new field of science that was going to have a ton of applications with regard to the space program. Jill wasn't really listening. She was wondering to herself what the hell Samantha saw in Darrin. She couldn't figure out why Samantha didn't just dump him and conjure up a perfect husband instead.

"I'm gonna get us some Cokes out of the 'fridge," Sisa said.

While Sisa was getting the Cokes Jill began idly burying the capsule that still sat on the spot of the former "volcano," pushing the hot powder on top of it with a stick. Even with her thick glasses, Jill's eyes were terrible. She leaned over to study her work. Sisa returned just as the capsule burst. Jill's face was only a couple of feet from the blast, but the "explosion" turned out to be more like a pop. Jill was startled by it, and jumped backward, nearly losing her footing. Tiny fragments of lightbulb-thin glass flew in every direction. Sisa dropped the Cokes and ran to Jill. She looked at her face, holding it steady with her hands. Jill had a couple of tiny cuts on her chin that stopped bleeding almost immediately, and she sneezed violently for a few seconds. Sisa wet a paper towel and carefully wiped Jill's face, removing the tiny fragments of glass and any chemical residue that was left.

"You okay?"

Jill shrugged her shoulders. "Guess it works." She was actually quite pleased she had caused an explosion. It felt like a Science Kid initiation. "That was neat."

Sisa went to get the Cokes she had dropped on the grassy lawn.

"Sure you're okay?" she asked again.
"Yeah. I'm fine."

Sisa put down the Cokes and the bottle opener on the edge of the barbeque pit and wrapped her arms around Jill. The phone was ringing inside the house. It was probably Jill's mom.

"Girl, don't scare me like that. What'd I do if something happened to you? Hey, all I've got to say is: thank God you were wearin' those big glasses of yours."

She opened a Coke with the bottle opener. Foam sprayed out like an eruption.

Charles Haddox

CAUTION: FALLING MICE

Richard Lyons was rich.

He lived in an affluent Chicago suburb and was neighbors with other affluents who tasted craft beer on weekends. Some even brewed it. He would drink nothing but the hoppiest hops brewed by the most esteemed hopsmen. The only exception he would make to this rule was at his annual fraternity reunion, where he would force down one watery Keystone, "For old time's sake."

He was Richard the Rich, Hopper of Hops.

It would seem unthinkable for a man of his wealth and title to be unhappy, yet Rich was just that, and there were many reasons for it.

First of all, Rich was not wealthy by his own standards. Far from it, actually. If you asked him quite seriously on the state of his assets, he would have said he sold out long ago and had been selling out ever since. He'd have told you he'd been selling out for so long there was little left of anything to sell. He also might have told you in a world of sell outs it's hard to spot one, so what difference did it really make anyway?

And what choice did he have in the whole matter of selling out?
He grew up in an apartment in the city the size of his now affluent house's reading room. He had a job at 12, paid his way through undergraduate and graduate school, paid his dues working the grueling hours of a consultant through his 20s, until he finally became the vice president of something. Oh, and he was raised by a single mother. On his father's death certificate it states chronic cirrhosis of the liver as the cause of death. Which is strange, because there was never an autopsy.

His mother couldn't afford it.

To many, the story of Rich was a feel good success story.

Caution: Falling Mice...

People would say, "Rich is so driven! Rich has a beautiful family. What's his son's name? Andy? Beautiful name, Andy. Rolls off the tongue. How is his mother? Tell the Lyons family we said hello." And so on.

And his many friends loved him. Rich the conversationalist. He had a lot to say and a way of saying it. Got that gift of gab from his ancestors. He was clever, the wing man who did all the flying. He could get your grandfather laid. Your dead grandfather. And there was something different about him wasn't there? Yes, there was.

Rich felt the opposite of different.

For Rich, his life had been a monotonous cycle of work and play, broken up by all those traumatic events in between. It was a cycle he knew, especially after his son was born, there was no breaking out of. Everything had become a known eventuality, to the point where his own self-awareness became lost at times. He was transforming into an expensively dressed robot. He was a zombie in a Fiorvanti, completely numb to his miserable daily routine. His numbness seemed to accelerate the passing of time. He noticed the phenomenon with an emotionless curiosity. His misery overpowered seasons in the blink of an eye. He found himself always on the cusp of winter.

He started to use the cliché, "Where has the time gone?" Even though he knew where it had gone. He'd toasted it farewell years ago. Or was it months ago?

Before he went to sleep every night, instead of counting sheep, he imagined taking a plane to London on business. That plane would crash into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. He would be the sole survivor of the crash, swimming to an uncharted island where he would live for many years until he grew bored, at which point he would build a boat. On this boat he would sail to Portugal where a glorious party would ensue. The scenario was a lot like the movie *Castaway*, but with a slightly different ending.

And it's not that he would care if his wife ended up with the dentist, as in *Castaway*. He might have years ago, but after his son was born she became a mother to everyone, including him. He could no longer smoke, swear, or skinny-dip. And there were things he must do. He must get the kitchen remodeled. He must get the bonus to get the kitchen remodeled. He must work to get the bonus to get the kitchen remodeled.

He called her Caballo Diabla.

Rich wanted to be gone.

He may have been able to manage these first world problems were it not for his job. It was the job that damaged him most. He'd worked half his life doing jobs he hated to get a job he hated. But he'd made it. Hadn't he? After all, he was the vice president of something.

Someday he might be senior vice president.

He'd rather not.

He'd rather get crushed by an icicle falling from a skyscraper downtown, which actually happens, by the way. This is a recent newspaper article on the subject:

A man waiting for his son to finish shopping was killed Monday when a chunk of ice fell off a building at 731 N. Michigan Ave. A piece of ice described by one police officer as "the size of a dishwasher" snapped off the west end of the building's facade and landed directly on the man. He was pronounced dead on the scene.
Some days, Rich wouldn't mind getting crushed by a dishwasher sized iceberg.

One of those days was a day not long ago. A Friday.

On that day, Rich had an important meeting with Goldman Sachs where he would recommend a reduction in units through an investment in technology which would lead the greater overall accountability, profitability, and of course flexibility. He would pull other abilities out of his ass, should Goldman object. The reduction in units was the key - the elimination of employees, of cost. Profitability. That headcount reduction alone would make the business case. ROI? Yes sir, chairman sir. 500%. Don't forget adaptability! Include terminal value and we can double that ROI. Sign here. Thank you. Looking forward to working with you. In the meantime may I suggest a drinkability? Did I say that hahahaha! Long week!

Then the call home.

Yes honey I will be home after I grab a drink at Stocks and Blondes no I will not be late I will catch the 7:40 train home I promise did I mention we can get that new kitchen no well we can I love you yes tell the kids I love them no I won't drink too much wait Andy did what in school we'll talk about it when I get home goodbye.

Let the night begin.

He walked across the river from the Financial District to catch the Brown Line. He'd take that north to a bar in Old Town where he would get dangerously drunk, then either take the Metra home or sleep with a certain

intern, in which case he would take a cab home extremely late. He could no longer sleep at intern's apartment, due to the fact his wife had reported him missing to the affluent police the last time he did that.

As he walked, he noticed with suicidal pleasure a "Caution: Falling Ice" sign. Hundreds of these signs litter downtown from November to April. The signs are a huge middle finger from the property management companies to the world. They are an announcement from the unseen chief legal counsel, "We are not liable for your death by falling ice." Cue evil laugh. They might be legitimate warning signs, if it were possible to avoid every sidewalk in the city at once.

These signs were like magnets for Rich. He walked toward them, caressed them, smoked under them. Life insurance is tax free, he figured. Kids don't need father I sure didn't. Then again, here I am standing in the middle of the city waiting to get crushed to death by falling ice. Touché. Lightning would be more likely. Will go jogging in lightning in spring. Write that down. With metal car keys in headband. Does life insurance cover suicides? Think so, but only after two years. Yes!

He paused by the falling ice sign, but not for long. It was getting late and he was thirsty. Golden Goldman victory hops. He moved on.

Another falling ice sign, yay. A homeless girl leaned against it, holding another smaller cardboard sign which read, "kwarter for a farry tail." He was intrigued by this sign and by this fairytale saleswoman. He'd once liked fairytales. He would pay for a fairytale and as a bonus might get crushed to death by falling ice.

He put a twenty dollar bill into her big gulp cash register.
"Mister that's a shit lot of fairytales. For that much, if you like, I can make up a fairytale just for you?"

"The fairytale of me? I must hear it!"

She started without a thought:

"A boy grew up and became vice president of something. One night, his wife said he would be pissed as lord off his fizzy cross of gold and she was right he would be pissed though he promised her he would not. The wind blew him home with the storm at some ungodly hour of the night, so drenched in Chanel No. 5 you would have guessed it was the flavor of the snow bucketing down. His wife had gone mad waiting for him. He'd crossed the line one times too many she said to herself, but she'd said that many times before. Later that night he snuck out of their bed and his wife thought sneaky devil always sneaking around. His wife searched the house for him. She found him in his son's room. His wife can't imagine the boy ending up like his lying daddy but he will. Squinting through the keyhole, she couldn't see anything until a rare flash of winter lightning exposed them. Her husband was standing near the window with the boy's legs and arms knotted about him like thick vine. His son's red hair glowed like a golden crown on the liar's shoulder. They were playing at pretend, his son was the wild king. They giggled together:

Your Highness King Andy
I've got brandy
Up the leg of me drawers

The two danced around the room, and the wife wished to be with them. She walked in and asked if she might dance with the majesties and the three danced.

"That is your fairytale."

Rich was dislodged. This wasn't always his fairytale was it?

As a boy, Rich thought the city was made of magic. He dreamed of mermaids swimming within Buckingham Fountain, water sprites dancing on the backward flowing Chicago River, and the ghosts of Fort Dearborn roaming the high rises built on their graves. He rode the el like he was riding a dragon.

He would make magic himself as a magician someday.

Rich looked up to the sky, not for falling ice, but for the place the magic had been relegated. Dim shafts of red light clung to the western horizon, reminding him it wasn't long ago the sun had set. It was that strange second between afternoon and evening when the moon and sun fight for ownership of the sky. The moon shone down above huge yellow stars which twirled together first above the sun, then the afterglow.

"A magic trick?" Rich asked.
"Yes please."

Rich pulled a 24-karat gold fountain pen from his jacket and scribbled a large "M" on the falling ice sign. The sign now read:
"Caution: Falling MIce"

A bow from Rich and applause from the fairytale seller, "You are mad as hops."

Rich placed the gold pen in her cup. On the train ride home, he dreamed a boyish dream of sprites, fairies, and falling mice.

Steven Wiley

YEYE

Mama said before she went away that all great people don't die, they just turn into something you don't expect. Mama went away two years ago. She was out on the street and a soldier wanted her. She was going to the church down the street. She didn't go most Sundays but wanted to go that day. She worked there during the week, she said "Lord has me for every day except Sundays."

She liked working there. She liked the people and they liked her, especially that soldier. He wasn't from government, he was a man from the village. He got picked up when he was a young man, he used to fight government. He was general. He took them boys and sent them to war. Them who didn't want to fight he kill. He was good at killing them. His men and them government soldiers. He was good at killing my mama too. She was walking to church when he called out to her.

"Habari Bi, look good today."
"Taka, mind your business – I'm the lord's today."
"Sure Bi, but he ain't going to work you like me."
"Today I'm resting Taka, get on home."
"Not going home Bi."
"Well I ain't coming with you."
"Yes you are."

Neighbor found her bundled up in the alley next to the church. She was shot three times, all them in the heart. Her hands stuck out of the tarp. Her nails were red with blood. Her nails had his hair clumped under them. Men told me she fought like warrior. No one knew it was Taka for a while. Church mamas brought me food. Taka would sit outside my house and watch the mamas come and go. He was looking for his next treat.

Their food was never any good, it was always their scraps. Them mamas got scared one day and never came back. Taka wouldn't stop licking his lips. I was left to my own. I kept house like mama did. Went to church some Sundays like mama. I got thin. Neighbor would leave food at my gate some nights. He'd catch me in the mornings when I went out to sweep.

"Sorry for your mama."
"Why?"
"She's gone."
"No she's not."
"Boy she is buried."
"Just her body."

Neighbor left me meat that night, looked like he hadn't touched it. I saved some for next day. I starved, again, day after. Week went by and I still kept house like mama. Swept the porch and cleaned inside. Mama been buried for month, went to her grave some Sundays. Brushed dirt off, left food for her. Her bowl was clean every time I went. Preacher came with me one day.

"She's not gone son."
"I know. She's coming back."
"Once lord spits her out. She was good. She come back strong and beautiful."
"Where will she come back?"
"That's not for us to know, son."
"She be a beautiful baby."
"If she that."

Preacher left me with you for hour. I cried. I went home and swept some more. Neighbor didn't leave anything. I starved again. Next day creature left marks in the dirt on the door step. Left me chicken. I left scraps for it after I ate. Creature came

Yeye...

and ate it all. Next day I went to church and told Preacher.

"Creature left me food day before."
"Where did you find it?"
"On the door step. Where I sweep."
"Your mama's back, son."
"What do you think she look like?"
"We got to wait for her to show us."

I went home and swept again. I trimmed the trees in the yard. I cleaned inside house. Mama came again. Left me two chickens. I ate and left the rest for mama on front step. She ate scraps.

Next morning I woke up and men were running all up and down streets. Taka was getting pulled by his legs towards my house. Men came running up to my door. Yelling up to me.

"Azi! This man kill your mama!"

Another went yelling.

"Caught him running from Preacher after confession!"

Them men waited for me to stand with them. Two held him on his knees. Pulled his hair back. Made him look at me.

"My mama was kill by this man?"
"Yeah, told Preacher hour ago."
"Did you kill my mama?"

I looked in Taka's eyes. No sorrow, no pain, he ain't feel nothing since last day fighting government in Kassala. Killed all him women and all him boys.

"Yes boy…"

One man come up with machete. Looked me over, and gave me the machete.

"Your duty to your mama."
"I don't want it."
"Then I kill him."

Preacher watched from the back of the crowd. First time I ever saw Preacher angry. I watched from the front. I got splashed when one man cut him.

He brought his arm up above his head. He looked at Taka, spat in his face. The crowd cheered. He turn around to face them all. Raise both his hands, crowd shouted more. Taka's eyes never left mine. Man turned around quick and cut through his neck. His head rolled backwards. Them men left his eyes open, one kicked his head out the gate, two more drug his body outside too. Took his body to edge of village left him for lions. He wasn't there next day.

I took my shirt and washed it. Hung it up on the wire in the back. Mama didn't come that night. She must have ate somewhere else. I went to church in the morning and spoke with Preacher.

"Did he deserve it?"
"I think so."
"Why?"
"He took your mama. He took my friend."
"Okay Preacher."
"Will I see you for service on Sunday?"
"No. I going to see mama."
"Should I come with you?"
"No."

I went and sat with you for another afternoon. Dirt covered your name, I wiped it, and sat staring at you for a while.

The tall grass started moving past your grave, near the fence of the cemetery. You peeked your eyes out. Beautiful and yellow. You watched me. I went to see your new body. You backed away. I sat back down.

"Mama, don't be scared."
"Mama, please, let me see you."
"Mama…"

You walked through high grass and towards me. Your shoulders dipped and curled as you walked around me. You had beautiful yellow hair. Your paws were bigger than my face.

"Mama, you beauty."

You sat in front of me and looked into my eyes. You sat motionless. Just looking. I reached to touch you and you placed you head in my hands. You pulled it back and rested it on my legs. You licked my legs clean of dirt.

Another pair of eyes came looking through the grass. Red as fire, looking over your body. Him crept out from the grass and showed himself. Young hyena came walking towards us. You stood up from my lap and faced it. Him came charging at you. Stood hard and pinned him, dug claws into his skin. Him laid and yelped. Blood came creeping out his wounds.

Yeye...

Leaned in and bit his neck. Then let him go. Him went running off through the grass, dripped while he run.

Preacher walked in and looked at us. You standing next to me, your shoulder touching my hips.

"Must been Taka looking get your mama again."
"She got him."

Preacher looked over you, from distance. You licked the blood from your paws and laid back down with me. Preacher stood looking over us for hour. Letting you lick my legs, and palms. Me running my fingers through your hair.

"I told you she'd be beautiful."
"Yeah Preacher and she is."

You stood up from me and walked towards Preacher. He touched your face and you licked his palms. He bent down looked you in the eyes. He started crying. He touched you again and you left.

"She be just fine son. She be strongest lion."

Connor Bjotvedt



PERSONAL EFFECTS

Sarah's grocery cart was nearly empty-- save for a package of toilet paper, some Daisy razors and a carton of Neapolitan ice cream. She had wanted it to be a quick stop, but instead, she wandered aimlessly through rows of cookies and chips and processed cheese.

Her thoughts wandered into territories that people weren't really supposed to think about. She wondered what would happen if she didn't ever go home. What if she walked outside, right past her car and vanished? How long until someone reported her missing? Probably not long enough, she thought.

Her abandoned car would the first clue. The registration would give her name. Someone would've seen her today. Hell, she was probably on camera. And then again, where would she go? She'd have to go somewhere.

Sarah thought of her wallet with her ID and credit cards and countless other things linked to her life. We have too many things, she decided. Too many things attached to memories and faces and names, meaningless things that become us. She pulled a green and copper marble out of her pocket and started rolling it around in the palm of her hand. She couldn't keep thinking this way, she told herself. It was unhealthy. It had been just over a year. She had to move on. Think about something else. Push it out of her mind, but not altogether-because she wanted the memories. Didn't she?

She put the marble back in her pocket and stopped at the magazine rack near the front of the store. A Cosmo caught her eye and she started flipping through it. She noted that, although the photos changed from month-to-month, the content always seemed to be the same. Sarah found an odd comfort in that. She caught the outline of a face just as it leaned toward her.

"Excuse me," the man said, as he reached across to grab an Esquire.

Then he smiled one of those obligatory smiles you give to strangers and headed to the express lane. Sarah had wanted to smile back, but that was difficult these days. She felt so far away from the person she'd been. Nothing made sense anymore.

"It's been over a year," her sister would say. "You have to move on, live your life."

Sam was like that-- unflinchingly practical, unemotional and condescending in ways she didn't seem to realize. All this served her well with the children. She'd taught kindergarten for the past five years and rarely had problems keeping them in line. She always had a snide comment about something. Sarah could already hear what she'd say about the ice cream.

"Sarah, really? You know ice cream makes you fat. It goes down smooth, but it becomes a hard clod of saturated fat right here," she'd say, motioning to her stomach.

"And that's the way we like it," their father would say and he and Sarah would clang their spoons together in victory and kept on eating.

It was always Neapolitan. Her dad would scoop out the strawberry and Sarah would have chocolate and vanilla, always in equal amounts. They'd sit and watch basketball for hours, laughing and joking during commercial breaks.

Eventually, the game ends and reality begins again. For Sarah, the game ended one day last spring. At an unusually early hour, the phone started ringing. Sarah eventually answered. The subsequent news shocked her to the core. She knew instantly that nothing would ever be the same. No one else knew how to react or what to say so they did what people have always done—expressed condolences in the most sterile of ways: flowers, sympathy cards, and well-meaning
phone messages that always sounded rehearsed in some indescribable way.

Sarah never imagined her father would be dead at sixty-two. Her mom had left them long before memories started to stick. Now, it was just her and Sam. Her sister didn't wallow in grief long. It wasn't her style. Instead, she got over it by creating another life. She was four months pregnant, eager to preside over a child of her very own, when she finally told Sarah.

"It's what Dad would have wanted," Sam told Sarah.
"For you to get knocked up?"
"No," Sam said angrily. "For life to go on." She paused. "When did you become so negative?"
"Well, it's hard to be positive… when all I'm left with is you. "

Sarah put the magazine down and glanced around as though she was
afraid that other people could read her thoughts. She regretted the statement now, just blurting it out like that. In that moment, she'd had so much anger and resentment toward Sam. Maybe she was sorry now, but part of what she'd said was true. Why in Hell's name would fate have left her alone with a sister she had nothing in common with except parents that no longer existed? She'd have to
make peace with it. Sam was still fam

ily, all the family she had left.

Suddenly, a loud beep of a security alarm whisked Sarah back to reality. She looked over to see a defiant-looking girl of about seventeen standing \\

near the store's exit. The girl was clad in army boots, a loose-fitting top and miniskirt. She looked like she about to hightail it out of there when the store manager appeared. He seemed particularly interested in the gaudy, threadbare tote bag she had slung over her shoulder. He reached for the girl's arm. She immediately snatched it away.

"Don't be touching me! You have no right!"
"Miss," he said calmly. "I just need to check your bag."
"Nothing in there," she snorted back.
The manager looked at her and paused.
"Look," his eyes rose toward the ceiling, "we have cameras here. I need to see the bag."
The girl didn't move.
"I'm not going to press charges. Just let me see the bag."

She looked up toward the ceiling, at the camera, and sighed loudly. She dropped the bag at the manager's feet. He knelt down and started rummaging through it. As he did this, the girl fiddled with several bracelets on her arm. Her eyes flitted nervously around the room.
She was wearing way too much make-up, Sarah noted. She'd never let her daughter wear that much make-up, if she had a daughter. It made the girl's eyes look hollow and it made her face look older than any experience she'd accrued behind it.

The manager stood up, an item firmly in his hand. When the girl saw it, the tough demeanor softened ever so slightly. She stood up straighter, embarrassed.

"I won't contact your parents about this alright?" he said with a note of kindness in his voice. "But, you certainly should," he added, clutching the EPT pregnancy test in his hand. The girl's body stiffened.

"Gimme my bag." She looked at him coldly.

He looked back at her straight on, now with more anger than sympathy.

"Look, Missy. I'm doing you a favor." He dangled the bag out in front of him. She snatched it out of his hands and darted outside.

"You better not pull this again, alright," he called after her, then shook his head in dismay.

Sarah was still looking in the direction of this whole commotion when the manager walked by her.

"Your ice cream's gonna melt," he said.

Sarah glanced down and saw droplets of condensation starting to form on the carton's lid. How long had she really been here? How much of her afternoon had been sucked away in this meaninglessness box of a grocery store? Her father would've chided her for squandering so much time. Wasting the precious gift of life, he'd say, blah, blah…

I gotta get out of here, Sarah decided. With that, she abandoned her cart and walked away. There was nothing she really needed, not today. She was crossing the parking lot toward her car when she heard the screeching tires. Then, there was silence, the quietest of silences you can imagine in the middle of the afternoon. In the midst of it, there was a figure in the street, motionless.

A few people started gathering along the sidewalk. Sarah walked toward them. As she grew closer, she looked down and recognized a tattered tote bag. Its contents were now strewn all along the street. She looked down at the girl and knelt down beside her. She was bloody, but conscious. The driver rushed up, terror in his eyes.

"I didn't see her! I swear I didn't see her!" He put his face in his hands. "Oh, God. She came out of nowhere…" His voice trailed off.

"Someone call 911!" a woman called out to the growing line of bystanders.

"I already have," a woman answered, waving her phone in the air.

Sarah turned back to the girl.

"We're getting help. Don't try to move. Just breathe."

The girl nodded and looked down at her leg. It was awkwardly twisted in an obviously unnatural position. She saw the scrapes and the blood. She definitely saw the blood. Her frightened eyes darted back to Sarah.

"Am I gonna die?" she asked seriously.

"You're going to be fine. Just fine. What's your name?"

"Rachel."

"Rachel, everything's going to be OK." Sarah reached into her purse for a pen. "What's your parents' number? I can call them for you."

"They don't know where I am. It's better that way. Please."

"Are you pregnant?" Sarah asked hesitantly.

"No. I don't know. I might be."

Rachel's pleading eyes had the depths of an ocean. Sarah could sense the pain, the drowning fear. She put the pen away and reached deeper into her purse and pulled out the green and copper marble, one of her father's famous marbles. She took Rachel's hand and dropped the marble into her palm.

"Now you hang onto this." She clasped Rachel's fingers around the marble. "It's a lucky charm. You can keep it if you promise to stay positive. Keep breathing."

Rachel nodded. She looked down at the marble in her hand.

"Someday," Sarah continued, "you'll look at that small, little thing and you'll remember the gravity of this moment and how it brought you back to Earth." Sarah realized after she'd said it that she was speaking for both of them. When the paramedics arrived, Sarah was quickly pushed aside.

"What's your name?" one of the EMTs asked Rachel.

"Are you a relative?" another asked Sarah. She shook her head.

"I don't know her. I was just passing by."

"Can someone get my stuff?" Rachel asked. "I don't know where anything is."

"I'll collect your things" Sarah spoke up.

Sarah walked back to the street and bent down to pick up one of Rachel's stray boots, her bag and whatever else she could find. She walked back to her car and carefully placed Rachel's things in the front seat, as if they were the most precious things in the world. From the parking lot, she saw the emergency workers hoist Rachel onto a stretcher. By the time she drove back toward them, the ambulance was pulling away. Sarah followed, as if there was no other decision to be made.

Rachel had never been in an ambulance before. It was odd being inside, rushing through traffic, hearing the sirens and knowing they were for her. She held on tightly to the tiny marble in her hand. Through the back window, she could see that woman who'd helped her. The woman she didn't even know. Was she following them to the hospital?

Rachel wished she knew the woman's name. What had she taken her away from? Surely, she'd had other plans for the evening that didn't involve this. Maybe she was on the way home to make dinner for her family or something. Rachel looked through the back window again. The woman was still following. Wherever this stranger had come from, her presence brought Rachel comfort. At least at the hospital, there would be someone she'd recognize, even if they'd just met.

She still clutched the marble in her right hand. Her fingers could feel its smoothness, its calming nature. Today she'd believe in the power of luck and the promise of hope.

Kendra Liedle

STRIDE

Her name was Paulette. Like Goddard, but no one knows who that is anymore. When she was young, she walked everywhere she went. She loved the feel of the breeze on her face. In springtime, she could smell the scent of rosemary and mint and watch children playing stickball in the street. In those days, her legs could carry her so far and fast, the old folks would joke that she had wheels on her feet. When she was 22, she married a sailor. He didn't like her out walking after sunset, her favorite time of day. He didn't like her wearing pants, her favorite walking attire.

"It's not proper," he would say. "You're not Dietrich."

She started walking during the day, when he was gone. Sometimes, she'd walk in secret— borrow a friend's car, without his knowing. She'd take trips to other neighborhoods, where she could dress like Dietrich and walk for as long as she liked. She'd go to places where no one recognized her as Paulette. Like Goddard. Or as the Missus, wife of the sailor. Within a year, she was pregnant. It hadn't been planned. She didn't know how to feel.

This is the way things would be: *A wife. A baby. A husband who's always away.*

She'd take the carriage out and walk with the baby, but it wasn't the same. She wanted to walk longer and faster and further, but the baby needed feeding and the husband was home on leave, and dinner still wasn't done.

She dreamed of being like Goddard, making love to Gershwin. And she dreamed of dressing like Dietrich whenever she liked. This wasn't a fad or a passing trend. It was a movement. Like other women of her time, she wanted to break free, move forward, and march on toward something better. She longed to be liberated, to run free in the streets as she had as a young girl.

The marriage didn't last. It didn't end either. He left; she didn't follow. And that was that. She didn't mourn this ending. She embraced it, behind closed doors. She wore pants and fedoras and these newfangled things called pantyhose. And she danced to Gershwin.

Again, she walked every night after sunset. She didn't walk as far or as long, but she was happy. She smelled rosemary and mint and the freshly baked pies some other man's wife had made.

Paulette knew she could never be Goddard or Dietrich. She wasn't a Ziegfield girl or a Rockette or anyone even remotely glamorous or important. She was just a divorcee who needed a job.

She could type and wear short skirts and stockings. So, that's what she did. She hadn't wanted to be a teacher— never a teacher— with all those children mucking around. With no emotion or connection, she could put her typing away at the end of the day. The evenings were hers alone, no dictation or shorthand to stop her. Her own child grew into a man: a stockbroker. He moved to New York and saw her rarely. Sometimes, he'd send postcards. He'd write short messages she'd read over and over again as she walked around the neighborhood.

Her walks were slower now. Her legs felt heavier than they ever had. But she wore her pants and felt the breeze on her face and felt free. It was on a postcard, she discovered she'd soon become a grandmother. She didn't know how to feel. This is the way things would be: A divorcee. A son she never sees. And a grandchild who lives thousands of miles away.

She wanted to feel happy, the way one is supposed to feel at such occasions. Instead, she wanted to escape. Around the block was as far as she got. She walked with a cane now. Most of the time, she didn't use it. She just carried it around as a safety in case her legs got heavy or her nerves got to her. Or someone tried to attack.

At night, she listened to the radio loudly and looked through old photos of a former life. She looked to the future, which wasn't long, and wondered: *What will the walks be like then, when it's all over? Will they be longer and faster and further as they were when I was young*?

This wasn't a fad or a passing trend, it was a movement: She was slowing down. Months later, she discovered, she couldn't wander far at all. Now, she needed the cane. There was no denying it. She hated this fact, the needing of something beyond her control. Her feet were calloused, her legs were heavy, and her nerves got to her. As she walked, every crack in the ground was a potential disaster. A broken wrist. A broken hip. The end. Alone.

On the last walk, there was a chill in the air as she stopped to rest. Down below, she noticed the pavement was uneven. This could be trouble. She poked at the sidewalk with her cane and stooped over to watch a parade of ants, marching along with purpose. They moved fast and far, as though they had tiny wheels for feet.

I'll never move like that again, she thought.

With that, she propped up her cane and stood up, only to discover just then—her legs no longer worked.

Kendra Liedle

Shrimp Etouffee

Ingredients:
3 LBs medium uncooked shrimp (peeled and deveined).
6 TBs butter
3 TBs flour
1 cup chopped Yellow Onion
6 chopped Green Onions
1/2 cup thinly sliced celery
1/2 cup thinly sliced Bell Peppers
2 cups water
1/4 cup chopped parsley
1 clove minced garlic
1 tsp red pepper flakes

Instructions:
Peel and devein shrimp. Heat a saucepan with tight fitting lid over medium-high heat. Melt butter, then stir in flour. Cook, stirring constantly until butter and flour mixture is a rich brown color. Remove from heat. In a separate saucepan over medium heat, cook and stir onions, celery, bell peppers and garlic until tender, about 5 to 10 minutes. Transfer cooked vegetables to saucepan containing flour mixture. Mix well. Next add parsley, red pepper, shrimp and water to the saucepan with tight fitting lid. Mix well then cover with lid and simmer or cook mixture slowly over low heat for 20-30 minutes. Traditionally, this dish is served over rice.

THE DINNER CLUB

The Moroccan Spice House is no place to recuperate from a broken heart. And surely it is no place to fall so bones and heels in love it feels as though your soul is bruised. It's a restaurant where the air is fragrant with incense and Middle Eastern spices such a cinnamon and ginger and cloves. Dim lights dangle in cast iron lanterns from a spotted ceiling. Heavy drapes cordon off rows of tables, providing diners with a small measure of privacy. The waiters wear fezzes and baggy pants and pointed shoes with the toes curled up. A centre aisle juts from the double swinging kitchen doors and cleaves the main dining room in half. It serves as a makeshift stage for the floor show, one for each seating, where belly dancers gyrate in veils and sequined bikinis to the scant applause of a semi-interested audience.

If I had never let Mike talk me into coming, I never would have met her. The host's name was Ruben and he sat at our table flanked by two women, giving him the illusion of a pimp with his flock. One woman was Mila, a voluptuous Filipino whose eyes disappeared into the tops her plump cheeks when she smiled while introducing herself and shaking our hands. The other sat so close to Ruben I thought perhaps she was his wife or girlfriend.

She was not beautiful, not by any strength of imagination. But she was striking. Long lustrous hair, too blonde to be natural, rippled in curls down the front of her blouse. Her face was heavily made up to hide, quite unsuccessfully, the furrows around her eyes. Shiny scarlet lipstick seeped into the shallow wrinkles around her mouth as though she pursed her lips too often and for too long, leaving behind the tracts of her habit. Pink rouge dusted her high cheekbones; her eyes were the colour of spring violets and framed in false eyelashes thickened with layers of mascara. She wore costume jewellery; large knobby beads rattled at her wrists and throat like drunken bones when she stood and extended her hand. Semi-precious stones glittered from rings on fingers lined at the knuckles. But her handshake was firm and the skin was dry and warm.

"I'm glad you could make it." Her voice was throaty and low, the voice of a seasoned smoker. "I'm Addison."

"Dan," I replied and she moved on to Mike.

"Nice to meet you, Addie," he said. "I'm Mike."

"Addison, if you please."

We took our seats at the table and stared at one another, five strangers, who would most likely never see one another again, gathered to share a meal. Mike was always getting involved in things like this. Since his divorce two years ago, he'd been joining one social group after another that he found on the internet. Most were clubs based on some interest or hobby, such as cycling or tennis or hiking—or fine dining. He claimed to meet many interesting people that way, though few women. Those he saved for the matchmaking websites where he boasted about his business acumen and sexual prowess. It was, he claimed, a splendid way to get laid, and much cheaper than a brothel. The man is a pig.

The Dinner Club...

I'm not so fortunate. When Anna left I spiralled into a well of despair and self pity that it would have made Sylvia Plath proud. It was only after weeks of goading and cajoling that Mike managed to pull my head out of the oven, dust me off, knot my tie and persuade me into joining him at the dinner club he'd recently joined.

"It's full of lonely schmucks just like you," he said as he slapped a generous dose of Paco Rabanne on his cheeks while I dressed. "You'll fit right in."

"I don't know," I whined and slipped my legs into my pants, scrambling for some excuse why I shouldn't go. "I won't know anybody there."

"Neither will I," he said. "No one will know anybody there. But what are these people going to do? Rape you?"

I should be so lucky. At least then I'd have an excuse never to go again. I put on my jacket and inspected my image in the mirror. I'd lost a lot of weight since Anna left. She'd been a stellar cook who collected cookbooks and whipped up gourmet concoctions on the weekends. I could use a good meal again.

"You look great, Danny-Boy!" I hated it when Mike called me that. He patted my shoulders and headed for the door. "Let's go."

It was dark by the time we arrived and a misty rain had begun to fall. The gutters were filled with grainy water that we dodged as we crossed the street from the parking lot to avoid getting splashed by the ceaseless traffic. Bit by bit, more people began to arrive, a faceless rabble that introduced themselves to the rest of the table and took their seats. Soon there were over a dozen people wedged among the purple drapes that surrounded our section, all making small talk but no one really connecting.

Addison wove her fingers together and leaned her elbows on the table, regarding me coolly with those captivating eyes. A Chivas and soda sat by her dinner plate untouched.

"So what do you do Dan?" she asked.

"Construction," I replied and thought I sounded like the dumbest fool in the universe. "But my real job is a poet."

"Poet, eh?" When Addison smiled I could see her two front teeth were crooked, one folded slightly atop the other, and stained yellow. "Is there much money in that?"

"No."

I didn't know what else to say. When I spoke with Addison it seemed as though my words garbled before they even left my throat and I came off sounding infantile and foolish. I glanced beside me at Mike for help, but he was already engaged in a lively discussion of the weather with a woman named Maureen. She'd been the last to arrive, shaking rain water from her umbrella and rumpled coat while wiping the fog from her glasses.

"I do a little writing myself," Addison continued. "But I don't think it's exactly your cup of tea."

Not my cup of tea? Hell, anything and everything Addison did would be my cup of tea. How could I tell her, after all these years locked in what I thought was a stable relationship, being out of the dating loop so long? I wanted to read everything she wrote, type love letters on an old fashioned manual typewriter, recite Shakespearian love sonnets while standing on the table.

Instead, I said, "I'm quite well read. I don't think anything you write would shock me."

Our appetizers arrived before she could respond: steaming platters of fresh baked pita breads and bowls of warm hummus glazed with a layer of olive oil with bits of roasted red peppers scattered over the lot. Relieved that the food provided a reasonable distraction, I grabbed at the nearest piece and tore it in half. Addison laughed and helped herself.

She had a fiery strength in her hands as she tore the bread into chunks and dipped them in the hummus. The baubles at her bony wrist rattled down her hands. They were like the wings of wounded butterflies, streaked with blue bulging veins, the skin opaque and wrinkled and pale with willowy fingers tipped in scarlet polish. She bit into the dripping bread and sighed through her lips as her shadowed eyelids fell to half mast.

"Mmmm…this is delicious," she cooed. "You must try some."

She held out her piece to me, directly under my mouth. My own bread lay stupidly torn in my hands, forgotten. I opened my mouth and she slid it in, the same piece that had been her own mouth only seconds before. The flavour of garlic and olive oil flooded my senses but I barely noticed. I could only taste the jasmine of her hands.

"Good, isn't it?"

I nodded, my mouth too full to respond.

"I hope I have some mints or gum in my purse," she continued. "This garlic is really strong."

It wouldn't have mattered. She could gargle with sewer water and I still

wouldn't hesitate kissing that sensuous mouth. It would all taste like jasmine to me.

We finished the bread and Ruben ordered three more bottles of wine for the table. I'm not much of drinker and when it comes to wine I wouldn't know the difference between a chardonnay and a merlot. But Addison knew her way around a bottle magnificently. The waiter carafed the wine and poured a dab into her glass. She raised it to her lips but didn't drink it right away. Her breasts rose like awakening baby rabbits and pulled taut the buttons of her blouse as she inhaled deeply and savoured the scent of the wine. She ran the pink nub of her tongue tip across those glossy lips after taking a sip and nodding her approval to the waiter. A drop escaped and beaded on her lower lip.

"Let me get that for you," I offered, appalled at my own audacity but by then it was too late. I dabbed my white linen napkin against her mouth where the wine seeped into the fibres like a drop of blood.

"Thank you, Dan," she said and placed her wine glass down by her plate.

The waiter filled her glass and went around the table filling everyone's glass in turn, pausing only to open the second and third bottles that Ruben sampled before nodding his approval. Mike, ever the extrovert, tapped his fork against his water glass to hush the table and lifted his wine glass over his head.

"A toast!" he said. "To good food and good fun and good friends!"

"Here! Here!" Everyone chanted and clinked their glasses together.

What a farce, I thought. There were no good friends around the table, save for me and Mike. These people were all strangers to one another. You could tell by the awkward and stilted attempts at conversation, at the exaggerated politeness. It was very unlikely these people would ever see each other outside the dinner club. And the prospect of never seeing Addison again made me panic.

"Cheers!" She smiled and tapped her wine glass against mine. It must have been made from high quality crystal; I could feel the vibration down to the marrow of my bones.

"To your health," I said and sipped the wine. It tasted like cough syrup.

Our main course arrived, a tagine of lamb and stewed dried fruit, fragrant with spice, and warm fluffy couscous laced with almonds. The waiter mounded the food on our plates and offered another round of fresh baked pitas.

"Aren't you hungry?" Addison asked, her fork poised over her plate. "It's really very good."

I shrugged and picked an apricot out of the stew. I don't care much for fruit with my meat and I found the cinnamon flavour overpowering. But mostly, I was too distracted to eat.

The floor show began and the whole dining room erupted in applause. Three women in chatoyant belly dancing outfits scooted out of the kitchen and gyrated down the centre aisle, each taking her place among the groups of tables. Waiters with trays of food balanced on their shoulders expertly dodged the dancers on their way to and from the kitchen. Addison laughed and clapped her hands in time to the music piped in through speakers mounted in the ceiling. Our dancer wore a purple veil draped across her face so that only her eyes were visible, but her hair was long and dark and lustrous and bounced down her back and shoulders with each movement. Small cymbals were strapped to her fingers and she clanked them together in time to her swaying hips that she shook faster and faster until they became a blur. The chimy music reached a crescendo and all three dancers collapsed to their knees and tossed back their heads, their plump breasts bulging out of their sequined bras.

Mike whistled and hooted amid the applause. The music resumed, slower and more languid, and the dancers slowly rose and peeled off their veils. The girl looked as though she was barely in her twenties. I was overwhelmed with a sense of pity. Surely, this was no way for a girl her age to earn a living. She sashayed between the tables, eyeing everyone there and looking supremely bored. She found her target in Mike. He was ready, more than eager to participate. She swished her veil over her head and wrapped it round the back of Mike's neck. It didn't take much persuasion to get him out of his chair and onto the dance floor.

Mike did a valiant job of keeping up with the dancer's gyrations. He shimmied and shook his hips in time to her movements. She kept the veil wrapped around his waist and the two of them gambolled across the dance floor, suggestively moving their bodies in time to the music. The people at our table taunted him and egged him on, fanning his fervour. I could never do something like that. I loathe being the centre of attention. It takes all my willpower just to stand up and deliver a speech at meetings. That's probably why I never got anywhere with my poetry. I couldn't bear to do a public reading.

"He's quite good, isn't he?" Addison

laughed.

"Yeah, he's the life of the party." I tried not to sneer but it was getting difficult to hide my derision. He was making a fool out of himself, and in turn, out of me.

The music ended and the dancers and their victims took their bows. Mike was panting and sweating by then. He grabbed the dancer by the waist and planted a hard lingering kiss on her cheek. She swatted him with her veil and stomped back through the kitchen doors, nearly toppling a waiter who was passing through with a tray of desserts balanced on his shoulder.

"You looked ridiculous," I said to Mike as he took his seat.

"Lighten up, a little," he said. "It was fun. You could use a good dance with a pretty girl yourself."

"I like to dance," Addison piped in.

"Maybe you and Danny-boy here could go out dancing sometime." Mike chuckled and patted my shoulder.

I was mortified. Good god! If she could only see me struggling with my two left feet on a dance floor she'd never want to have anything to do with me again. Ever.

"Mike…" I stammered, unsuccessfully hiding my chagrin. "You're embarrassing me."

"I think that would be a splendid idea!" Addison's eyes lit up as she spoke.

"Good, then it's settled," Mike said.

"No it's not!" I protested.
The manager was a stocky middle aged man with a dark complexion and a moustache so thick and shaggy it concealed his entire mouth. He leaned his head between me and Mike and placed a reassuring hand on Mike's back.

"Excuse me, sir," he said in a hushed voice. Mike looked at him as though he'd materialized out of thin air.

"Yes?"

"The lady tells me you took liberties with her when she invited you to dance."

"Liberties?" Mike looked to me for support but I offered none. "Oh, you mean that! I just gave her an innocent little peck on the cheek to thank her."

"I'm afraid we don't allow our guests to touch the entertainers." The manager's voice turned low and serious. "Besides, she is my daughter."

"I'm sorry." Mike sounded flustered for the first time since I've known him. "I didn't mean anything by that."

"Nonetheless, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The manager straightened and stared down at Mike.

All conversation abruptly stopped and everyone—Ruben, Mila, Maureen and all those people we didn't know, stared at us.

"The rest of your table can stay, of course," the manager continued, "and enjoy some dessert and coffee."

Mike looked back at everyone. Mila shifted uncomfortably in her chair and Maureen flicked her eyes to the bread platter as though she'd never seen pitas before. Everyone else just continued to stare.

"Fine," Mike huffed and tossed his napkin onto to his plate. He dug into his pocket for his wallet and flipped through it for his share of the tab. "Coming, Dan?"

Relieved to finally be getting out of there, I nodded and dipped into my own wallet. Sixty-seven dollars for a few pitas and a lamb stew which I didn't eat. Mike pressed the money into the manager's hand.

"Here you are," he said. "To cover our share of the bill and a few extra dollars for you as an apology."

"That won't be necessary, sir," the manager said.

"Take it." Mike insisted and pushed his arms into the sleeves of his coat.

"I'm going with you," Addison said and snatched her purse from under the table. She dropped a few bills on the table beside her plate and grabbed her raincoat and umbrella.

I knew everyone at the table was staring at our backs as we left. Addison walked between us, her arms hooked through our elbows as though we were three soldiers marching into battle. She strode with a mighty dignity, her chin raised and her gait heavy and deliberate. I didn't realize how tall she was when she sat at the table. She stood a half a head taller than me, at least as tall as Mike in her heels.

A cold drizzle pierced the fog. The traffic had subsided somewhat. Blurred headlights floated by in the street. Addison opened her umbrella and the three of us huddled under it, looking at one another and wondering what to do next.

"It's been an interesting evening," Addison laughed.

"Sure has," Mike agreed. "Want to go somewhere for a drink with us?"

The Dinner Club...

"No thank you," she replied. "It's getting late and I really must be getting on."

I swallowed hard. This was my chance.

"How about we get together some other time?" I suggested and Mike flashed me a million watt smile of encouragement.

"I'd like that." Addison held out her hand. "Give me your phone. I'll put my number in it for you."

She seemed pretty adept with cell phones. It had taken me days to figure the damn thing out. She used her thumb to punch in the number and save it.

"Call anytime," she said and handed it back to me.

"It was really nice meeting you," I said and tucked it back into my coat pocket.

"Ditto," she laughed, "You two are a lot of fun. I'm really looking forward to getting together again."

She leaned forward and planted a hard deliberate kiss directly on my lips. I was about to kiss her back when I felt the prick against my lower lip. Shocked, I pulled away.

"Bye, guys!" Addison turned and ran into the fog, her yellow umbrella bouncing over her head like a mushroom in bloom.

Mike laughed as he watched her go.

"Well, I never thought she'd be your type," he said.

"What do you mean?" I still felt the sting in my lip.

"Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

Mike tapped the Adam's apple bulging from his neck.

Caroline Misner

THE GRANNIES

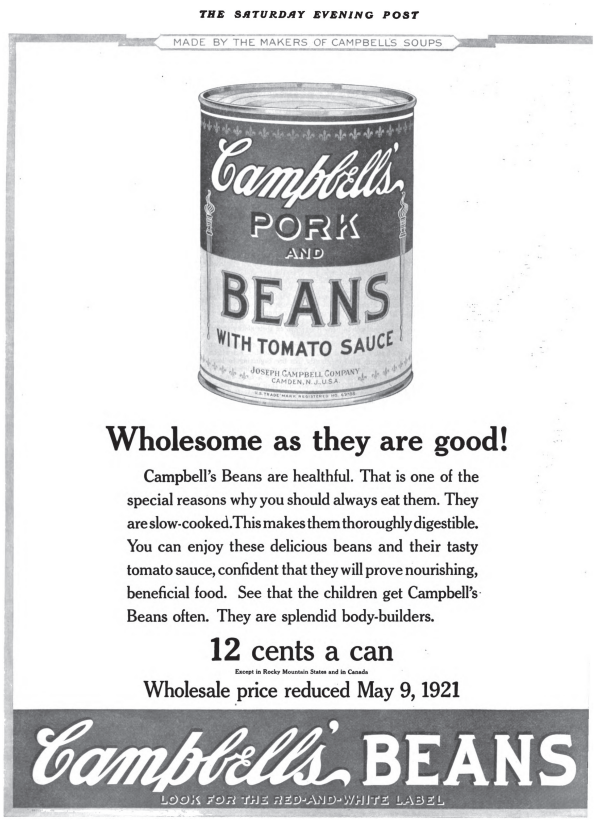
The Grannies live across the street from the house Dad and I had to move into after Mama died because Dad says the insurance company isn't going to give us any money. The new house is just big enough for me and Dad. It's close to my new school, and I don't really miss any of my old friends. Especially CeeCee Jenkins. Dad and I both agree that starting fresh is sometimes all you can do. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if I was part of a big family that could help take care of me and Dad, but he doesn't have any family left and he says that Mama's family gave up on her long ago. Too bad for them, he says, because maybe Mama was difficult when her meds weren't working, but she was made of pure love.

Janie Knicks lives a few blocks away and says the Grannies are three witches and will cast a spell on me so I'll grow a beak and feathers 'til one day I'll be a full-fledged crow. But floating through the air as a big black bird doesn't sound any worse than having to learn long division, so I ring their doorbell and ask the Granny that appears if she's a witch. She wears overalls and a bandana in her hair. I think she's more likely to be painting houses than stirring up trouble over a caldron. But maybe a witch's best weapon is her ability to hide the fact that she's a witch. When I ask her my question, she throws back her head and cackles, true as any witch I've ever heard, but still, I think she's pretending.

She invites me in. It's suppertime for the Grannies, and I worry about not being able to eat the meal Dad is fixing across the street, but eating with three maybe-witches seems too good to pass up. Plus Dad hasn't really gotten the hang of cooking yet. Who knew there really is such a thing as too many grilled cheeses?

After I sit down at their dining room table, I worry that the Grannies might try to feed me something cruddy like bat wings or frog tongues. But the Granny that serves dinner has deep dimples in both her cheeks and she is taller than the first Granny, but her eyes are the exact same shade of blue, and I think maybe I'm safe enough. It turns out we're having baked chicken and dumplings. I eat two helpings. They smile and tell me to eat up. Maybe they are fattening me up and plan to make me into dumplings someday. But it's so yummy, it might be worth it.

After supper, they let me feed bits of chicken gristle to their fat black cat named Hecate, which is kind of a weird name for a cat, but she likes me well enough after that. She even follows me out to the back porch where the third Granny asks me to hop up on an old stool. She's skinny as a tetherball pole and it seems like every bit of her is pointy in some way, including her black boots, but she has those same blue eyes. I think she is the most witchlike of the three and the most fascinating. So I hop up and I sit there, dangling my feet, swinging them to and fro and watching her set up an easel. She says she wants to paint me because I have lovely



The Grannies...

cheekbones. I tell her I got them from my Mama. She sells her paintings in a gallery downtown. But I don't like the idea of someone being able to buy me, and she promises me she'll just give it to Dad.

I leave when I hear Dad out on our front lawn calling my name, but not before the dimpled Granny give me a plastic bag full of homemade cookies. They promise next time I come over to sit for my portrait, I can play dress-up with all the old clothes in their attic after. Dad comes over to apologize for me bugging them and reminds me that it's rude to drop in on folks without calling first, but says I'm just like Mama. He doesn't say it, but I know he means the way Mama was on her good days. Curious as a cat, friendly as a puppy, made of pure love. This comparison to Mama both pleases me and scares me at the same time, but the Grannies just beam and say I am a doll for brightening up their day, and I'm welcome to hop on over and ring their bell anytime I want.

They stand in a row waving goodbye as we cross the street, and I look back to wave too and see them smiling almost identical smiles. I think how nice it must be to have sisters to move in with when you get old, and I suddenly wish very much that I could have gotten a sister before Mama died. But I guess it is just going to be Dad and me from now on.

The next day, Janie Knicks invites me over to play video games and while we're zapping zombies, I tell her about the Grannies. She still says they're witches, and I should probably stay away from them if I am going to make any friends around here. I tell her that if they are witches, I hope I grow up to be a witch too. She just keeps killing zombies and when the game is done, she says maybe it's time for me to leave, which is exactly the same thing that CeeCee Jenkins said after I got mad at her for saying Mama was most likely in hell, and I'd have to do a lot of sinning if I ever wanted to see her again.

Diane D. Gillette

FRENCH PASTRY

Adam Winslow, Esquire, patted the two hundred thousand dollar check in his suit coat pocket. He chided himself just a tad for lacking humility, but he knew his largess would make possible a new church meetinghouse, aptly named Adam Winslow Hall. His sigh, heavy with satisfaction, escaped into the air.

Wife Margaret smiled at him, taking his arm. He squared his shoulders and stood a little straighter. They walked toward the chapel exit, toward a familiar bronze plaque nestled in the stone of the church wall. He knew every word.

Covenant Assembly Church
Founded 1780
Walter Moses Winslow, First Deacon
Talbot Mills, New Hampshire

Once outside, Margaret stopped to visit with friends. Adam, spying church elder Jacob Lattimer, excused himself and walked across the wide lawn to join him.

"I have what I promised," Adam said.

He began to remove the check from his pocket, but Jacob placed his hand on Adam's arm.

"I've a surprise for you," Jacob said. "I won't take the check now. We've planned an official presentation at the board meeting tomorrow and invited the local press. There'll be an article and picture in the paper. It's always good to let the townspeople know how the church is growing."

"Wonderful idea. I'll be there, Jacob. With the check."

They shook hands and Jacob moved on to speak to another parishioner. Adam strolled toward the shade of a leaf-heavy maple tree, delighted the story and picture would appear in *The Talbot Mills Tribune.*

His forebears would call his pride-filled manner a sin. However, it was time the people of Talbot Mills recognized him and his achievements. His mother called him a pillar of the community, besting the Winslow men before him, even his father.

A pillar. He liked that.

As Adam inhaled the clear Sunday air, a slender woman, hips swaying beneath a yellow summer dress and a large straw tote bag hanging on her arm, strolled toward him.

"What a surprise. Hello, Jack. Remember little ol' me?"

Jack? *Jack? Uh-oh. Jack*. A breath wedged in his throat. The slow, soothing voice. The southern accent. Her playful blue eyes, trim athletic body, auburn hair. The recent attorneys' convention in New Orleans. Oh, yes. He remembered all right.

"Ah, Miss Bellerose. Monique."

Moisture collected under his arms. What was *she* doing *here*? His wife, her back to him, chatted with Orinda Benson by the rose garden.

Monique brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "Whatever y'all doing so far from your offices in Los Angeles?"

Jacob Lattimer, mingling among the parishioners, glanced at them.

Adam rubbed his sweaty palms together. "Ah, um, touching base with our New England associates about a current case. Squeezing in a little sightseeing. And you?"

"Visiting my sister in town. Said I should see this little ol' church. Probably hoping a little religion will rub off." Monique made a slight frown. "Jack, you never called me after the convention."

Adam cleared his throat, but Monique didn't wait for his reply.

"No harm. I know all about the crush of business." She removed a business card from her bag, jotted a number on the back of it. "I do have to rush. Nephew's surprise birthday party today. Call me. I'm staying for ten days. Y'all can show me the sights."

Adam watched her walk away and shoved the card in his pocket. He enjoyed his usual convention fun. What was the harm? No one ever knew. But how in the hell did he find "fun" with a sister in Talbot Mills? What were the odds of that? He dabbed his forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief.

He glanced at Margaret and jammed a finger inside his collar. For a hundred dollar shirt, it suddenly felt like it would choke him. He slowly walked across the lawn toward her, his brain ablaze.

Ten days.
Tribune article.
Glad-hand picture.
What if Monique discovered who he was?
Bells clanged in his ears, except the church bells weren't ringing.
What if his wife found out?
His heart pounded, timpani drums run amok.
His reputation?
Good God.

Forcing himself to meet Margaret's eyes, he stood beside her.

"Adam, dear, I was afraid you'd forgotten. We've promised to take Pastor and his wife to brunch at the country club today."

Early morning coffee and French pastry churned in Adam's gut, followed by a rolling rumble of gas.

Good God Almighty.

Carol Mann

UNSUNG

My cousin Yijiang wanted to be Christian and a Marine, the first hot pot my grandfather ever refused to swallow.

"Your ancestors blinded themselves from reading the scrolls so many times," *Yeye* spat, his eyes soaring to a faraway place I could never reach. "That's what this 'God' gives you when you believe."

A younger me nodded, transfixed. It never occurred to me that *Yeye*'s words weren't etched in some Chinese gospel iced with conviction.

The day *Yeye* led me down a winding forest path, he spilled me the lifeblood of his story for hours on end, the smoky bags plastered under his eyes ablaze with vitality. With his palms crinkled as shadowed snow, he handed me his memories: the Japanese and their gun-licked fingers and salt-smoked lips. His mother's collapsed life, one moment a family and the next, she and her children, all eight of them, under the rock. His father, whom *Yeye* wouldn't see until he became a stranger, gone.

"What kind of God would starve a woman of hope and two of her children of life, *haizi?*"

At the time, my ten-year-old self felt blistered. My mother, a part-time Christian, had trained me from a young age to respect religious affiliations of any nature; to me, Yijiang, my fresh-faced cousin cruising along at a swinging twenty, could pray to his great whatever.

"Why is that God's fault, *Yeye*?" I mumbled, my words tumbling over the sometimes burgundy, sometimes melon-yellow forest floor.

"Because doing nothing is doing something."
I now interpret my following silence that day as being just that, doing nothing, making no move to have my own voice heard. My inaction remains a scar, my at once lethargic and aggressively forward decision to meet *Yeye*'s one-sided truth with the absence of my own.

But that day, as *Yeye* weaved his superstition in the forest canopy, the silver sunlight dripped and bled over the cloth he'd long spun about death. Searching for such a thing was inviting it into your home and smiling just as *Yeye* had done when he stretched his arms and shattered faith and remembered all that he'd lost, all that he was afraid Yijiang would lose.

Hours later, after I'd finished explaining what had happened in the forest, Yijiang would whisper, "It's okay."

The words, I was shocked to realize, were probably the same ones his father had used before he'd left. They shivered from Yijiang's mouth, yet as he kneeled on the dust-filmed floor of his mother's house, he brought a careful finger up to my face to brush away tears I didn't know were there.
"Why—"

But I choked on the word. I melted into sky-bowls of tears, because I knew the next day he would be prey to the world of Marine training, at the mercy of whatever lies beyond God.

"This is His path for me."

I shuddered, ashamed for suddenly being so afraid about what my own path was. Yijiang, as always, saw through my silence, and he curled my hand in his, his mouth tight when he swore that no one could ever take my voice away from me.

Looking back, Yijiang's words were what drove me to see my own light and how things like the great whatever were my own to dictate. This newfound wormhole of infinity, terrifying as it was, was also liberating; I no longer had to squeeze into my ancestral mold, and so, that night marked the moment I braved myself into my silence.

Weeks later, when Yijiang graduated from the Marine Corps Recruit Camp as a second lieutenant, I looked over to my motionless family, their hands frozen on steel laps. Then, breathing in the soft-sweet Virginia air, I rose. My cheers took flight.

Katherine Du

BORZOI BOY

The dog loped to my Austin-Healy as the tires grazed the elm-lined curb in front of my Maybeck redwood house.

"Howya doin', boy," I said.

He was a friendly animal, but he didn't follow me. He hung back and watched me go in the front door. There he was again the next day. And the day after that, just roaming in the street. He always came up to me as I parked the Healy. The same car I used to move all my stuff. How do you move everything in a sports car? Easy, get a divorce. In the evening I walked down to the trickle of a stream running through the towering redwoods in my backyard and sat at a picnic table thinking things over. When I went back to the house there was this golden lump on my backdoor mat. The dog. He stood up, but his head hung low. He was a little shaky on his feet, swaying some.

It dawned on me. No collar. A stray. He hadn't eaten for--how many days now? But he was too polite to come right out and beg. I zipped down to the co-op market and came back with a pound of hamburger, lean. Put half of it in a bowl in front of him and said, "Here you go, boy." He looked up at me. "It's alright," I said.

He ate.

~~~OOO~~~

In the morning the dog was still there.

And that's where he was when I came home that night. So thin he looked taller than he really was. Ultra-thin, as if he could pass through the eye of a needle, with white and gold markings.

I fed him the rest of the hamburger inside the house and placed a throw rug at the foot of my bed. He watched me.

"This is your spot," I told him. "You don't go on the bed."

Sure, that's cool.

When I went to bed, the animal lay on the rug and stuck his nose up on the handmade quilt. That's all, just his nose.

The next night it was a nose and one paw.

"Don't get any ideas," I said. "I know what you're up to."

He put the paw down. Nose stayed up, brown eyes peering at me.

This went on for a week and a half, almost two weeks. Every night. One nose and one paw on the bed. Two paws on the bed. No paws on the bed. One nose, one paw. I got the message. He was telling me to invite him up on the bed, just for a little while.

Okay. But then back to the rug.

The next thing I knew he had his side of the bed staked out. He was slick, the skinny little con artist. But, after all, it was the biggest bed I could find. Round, seven feet in any direction. Plenty of room for a middleweight man and a medium-sized dog.

The day broke bright and clear with lots of bay area sunshine. Not too hot, not too cold. I said to the dog, "You want to come in the car today, boy?"

Okay, why not?

He hopped in and sat in the bucket seat. Didn't jump around or make a big deal out of it. Ready when you are.

"Okay, here's the deal," I told him. "I'm not putting a leash on you because I don't have one. But when we get out in the world, it's your job to stay with me. Got it?"

From then on he could be seen waiting for me outside the local coffeehouse. Or the grocery store or the art gallery or the fish 'n' chips place, any place I went into. He'd hang around greeting students and professors and businessmen and prostitutes and junkies and street freaks walking by, treating them all as equals.

If we got separated on the street, I didn't have to look for him. He'd trot back to the car and jump in the window. When I got back he'd be sitting up in the passenger seat, surveying the passing scene.

I took him to Thanksgiving Day dinner at the home of my girl friend's parents. We walked in the multimillion-dollar house and her flustered mother said, Oh, we can't have a dog in the house. And I said I thought it was all right since they had a dog, the one standing right at her feet.

Oh, yes, but, um - well, my dog might pee on the carpets. So let's just put him on the patio, shall we?

It wasn't a minute later, minute and a half at most, when Boy, watching through the glass doors, with me and the mother only two steps away, witnessed her lavish Lhasa apso take a prolonged pee on the corner of her Persian carpet.

One sunny day a feisty freckle-faced little blond girl in pigtails--couldn't have been more than four or five--stopped me on the street, saying, "Hey, Mister, is that your dog?"

"Yep," says I.
"What's his name?"
I thought about it.
"Boy. I call him Boy."

She wrinkled up her freckles, glared
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Borzoi Boy...

at me and said, "That's no name for a dog."

She had me there. I had to think fast.

"Yeah, but, uh--he comes when I call him."

She squinted at me. Then she nodded and strolled off to mull that one over.

That's not all Boy attracted. How about a cop? Oh, yeah. I was stirring up a batch of yogurt when I heard his bark at the door. I swung the door open and stood face-to-face with a man in a blue uniform wearing a badge. Boy grinning up at me. Guess he liked the uniform. The cop was panting like he'd just taken a bronze in the hundred meters.

"Is (pant) this (pant) your dog?"
"I feed him."

Leaning on the doorjamb he said, "Leash law (pant) citation. Ninety dollars. Goes up for each offense."

"Would you like a glass of water, officer?"

Ninety bucks. That's what it cost. Still no leash.

Boy attracted college girls, too. One afternoon he came prancing down the sidewalk with an energetic auburn-haired, green-eyed phys-ed major. Just snagged her while we were out walking, boy roaming free. She said he was a beautiful dog, and let's take him to the U.C. Berkeley football field for a run. Turned out to be a great idea. I never saw so many dogs zipping around, sizing each other up, yapping.

And two men.
They laughed at my dog.
One guy says, "Is that a male? He better not be here when Max gets back. Max will run him off."
"Yeah," the other guy pipes up. "You better get him outta here real fast. Hah, hah."
"Uh-huh," I said.

Sure enough, in a flash here comes Max tearing across the gridiron heading straight for Boy, making lots of snarling noises. Max built like a Mack truck. Boy was delighted to meet Max. He bobbed to the right, he danced to the left, and then jumped over Max's back. Came up from behind nipping at his heels. Ran around Max in circles, a friendly nip here, a quick bite there. Constantly darting in, but just outside the reach of Max's snapping jaws.

Last we saw of the guys they were running after Max as fast as they could—Max whimpering and heading for the Berkeley hills—screaming, "Max, Max. Come back, Max."

A straight-arm in my spine woke me in the middle of a dream that night. More like a straight-paw. I was racing through a craggy, dense dark forest, wild and reckless. Me and Boy on the trail of a vicious and elusive quarry. The thrill of the chase left me in a cold sweat. We were on the hunt for wolves. I glanced over at Boy. All four of his feet were twitching.

Borzoi.

Or Russian wolfhound, what some people call them.

One night Boy didn't come home. I felt abandoned. He showed up at the door about three in the morning with this goofy look on his face. I'm in love, Dad.

You should have seen us together. Like a demonstration of mental telepathy. I never trained him. Didn't need to. I told him what to do and he did it.

Every time.

You don't believe me?

I got a call from a man who knew I spoke Spanish. He wanted me to go to Mexico and open up an old Spanish gold mine. "We think gold's going to $2000," he said.

Mexico. Señoritas. I couldn't resist. I said yes. But what to do with Boy? Huge hassle to take a dog to Mexico. Paperwork. Shots. And he could end up in a taco.

My twelve-year-old son didn't have a dog, so I made arrangements to fly Borzoi Boy to him in Los Angeles. That night I picked up some scraps at a steak house. I was a regular and they loaded me up with filet mignon, rib-eye, sirloin, t-bone. Amazing the food people leave on their plates. What a feast we had, a bon voyage party. I told Boy he was going to visit *my* boy.

Then Boy did something I'd never seen. He raised up on his back legs and came down fast with his front paws stretched way out. He stayed down, his butt up in the air, looking up at me from the floor as if to say, *Really?*

I'm getting to the telepathy part.

We're at the airport now, through the terminal and out onto the tarmac. Jumbo jets blasting off, trucks rolling back and forth, smell of jet exhaust, and two beefy baggage handlers standing beside a plywood animal transport box on a baggage cart.

One of the men shook his head when he saw Boy ranging around the area, inhaling new odors. He said, "How you think you're gonna get that dog in there?"

"I'll tell him to get in," I said, yawning a little, bored with the question. These

Borzoi Boy...

two gorillas glanced at each other and sneered. They guffawed and started jerking around, giggling like girls. Like that was the funniest thing they ever heard.

"Just open the box," I said.

The bigger baggage guy smirked, flipped the metal bars up, looked at the other guy and sniggered.

I slid Boy's bowl into the crate and turned to him. "Get in."

Boy came over and gave me a look. You sure about this?

I made a gesture with my hand, not pointing, just the merest flick of the wrist. Boy leaped into the crate in one bound, turned around and stood looking out.

After a few frozen seconds the baggage handlers came to life, closed the barred door, and locked it. They didn't say a word.

I reached through the bars and gave Borzoi Boy a rub on the lips.

Gary Winters

CATS' RELIGION

One lazy Saturday afternoon, our fat orange cat Kitzhaber climbed into my lap while I was relaxing in my Lazy Boy. The cat is named after our governor because the cat wouldn't make a good governor either. I woke up later from a dream in which Kitzhaber said "I don't like what you call me. Why would anyone want to be named after a governor that resigned in disgrace? Call me Fireball." Trying to remember what happened before I fell asleep, all I could recall was Kitzhaber, I mean Fireball, purring extraordinarily loud.

Sunday we went to visit my cousin Jewel all day, so I didn't have a chance to see if calling him Fireball would have any effect. On Monday, I called out "Fireball" while he was in another room. As with most cats, he never reacted to being called, but this time he immediately ran in and jumped on my lap. Wife Sally asked about his name change and his strange behavior. Rather than sound crazy, I said that I was trying out "Fireball" because he was flaming orange, but had no idea why he ran to me.

Because I had always viewed cats as mystical and mysterious creatures, I was not as surprised by his behavior as you might expect. On Tuesday while Sally was out shopping, I called to Fireball. He came to my lap, again, and I am fairly sure I was awake when I heard what I think was him speaking to my brain, I guess you could call it telepathy, but I'm not sure. "I could tell when you called me Fireball, that we had a link." As much as I was convinced that Fireball was speaking to me, I also wondered if I was crazy or having a stroke, but I 'heard' "No crazy, no stroke".

For a little while I thought about asking Fireball something only I would know, before I realized how foolish that would be. Instead, I went along with the craziness and asked him a few questions.

"Why are you talking to me now?"

"From reading your mind, I could tell that we would be simpatico, and I was getting bored without any real conversation."

"Would you talk to Sally?"

"No, I can tell that she would want to tell everyone, but I think that you can keep this our secret. If you ever do think of telling anyone, imagine the reaction."

"Do cats commonly converse with people?"

"Not at all lately. Most cats can't talk. I'm special, as you should know. Of those that can talk, most are not interested. They either have nothing to say, or their human company is not worth talking to. A lot of people would kill talking cats. If you know your history, millions of cats that were the familiars of witches were killed. After that we rarely communicated with people."

"What do you think about being neutered?"

"Despite what humans may think of it, it really works for me. Whether I wanted to or not, if I was entire I would be fighting the other toms to impregnate some local queen. Most likely, I'd get ripped up badly. Just like people who should know

Cats' Religion...

better, get drunk and drive anyway, we can't help ourselves as long as we have testosterone. Now I get all I want to eat, a clean dry place to sleep and avoid nasty jungle craziness."

"What's your thing with torturing your live prey?"

"What's your thing with war? OK, to answer your question, that is how we start the digestive process."

"Do cats have a theology?"

"Some, but not all cats, believe that we were created by a divine lion-like creature, which then made the other animals to keep us humble. We expect that on the day of truth all the other animals but cats and edible rodents will perish from the earth and paradise will be attained."

"I can't tell what you are thinking. Does your facial expression tell me anything?"

"You can't pivot your ears, and I can't do much with my face. If I'm hissing, stay away."

"Do related felines, like lynxes, have the ability to "speak"?

"No, we consider them to be retarded, but mostly the skill requires spending lots of time with humans."

"How do you feel about dogs?"

"When they don't want to kill me, I can take them or leave them. Some can be good companions and I know that a lot of people get all gooey over them. I have real reservations about their sanitary habits. The whole sniffing other dogs' butts and rolling in stinky things grosses me out."

"But you lick your own butt."

Fireball left the house without replying.

Over the next few weeks, Fireball and I continued to "converse", when Sally wasn't around to break our concentration. This was of course entertaining, but then I was laid off, and we had something bigger to be concerned about.

My problem then was how to monetize a telepathic cat. Fireball made it clear that he would not be involved in any silly show biz gig. If I tried, he would just clam up. I even tried to bribe him with a separate, well furnished house of his own.

Since we are rich now, you probably wonder how I pulled it off. It turns out that Fireball is not the only smarty in the house. I told Sally, we needed to ignore our problems for awhile and take a little vacation. My other cousin Shane, the rich investor, always liked Fireball and agreed to keep him while we went to Cannon Beach on the Coast.

After our vacation when we got Fireball back I made a lot of successful investments. Fireball has his own small house now, but spends a lot of time with us. From time to time, he boards with Shane while we are out of town, so the money continues to roll in. I don't feel too bad about using Shane's expertise – he always treated Fireball better than he did us, and kept all of his investment ideas to himself. Sally is amazed at what an astute investor I've become.

Over the next several years, Fireball and I had a lot of philosophical conversations, talking about whatever came to mind. We learned to dance together. At first we both tried dancing on our back legs, and then on all fours. Neither worked, so we each danced our own way. Sally was surprised because Fireball had never previously showed any sign of being interested in "tricks".

Of course it couldn't last and it didn't. At a ripe old age Fireball had slowed down and even seemed to "talk" to me less. One day he came to me and said "You are going to have to put me down. My time is growing short, and I don't want to suffer before I go. I have just one request. I want you to bury me under that tree in the backyard where all of the birds perch and torment me. All that screeching, knowing I can't get them. You know I'm unsure of the afterlife, but if I can, I want to haunt those bastards when I'm gone."

I didn't want to bother the birds, but I couldn't believe even a "talking" cat would become a ghost after death. Sally had been noticing that Fireball had declined a lot, so I wasn't surprised when she broached the subject of taking the last drive to the vet. After all of the love we had shared, we both shed some tears about losing our cat. Fireball surprised us again by dying before we could get him to the vet. That made it easy to grant his wish to be put to rest by the trunk of the tree.

After living with a telepathic cat, how could anything be impossible? Birds would land in the tree, but immediately fly away. Fantastic Fireball got his wish.

Doug Hawley



THIS IS BLISS

I met Megan for coffee this morning. I brought her cocoa butter for her stretch marks, a gift certificate for an expensive massage, and three jars of pickles. I also bought coffee. She brought my baby.

She ordered a decaf caramel macchiato--the largest one possible--with three extra caramel pumps. She shrugged and smiled at the barista. "The baby likes caramel. What can you do?" I smiled because Megan ordered her macchiato like that before the baby. Except with the caffeine. Extra caffeine.

"How far along are you?" the young and very pretty barista asked.

"Not as far as I want to be," Meg said. "Seven months and counting." She turned to me, "but what are sisters for if it's not carrying each other's babies?" That's her way of including me.

I reached my arms around her big, round belly and I hugged her. "She's my surrogate," I told the barista.

At that point, you get a variety of responses. People ask if I'm gay, people ask me what's wrong with me, or they ask what that means, or they look around uncomfortably, but mostly people gush over how selfless Megan is, and they tell me how lucky I am to have her in my life--as if I don't know that.

This barista just took my order and made our drinks and said to neither of us in particular, "Good luck with the baby!"

We found a table and sat down. Megan told me how much her back hurts, and she lifted up her enormous feet to show me. "If I didn't have spogs before, I sure do now!" She was already a size 11 before the baby. "You're going to owe me a new shoe wardrobe if this swelling doesn't go down."

"They better be cheap shoes. This baby is going to need diapers, you know."

"Get reusable. My feet are more important."

So we talked about of course I'm buying reusable, and I told her about the colors for the nursery--green and yellow. Meg knows the baby's sex, but James and I are waiting for the surprise. People always ask us what we're hoping for. I'm hoping for a baby.

I told her the names we are thinking about. We like Biblical names mostly, or else names from Victorian novels. We haven't narrowed it down at all. We just throw them out as we think of them. We'll know what the baby's name is when we look at it, right? I don't know--this is our first, and it's happening all crazy. We're making it up as we go.

Megan's a gestational surrogate. That's what they call it when it's my egg and James' sperm, but it's Megan's uterus. Mine's no good. Megan never wanted to give birth to children, but she volunteered as soon as she heard. She's that amazing.

Sometimes I feel like I let James down.

It makes him uncomfortable that Megan is the one having the baby. A woman who's not his wife is pregnant with his child. I get that that's weird. Especially since it's my sister, but there just wasn't another way to do it. I couldn't let a stranger have my baby. People say we should have adopted, and maybe we will next time around. We certainly can't afford to do this again. The in-vitro, I mean. But the people who tell us we should adopt are always the people with the big families, made up of their own biological children that they conceived by having sex with their husbands.

Megan told me a story about her flirting with this guy, who seemed really uncomfortable. She couldn't figure out what his problem was until after she left the grocery store and realized she never told him that she was carrying the baby for someone else.

"You forgot you were pregnant?"

"No, I remembered that! I told him that we could get drinks after the baby was born!"

"Megan! You didn't!"

"Oh, I did."

"So he's imagining you abandoning your newborn to go out and meet guys, then coming up to get your baby drunk with your vodka laced breast milk."

"Correct," she said.

We were dying. It was so funny. So Megan.

"Oh, the baby's kicking!" She grabbed my hand.

I hate that I have to use my hand to feel my own baby kick.

Sometimes I dream that I'm pregnant. In those dreams I can feel the baby kicking, and I wake up and my stomach is flat, and my first thought is that I've misplaced the baby, or someone's taken it away from me. I look through the covers and over the edge of the bed before I remember that the baby's with Megan.

James thinks this whole thing was a mistake. He says, "I didn't know how hard it would be on you," and then I feel bad for not handling it better.

Being with Meg was such a welcome break. We laughed. She did the craziest things; she always has. She makes friends with everyone. She broke out

in song in the middle of the street. She wanted to go dance next to the man playing the saxophone, and she said I have to go with her because she's having a baby for me. So I went, but I just laughed while she danced. She let two women walking by touch her belly. She lets everyone touch her belly. I wish she would ask me first. What if I don't want everyone to touch my baby?

I wonder if I'm ever not going to owe her.

I spend a lot of time with her these days. Because it's a break, and because she needs help now that she's so big, and because I want to be near the baby. James feels left out. It's his baby too. He never really liked Megan. Sometimes I think this whole thing was a mistake.

But I'm grateful. I'm so grateful. And I tell myself, and I tell James, that when we bring this baby home from the hospital and it has my eyes and his chin, then this will all be worth it. And he tells me that he wanted the pregnancy to be something we went through together. And I tell him that I wanted pregnancy to be something I could go through at all.

It was easier at the beginning. That first ultrasound. We just held each other, and neither of us could stop smiling, and we put the picture in a frame by the bed, and we had sex three times in a row--no birth control, no need--and we just kept saying, "Oh my god we're going to be parents!" And I was so happy I cried.
I don't know where all of that went.

Megan gave me name suggestions. Chauncy for a boy. Or Oscar after her dog. She suggested Barack, and I spit cappuccino across the table. When I regained composure, which wasn't for a while, I asked her what I should name it if it's a girl. She said, "Well obviously you have to name it after me." I laughed, but that was much less funny. I do not want to name the baby after her.

James and I have talked about how life never turns out like you plan. But you have to make the best of it. That's not how you should talk about having a child. You shouldn't have to make the best of having a child. We talked about how no one is really normal. What's normal anyway?

And I don't know. I don't know what normal is. I don't think I've ever seen it. But I know what normal is not. Normal is not this.

I went home after coffee, jittery from the caffeine I sometimes use to fill the void. If I can't have a baby, at least I can have all the caffeine I want. I don't even like caffeine; it gives me a headache.

I pulled the car into the garage, and found the makeup remover I keep in my purse, and the eye drops that take the red away. I practiced telling James how much fun coffee was and how beautiful Megan looked and how excited I am about the baby, and when I could do it without crying, I washed away the smeared mascara, and re-applied it so it looked like new.

Is this normal? Normal's always changing. Trying to have a baby used to be normal. Negative pregnancy tests used to be normal. Now normal is Megan will always be the martyr, and I will always be the broken one. And I will always owe her. I hope the baby will be a boy. So that we can name it after James. I hope the baby will be a girl, so we can name it anything but Megan.

James and I are putting the crib together tonight, and he will drink and I will cry, and we will have sex because we are lonely, and it won't help. We will ask each other, "are you okay?" a million times each. And in nine weeks we will have a baby that will be mostly us, but a little bit Megan.

I don't know what normal is. I've never seen it. I've definitely never been it. Come to think of it, I don't know if I've ever been happy either. Unless this is it. It this it?

Rachel Peters

DOH!

WHAT CAN YOU SAY TO BOTHER A WRITER?
"The list is to long too wright hear."

HOW DID THE RUN-ON SENTENCE KNOW IT WAS PREGNANT?
"Its period was late."

HOW DID CHARLOTTE BRONTË SAVE US FROM SUFFOCATING?
"She invented Eyre."

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE WALK INTO A BAR...
"It was tense."

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOOTHE THE GRAMMAR POLICE?
"There, their, they're."

WHAT KIND OF WORD SHOULD YOU INVITE TO A FANCY TEA PARTY?
"A proper noun."

WHY DID THE COMMA BREAK UP WITH THE APOSTROPHE?
"Because it was too possessive."

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CAT AND A COMMA?
"A cat has claws at the ends of its paws, and a comma is a pause at the end of a clause."

IS THERE A WORD IN ENGLISH THAT USES ALL THE VOWELS INCLUDING "Y"?
"Unquestionably!"

MY ENGLISH TEACHER ASKED ME TO NAME TWO PRONOUNS.
"I said, "Who, me?'"

WHY DO WORDS AND PHRASES END UP IN COURT?
"To be sentenced."

WHY DID THE WRITER FEEL COLD?
"Because she was surrounded by drafts."

WHY DID THE PREGNANT WOMAN YELL "WOULDN'T! COULDN'T! SHOULDN'T"?
"She was having contractions."

THEY EAT THEM IN CHINA

The whole thing left a horrible taste in my mouth. For months afterwards, I seriously contemplated giving up the practice of law, anything to get away from a world I have grown to despise. Instead, I keep on with my life, even though that means suffering the frequent nightmares that have me jolting awake, my head filled with visions of those poor suffering creatures.

I should have declined the case, but public defenders in our fair state don't get a whole lot of leeway on such matters. Anyway, at the time, I figured he'd plead out. But the old coot was stubborn as a kid facing his first haircut. His grip was strong, his hand calloused, and his blue eyes just about as warm and inviting as an iceberg in the North Atlantic. I remember thinking I would not want to have that man following me down a dark alley.

I suggested right off that he consider copping a plea. "Hell, no," he'd replied, his bushy gray brows nearly meeting at the top of his nose. "I ain't done nothin' wrong."

Silas was a wiry, hardscrabble, back country boy who hadn't bothered to finish school or learn a trade and yet had found himself having to do something to make a living, considering he had a wife and four kids. He never smoked a corncob pipe, but that's the way I always picture him. For some odd reason, his claiming to be innocent had me thinking about my ancestors who'd made their living doing something wrong and had been willing to die defending the institution of slavery. It was one reason I'd chosen to be a public defender—a feckless attempt to redress past wrongs, I admit, but . . . was Silas any different from them?

Now, you might not understand it—hell, sometimes I don't really understand it—but a man's entitled to a defense, and I, as his attorney, was duty bound to defend him to the best of my ability. Even if I thought—make that *knew*—he was guilty and should fry in hell.

Silas was caught red-handed, the evidence of his cruelty beyond dispute. Those poor little puppies were all crowded together in tiny metal cages, stacked on top of each other. When the dog on top crapped, the rest got a shit shower. The cages were so small, the poor critters could barely turn around, let alone get any exercise. Some of them couldn't even walk, they were in such bad shape. And that's before they were rescued and the vets discovered severe hair loss, skin infections, dehydration, gum disease, and gastrointestinal issues, among other ailments. Sixteen of them died shortly afterwards. One of them was a Labrador bitch who'd just delivered a litter of seven pups.

Of course, I tried to explain to the SOB that pleading guilty might get him a lesser sentence, maybe nine months and a fine instead of two to five at Central. It was a no-brainer, to my way of thinking, but he steadfastly refused. "Hell, I'm just makin' a livin'. What's wrong with that? You sayin' a man cain't run a business in Nawth Care'lina, put food on the table for his family? No way I'm travelin' down that guilt road. It ain't true, and it ain't right."

I don't know what the guy was thinking when he demanded a jury trial. And I often wonder if the jurors also suffered nightmares afterwards. They heard the testimony. They saw the photographs that I had failed to get thrown out of court on the basis of their creating an insurmountable bias against my client. "You're going to have to do better than that, son," was the judge's comment when he ruled in favor of the prosecution.

What sticks in my craw is the conversation I had with Silas about his defense before the trial even started.

"Why are you claiming innocence?" I asked him, leaving the fact of his deeds unspoken between us.

"Because *I am* innocent. I weren't doin' nothin' a cattleman or a pig farmer wouldn't a done. Ain't none a *them* accused of animal cruelty."

"Perhaps because you can't stack cattle in cages?"

That comment got a shrug from Silas. "They're both livestock, ain't they? 'Sides, I heard tell they eat 'em in China. So what's the big fucking difference?"

I scratched my head a moment, thinking, *in this country, they're pets.* "You weren't raising puppies for food, Silas."

"So?" His thick brows met in the middle again. "Plenty a farm kids around these parts got pet pigs and pet chickens—leastways till there's a need to eat 'em."

He had a point, which, it turns out, became my defense.

I didn't expect to win the case, but I figured I wouldn't be laughed out of court either. I'd give the jury something to ponder in their deliberations. Maybe one or two of them would be farmers, unsentimental types who were quite used to seeing a pet pig or calf sent off to slaughter, who probably feared that, if they didn't draw a line somewhere, the animal rights movement might show up on *their* doorstep one day. They'd get things so messed up in that jury room, there'd be no way

FOR FEAR OF HEIGHTS

With my dead sister's letter clutched in one hand, I knocked on Nate's door with the other.

For a while I just stood there, picking at the hem of my t-shirt and rocking on my heels. Anybody else would've left after five, maybe ten minutes passed – but I heard the TV playing on the other side of the door. Nate's mother had told mine he hadn't left his apartment in weeks - not since it happened.

He was in there.

I raised my fist to knock again for good measure, but the lock and deadbolt clicked and he opened the door just a crack. Just so he could see me.

"What're you doing?" he said. His voice was thick and nasal, and his eyes were a little bloodshot like he'd caught a cold or spent the day crying.

It was safe to assume it was the latter.

"Hi, Nate."

"Is everything okay?" His eyes darted behind me, just passed my shoulder.

I shrugged. "As okay as things'll ever be, yes," I said. "Want some company?"

Nate just stared at me and licked his lips before he dropped his gaze to the floor. "This isn't really a good time, Tess. Sorry."

He started closing the door but I stopped it with my foot.

"But I have something for you," I said, and held up the envelope.

"What's that?"

"A letter, I guess," I said. "From Becca."

He froze, just staring at the envelope in my hand then swallowed. "From Becca?"

"Yeah. I've been holding on to it for a while, don't know why. But my mom's been bugging me to get out of the house, so…" I shrugged. "Guess I'm killing two birds with one stone."

"Oh." He hesitated for a few seconds, then pulled the door open all the way. "You could've mailed it."

"I could've, but I didn't," I said. "I'm sure you're a little behind on your mail anyway."

He shrugged, stepping out of the way so I could come inside.

His apartment was in the exact state you'd expect from someone whose girlfriend just bit it. Take out boxes and dishes stacked on dishes. Dirty laundry strewn on the floor and chairs.

Nate had always been so neat.

"How'd you end up with it?" he asked. "The letter, I mean."

"She sent it in a souvenir package from Mali. Put everything together with a little note that said 'Give this to Natey-Bear' or something obnoxious like that. You know how she likes to save money on postage and all." I turned the en-

They Eat Them in China...

to reach a unanimous verdict on the full count.

To my everlasting shame, it worked. The jury found Silas guilty of the lesser charge of animal negligence. The judge gave him a tough lecture, which probably went in one ear and evaporated before it could even reach the other. He was forbidden to own dogs or cats or other animals considered pets, sentenced to sixty days in jail, and assessed a fine that I knew he couldn't pay unless he managed to sell off some of his so-called "livestock." The thought sickened me.

I know all that balderdash about vengeance being the Lord's, but it didn't stop me from believing that, if the world were truly just, Silas would go to jail for far more than sixty days, that he'd wind up in a very small cage at the bottom of a stack of cages housing other felons whose bodily excretions would naturally obey the laws of gravity, that he'd learn just how it felt to be hungry and thirsty all the time, to get sick and not be treated, maybe even to die. And maybe all of his misery would be accompanied by the cries of helpless puppies in distress.

Of course, that would never happen. The punishment seldom fits the crime in the crazy world we live in. After his release, Silas would head back home, start breeding more puppies, and stack them in cages like he did before. Oh sure, he'd be on the authorities' watch list. He'd get raided again. But I feared the same defense that I had just employed might work just as well the next time around.

I was shoving my papers back into my briefcase, when the words just slipped out. "How could you do this to such innocent creatures?"

Silas just stood there, those cold blue eyes regarding me like a wolf about to pounce. "You ever heard that sayin', 'the sins of the fathers?' If your great granddaddy was still alive, I might could ask him the same question."

Caroline Taylor

For Fear of heights...

velope around in my hands, brushing my thumb over the front where she'd scrawled *Nate* and doodled a heart by his name. It was the same bubble-lettered handwriting she used to tell me how much she missed me in a note that came with my package of kola nuts. "Anyway, here," I said, and handed him the letter. "Nobody opened it or read it or anything."

Nate took it and just looked at it real hard, like maybe he could read the letter through the envelope or something.

We stood in silence.

He finally drew in a deep breath and met my eyes. "You don't – you don't think it's a – a suicide note or something?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

The notion that Becca, happy-go-lucky Becca who'd spent her summer in the Mali Peace Corps would take her own life was beyond me.

"It might be," Nate said. "That's what everyone's saying. They're saying she jumped."

"They're wrong."

"What else could've happened, Tess?"

"She didn't jump."

"She fell twelve stories. You know Becca, she hates – *hated* – heights. She wouldn't have been fucking around on the edge. It wouldn't have been an accident," he said. His voice was getting louder, higher, more hysterical.

"You don't know that," I said. "Nobody knows that. You weren't there. Nobody was. Nobody knows what happened except for her, and she's not here to tell us."

His breathing became labored. He scrubbed a hand over his face, then tore the envelope open.

"You don't have to read it in front of me," I said.

But I was hoping he would.

Nate read the letter where he was, and I watched his face. His lips were pursed together and his jaw was set tight.

When he finished, he slowly lowered himself into a kitchen chair and pressed his hand over his mouth.

"What?" I said. "What'd she – what'd it say?"

He just shook his head, trying to collect himself.

He took in a shaky breath and dropped his hand from his mouth.

"She wanted to tell me about a nightmare. A recurring nightmare she'd been having," he said. "She was trapped in an elevator, and it was falling. The last thing she thought of when she hit the ground was me."

Madison Harrold



FINDING MY FATHER

My bones feel creaky and brittle; there's a mild pain in my lower back that hurts whenever I take a deep breath. I need to get out of town, to get away from everything. I don't want to tell anyone—family, friends or co-workers. Just drive as far as my car can take me. I'm itchy for a new experience, anything to make me feel different, and to take the pain away.

So I get in my rundown Mazda and I drive up the coast, searching for a sign, a message, or an experience that could help me find my direction. My father had always been my friend and mentor. He always supported me. He encouraged me like a good counselor. He was the one that I went to when I felt stuck. Now I'm stuck and he's gone.

He always said the right things. They were simple words, but he said them generously, from a place that was real and sincere. When I pined for a woman and didn't think I would ever find one, he told me that there was a "lid for every pot." When I was in the hospital suffering from pneumonia, hooked up to an IV and despondent, he told me that at least I don't have cancer. They were silly comments, some may even consider them to be insensitive, but you had to know my father. The things that he said came from the right place. He knew how to make me feel better.

Heading north to the Bay Area from my home in Santa Cruz, I get on Route 1 and just drive. A country song on the radio reminds me of him. He liked singers like Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash who had a chip on their shoulders. He called them "down-to-earth" people. "These guys don't bullshit you," he said.

My father was a simple, unpretentious man. He sold fruits and vegetables most of his life. His father handed down the produce profession to him. If you knew him, you'd call him a blue-collar guy, a hard worker who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He always put in a good day's work, coming home each night with scuffed boots and grimy work shirts. He labored long and hard for many years.

He wanted me to have an easier life, one where I wouldn't have to wake up early in the morning and load a truck with fruits and vegetables. He wanted me to be different, to not work so many hours and to not wreck my body lifting heaving boxes of produce.

Passing the citrus fields and avocado farms remind me of him. His large hands and strong fingers put a heavy bag of potatoes on his back. He dumps the potatoes into a display bin and removes the rotten ones without using gloves. I think of him putting a couple of wooden crates of cantaloupes on his handcart and wheeling it to the cooler. He weighs a hand of bananas on a hanging scale. He smiles at a customer with his thick lips and a mouth full of false teeth. He tells the customer to throw in another banana or two to make it three pounds. He never charged extra when it went over.

I want to see the redwood trees with centuries of history that could put my life in perspective. I want to be in the middle of the Muir Woods and surround myself with nature, lose my melancholy, and feel strong again.

An image of my father pushing me on a swing comes into my mind. He helps me up the slide and makes a funny whistle when I slide down. He holds my rump when I climb the monkey bars so I don't fall. He teaches me how to bounce a basketball without losing the dribble. We laugh a lot. We hug each other. He comforts me when I bruise my knee. He reminds me to be nice to other children.

He makes me feel good. When I'm with him, everything feels the way it should be and nothing will ever change. Time will stand still. I will never grow older. He will live forever.

Walking along the wooden pathway of the Muir Woods, I see luscious green plants, tiny animals, insects, and hear the tapping sounds of woodpeckers. Nature is arranged so perfectly, just like my father arranged his fruit truck with his merchandise. No space wasted. Things put where they were supposed to go. He knew exactly where they were when he needed them. I breathe in the cool, fresh air making my lungs fill up and then sigh it all out.

The Polaroid pictures of my dad holding me as a baby flashes in my head. He held me tight, not wanting me to fall. He

looked at me like he was looking at a miracle. His eyes watered with happiness and his emotions ran high. He whispered that he would always take care of me.

He allowed me to walk at my own speed. He didn't push or pull me like some parents might do. He didn't try to control me but let me explore life at my own pace. When he did grip my hand, it made me feel secure and loved.

Right now I'm trying not to cry. If my father were here he would tell me to let it all out. He was very masculine but he believed that it was okay for a man to cry. He cried at his brother's funeral, my mother's struggles with mental illness and the many other sad events in our life. When he cried, his baldhead got red, his glasses fogged up and he carefully cleaned them with a tissue. It was powerful to watch him cry. It made me not be afraid of tears.

Crying like a man, like my father today. I long for him to be breathing and his blood circulating through his body. His voice is loud in my head and his infectious laugh feels comforting. He squeezes my shoulders when he hugs me. I sit on his lap as a kid and he bounces me up and down on his knee. I can't stop thinking about him.

Feeling weak and vulnerable as I walk through the woods. It will be my time soon to stop living. It might be tomorrow or next week or some time in the future, I don't know. I'll be dead and gone and my kids will go through the same melancholy journey. Why did he leave me so suddenly? I should have taken better care of him or encouraged him to see the doctor.

I'm trying to stop crying, but I can't.

My legs feel shaky like I'm going to fall. My father keeps me from falling. He holds me upright so I can stand tall. He taught me to walk, to ride a bike, and to drive a car. He bought me my first car. He taught me how to drive a stick shift. He didn't yell at me when I made mistakes. He just told me to keep trying.

The sunlight splinters through the tall trees making the spider webs look like beautiful kaleidoscopes. I lose myself in the whistling wrens, blue jays singing, owls hooting, scurrying wood mice, crayfish in the stream, snowy egrets with skinny legs, and the river otters splashing in the water.

Standing beside the tall trees with their massive bark, I find myself experiencing its unspoken wisdom. The trees survived far worse than me. Their power and history far outweighs mine. I dig my heels into the earth to take root. Closing my eyes, I imagine I'm one of the tall trees.

My father touches my shoulder. He is silent in his strength. He communicates to me without words, that it is all right. It is what it is. Death comes and goes. Don't try to control it. Embrace it. It's all good.

My father walks beside me. He is young again. He is not hooked up to a respiratory machine. He is no longer on life support, gasping for air and barely living. He is fully conscious, breathing freely, functioning without any help from machines. There is no longer the need for a morphine drip to ease his pain. He is happy again. He smiles at me for the longest time and slowly dissolves in the cool forest mist, leaving behind his signature odor that once defined him.

My energy has come back. The pain in my lower back seems to have disappeared. The palette of nature's colors in Muir Woods appears more beautiful and vibrant now. With each step I feel more in harmony with the way things are.

I call my wife to tell her where I am and that I'm on my way home. She informs me that my son is out with his friends and that my daughter is in her room finishing a term paper. My wife says that there's some stew cooking in the Crockpot and would I please pick up some French bread on my way home.

The oyster and turkey tail mushrooms are below my feet on the forest floor. The insects, spiders, squirrels, and chipmunks are more active. The woods engulf me once more. I forget my fears, my loss, and have a renewed sense of belonging.

The darkening sky signals me to make my way quickly back to the car. It gets windy and the leaves swirl around me. Looking up at the trees for one last time, they seem to be reaching for the heavens.

I realize that I haven't lost my father. He's as close to me as he ever was. He never left.

Mark Tulin

Laundromat Arithmetic

Practicing numbers,
he watches her smoke. She stares
at nothing: Not him,
not the passing red mustang.
I'm not (one, two) he thinks (three)

thinking about her.
A breeze blows blue smoke through red
hair. He blinks and folds
his laundry (four, five) slowly,
then walks right out of her life.

Mark J. Mitchell

Sanctuary

In the gathering of fertility
laughter ricochets off the photo frame.

I smell the smoke
but can't see the fire.

Watch dogs rotate through the broken fences,
where "wildlife-y" rocks listen to curses.

The purple ipod
is set to revenge.

Linda Sacco

Balancing Act

He stood accused
of arresting an insight.

But no, he objected,
he'd only plucked it, lightly,

with two slim fingers and,
for barely a semi-quaver,

held it up to the light.
Then he let it float away

until it burst with the silly sound
of a soap bubble striking a bell.

Mark J. Mitchell

Take Me on a Journey Please

I wish I were off to another world
Where my destiny would be unfurled.

Could I become a brilliant spell caster?
Or only learn to fly faster?

Perhaps I could board a circus-filled freight,
Begin timid, but learn a lesson from a mousy mate?

Maybe if I had another mind,
Inspiration in a movie train wreck I'd find.

Before sharks and wars, it would be a start,
A director's movie career would depart.

What if I could witness a historic ride?
Be there to see the supporters relish in hope and pride?

A retraced step for leaders is part of the sign
To make the most famous rail adventure of '09.

Take me on a journey please I beg the textbook on my knees!

Linda Sacco

THE LAST DROPS OF LIFE

The vase is a simple one that stood on our dining room table for all of the sixty years that we had been married. It's cylindrical, about two and a half hands high and three quarters of a hand wide. Its thick walls were finely crafted from a deep cobalt glass that seemed to radiate a friendly, sometimes capricious, glow when the light from the dining room window sparked it. It was given to Ann and me as a wedding present and had become a touchstone, part of our lives, and a beautiful member of the family. Ann would fill it with fresh flowers every week—often red and white carnations that were "our" flower--the sign of love that we adopted early in our courtship. It saw blossoms of all colors, shapes and sizes; some from our fine garden, and others from faraway tropical jungles and distant isles. It celebrated every major event in our lives--anniversaries, engagements, weddings, graduations, and all of our birthdays.

After Ann's funeral, after the callers had gone and left their casseroles and cakes and all sorts of food that I would never eat, I was alone in my mourning. I looked at the vase containing the last flower arrangement that she had done. It was a joyous display of callow lilies whose white funnels and yellow, life-giving stigmas reached toward the sky; toward Ann's now safe spirit. I didn't have the heart to throw out this last living vestige of her.

I visited the vase, the shrine, every day and prayed for Ann. I watched as the stems sagged a bit, and the blossoms became limp. The water had evaporated and filled only half the vase. It contained an ugly gray-green cloudy mixture of rotting flowers, as age had sucked the life out of the once fresh blooms.

One day I found a small pool of water around the vase's base. I noticed that it had developed a slight fissure in its side, near the bottom. It hadn't been dropped or hit, so it must be a function of its age. Or it felt its usefulness over now that Ann has passed away. Glass is full of stresses and, I suppose, one just ran amok. I watched as tiny drops of water seeped out of the crack, and ran down the vase's side, sliding onto the tabletop. I put a pad under the vase to protect the table's finish.

Over a few days, more water droplets, the flower's life fluid, their blood, fled the vase. I left for a few days to visit my daughter. When I returned I found the vase empty of water save a tiny residual pool. The petals had fallen and the leaves turned to a mottled brown-black. The flowers and vase were dead.

I feel like my vase. There are cracks and fissures in my spirit and body. My faculties are slowly leaking out of me. First my memory devolved. Then there was the cancer operation. I didn't smoke so I don't know where that came from. I've had two knee replacements, undoubtedly due to my long distance running days. I have difficulty getting up out of a chair. And the other day I lost my balance and fell. Thank god there were no injuries. I ache in strange places, and walk slowly and cautiously. I'm slightly hunch-backed.

I'm not bitching about my lot as tiny drops of life run out of me. Like the vase, I too have honored both special occasions and the common occurrences that mark everyday life. I've had a wonderful and happy life with Ann. She is no longer here to celebrate the beauty of our flowers and us. The vase is empty now. There is no one here to fill it. It is dead, but not yet buried. I can't bring myself to throw away this symbol of our life together.

I too am a vase, waiting for the last drop to hurry out so I can join Ann.

C. Davis Fogg



THAILAND THUNDER

A huge wooden oblong crate was delivered. It was the kind made from sturdy planks, with the top nailed firmly in place, about six feet long, four feet wide and four feet tall. The return address was my brother and a military APO. We were expecting him home from his eighteen month stint in Thailand where he had worked at a US Army motor pool. Mom had the delivery men take the crate down to the basement which had its own back entrance and a wide doorway down a few short steps. As the days stretched into weeks, we waited for Tom to arrive. At least once a day, we surreptitiously snuck down to the basement to gaze at the crate, wondering what could be inside.

Tom's homecoming a month after the crate came was meant to be festive, but after a few rushed hugs and slaps on the back, we steered him down to the basement. Dad produced a rusty crowbar which weeks before he had routed from the dusty back corner of the garage in anticipation of the opening. We hurried Tom along as he struggled to pry up the top. Finally Dad grabbed the tool from him and efficiently dispatched the wooden cover guarding the unknown treasure inside.

It was 1969, years before high tech bubble wrap and Styrofoam eggs were used for packing. Instead, we found a mountain of stringy paper strips and wadded newsprint. Removing the cushioning fluff, Tom began to lift wondrous items from the crate. There was a teakwood box hinged with brass fittings, inside of which my Mom found a magnificent set of brass flatware-knives, forks, spoons, serving utensils-each with beautifully fashioned teak handles, polished to a fine luster. My present was a teak and brass abacus-I was good in math in school. Dad received a diamond tie tack and matching cufflinks. Tom kept unpacking gorgeous wooden and brass objects. Finally, all that remained was a reel-to-reel tape player and two large speakers. Tom had purchased this audio marvel from the PX as a gift for himself.

Later, after the family had settled in, left to admire their presents from the Orient, I followed Tom back down to the basement, ostensibly to set up the new stereo system. I was puzzled as he began to unscrew the fronts of the tall speakers. This was the true opening Tom had been awaiting. He carefully removed a package wrapped in plastic from the first speaker. As he slit the tape and unwound the bundle, I saw a green leafy mass. Each speaker contained a kilo of the verdant stash. Tom explained this was called Thailand Thunder, the best marijuana in the Far East, if not in the world! I was only a freshman in high school and had never even seen the demon weed. But my big brother introduced me to my first toke. I was spoiled for life by Thailand Thunder.

Deborah Rohde

Pedestrian

A new year passed. My gay friend with the glass eye
received, just today, his insurance settlement.
And me. A complexity thwarting mine,
I've knuckled down to my bereavement.

God have mercy, how his gaze used to rove
each carpool to the vet, such trees, such calculations of sky,
and how a mind and body must yearn so for love.
The crash like a nuclear blast! Not the average guy.

Life isn't fair. Me being a fag-hag-Buckeye
from corn-row, I suggested in goodwill a humble renga party
during which time he wrote about it (the glass eye)
and made me feel a gracious and forgiving host.

I'm sure it must suck (and I try not to look).
The stiffness in my spine keeps my tongue tied.

Such suffering. Such loss.
"Just a jamb in my printer!"
I laugh it off.

Anna Cates

DIAMOND WATER

"That's where you want to go?" she asked, her eyes hovering over the loud letters on my sweatshirt.

I nodded. "I've always wanted to act in its theater program."

Her eyes blurred then, drifting somewhere far away from the eighth grade art room. I could feel memories, warm and bright, melting from her smile.

"You've matured, Katherine," she said. "You've really matured."

My art teacher didn't come to school the next day. The sub told us she was sick with a mild cough, and we believed him until the cough kept Ms. Cellini out of class for a few more days. A week. Two weeks.

And then the phone call came. I remember taking it, then wishing I hadn't. After I hung up, I stepped into the shower and let the diamond-cold water pierce the spaces between my toes. Time passed. My back began to tickle, to steam. Some lingering part of me found the sense to switch the nozzle off, but the rest of me hung suspended. My eyes wouldn't close.

Back at school, the administration made everyone in Ms. Cellini's class go through a one-on-one session with a counselor. Mine told me to write a goodbye letter to her, so I did, inventing feelings I knew would get me out of his office.

I remember starting to take one, two, three showers a day. There was something about the jet cold, the smoldering heat, something glorious about the way my tears became numbed, lost. A few days into this routine, I began re-writing goodbyes, quiet words in the fog that spread like butter over the fiberglass walls. *I miss your words. I miss your smile. I miss the way you looked into my dreams.*

And sometimes, when I hugged those words on the walls, it felt like I could see her, like I could taste the fire dancing off her smile again.

Katherine Du

When We Land

it will be like the pilot ejected from his plane,
finally touching soft ground.
It will be a handshake that means forever,
many seasons of ripe cherries -
an evergreen growing in the basement.
And all the stars will sing "kindness eternal"
like a summer beach without the crowds or looming sharks.
And happy will be our hands swinging from trees,
made whole again by the healing act of honest love.
We will walk briskly. We will be smiling. Miracles
are born from the emptiness and
the longing for ancient beginnings.
Blue Jade under the pillow.
Our animal shapes, rising internal.
When we land, we will smell the nightmares evaporating,
senselessness will have run its course.
And all that we lost, and all that we never had
will blend in beautifully, transcended
by this direction.

Allison Grayhurst

Cardboard Memory

When the lights flicker in the purple-bruised skies,
i'll see the crabs that

Walk around your eyes at night, and I'll wonder
how much of you is water

And how much is flesh. Maybe you're a
crinkled ball of pinching lies,

Or maybe it's not you, maybe it's that
diabolical mother of yours

Doing another syringe of world-class ecstasy
in the room next door. Careful

There, sleeping beauty, I can see your tears,
yet you told me rocks couldn't cry and

I could never be the one, and no, love,
i never did tell you how much you

Remind me of fresh-scrubbed beach and tide,
because you know what?

Sometimes I'm scared that if I look hard enough,
i'll see myself in your crab-rimmed eyes.

Katherine Du

HE REMEMBERS THERE WERE GARDENS

It's darker than he ever imagined, like a great plug pulled on the world, with nothing but the sound of his own breath beating slow. Darker than nights he dreamed of oceans coating his lungs, filling his heart, left motionless in his own body, fallen back into a time before other people, only two sets of hands clasping each other. A time when she was looking at him and he was looking at her and everything was green and hope and thrilling new laughter at each discovery. Time spent naming all they found, never disagreeing on a syllable, as animals growled their own, brought out like fresh flavors on their tongues. The trees are heavy with food, shade, a million things blending with their bones.

But one day, there is a crack in the world and she is looking at him and he is looking at her and there is a wrinkle along her brow, a story of smooth alien skin wrapping her arm, murmuring into her ear, revealing secrets, revealing all, breaking her heart open wide, blood running out, terrible thoughts running in. She pulls him in close, and when she touches his temples with her fingertips, he knows it's true. Suddenly, as if by magic, nothing is what they want anymore. There are dark new layers, meanings they don't expect, scales falling from their eyes, blinking in the sunlight at what really exists.

And then God came. And everything was mud and shame and desperate claws at forgiveness, denials of promises made in shouts and betrayed in whispers. You were made of stars, God said, stellar matter dispersed. I created a whole universe inside you and what have you done?

He looks down at his hands, her hands, their hands snaked together. Watches them decay until photons, neutrinos, positrons are the whole world drifting rootless in a space larger than the mind can imagine. They have become all pain ever felt, all joy ever had, gone, done, meaningless, silent and cold.

But not yet, God says. It will be years and years, trillions and trillions. You'll wait until forever before you come back the way you started, before you're anything I wanted you to be.

He draws a sudden, deep forceful breath as if his head has been pulled from under water. Coughing himself out of a dream more real than real life, he remembers there were gardens.

Kate LaDew

CARMELA

Curled like a stray cat in the sand around the fire's dead ashes Pedro Cesar twitched and grunted, simultaneously trying to emerge from the dream and sink into it, deeply, forgetfully, forever. Or was it a dream? He clutched the stiff, dirty pelt he had thrown over him as a cover and tried to rise. A shadow darkened the open doorway. Pedro Cesar cried out—the scream beat against his eyes, blinding him; through the darkness he heard a voice whisper *Carmela, Carmela*. The cry died in his throat. The voice was his and Carmela lay on the floor, bleeding and screaming.

He rushed to help her. She screamed him away, teeth moist and jagged like a wolf's. The child had become twisted during labor and its foot was lodged beside its head in her uterus. It could not expand enough to emit him and she'd cut the fetus out with a knife. Again Pedro Cesar approached, his jaw slack and cheek jerking; Carmela drew herself upward, her head back, her long hair matted and plastered against her face, and howled in anguish and hatred, cursing him and all men and the instruments of torture and pleasure by which they bred—and bled—their human cows.

The hand he extended to help her, she caught in her teeth. He spun away, crying deep in his chest, plunged through the door and ran through the hot afternoon dust screaming for help.

The old women who came revived Carmela long enough to mutter rites and wave their hands over her expiring body. One toothless crone, obesely toadlike, lit a tallow candle and moistened her fingers in Carmela's blood. From her mouth she drew a blob of spit and rolled it in the dust and kneaded it into the blood to make a little cake that she placed on the dying woman's lips. Then she dropped it onto the spluttering candle.

Charlene (1976)

The scent of moonlight was trapped in my nostrils when

Chortles of the cockcrow overflowed from my ears and drowned My eyes announcing another chance

A mere man-child
My lanky limbs begged the aching between my legs to cease
But I couldn't help but think about her

She was licorice and smelled of nutmeg

Breakfast was calling

My grandmother would pulverize tablespoons
of charcoaled beans
So's they'd simmer into liquid midnight

There was cornbread
Honey toned like my grandma Lina
Bacon
Eggs if the chickens were layin' right

But I loved my sips of coffee best
Slurping her in
Her texture warm and wet
Echoes of a Carolina blossom

She became my tutor
and I learned to slowly savor
The notes of bull grapes and
juniper and
oak skirted in Spanish moss

My first kiss tasted like coffee

Now coffee tastes like my first kiss

Mornin' comes

And I still ache like a boy.

C. Z. Heyward

Carmela...

The flame wavered, vanished. The toadlike woman tilted her head and screeched—one sharp, glottal call—and the flame quivered to life again. A sharp, hot wind swept across Pedro Cesar's face. He whirled, trying to catch the spirit but it had vanished. *Carmela!* he murmured. She was gone. Only her body, torn and lifeless, remained.

Later a priest came to mutter, monotonously, over the hole into which they'd dumped the two corpses. Newly ordained and bitter, a Mexican of Spanish origins, he complained of aching feet and the lack of wine and insisted that he be paid in whatever the *campesinos* could gather: chickens, *cańa*, adobe bricks. Through the confessional, a wicker made of corn stalks, he counseled Pedro Cesar to abstain from fornication and pray to the Virgin and reminded him that The Father in His Infinite Wisdom was infallible and Carmela, having paid on earth for her sins, would become His handmaiden in Heaven.

Unable to sleep and afraid to be alone, Pedro Cesar swilled himself into blubbering insanity and slept the night face down in his own puke on the floor of the *cantina* in which he'd been drinking. Just as night was receding and dawn beginning he awakened, sick, guilt-ridden and angry, and staggered outside. A coyote was howling. The sky, though cloudless, seemed ominously electric. Pedro heard a voice whisper *mi amor*. Suddenly Carmela was in front of him, her hand outstretched, her head tilted and laughter in her eyes.

"Ay! mi querida!" Pedro Cesar cried out. The coyote's howl crescendoed; Carmela's smile lengthened into fangs; the head she flung sideways was gray and tufted; her teeth ripped at his wrist.

"Carmela! Carmela!"

Slowly he pushed himself above the slime he'd vomited on the packed cantina floor. His shirt, sticky with sweat, clung to his ribs. Birds were singing. He stumbled to his feet. *Ven! Ven*! A voice—Carmela's, beside him—whispered. Instinctively, wanting her, he followed, clutching at the wind as though it were garment she wore.

The hole they'd dug had been opened. Not by shovels—even in his stupor Pedro Cesar could see that some frail, angry thing had clawed its way out from within. Carmela! he screamed. *Ahr-mail-yah*! a voice, far away, answered.

He slumped to his knees in the soft dirt, quivering and repeating her name. *Ahr-mail-yah! Ahr-mail-yah!* the wind flung gusts of moist soil across his face. Pedro Cesar sagged back, his mouth open. Dry weeds behind him began to whisper then, wind-struck, to cackle. He twisted to face whatever was there, hands thrust upward. Shadows burst across him: wolves with huge slavering fangs; he ducked, cringing and slid halfway into the open grave.

Pale, pre-dawn light framed the shape of the old toadlike crone. Her face and shoulders were wrapped in a dirty gray shawl; her eyes were like quivering beetles within her wide, warted cheeks. Cackling laughter wrestled into the folds of skin hiding her throat. She bent forward. "In life," her thick voice accused, "you were her burden. Now in death she is yours."

"Ay! viejita! I meant no badness. I did only what other men do!"

"Like them you walk through slime!" Ponderously, a huge, dinosaurian aggressor, she pressed her bare foot against his face and shoved him into the grave.

Earth toppled around him. He tried to push himself up but his arms failed him. A chorus of toad voices hooted and cursed. Slowly he rolled over. The grave—the pit—seemed to have flattened. The toad curses sharpened into humanlike cadences. He opened his eyes. It was fully morning and he was lying beside the road.

"Qué despierta, pendejo!" Slop water sloshed his neck and shoulders.

"Whores!" he cried out, blinking and choking as he twisted to face his tormentors. The toadlike old one was not among them. These were younger village women, friends of Carmela's: Gina, Pedro Cesar's sister, was with them. "*Chingada*!" he whispered under his breath, "*qué no me molesta*."

Twice, stumbling along behind them, he had to stop, writhing, his stomach still trying to disgorge the last of his night's debauching. A pig snuffling in the dust beside the road crooked its head to glare at him. It had dug a portion of a butchered skull bone and noisily was cracking it between its teeth. "Beast devil, eat your own kind!" Pedro Cesar cursed as he stumbled past. The women he'd been following now were almost to the graveyard where Carmela had been buried. He held back, hunched, frowning, waiting for their cries of alarm.

"Come, *pendejo,*" they called coldly. Still talking, shuffling their feet, nodding, they threw twisted zinnias and bluish-gray wildflowers on the slightly sunken grave. Pedro Cesar edged closer. Through the slow, dry swirling that rocked his brain he could see that it was no different than it had been the day before. Nothing had tried to claw out of it. The only trace of the dream in the dust beside the grave was the dried, bird-pecked skin of a toad.

Robert Joe Stout



A TERRIFIC COOK

When Jim comes home Wednesday night, he has a woman with him. A skinny-assed woman around twenty-eight, with a kid about four dragging behind—Italian or Puerto-Rican. She has a head full of gorgeous black hair.

"Jean, this Teresa," he says. "She's a waitress at The Bull. You've heard me talk about her. She needs a place to stay."

I smile nice and bend down to say Hello to the little girl. But I'm fuming. When I first saw them from the parlor window, I figured he was bringing her home for dinner, and that pissed me off enough, without him telling me beforehand. But it sounds like it's going to be more than dinner.

Like the fool I am, I bring the woman into the parlor. I say, "Here honey, sit down." I swat the cat off the couch and move some newspapers. "How about some tea or some coffee? Or something cold?"

"Coffee would be great," she answers.

She has this matter of fact voice which makes me wish I had never called her "honey." She's still in her uniform from work, and her skirt is creeping halfway up her ass.

I feel my head begin to throb, but I keep acting real polite.

"There's some toys in that box over there," I say to the child. "The kids will be home soon and then there'll be somebody to play with."

I feel sorry for the little one. She has this bewildered look and she's wearing this dress that she could probably wear for her first communion.

"Jim, maybe you could give me a hand in the kitchen."

I nod to Miss Señorita and go into the kitchen.

"What the hell's going on," I whisper.

He's wearing his sheepish grin—the one that used to always win me over—but I'm in no mood for it today. He says, "Jean, it's not what you think. Her husband's this crazy Hispanic guy. She can't leave him. He'll kill her. So she just needs a place to run to."

"What about us? What's he going to do to us?"

"Nobody needs to know. He won't come into the bar, and we'll just bring her here as best we can."

"Do you want some?" I rasp in a tone of disgust. I place a teaspoon of instant coffee into a cup for her, and I prepare one for myself. He shakes his head no, and then reaches into the refrigerator for a beer.

"It won't be long. Or if it is, it might be fun. She can baby-sit every so often"—and he actually has the nerve to give me a little pat on the rear—"and she can help out with some of the bills. Christ, she makes as much as me."

I yell into the parlor, "How do you like your coffee?"

"I'll fix it," she says, as if I'm too stupid to know how to put cream or sugar in someone's coffee, and she comes on into the kitchen with her little one following right behind, so that there are three adults and a child maneuvering in a kitchen that's crowded with just me and the cat.

"Is there a problem," she asks, looking at my husband with the kind of eyes that remind me of those women doctors or writers you see on the talk shows, all smiles and brains and seriousness, but her looks makes me think that there's more to this deal than just a place to hide out.

"No Terr, everything's fine," says Jim. "How about if I go upstairs and try to fix something up for you and Lisa?"

And that coward grabs his beer and hustles up the stairs, two at a time, leaving me in the kitchen with Teresa. He's always been like that. Avoids confrontation like the plague. In fact, in eighteen years of marriage, I can't remember ever having a real argument. We disagree plenty, but it never comes out. He just gives me the silent treatment when he's angry or simply gives in when he doesn't care enough to fight.

So anyway, it's me and the young woman in my kitchen, and her overdressed daughter clinging to her legs. And there's nothing to say. Luckily, I was planning on spaghetti tonight anyways, and there's always plenty, so I just hand her six plates and tell her to put them around the table.

The evening is awkward. The kids spend most of the night playing with the little girl, but when it's time for them to do their homework, she seems a bit lost and nestles close to her mother's side. To be truthful, I feel a bit sorry for both of them, but still I hope the mother realizes the problems she causing in my house.

She goes up to bed early with her daughter, and for a long time, I can hear her unpacking—Jim took the summer clothes out of the spare dresser and put them in the attic, so our pair of guests have somewhere to put their things.

Jim and I talk late into the night, far later than normal. Usually, I'm asleep before the news, but then I'm the first

one out of the house in the mornings. Tonight, though, I couldn't sleep if I wanted to.

He promises that it won't be any problem, and that there's nothing more involved that his big old Good-Samaritan heart. The crazy thing is, I guess I believe him, but I'm not completely sure yet.

The little girl, he tells me, will still be at the same day-care where she's been all the time, and Teresa is more than willing to pull her weight.

"Besides," he says, "she's a terrific cook."

Both Teresa and Jim don't start work until eleven—they have the eleven to nine shift—and Teresa's still in bed. Jim comes downstairs with me and helps get the school lunches ready. They don't leave until 8:15 but he's got everything ready by 6:45. I zip up my parka, give him a kiss, and notice that he's already shaved.

"We'll see you about ten," he says, and I head off for work.

The next couple of days go fine. The kids treat Lisa like she's some kind of doll, and the poor girl's probably never had so much attention in her life. Really, she's a sweet thing and very lovable. Last night she sat up close to me on the couch and watched me cut coupons, and after a while I read to her from one of the books the kids had when they were her age.

Monday is Teresa's day off, and when I come home, the house is filled with the smell of onion and garlic and something else I can't place. I remember Jim saying that she's a good cook, so I go straight to the kitchen. I lift the lid off a simmering pot and take a deep breath from tonight's dinner.

There's a note on the table saying the stew should be ready by 6:00. There are instructions to stir it every so often. I take a slice of bread and dip it into the pot, soaking it with the juice. I finish it in two bites, my head stretched over the sink so as not to drip on the floor, and then I go upstairs to see the kids.

"Where's Teresa?" I ask the oldest.

"I don't know," she says, barely looking up from trying to slide some pants onto a Barbie doll. "She went out."

Around 7:30, I feed the kids, not setting a plate for myself but dipping slice after of slice of bread into the stew. The little one eats quietly, looking up at me every so often. I guess instinctively she knows.

At 9:00, I put the three of them to bed and go down to the kitchen. The kid's plates and the bowl of stew are still on the table, but I'm too tired to clear them. I grab a fork and stab at one of the potatoes in the bowl. Then a piece of beef, a carrot, another potato, an onion. Bite by bite, I eat everything in the bowl, and then wipe it clean with a last slice of bread. It's after midnight when I turn off the kitchen light and go up to bed.

J. P. Bohannon

NEW VOCATION

After the Great Kerplooey, everything was worth about a penny. If that. The Stock Exchange had become a Mausoleum, precious metals became superfluous, and the word *entrepreneur* got 86ed out of the collective lexicon. Real estate moguls dedicated themselves exclusively to marathon-running, but nobody really cared about their cheap sweat. Coffee consumption plummeted. It was worse than the 18th Great Depression, we were on the verge of the Second Great Ennui, and the bumberclotters weren't helping, believe me, they kept bitching about having nothing to do so the Grand Poo-Bah made a bold speech, declaring that his planet wasn't going couch potato on his watch. Everybody had to do something, even if it meant we'd all become light bulb installers.

Filled with a sense of civic duty and overzealousness that can only be rivaled from a return to classes after a long recess, I plunged into my new vocation. I chose it the way most college freshmen pick an elective, eenie, meenie, minie. Moe. Eye closed, I landed my scrawny index finger on Dust Buster and the rest is history. Nothing is more therapeutic. And, for a recovering agnostic, there's no better way to scrub your soul. I still couldn't say the G-word, but when I got into a cleansing flow, sucking up dustballs under the couch— *hey now*. Hadn't been so jazzed since my punchball days.

One of the consequences of the Great Kerplooey was that baseball took a nosedive. All the prima donnas bugged out when the American Pastime became a boys' game again. They were only doing it for the money. Without a celebrity lifestyle, they decided to play video games. So the scrubs took over the diamond. A .279 batting average became a viable contender for the batting crown. It wasn't pretty, but at least folks still had a reason to drown themselves in stale beer in the middle of the

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FALL-OFF-THE-BONE BABY-BACK RIBS



Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cut ribs into sections of 2 ribs per section. Season lightly with salt, pepper and a little garlic powder.

Line a baking pan with heavy duty Reynolds wrap, using ample wrap to cover all four sides and completely enclose and seal the rib sections.

Place the ribs in the foil-lined pan, adding 3-4 ice cubes and seal the foil. Repeat if you have more ribs than will fit into one pan.

Place in the oven and cook 30 minutes. Meanwhile, heat grill on medium-high heat.

Move the foil package of ribs from the oven to the grill, leaving the foil sealed, and cook for an additional one hour.

Remove ribs from the foil and place on the grill for an additional 15 minutes, basting with your favorite BBQ sauce.

Bill Melton



CORN CAKES WITH HONEY

Ingredients:
1 package corn muffin mix, prepared--I recommend Jiffy brand.
2 large ears of fresh corn.
1 orange, zested.
2 scallions, whites and greens, finely chopped.
3 tablespoons butter
honey

Mix corn muffin mix batter in large bowl. Heat a griddle or cast iron pan over medium heat.

Cut fresh corn kernels from cobs and scrape residue (dispose of cobs). Stir the fresh corn, orange zest, and scallions into muffin mix batter. Cut up 2 tablespoons butter into small bits and fold into batter.

Lightly coat pan with butter.

Pile the batter into mounds, 3 inches wide, and cook the cakes until golden on each side. Repeat with remaining batter.

Meanwhile, heat a small pot of water over low heat and bring to a boil. Remove the pan from heat and put the honey jar into the water bath until gently warm.

Arrange the corn cakes on a serving platter and serve with the honey drizzled on top.

Bill Melton

New Vocation...

week, bulbous red nose to bulbous red nose, listening for the ump to vent his lungs.

Then there was Marty Pilbeam who had enormous zeal and the skill set of a toothpick. He spent eight hours a day shagging flies and grounders off the schoolyard wall. The slapdash arrangement of bricks redirected most of his tosses so it virtually impossible to predict where the ball would go. As a result, Marty got one heck of a workout.

In the mornings, I passed him on my way to fetching my paper. He always had the crazed puss of somebody embroiled in a life and death tryout. Sometimes he even looked respectable out there, but who had the heart to trample on his one pipedream.

Wayne Piscatotle, our neighborhood yutz, almost did numerous times, but I told him not to hassle the poor sap. I gave Wayne chocolate bars so he'd stop being a killjoy. He first recognized Marty's schoolyard antics and kept me posted. He assured me Marty would be straightjacketed by mid-June. I passed by the schoolyard in the mornings to see for myself. It all seemed a little pathetic, but harmless until Marty stopped bringing the ball. He still had the glove, cap, and the same mealy uniform, one yellow stirrup, shimmying down his ankle like a shriveled corn husk, but he kept shagging ghost flies. Without the ball, I got a little worried. His intensity had always been a bit unsettling for most people though it never bothered me much. I saw him as a big, wad-chewing kid, even at thirty-seven.

When I saw him punching his mitt and screaming, "We want a pitcher not a belly-itcher" to a flummoxed pigeon, I knew I had to step to the plate.

I walked over to Marty and he threw his arms up. "Whoa, Nap," Marty said. "Where you going?"

"Just wanted to talk."

"With runners on the corners?"

"My bad," I said and pretended, I too, could see the invisible players, taking their leads.

Right then, I was in over my helmet. I had to figure out the ground rules pronto or else I'd get beaned by a screwball.

"What inning?" I asked.

"Top of the sixth," he said.

"Cool. Maybe we'll catch up later."

The next day Marty was chasing down a runner when I showed up. He lunged with his gloved hand, finally nabbing the guy. I felt like clapping, but didn't want to encourage him. Then he thumbed me over.

"Would you mind throwing a little B.P?" Marty said. "We're shorthanded."

Besides the two of us, there was only a scrawny tabby in the schoolyard and she didn't even have a glove.

I went over to the makeshift mound and warmed up while Marty took cuts with his invisible bat. I must say, he looked ferocious at the point of contact. After a couple of minutes, he yelled "Batter up" and I heeled the rubber.

From a half-stretch, I tossed a few meatballs till Marty got his groove.
"Boy, you roped that last one," I said.

It all seemed harmless enough until Wayne budinskied. He was surprised to see me messing around with Marty so early in the day, but after I tossed the imaginary meatballs for Marty to smash off the fence, Wayne's jaw dropped.

As I was loping to the fence, fetching the phantom balls, Wayne tugged my shirt sleeve.

"How long you going to play this charade?" Wayne said.

"As long as necessary," I said.

"Well, I want you to know that I think it's wrong."

"I know."

"You know what I think or you know it's wrong?"

"Both."

"What you plan to do about it?"

"Don't know."

"You can't keep it up forever."

And I knew I couldn't, but I was a very good procrastinator and equally adept at sweeping the metaphorical under the rug. My vacuuming, you know, was unparalleled.

Marty's enthusiasm was contagious. He kept digging in his back heel. You'd swear we were on a dirt field rather than a crummy schoolyard. So animated were his rally cries I started doing the wave.

Folks started to come by to watch our miming routine. At first, just a dog-walker or two; the labs didn't make a big fuss, but their leash-yokers were stoked. Then hedge-clippers, plumbers, and even a few suits took in our matinee. Soon fathers and sons garbed with their own gloves filled the out

field. Not my boys. They were too busy with their string theory experiments. Fortunately, they had their mom's brain and weren't going to catch me in the act. I don't think I could've lived down the ridicule.

When we got ourselves a full infield, and an opposing dugout of like-minded enthusiasts, we knew we had something. It was a soaring feeling. Must've been the same rush pioneer air guitar bands had. I found myself chest-bumping with the ump over a lousy call.

Eventually, I traded my favorite tweed jacket for a decent shortstop's glove. Got a couple of cans of linseed oil and began smoothing it in. You couldn't put a price on what we were doing. We were putting the fun back into the Great American Pastime or that's how I saw it.

Marty crossed a different Rubicon. He had the hangdog face of a pennant-chasing manager. He blew a gasket whenever he suspected somebody wasn't pulling his weight. His neck veins thick as glue sticks. Trotting was a big no-no. "Burn, baby burn" was his favorite chant. It became his mantra. Once he had to discipline me for not dropping a bunt to move the runners over. I took it to heart and it didn't happen again.

He expected the guys to do laps and winds sprints before the game. I'll admit it became less fun and more of a grind. Even Marty seemed to be stressing more and I wondered if it was all really worth it. Then, before I had the chance to say anything, he sidled up to me while we were in the middle of batting practice. I was smoothing the hitch from my swing when he said, "Hey Nap, this isn't what I signed up for."

"No, maybe not" I said.

"Don't let it eatcha kid," he said with a hand on my shoulder.

I could see his lid-heavy eyes roiling in disappointment, not in himself, but in the whole work-in-progress. He still had that hardnosed, extra-innings-mien, but walked with less bounce.

Just before I tossed the imaginary donut off the barrel of my invisible bat, he dropped a doozy on me. I pretended I didn't hear him, but, of course, Marty asked me again, "Would Pops be proud of me?"

"Sure he would," I lied.

"He always thought the world of you."

"And you too," I said, trying to sound convincing.

But the thing is, I'm not sure, at all, what Pops Pilbeam would've thought. He coached us mostly to get away from Mama Pilbeam. He never used hit and runs, never taught us the hook slide, never gave us signals to be a legitimate, midget-level ballclub. He struck me as somebody who was fully aware of his limitations and that his four-foot progeny wasn't going to cut the mustard. I was grateful to him that he took an early interest in me, taught me how hit to the opposite field, but I wished he would've given his poor kid a little more attention, and didn't call him pudge. I blame him for the reason I spoil my boys.

The next day Marty had disappeared like a foul ball gobbled into the stands. We waited for him, pushing back the game for as long as we could. I filled in as captain and we did the best under the circumstances. There was more kibitzing, but I let it slide because we all needed to blow off steam.

I blew up when Dunlap got a late jump off third on a flyout. We lost the game by a stinking run and I took it out on the water cooler, kicking its plastic rump. It felt great. Somebody from behind the fence clapped. For a nanosecond, I thought it was Wayne mocking me. Had it been, I would've gone water cooler on him. My admirer had a large pair of shades, cap pulled over his brows. I recognized that chew anywhere. It was Marty, grinning like a stolen base king ready to dash. He *pssted* me over. Much as I wanted to give him a big howdy, I didn't blow his cover.

"You got a way with them," Marty said.

"If you say so."

"Sure you do and I'm not stepping on your toes. Not till we clinch."

"Can't do it."

"You have to."

"I've vacuuming to do."

"Leave it to me."

The idea of Marty taking care of my vacuuming duties had me worried, considering his soft spin on schoolyard baseball. Amazingly, he was a fill-in ace. Piscatotle had been tracking him. In fact, Marty had geometrically grown my business. He even picked up the slack of the garbage men. No more Snickers wrappers, blowing in the wind. No gum splotches, cigarette butts, or cheese doodle puff.

It had me curious. I checked up on Marty when I was done with practice. The suspense was killing me. Around seven o'clock, I saw him outside the window of Clifford's deli. If any place needed a good sprucing up it was Clifford's for sure. He hardly had a reason

New Vocation...

to clean. With so many going vegetarian, Clifford scaled back on his cold cuts, even removed the hanging pig from the window, but no matter what he did he couldn't bring in traffic. Not that he needed to fill his till, nobody had to pay rent anymore anyway, but the dusty/dingy motif kept people from loping in to shoot the breeze. What else did we have to look forward to but a little chitchat?

I winced at the thought of those dusty boxes of crackers and filthy jars of jelly. It nearly gave me a sinus infection. No vacuum or push broom in sight. There was no bucket or cleaning product whatsoever. Marty was on his knees, wiping the floor barehanded. The door was open so I crept in for a closer inspection. He wasn't even touching the floor with his hand. His palm raised, at least seven inches above the unvarnished wood, and everywhere his precious fingers roamed, a new sheen emerged. It was spooky. He didn't notice me as I accidentally stubbed my toe on the edge of the counter. His laser focus moved to the jars of jelly, quinoa, and the fuzzy boxes of wheat thins. Again, he kept a finger-snap's distance and as he passed each row the jelly jars and cracker boxes looked brand-spanking new. I wouldn't disturb him, couldn't disturb him, for Marty Pilbeam had found his great calling.

John Gorman

CHOREOGRAPHY

Winston approaches the pedestrian walkway crossing the busy, four-lane road. He sees it will not be easy to navigate today. Normally, there are breaks in the traffic and he can jay walk if he moves quickly. But today, the automobiles are thick as thieves in both directions--*most unfortunate.*

Winston pushes the walk light. It will be another 120 seconds before the traffic signal will change to red and the walk light will illuminate. Winston hates delays; he has his walking commute timed to within three minutes. It's not like Winston counts the number of cracks in the sidewalk but he does take a certain pride in insuring a precise commute.

As Winston waits, he observes a middle-aged Asian woman accompanied by a small child. They are marooned in the traffic island of the roadway. They've succeeded in getting only halfway across. *How unfortunate*, he thinks. He wonders how long they've been out there.

The woman looks to be at her wits' end. Eventually, however, she spies a brief interruption in the flow of the traffic and hurries to get herself and her little girl across the remainder of the parkway. Just as they reach the safety of the opposite curb, a motorcyclist guns its engine and speeds past them, missing the pair by mere inches. The woman is frightened for her safety and the child's. She reaches down and clutches the girl tightly to her side. The cyclist continues down the road at a breakneck speed. Winston wishes he were situated a bit closer; he would right this injustice by using his smartphone to take a photo of the motorcycle's license plate and report it to the police. It would take no time at all. In fact, he wouldn't even have to slow his pace. It could all be done while he continues his commute.

The cyclist is savoring the success he's enjoyed causing fear in the mother and child. Winston sees the cyclist looking over his shoulder at the pair. Winston also sees that the cyclist is oblivious to his proximity to a traffic backup and the stationary vehicles situated directly in front of him. It takes the cyclist only two seconds to close the distance. Winston watches the ensuing carnage with fascination: the motorcycle rear-ends a car while traveling at approximately 45 miles per hour.

The motorcycle hits the vehicle's rear bumper and the cyclist becomes airborne; his head and torso slam into the car's rear windshield and roof. Not only does the collision of flesh and bone with metal and glass produce a sound similar resembling a shotgun blast, it also retards the distance and velocity of the rider's ballistic trajectory. The lifeless corpse flips lazily, head-over-heels, for a distance of five to six car lengths before landing back onto terra firma with a *thud*! It takes only a little under four seconds. Winston is impressed by the sound and fluidity of motion. It reminds him of a well-choreographed opera. He suppresses the urge to applaud.

Winston places a call to 9-1-1. In just under 17 seconds, he's relayed the location and nature of the emergency. He is ambivalent about waiting, but ultimately he decides to stay and observe until the police arrive. Winston notes the sirens are audible in just less than four minutes. Six minutes and five seconds later, both the police and ambulance arrive on the scene. The first responders scrape the cyclist's remains off the pavement.

Winston is not happy that his arrival at home will be delayed by thirteen minutes and 45 seconds, and he's especially unhappy that he's forced to wait for the additional two-minute walk-cycle.

C'est la vie.

Phil Temples

Derek McCrea













Featuring the art of Derek McCrea

Derek McCrea has been a prolific artist since 1982. He started painting under the instruction of Jimmy Peterson and his own mother in the early to mid 80s. He continued self study en plein air internationally wherever he was stationed as an Infantry Soldier (1987-2010) in Italy, Germany, Belgium, and across the USA. Since 2010, he has served as an adviser to the military and continues to paint. Derek paints in a whimsical impressionistic style in plein air settings. He was born in Albany, Georgia on February 19, 1969 and presently resides with his wife, Sheila, of 26 years, and his two sons. Derek completes around 20 commissions per year for customers from photos. His art can be found in galleries throughout the Southeastern United States, in private collections worldwide, and in many publications.

You can learn more about this artist, and buy his artwork by visiting:
http://www.derekmccrea.50megs.com

You may recognize Derek McCrea's artwork from the cover of this magazine! Full color images of these works can be enjoyed by visiting the Art and Photography page on our website:

http://DualCoastMagazine.com

Poor Man's Melody

I've been placed within a burdened lot so low.
What happened to the world I used to know?
Don't speak of what you see or else you will be known.

One perceives in others near only what he doesn't want to be.
For the ordinary man, it takes too much to say to him hello,
That's why I'm found within a burdened lot so low.

I must be odd for everyone is talking, but around me, no one speaks.
I've acquired a speech impediment and say things I do not know.
Don't speak of how you feel or else you will be known.

Since when do we represent, obliged to tout our ideologies?
It could only mean the loss of the ones we owned.
Why am I misplaced within a burdened lot so low?

Can't everyone see the new diseases are nothing like they used to be?
Being among the nameless infects demons contagious. Exorcism the cure, alone.
Don't think, and stay far from the others or you will be known.

To adapt to life through a new lens is like evolution in Darwin's theories.
Will I make it through tomorrow? The road is becoming more narrow.
There must be a place where I won't be so alone.

A ground hog woke up in spring and was scared by an ominous shadow;
It returned to its hole, to wait for a brighter day, tomorrow.
Why have I been placed within a burdened lot so low.
Don't look at me and speak of what I say, or I will be known.

Timothy Norton



Her Last Breath

She gasps for air
Like a fish out of water,
Minus the flopping around bit
As oxygen is forced into her.

What is going through
That head of hers
As she struggles to breathe
Her very last breath?

Can she hear us or
Are her actions solely
Due to the nature of
Dying from old age?

Her piercing blue eyes
Hide behind her eyelids
And I wonder what she's seeing
And why I can't see it, too.

Her grey hair is matted to
Her head though it is soft
And dry when I run my fingers
Through her old locks.

What is she thinking as
Death begins to suck whatever
Life is left in her, as her life
Begins to slowly slip away?

I wish I could follow her
To the place she's fading to,
Though I know I won't be able to
For quite a long time if I'm blessed.

Her Pale lips used to sing when
She cooked, always has a laugh
On the tip of her tongue and always
Knew what to say and when to say it.

I called the woman Nana, though
She also went by: mom, sister, auntie;
Jeannette, the woman with a song in her heart.

Caleigh Hanson

LINGER LOVE

Whether you and I observe--
lying in the cool grass of evening,
your leg crossing mine--
my fingers brushing your palm,
the moon will glow.

Whether we take that switchback
trail at dawn, laughing into the open space
around us and between us
under the moon's light-blanket,
that stream is playing its part.
Eternal concert, we sometimes care to listen to.

Oh love! Linger here
even when--especially when--
I alone observe the moon,
stroll singular beside the chattering stream.

Liz Shine