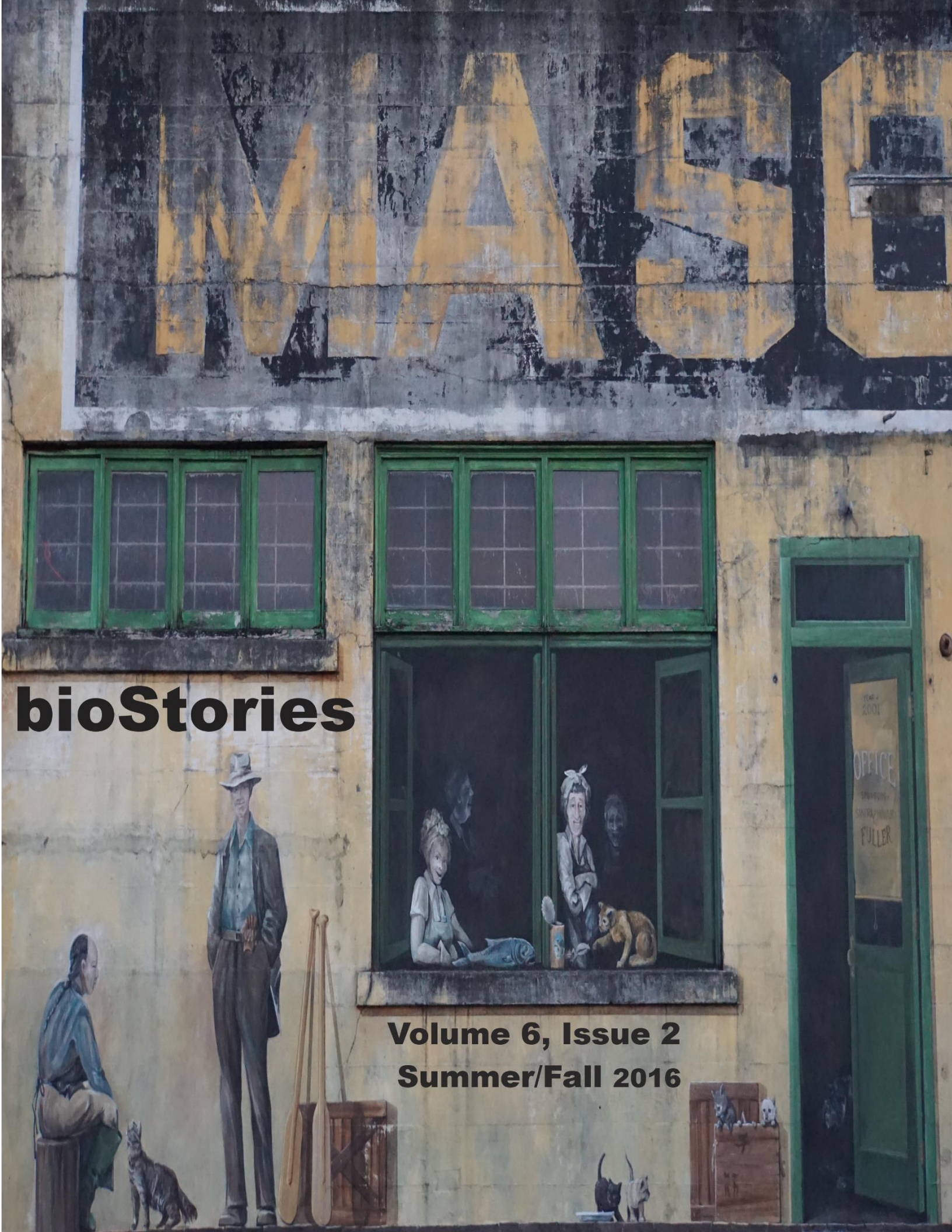
bioStories
Volume 6, Issue 2
Summer/Fall 2016

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

*bio***Stories** is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly conveyed can help strangers peer briefly within its whole, hold that life momentarily in their eye, and quite possibly see the world anew through that lens.

We feature new work weekly on our website, gather materials twice a year in issues like the one you are now reading, and offer thematic anthologies cultivated from work featured on the website. To read more essays, visit www.biostories.com. We encourage you to visit the website weekly for new essays and to follow the magazine on Facebook and Twitter.

Volume 6, Issue 2 continues our tradition of featuring an eclectic variety of essays, from profiles of a “tough guy” and a mom who sneaks Vodka from yellow Tupperware to a teenager inspired by Punjabi poetry and Kirtan and a Jewish grandfather who delighted in sparring with academic texts and family members alike. In this issue, our authors share their losses and their triumphs, take us inside unpredictable police encounters, homegrown wild animal refuges, 1950s department stores, decrepit New York brownstones basement apartments, and the burned-out remains of a Kentucky music store. You will meet heroes and heroines, addicts and saviors, all presented through the words and experiences of extraordinarily talented writers.

The image displayed on the cover of this issue is a photograph by Martha Clarkson. Her writing also appears in this issue. The photo is of a mural painted by Jo Lumpkin Brown that appears on the old Sears building in Astoria, Oregon.

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Vanishing

Siri Liv Myhrom

1.

Raymond hasn't eaten in five days. He will go on dying of dehydration, starvation, and cancer for five more days, and we'll take turns keeping vigil by his bedside, watching him incrementally disappear until we wish him gone, for his sake and ours.

It will finally happen on a stormy, slate-sky Tuesday afternoon, six people surrounding him, earnestly resting flushed hands on his sallow rawboned limbs.

He'll breathe in—we'll wait, holding our own living breath—but no exhale will come. And that will be his exit: mouth slightly agape, eyes steady and skyward, a Renaissance saint in rapture. I will sit for an hour beside him afterwards, almost more in awe of this terrible beauty than in grief, wonder for weeks what he saw, wonder still.

Outside, the crab apple trees will be at their fullest, the arching, wind-blown branches crowded and busy with sturdy white blossoms that keep shaking off the rain.

2.

Four months later, it will be my mother. Some floodgate will open in her brain, some explosion of light and blood at the base of her skull, a bright flash. She will look at my brother and say, *I feel so tired*. He'll say, *Come in the living room and sit down*. She'll say, *But it's so far*, even though she's only ten feet away from the chair.

Then the blood tide will rise too fast and strong in her brain, and she will drown right there in my brother's living room, ninety seconds from start to finish.

I'll sit with her in the hospital room, every part of her that mattered already snuffed out, but in the absence of her, I'll cling to what's left: those artist's hands, the soft flesh of her upper arms, the long, warm space between jaw and collar bone. I'll sing to her all the hymns I know by heart, the ones she loved, because it is the only way I can figure out what to say to her about what I am witnessing.

Even after the breathing tube is pulled, she will work so hard to die, for hours, through the entire night and into the morning, her whole sternum heaving, the gurgling inhalations and the sour exhalations fluttering and halting. This is a sound, along with my father's muffled sobbing into her chest, that will relentlessly revisit me in memory.

The last moment will be just that: a moment. She'll let her breath all out, finally letting go, her ribcage depressed, my ribcage on fire. Nothing but white and the faint beeping in the room. I'll think, *Even if this is it, even if there is no heaven, this painless quiet is enough.* The blazing blue September sky outside the window, and all the embered trees, will bow in agreement.

3.

Jeff will choose to die at home. We will take turns sitting with him during the night, having our own surreal and mundane conversations about ordering pizza, feeding the cat, washing dishes—all this brash talk of living things in the presence of the dying.

Finally, his breath will soften and slow. He will bring his teeth lightly together with each inhale, his mouth barely open, like he is tasting and chewing the very last of life. His new bride, Marti, will put her head on his chest, will hold his wounded head—the source of all this misery, the surgeries and still the insistent tentacles of tumor. She will kiss him over and over, will give him permission to finish this one last meal of air.

And he'll listen. That last breath will be a holy trailing thread that holds him here one moment and then just releases him into the embrace of some soft compelling Invitation. It will be so tender a passing that she will have to ask, *Is he gone? Did he go?*

Then in the brittle winter morning light, we will wash his still-warm skin with cloths dipped in a metal bowl of steaming soapy water and lavender oil, a sacred offering on this All Saint's Day. We'll dress him, awkwardly heft his bony body from bed to wooden coffin. We'll weight his eyes with quarters, tie his jaw, arrange his arms and legs, line his body with ice packs, line the coffin with sunflowers and lilies, adorn the room with a summer's worth of flowers. Other than the rare whispered question, we'll move mostly in silence, so gently, so gently, knowing we are inside a consecrated moment, that we have stood at the temple door between Here and Not Here.

4.

On a warm June evening, I will open the garage door to get the reel mower, and I will see a baby robin with his head tucked under his wing. I will know something is amiss when he doesn't startle or try to escape at my approach, when he lets me pick him up with little protest. I won't know how he got in or how long he's been there.

I will take him out in the back yard, hoping the fresh air and close light will revive him. I'll give him a few eye droppers of water, which he will quietly drink.

My three-year-old will hold him so gently and say, *He looks tired. Maybe his momma will come get him soon and snuggle with him*. *I think she will.* But his breathing will be getting erratic by this time, and he'll keep closing his eyes, and because I believe in telling her the truth about these things, I'll talk about the fact that he is probably dying. She'll take this news with a kind of sagely acceptance: it is what it is.

Is his brain hurt? she'll ask, reaching back almost nine months to the conversations I had with her, when she was two, about my mother. I'll marvel again at how kids don't miss a thing—and how they resurrect moments and make connections in the weirdest, most clairvoyant ways.

She will go inside to take a bath, and I'll hold him again, press him up to the warmth and pulse of my neck.

And how can I not think of every creature I have ever loved, every being I've held as it left, everyone I love right now with such a ferocity that I hardly know what to do with it? As soon as I commit to sitting in one small moment where I'm paying attention and not flinching or distracting or numbing myself, I've committed to sitting with all of it, and it's always a little bit like drowning.

I'll make a bed for him in the mulchy leaves under the dense hosta. His eyes will be closed and his feet curled, though his chest will still be moving—but I will know by now when there's nothing left to do. There's so much I can't do a thing about except be a witness. And it will seem strange to me, since so much of life is letting go—most of it, really—that it is still such an awfully hard thing to do.

I Met My Mother's Body at Loehmann's

Jan Zlotnik Schmidt

"Loehmann's Closing Down After 94 Years"
—*New York Times*, January 24, 2014

I met my mother's body for the first time at Loehmann's. There she was in a girdle, with those tabs for beige stockings, a white bra and half-slip, staring down at me, a child looking up into the expanse of her flesh, her curves, her midriff bulging over the top of the elastic band of the slip. I was a six or seven or eight years old, crouching down, peering up at a glade of women's legs—some stalk thin, some stockinged, some pudgy at the calves. And gazing upward I saw their serviceable Playtex bras, a glimpse of them, as they tried on blouses, sweaters, and jackets. We were at the back of the store—there were no dressing rooms—and in front of me were the gilt circular staircase, the crystal chandelier, enormous diamonds of filigreed glass, refracting the little afternoon light in the room. At the entrance, the men sat and waited, hunched over their *Times,* or *Herald Tribune*, or *New York Mirror*, women's pocketbooks dangling from their arms, eyes looking down, not daring that taboo glance to the back of the store.

The women became Circe, Dido, the Graces, preening in front of the mirror in cashmere or silk, or sleek black shirts, asking for approval first from the women and then from the men. They had beehive dyed blonde and brown hair, perfectly manicured white or pink nails, straight lines in their hose, and a hint of Arpege perfumed the air. After gazing with satisfaction at their profiles in the mirror, they praised each other for their keen eyes and instinct for the bargain, the cashmere coat originally 59.00 down to 29.00, the B. Altman's blouse a steal for 6.95 down from 9.95. Their bodies, ready, girded for battle with a larger world, a world in which they wouldn't be viewed as immigrants or imposters. They had the right clothes. And I, patient, sat cross-legged, staring into my future.

Loehmann's remained a constant in my relationship with my mother—each time I returned home from college, from adult life teaching in Kentucky, from middle age boredom, my mother and I would go to the store, first on Flatbush Avenue and Duryea Place and then Sheepshead Bay. At that point we knew each other's mode of being. I went for the turtlenecks and black pants, she for silk blouses and rayon stretch pants. And she always made me try on a bigger size. The tunic revealed too much of my breasts, or the shirt, she said, popped open at the buttons, or the blazer pulled across my back. My mother, jealous of my lithe body, hers so stocky and stout, unconsciously pulled me into her world by convincing me to go for the larger size—the sweaters wouldn't fit under the coat, she would say, or you don't want to reveal every bulge of flesh. But I wanted the knit tops that emphasized my figure or the blazer that created curves. Then we'd argue until I gave in, unsure of my desirability.

There also were the conversations that passed for intimacy in the dressing room or in the elevator between the racks of sportswear on the first floor and the second floor Back Room, Designer Showroom. "How are you doing?" she'd ask in a crowded elevator as the other women listened. And what could I say? "Oh fine." She once questioned me during a particularly difficult period in my marriage, and I realized that the advice about clothing would have to pass for closeness. She really didn't want to enter my inner world. The intimacy of the dressing room would have to be enough.

Later in her old age, I was the one pressing the creases of clothes in place, straightening out the crepe blouses, pulling up the rayon pants when she couldn't bend down because of her arthritis. I was the one who helped her pull the cotton sweaters over her head, I was the one who heard her worries about dying as she tried on Kelly green silk blouses, and I was the one who saw the empty left sac of her cotton bra. We still had Loehmann's—the ritual of dressing ourselves, the ritual of advice, the ritual of caring.

Five years after my mother's death, I am in a Loehmann's in Boca Raton, Florida. The communal dressing room is empty. I try on a salmon pink silk shirt with pearl buttons. A shade that says, "Look at me." I slowly close the buttons, swallowing hard, remembering too much of my past, looking around the dressing room for someone to ask for advice. Now I have some of my mother's body—a slight paunch of a belly, thick upper arms. But I still am tall and fairly thin. I sashay this way and that, gazing at myself in the full-length mirror, not sure of the blaring color. A young Russian girl, a Lolita-lookalike, comes in; she tries on a yellow bikini and a black net beach cover-up. I gaze at myself in the mirror.

"That looks nice." She comments.

"Really?"

"Yes. It's a good color for you. With the hair."

I smooth down my silver hair.

"Buy it. The color is just right for you."

Suddenly I miss my mother.

Fanning the Flames

Shira Sebban

“How are you, Saba?”

“I? I am old.”

This question and answer routine would be repeated each morning like a familiar ritual when we would ring to check on the “Old Boy” as he was affectionately known, who still lived alone in a flat nearby.

I assume he appreciated our concern, although he never said so. Still we need not have worried … not then. Relishing the solitude that enabled him to read, think and write—so long as it was interspersed with alternate dinners at his son’s and daughter’s homes each evening—he was keen to preserve his autonomy for as long as possible.

Until well into his eighties, Saba (Hebrew for grandfather) would continue his exercise and diet regime, doing daily sit-ups and stretches, taking afternoon naps, munching on carrot and celery sticks, and preserving prunes in jars, which took up almost all-available bench space in his kitchen, be it at home in Melbourne, Australia, or wherever he was living overseas. I can still recall our family kitchen in London, filled to overflowing with my grandfather’s preserves, his snores emanating from the tiny bedroom next to the one I shared with my sister.

Not to say, however, that he lacked a sweet tooth. He could whip up a mean trifle and revelled in long smorgasbord lunches at fancy hotels, where he would indulge in chocolate éclairs and other treats, acknowledging his diabetes by popping a sweetener into the habitual tea with lemon he drank after every meal.

Lemons were so important to him that when he was asked to look after us as teenagers while our parents were overseas, he would dutifully arrive each evening for dinner and promptly disappear outside to water the lemon tree, which he believed would prevent the fruit's skin from thickening. In the morning, he would depart for the peace and quiet of his apartment again, where he could spend the day in undisturbed contemplation.

Classical music was his constant companion, be it tapes he had made himself or the local classical music public radio station, with which he had a love-hate relationship, railing against the "moaning and groaning of illiterate so-called contemporary composers." In one letter to the station, he urged such composers to test their claim to have popular support within the open market rather than "bludge on the public purse and coerce the people to listen to their incompetent noise-making."

He was also partial to international melodramas, often joining the family in front of the television after dinner, when he would walk around jangling keys and loose change in his pockets during particularly tense moments. Keen to avoid confrontation whenever possible, he would burst into song—usually the old Russian folk tune *Ochi chyomye* ("Dark Eyes")—whenever a family disagreement arose, which did not involve him.

Every so often, craving intellectual companionship, Saba would pack a bag, sling it over his shoulder, and head off overseas to Europe, his old home in Israel, or the United States, where cousins, who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust, were scattered. He would visit each in turn, and they would host family dinners in his honor and write him letters in English, Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish when he was back in Melbourne, sharing how they had delighted in his company.

During these trips, which could last several months or sometimes even years, he would commune with philosophers and historians at academic institutions in London, Boston, or Tel Aviv or on long walks through the Austrian Alps, even though he himself had not had a formal secular education and, to the envy of his grandchildren, had never even sat an exam.

He strove to cultivate a personal relationship with us from a young age too, asking for letters from each of his six grandchildren while he was overseas. If we were remiss in writing, he would remind our parents that we owed him a letter, and he liked nothing better than to respond to our questions, the more philosophical the better. I revelled in his attention—especially on the rare occasions when I was fortunate enough to join him on his travels—and placed him on a pedestal: my wise Saba could do no wrong.

Blessed with an inquiring and incisive mind, an insatiable desire for knowledge, and a photographic memory, he would peruse erudite tomes on a wealth of subjects in second-hand bookstores, sending crates of books back home, where he would autograph and catalogue them as part of his own library or distribute them as gifts to family and friends. As he explained in a letter to his daughter, “I will at least leave an inheritance, not in diamonds and jade, but in books, which were costly to me not only in money but in time and effort.”

I treasure that inheritance today, my study’s shelves arrayed with books my Saba gave me. The one I value most is his personal copy of *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, an encyclopaedia of Jewish learning from the 1960s, which he presented to my husband and me during his last visit to our home, scraps of paper still marking the pages most important to him.

When bestowing a book as a gift, he would always include an inscription, ranging from a birthday wish or expression of love to an elaborate desire for social cohesion. The dedication on our last gift reads: “Wishing you success and a humane understanding of the kindness and social variety of others. Best wishes from an old octogenarian. Saba.” For he strongly believed that everyday human relations should be conducted with empathy, truth, and love.

During his travels, he would occasionally purchase a work of art for himself or as a gift. He thought that while art appreciation is subject to individual taste and values, “striving to

enjoy art in all its forms" helps "a civilized person to cultivate a taste for aesthetics and so foster an understanding of beauty."

As he wrote to my parents after buying them an antique Tibetan Buddha in Spain, "Art objects should serve as a means to inspire the most lofty thoughts. But should a collection serve only as an accumulation of wealth or to show off, to my mind it is wrong."

The patriarch of the family, Saba would preside over gatherings, regaling the table with such passions as the problems of justice and of individual freedom within the rule of law. I recall many festive dinners where the extended family would gather around the long dining room table with my grandfather at the head expounding his views. No two dinners were alike, as he could be relied upon to present his arguments from multiple angles.

Berl ("Saba") Gross

Fundamentally, he believed we all face a personal choice between leading an autonomous life of rationality, integrity, and dignity in the human world of ideas or a life of emotion, imitation, and subservience in what he termed "the domesticated animal kingdom." As he wrote to a friend, "Does a man act out of rational argument or is man an animal whose elected shepherds know best what is good for him?"

Alternatively, he might have been keen to discuss what he had read that particular day which, given his eclectic interests, could range from a biography of Galileo Galilei, or the writings of Bertrand Russell, to biblical commentaries on Abraham, Moses, or Samuel, various newspaper articles, which he would mark for others to read, or even an account of the Shakers, a utopian Christian sect, some of whose former American settlements he visited and whose virtual demise fascinated him. Even while on an otherwise disappointing holiday in Tahiti, he derived enjoyment from reading daily doses from a

volume of Albert Einstein's essays, which he had happened to pick up at the Sydney airport.

Anyone brave enough to attempt an answer to what Saba meant as a rhetorical question would usually be met with a resounding "no" or, far less frequently, an "oh" in agreement (both words pronounced with a short 'o' sound) and a lengthy, passionate exposition of his views. Yet he did not lack for sparring partners.

"How do you know that you know?" "What do you mean by God?" Influenced by the late eminent philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper, whose seminars Saba attended at the London School of Economics in the 1960s and who later became a life-long friend, Saba emphasized the importance of having a skeptical outlook on life and of continuously questioning one's premises.

In contrast to his own childhood experience within an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Poland, he argued that parents do not have the right to impose religious beliefs on their children, as such convictions are open to doubt and "It is up to parents to guide the young ones with unquestionable honesty." At the same time, he believed that an agnostic is still free to maintain traditions as an expression of cultural and communal adherence. He continued to attend synagogue fairly regularly into old age, always ensuring he had a book to read discretely during the rabbi's sermons.

He vigorously opposed the use of force in disciplining children, arguing that physical punishment may "influence the child to look at the world as a society where reason is not a way of life, only force is the language of grownups. The child does not accept the beating as a consequence of being wrong, but rather reflects that grownups beat children because children are weak and cannot fend for themselves." He was speaking from personal experience, his own father having used force against him. I never recall Saba raising a hand against anyone. For him, the power of persuasion depended on one's choice of words.

Self-deprecating and able to converse with young and old alike, he cultivated a multitude of friends around the world. Academics and thinkers enjoyed the free exchange of ideas in his company, while students wrote him letters of appreciation for helping to clarify their thinking or correct their theses. People generously opened their homes to him and upon his departure, would write, requesting another visit. He maintained a rich correspondence with many who broadly admired his values and ideas, as well as the freedom of his chosen lifestyle, which he described as that of “a man divorced of daily responsibilities.”

Nevertheless, Saba always considered himself an outsider, and although his vocabulary was highly sophisticated, he was particularly unsure of his written English expression, writing drafts of important letters and texts, which were often corrected by his daughter.

He advised those around him to do our best to enrich our lives with, what he termed, “mental-spiritual interests.” As he wrote to my teenage sister and me: “Very soon, your holidays start and you have a swimming pool, books, a piano, cello and violin, what a rich life in front of you!” Whenever his children or grandchildren would ask his advice on our future studies, he would steer us in the direction of a great body of thought such as Science or Philosophy and encourage us to be creative and aim for excellence. He set an example by striving to learn mathematics at the University of Illinois in his fifties.

Yet, he remained highly critical of academia, which he considered to have largely degenerated into “coercive systems of education,” staffed by incompetent “charlatans” who felt immune from scrutiny. Careers were not as important to him as the sheer love of learning, although he certainly emphasized the need to work, which he averred to have learned from his father. In later life, he would often tell stories of his father—the last Jew to have a full religious burial in the central Polish town of Zdunska Wola—acknowledging that he had instilled in his children a love of Jewish learning, as well as an appreciation for the importance of being responsible for oneself and one’s actions. As Saba explained, “self-reliance and self-respect are important for self-fulfilment, which is the difference between man as a person and man as a domesticated animal.”

My grandfather always remained true to his principles—until, as he put it, he lost his “I”, Alzheimer’s disease ultimately robbing him of whom he was as a person. In my mind’s eye, I can still see him sitting in the middle of his room, endlessly twisting a Rubik’s Cube around in his hands. Up to that time, however, he lived as if he was on an insatiable intellectual quest. As he wrote to me, “Life is full of exciting curiosities, joy, and deep feeling for the world’s mysteries.” Integrity, autonomy, and family were among the values he held dear and are now those I strive to instil in my children.

Saba was my mentor and anchor, who showed me that I could do anything to which I set my mind. He encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in and not be afraid to admit I had made a mistake, learn from it, and move on. My children may not have the privilege of growing up in his company, but they can still benefit from the rich and courageous legacy he left behind.

Midnight Stops

Eugene Durante

The Manhattan bound train is empty as it lurches forward and begins its midnight journey out of Coney Island. Winter winds whip through the train when its doors open as passengers board at the elevated stations. Most are headed to a night shift job or New York night out. My police radio is dead silent. With only one year on patrol I have yet to learn the best crime fighting efforts do not come from police executives or politicians, but from the tendencies of Mother Nature.

My assignment to late night train patrol was precipitated that winter by a 'lush worker.' He was cutting open the pockets of passengers to remove personal items while they slept. The crime is not atypical for the hour or area, and the eyewitness description of the perpetrator was a black male eighteen to thirty years old wearing a black jacket, black jeans, and armed with a box cutter. My platoon had been briefed numerous times about the robbery pattern, and with rookie ambition we certainly generated many stop and frisk reports that winter for the NYPD.

As the train pulled into the Neck Road station, I saw a figure on the opposite platform. He was a tall black man with braided hair, and he wore a full length black jacket and black pants. His hands were in front of him and he was facing the wall while awkwardly pivoting left to right. I could not tell if he was kicking the wall, marking it with paint, or moving back and forth while urinating.

Utilizing the advice of veteran patrol officers, I exited the train and stepped down a few stairs to tactically survey the cloaked figure out of view. Fortunately, his train had also just left and there was ample observation time. His behavior persisted, so I quietly approached for a closer look, but while crossing to his platform I made a common rookie mistake.

My radio had begun screeching and I quickly muffled it with my hands. The male froze, then looked around. I was surprised he heard the noise from the distance, but Neck Road is an eerily silent place at night. Prior to renovation, the train station was a spawning ground for rats and pigeons, and to this day there is not enough revenue to justify staffing the token booth overnight.

Broad shouldered, the curious figure turned my way and stood silent as I slowly approached. His hands were at his sides and his fingers were spread apart. He looked about forty years old from the sporadic gray hairs in his braids. I sensed he was no stranger to being stopped by the police.

“How you doin?” I casually asked, utilizing a common Brooklyn greeting.

“I'm lost,” he said. “I fell asleep on the train.”

Getting closer, I noticed black dress shoes and a black suit beneath the trench coat—not the common attire of a lush worker.

“Must’ve been a good sleep,” I said. “You’ve drooled on yourself.”

He started wiping his coat with a handkerchief, yet he awkwardly looked away and not at the stain as most people would. Then I noticed his walking stick and backpack on the floor next to a garbage pail.

“I know my home station perfectly,” he said gathering his articles, “But I have no idea where I am now. Thank you very much for being here.”

“Just check your belongings, Sir. Unattended items grow legs quickly in Brooklyn,” I replied. “These scummers will steal your walking stick if you weren’t looking.”

He smiled, and with that we broke the ice.

We made small talk as we walked toward the Manhattan bound platform. He reminded me to let the blind person grab your arm for better guidance. We exchanged names as I led him to a bench.

“So how long are you on the job?” he asked while using air quotes. I replied, then I enquired if he was born blind or lost his vision over time.

“My sight has diminished in the last decade,” he said, “but I can still see silhouettes.”

“That's very fortunate,” I encouraged.

“Sometimes I wish I never had vision though,” he said while adjusting his long coat in the thick wooden arm rests of the bench. “I think I'd have less anxiety overall.”

He continued; “Instead of earning my independence as a man in this world, I'm forced to live with my mother and sister for support. I'm blessed that I still have family, but I always dreamed of moving out of the ghetto after college. It's sad enough that I've changed, but I have witnessed myself become a different person to others.”

His voice then cracked, “To the outside world I’ve become a ‘he,’ as in would ‘he’ like a chair or booth, or would ‘he’ like another cup of coffee...as if ‘I’ never existed. You have no idea what it feels like when I go shopping and I ask the salesman if a shirt is a lighter or darker tone of black, and his response is, ‘Does it really matter?’”

“I used to always date hot women,” he said, “and now I'm alone. Heck, I don't even know what the Spice Girls look like.”

The blind man became silent and looked away into the darkness. The rattle of a distant train started vibrating the tracks. We then boarded the train together, arm-in-arm, toward his home station. On our way we discussed our experiences growing up in Brooklyn and

how the city was changing. Upon arriving at Newkirk Avenue he softly pushed my arm away.

“I got this,” he said, and he breezed up the stairs and out to street level. I followed him up the steps, and we stopped together on the sidewalk. I offered to walk him home, but he insisted on walking alone.

“No problem,” I said. “I understand we both have reputations to protect in these parts.” We shook hands and extended that half-a-hug gesture that men do so well.

“Hey, Gene,” he said, “thanks again for being there, and more importantly, thank you for treating me like a regular guy.”

He walked away as my radio reverberated off the buildings on Marlborough Road.
Though I do not remember his name, the man’s heartfelt compliment was poignant and lasting. That appreciation is rarely experienced on patrol any more. Yet after two decades in public service, I’ve learned to embrace the lasting value of small deeds. Helping many people in little ways, with empathy and compassion, can be more beneficial to the spirit than helping a few people in big ways. Such interactions benefit the public by breaking down barriers and cops’ professional selves by promoting positive solutions. As police officers, we’re conditioned to think our careers are defined by newsworthy events, but too often we overlook the touching moments that help us become better cops, and better human beings.

Taking Refuge

Marjorie Maddox

The sixty-year-old volunteer in a coyote T-shirt wipes the sweat from her brow with a brown bandana and then turns to us. “This morning at 10:00 am,” she says, “there were fifty people on this tour.”

It is almost 2:00 pm and nearing 100 degrees. There are only four of us waiting on two paint-peeling benches. My daughter and I look around at the large, faded sign and near-empty lot, which we passed twice before deciding we had reached the entrance to our destination. “I guess this is it,” I said just fifteen minutes earlier, as I pulled alongside a still-locked gate. A smaller sign read, “Tour starts here.” A minute later, an elderly man in jeans had strolled out, smiled, unlocked the padlock, and swung wide the gate.

Since my eighteen-year-old had slept until noon, we would have to suffer the hot sun for the second and last tour of the day. We are joined only by a sporty grandmother and her pre-teen grandson, who is visiting her from California. They have hit the local amusement park they tell us, and tomorrow they will hike under the waterfalls in the nearby state park. Today, though, today is animal refuge day. The grandmother, who is younger than I am, shields her eyes from the sun and nods towards us. “Want some cold water?” she offers.

“Yeah, sure!” I exclaim, and she retrieves a bottle from the cooler in her nearby SUV.

“To Cats of the World!” we toast.

In a sense, my daughter is on vacation as well. At home for a week from her pre-college summer job a few hours away, she has been joining me for day excursions, impromptu adventures in between medical appointments that brought her back to our suburban Pennsylvania home before she begins college classes. “This will be great, Mom,” she

says as we pull away from the dentist's office, the GPS on her iPhone now set to "T & D's Cats of the World: Animal Refuge Specializing in Exotic Felines and Wildlife."

And so she and I, the animal lovers in the family, are off on a last hurrah to explore a thirty-five-acre wild animal refuge way off the beaten path. The site has been open since 1985, but we only just learned of this place, and—although we have ventured out as tourists—we are surprised to find we are not at a tourist attraction, but at someone's expanded home, a home that has been opened to over 200 abused, rejected, abandoned, or otherwise mistreated animals.

The elderly owners' adult daughter, one of the children who has taken over the day-to-day management of the refuge, appears with feed bucket in hand, quickly introduces herself, then turns back to her chores. She nods goodbye to the guide.

I look at my daughter, who is looking at me. "Kinda cool," I tilt my head and whisper, "It's just you, me, and them.

The animals come from circuses, zoos, government agencies, people's apartments—these lions, tigers, bobcats, but also bear, fox, lemurs, monkeys, parrots, and other creatures. Almost immediately, our guide tears up. She has been driving here twice a week from the next town over for twenty years. Her tears show the volunteer work continues to change her life. As she points out the spider monkeys, she tells us about the pet primate that was dressed up and treated like a baby, the raccoon that was fed primarily candy, and the black bear that was chained for years in a man's front yard. "What's the matter with people?" my daughter leans over and asks. What, indeed?

Near each animal is a sign that lists its donors, who are contributing to that animal's food and care. "If it could," I ask my daughter, "what would that otter write on the sign about its own life?"

My daughter counters, “What, if it could talk, would that skunk tell us?” We giggle, but our questions also are serious. What, we wonder, have the rescued animals learned from the strict teacher of experience?

While we stare in the eyes of a particularly mischievous monkey, I think of the TV commercials for sponsoring wide-eyed, thin-boned orphans. Yet, though many of this refuges’ animals arrived scared, malnourished, often with bones broken, today they are lazing in the sun, scurrying up and down ramps, swinging from tires, or hiding in the vast expanse of tall grasses. Our guide looks on admiringly. I don’t ask if she has children of her own; clearly, she has “adopted” several of the “grown-up kids” at Cats of the World.

It is the hottest day of the summer, but my daughter, who hated any family vacations that forced her too long in the sun for “educational” tours, is mesmerized. She squints in the bright light to read each creature’s story. The names, we learn, are only known by the owners and volunteers, whose relationship with each allows them to best care for their adopted clan. They, alone, have earned this communication. Visitors calling out bears’ monikers, whistling loudly to the Macaws, throwing bread at the coatis—none of this is allowed, and for good reason, the guide explains. Animals’ well-being over entertainment is the mantra. Diverse places to hide from spectators allow animals the choice of whether or not to be “on display.”

“These animals are wild, wild, wild,” the volunteer reminds us again and again. She waves her arms for emphasis. “They are not—and never should be—“pets.”” I think of our local SPCA and, even there, of all the returned Christmas presents of rabbits, cats, and dogs—animals that turned out to be too much work for a young child or a busy family. But here, on this family plot turned sanctuary, over 200 creatures leap or growl or splash in a safe environment. If we listen closely to their healing, what will we hear about ourselves?

On our windy path down dirt roads and around wooded bends, it becomes increasingly obvious that such consistent and safe care of so many is a lifetime of hard work.

“Whoa,” the grandmother walking alongside us jokes when she sees the expanse of the property, “What kind of allowance did their kids earn growing up?”

My daughter rolls her eyes. “Nothing, I’m sure.”

I wonder at what moment the owners decided to commit their lives, and in turn, their family’s lives, to the nurture not of a few goldfish, guinea pigs, or hamsters, but to this diverse fur-and-feather community. Some parrots, we’re told by the tall and rather cute grandson, live sixty to eighty years. “Eighty years!” my daughter and I exclaim in unison. Eighteen years of raising my daughter zoom past. Eighteen years of preparing her to “fly the nest.” Multiply that by almost four and a half—not exactly a passing fancy.

Soon, however, we find out that Cats of the World wasn’t a one-moment decision at all. Instead, it was a series of small choices that snowballed. It began, the volunteer tells us, when the father, Terry (the “T” in “T and D’s Cats of the World”) took in injured wildlife discovered by locals. An avid animal lover, he nursed the creatures back to health, then returned them to the wild. Later, when he rescued cougars and bobcats from illegal sales, the word spread. Here was an individual helping abandoned and abused animals. Calls came in from around Pennsylvania, from neighboring states, and then from even farther away. Cats of the World, which started out with wild cats but now hosts much more, unfurled into the homegrown refuge that it is today.

As we walk along, my daughter and I talk about how—day in and day out— the owners communicate to the animals through action. The fox darting in and out of its man-made den doesn’t bark its gratitude, but it knows its food comes on a long pole through the fence. The brown bear scratching against a tree knows that someone will clean and refill the small swimming pool of water he uses on especially hot days. What really grips us is how many of the animals were captives their entire lives; they can survive no longer on their own in the wild. Others are too weak. Some are rescued birthday entertainment, “photo animals” that were too expensive to keep and would otherwise be put to sleep. We

try to look in their eyes, but they are too quick, too busy with their animal lives to heed us. Their communication is made of furtive stuff.

The owners' wooded trail provides respite from the heat, so we take another gulp of water and continue with our five-some past wolves, coyotes, lions, and leopards. Our companions, the grandmother and grandson point at a yawning tiger and share a joke about an uncle. My daughter and I marvel at the lanky and beautiful servals, which pay us no mind. They are too busy slinking past each other, communicating in some way with their own family.

What we also see throughout our trek is the owners' family. In the background or off to the side, they are sloshing out food, cleaning pens, mowing fields, repairing animal "playgrounds," and building new shelters. Like their charges, they also pay us no mind—that is, until we ask about the animals. The creatures' habits, food source, life span: the owner's daughter is an especially rich source of information.

The last time I see her, I have one more question. "How," I ask her as she refills a water trough for the Binturong, "do you ever go on vacation?"

She looks at me as if the idea has never occurred to her. "Well," she says, continuing on with her work, "we don't." Then she heads back to a small cart for a shovel. "If I have to be away for a day, I just call my brother. He knows all our routines. But I don't need to call him often."

On the last leg of our educational hike, we stop to see the parrots—all sixty or so. In huge cages, some are huddled together in twos or threes as if conspiring ways to save the world. Others flap from one branch to another in great paintbrush strokes of reds, greens, blues, and yellows. A few, perched alone and aloof, peer out at us: the families displayed on the other side of the bars.

Social creatures, almost all of the birds are singing. Some are even talking. A Blue Fronted Amazon blurts out what could be “What’s up, pussycat?” but sounds more like “Wasp at?” My daughter takes out her iPhone and begins filming.

As we finish our journey, my daughter and I bid adieu to the birds and thanks and farewell to our traveling companions. We toss our water bottle in the supplied bin, thank the grandmother again for the drink, and—for the drive home—buy another bottle from the small but well-stocked gift store. Cranking up the air conditioning in our Elantra, we head back to our almost-quiet and cooler home an hour away.

There Gizmo, the lineolated parakeet that has traveled home with my daughter while her boyfriend vacations with his extended family, whistles his loud Welcome Home song. Automatically, my daughter translates: “I missed you! I missed you!”

We do our best to whistle back: short, loud bursts, then quiet, breathy ones. It is the rhythm of our communication. After a few minutes, we open the cage and let him fly around the room. When he settles on my daughter’s head, we take turns telling Gizmo the tale of our day. I wonder what, in his smart bird brain, he will think. I wonder what he already knows. About us. About the world. About cats.

Masters of Universes

Ryan Harper

It was a regularly televised conversion. Adam holds aloft the mystical Power Sword and exclaims, “by the power of Grayskull….” The sword draws fire from heaven, and it enters Adam—blowing his clothes off and transforming him into He-Man. Before the scene ends, the bare-chested hero lowers the sword, holds it horizontally, and finishes the sentence in a reverberating voice: “…*I have the power!*” The conversion was always sudden, and it was usually late.

I watched *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* religiously as a boy. It was one in a series of after-school cartoons that provided the content for my young imagination: *G.I. Joe*, *Transformers*, *Voltron*, *Thundercats*. My parents and grandparents furnished me with the action figures, even Mattel’s playset masterpiece, Castle Grayskull. In addition to playing with the toys, I started dramatizing *He-Man* episodes. After constructing a passable replica of the Power Sword using my erector set, I—Adam, He-Man’s Clark Kent—would run wildly around the house, as if I were being chased by He-Man’s arch nemesis Skeletor and his henchmen. Then, finally cornered by the imaginary adversaries, I would stop, settle myself, and rehearse the moment when Adam put away his old self: *By the power of Grayskull*…quickly dropping the sword, removing my shirt, picking up the sword again…*I have the power!* Shit was about to get real.

My mother stayed at home during my formative years, so she bore witness to this spectacle. One day, after hearing me perform this incantation the fourth or fifth time, she took me aside and gently informed me that she did not want me saying those words. She then smiled as she suggested what she obviously regarded as a plausible alternative: “Why don’t you say, ‘by the power of Jesus?’”

I knew enough to tilt my head and nod reflectively, as if her suggestion seemed plausible to me. It was not. I was embarrassed, horrified, and a little bewildered at her proposal.

This was not because I did not believe in the power of Jesus. I was a good young evangelical. I already had been "saved"—prayed the "sinner's prayer" and accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. I spent most of my weekends traveling to revivals and church homecomings, singing and playing drums in my family's southern gospel singing group. Rather, I felt uneasy about my mother's suggestion because, it seemed obvious to me, He-Man's world, Eternia, did not include Jesus as a character. Eternia was make-believe. A different set of powers and principalities were in play there—"good" and "evil" forces that I recognized as having analogues in the real world, but fictional forces nonetheless. To introduce Jesus into the drama—who was made and remade real for me at every weekend Pentecostal revival, every dinner conversation, every moment lived in a region in which even the profane citizens lived inside the broad shadow of the evangelical cross—would have been like introducing my grandpa or my dentist. Giving Jesus an explicit role in Eternia, I thought, made him less real.

My mother did not share my view towards fictional realms of play. She had a radically holistic view of the Gospel's reach. For her, the spirit of Christ was at work in even the seemingly innocuous, recreational aspects of life—including the imagination and its products. Naming Jesus in Eternia was simply identifying he who had been active, anonymously, the whole time, like Paul revealing to the Athenians the true identity of their unknown god. We were conservative evangelical Christians—not fundamentalists, who shunned all worldly entertainments, whose households would not have contained Mattel's Castle Grayskull. As such, we did what believers had been doing since Constantine, if not Paul: we converted the accoutrements of paganism into Christian icons. My mother responded to my dabbling in the black arts of Grayskull by transforming Grayskull into Golgotha.

Of course, the transformation only was worth undertaking if the paganism in question had some usable features. It certainly was important for a young evangelical male to have manly heroes. He-Man became a mass-market sensation in the early 1980s, which Reagan had wrested from Carter. For most evangelicals, a warrior of dubious religiosity

seemed preferable to a pious but soft patriarch. A year before my He-Man controversy, I requested a Cabbage Patch Kid for Christmas. My father, who refused to let me have a "girl's toy," compromised and selected for me a doll from the feline section of the Cabbage Patch—a "Koosa" whom I named Prince, after a secular musician about whom I knew nothing, on whom I could lavish a fictive love more akin to a pet owner's than a mother's. No one in my family had the equipment to understand that the bob-haired, hot-pants-wearing hero of Grayskull and his various life partners (characters with names like Man-At-Arms, Man-E-Faces, and…sweet Jesus…Ram-Man) undermined evangelical gender norms much more seriously (and, I now see, much more hilariously) than did Xavier Roberts's homely creations. Having supplied me with the action figures and the playset, my parents obviously thought that, with a slight rewrite, the man from Eternia was a serviceable evangelical hero for a boy.

But as soon as my mother suggested her rewrite, *by the power of Jesus*, it was clear to me that I would no longer play He-Man out loud in the house. The prospect of saying "by the power of Jesus" inside Eternia, even when I was playing alone there, sent an embarrassed shudder through me—that sort of shame over an unrealized iteration that occurs when you think some horrible thought during a job interview and realize how easy it would be to open your mouth and let the thought pass into a world in which it does not belong, thus spoiling entire realms of possibilities, irreparably. I disassembled my Power Sword and summoned Prince from my shelf.

I was miffed at having to reroute my playtime, but I never harbored resentment toward my mother. She and I have gone over this episode in my adulthood, and she now laughs at her excessive, if well-meaning, parental policing. I am now the age my mother was when the episode occurred. It occurs to me how easily my late-thirties self—now equipped with one graduate degree in theological studies, one more in religious studies—could offer a much richer, more systematic, and consequently more joy-killing gloss on *He-Man* than she did. She taught me well. Was not Adam's animated transformation, with Grayskull in the background, suggestive of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice on Golgotha, available to all who would call on its power? Was not Adam transformed by the power of

Golgotha into the new Adam? Was not He-Man's turning of the Power Sword from its vertical to its horizontal position emblematic of justification and sanctification: a Christian is made well by power from above, and then is called to use that power to lead a holy life "horizontally," in this world? Was not Adam's decision to share his superhero identity only with a select few akin to the Gospel of Mark's Jesus, who instructed his few open-eyed followers to tell no one he was the Messiah? Imagine a boy being subject to such a parental disquisition!

I would not state these cases to my child because I no longer think such matters are all that important. But I do think *some* matters are just that important. I may no longer be an evangelical, but I retain my old evangelical disposition to read, interpret, and criticize all aspects of my culture. I retain that sense that whatsoever all of us do (and take in) constitutes us as moral beings—even, perhaps *especially*, the quotidian endeavors. I am a writer. I still believe words possess concrete and concretizing power; I might believe this more expansively, if less metaphysically, than I did as a child. I'd like to think that growing up in an evangelical universe equipped me to detect hard-to-see patterns of injustice in the world and its various tongues. I can imagine harboring my own misgivings over a child watching a show like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*—the thirty-minute toy advertisement, the Anglo-Saxon heroes pitted against animalian or dark-skinned villains, the equation of muscle with virtue. How much more obnoxious would I be than my mother was, in my attempt to route the fantasies of a life under my charge?

I hope I would not be obnoxious. But I hope I would care, as my mother did, about how inner and outer worlds converge. I hope I am sensible to what arrives in a life, to how a life arrives, to the processes of arrival.

Or perhaps I am still an evangelical. For all their Damascus Road rhetoric—their altar calls, their singular born-again moments, their rejoicing at the tales of sudden deathbed conversions—evangelicals do not play fast and loose with dramatic denouement. I was brought up to understand the sanctified life as a long slog. My evangelicalism had an Emersonian edge: the soul *becomes*. My favorite boyhood cartoons, animated at the height of American mass consumerism, the age of immediate fulfillment and quick, short-

term gains, suggested the opposite. Although his individual might was never enough to vanquish his foes, Lion-O, protagonist of *The Thundercats*, always summoned the rest of the Thundercats when he was cornered, late in the game, with great fanfare and sudden success. Although individually the heroic robotic lions in *Voltron* were never a match for their antagonist *du jour*, the lions only merged, to form the super-robot Voltron, in the episode's final minutes—again, with great fanfare and success. It was the same with Adam, who typically conjured Grayskull's power when the enemy was right at the gate. I suspect that if you did the tally, you'd find that Adam spent a lot more time as Adam than he did as He-Man in those cartoons.

On some level, the arc of those stories must have grated against my mother's sensibilities, even as she found usable features in them. In imagination and in reality, there is something profane about coming intentionally late to the fullness of your power, about thinking you can postpone the achievement of your higher self until a sudden, final moment. By the power of Grayskull—my mother was right—I would be raised better.

Taylor's Drain

Joy Weitzel

I look over the ridge and see green. I tell my husband to stop the car so I can take a picture; I want to remember what it looks like from up here. From this view, I see a few vultures floating on wind currents, looking more majestic than they should. I see tree tops and ridges that fall into valleys where patches of light green signal a farm or pasture. I can't see within the green tree mass that guards the rhododendrons and their tangling pink flowers, the mossy stones that peer out of fallen leaves on the forest floor, or the little stream that trickles over stones but cuts a deep path, every drop running over sandstone to find the Tygart Valley.

I wait for a vision, a time machine to fall from the blue sky with its date set to 1847. If time machines were real and fell from the sky, I would hop in, and, as the lights and whistles spun around me, the mountains would reverse the seasons several times over. The trees would shrink back into the earth, leaving the ridge bare. Loggers would replace the timber with their axes, putting the poplars and birches back in place. Fields would open and close like fish rising, their lips breaking the surface to create ripples. When it all stopped, I would look out from the bald ridge I stand on, and I would search for a sign, something that says "I am here; this is my home. Come see me, and I'll show you my life." It would be above a cleared field that you might be plowing at this very moment, pushing the metal and the wood through the dirt. I would walk beside you, while you told me of the journey, the bear you killed last fall, how you know the earth—the technique for sowing and harvesting. You would teach me how to push the plow behind the mule, though I would slip in the dirt as the iron hit stone.

A little hill rises on our left, where two deer graze in a green cemetery. They flee when they see us, lifting white tails. As I climb the little hill, I find names—Boehm, Mitchell, Hathaway, Weaver, Proudfoot. The wind and rain have worn the gray markers so some

names cannot be read; they stand, lie, or lean bare and blank. By the number of stones with our name, I can tell you have frequented the familiar trail to this place. There is your thirteen-year old son, who died while older sons went to war. There is the daughter who never married. There is your wife of nearly forty years. There is your son who fought in the Civil War, came home, married twice, and died in December.

You are nearby, lying flat beneath the shade of surrounding trees. I brush away wet grass that has settled in your name as if I were brushing away hair from your face. I want to clean you up, remove the dirt that hugs a hand holding a Bible. Though it is just a stone, I sense an odd connection to the damp dirt in which you lie. Your presence dwells in the dates, in the carved hand, in the imprint of your name, in this gray stone lying on its back. The dirt is what I'm supposed talk to because this is what remains: bony fingers, hollow eye sockets, your best Sunday suit. You are earth now, dead and decomposed. But I don't think about that.

I think about what to say.

I don't go to cemeteries often. I've escorted grandparents, lying in coffins, to their earthly rest, but I never stayed long enough to know their stones. I rarely return. Now I come looking for history.

My fingers touch your marker, deciphering its Scripture. I came here to see you. To see how fast you ran, how you looked at creeks and saw fish hiding in shadowy depths, how you looked at your wife when she was young and when she was old, how your son, Ephraim, climbed up your lap and asked about the bear, how you read the Holy Bible or depended on the farm, on nature and wind.

You chose this place beside the Tygart Valley River for a reason. You looked up and saw timber spread over a half-million mountainous acres. You shook ancestral seeds and scattered them: corn, wheat, oats, barley, soybeans. You might have cleared a few acres for crops, a few for future pasture. Your axe swung to heave your home in place; muscles

ripped as the impact of metal reverberated through handle, through narrow wrists and elbows, through a strained bicep and shoulder, through an aching neck that lately had been giving you trouble, and through the skull holding the brain that told you, “good will come.” Your patch of light-green broke the surface, rippled the dark and tangled, and finally grasped the mayfly.

We can’t go back in time to meet with a handshake or a hug. I can’t make your stone speak any more than I can the trees or the ground. All is silent. As my knees become wet with dew and earth, I wonder if I’ve matched you with who I think you are or if you are still a stranger. Then, a woodpecker taps the telephone poles and a grouse beats its wings like a motor. We both know these sounds.

This is what I say: I am your fourth great granddaughter. I have a heart for Great Lakes, and I’m good in a kayak and on skis. When I go, I like to go farther, to the very end, so I can see mountaintops colored with fall and winter’s blanket backed by Lake Superior. I’ve been taught these things like you’ve been taught by your father, and now I’ve completed the circle to see that part of me is here—in this cemetery called Taylor’s Drain.

Tough Guy

Darryl Graff

The sign-in book at The Hamilton Arms nursing home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania was filled with my signature: “Darryl Graff … Visitor … Jules Graff … Resident.” Sometimes, I would look through the pages of the sign- in book at the names of the other residents. They had so many visitors. My father only had me and my wife, Regina. It broke my heart, and my father… well, I couldn’t imagine how he felt. My brother, his first- born son, was too busy being a yuppie to see his own father dying in diapers, in a nursing home. Regina and I came every Sunday. An eight-hour round-trip train ride from Manhattan.

As had become my habit, I kissed my father on his head; it was soft, bald, and wrinkled.

“How you doing, tough guy?” I asked.

I started calling him “tough guy” when he first went into the nursing home. It was my way of making him feel stronger. I know a lot of things, about a lot of things; I know that once you hit that nursing home bed, if you don’t get out of that bed and walk around the room, the bed is going to get you. After a month, I could see the bed was going to win, but if anyone could get out of the bed and walk this thing off, it would be my father. I only remember him being sick one day in my entire life. He went to work every day to provide for his family, and he drank heavily every night for seventy years. I called him tough guy because, well, he was a tough eighty-nine-year-old guy.

“How’s your job?” he asked in a faint whisper.

The man who taught me how to cook was lying there with a feeding tube pumping liquid into his stomach.

I started to tell him details of the job, but that's what I do six days a week. Details, everything is details. Everything has to be exact. I stopped talking about work. It was pretty clear to me he had no idea what I was saying anyway. So I decided to save the details for the job. Instead, he wished out loud for an adult scooter. So he could just get on the road and start driving, and not stop until he was far away from this place. Before he could get on the highway, he wanted to buy Regina and me lunch at the nursing home restaurant that didn't exist.

When I was a kid, sometimes my father would have Chinese food delivered from the place on First Avenue. We'd shut off the lights and eat Chinese food by candlelight. Now, I was sitting under hot fluorescent lights next to my father's bed. I held his hand; the feeding tube made a gurgling noise. This was my only day off. Some day off.

Thank God for Q's Duke Bar on Liberty Street, a sad little bar. Mostly biker wannabes and long-ago burnt-out townie factory workers.

Regina and I went there every Sunday before catching the train back to New York City. How did my Jewish New York City father wind up in Pennsylvania Dutch Country? Well, it had to do with a woman. It usually does. If the Q's Duke Bar had a sign-in book, I would have signed it every Sunday.

We got to Penn Station at 8:30 a.m. for the 9:15 to Lancaster. It was Christmas day. My father would be dead in a few weeks. We got in line at the Zabar's in Penn Station and waited, in a slow, jerky line of tourists and junkies. I got some beer and Regina took care of the sandwiches for the trip. At the cash register, there was one lonely looking box of Christmas cookies. I threw them in the bag with the beer and the sandwiches—a little something for the women who worked at the nursing home.

After chain-smoking a few cigarettes on Eighth Avenue, Regina and I ran down the escalator and onto the 9:15 train to Pennsylvania. A half hour outside of Philadelphia, it

started snowing, and kept snowing, and snowing. When we got to Lancaster, the city was shut down by the biggest blizzard in years.

“We’re never going to get a cab. How are we going to see your father?” Regina asked.

“I’ll flag down a car and explain, it’s Christmas day. My father’s dying in a nursing home. Somebody’s got to give us a ride.”

Regina waited in the train station. I stood on the street corner in knee-deep snow for an hour and never did see a car. We walked into the Q’s Duke Bar, wet, cold, and defeated. Dark, crowded, loud, Led Zeppelin, NASCAR racing, whores, tattoos, a pool table, and next to the pool table, a small buffet table. It was Christmas dinner at the bar. Ham in a crockpot, hot dog buns, potato salad, and paper plates.

“Merry Christmas!” some biker babe yelled as we sat down in front of a large-screen TV.

“Have some ham.” And we did.

We wound up sharing the Christmas cookies for the nurses with the whores and speed-freak bikers. “Merry Christmas!” they yelled as we left to catch the last train back to New York City.

The Biltmore Theater restoration project I was working on lasted nine months. My father’s nursing home project lasted five months. On February 14, 2004, at the Hamilton Arms Nursing home, I didn’t have to sign in. Instead, I had to fill out a personal items form. It wasn’t much, just a gold wrist watch. Forty years of dedicated service.

The Groff Funeral Home on Main Street in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was only six blocks from the Q’s Duke Bar. It was a very professional place. The “grief counselor,” or cashier, seemed nervous that we didn’t have a car in the parking lot.

“I’m from New York City,” I explained to her. “I don’t drive. I don’t have a car.”

She couldn’t give me my cremated father’s remains fast enough. I handed her a check. She gave me a small box in a paper bag. We walked to the Q’s Duke Bar and sat at a table. I went up to the bar and got two drinks.

“Get an extra glass. We’ll have a toast,” Regina said.

I poured some beer into Jules’ glass. Regina and I clinked glasses.

“To Jules!”

Back in New York City, it was freezing cold in Central Park. We kept walking until we came to the right spot, a big oak tree overlooking the Conservatory Pond.

I could sit for hours and watch those remote control ships go around and around the pond. One guy even had a remote-controlled submarine.

It was the 1960’s. Anything was possible. I wanted a remote-controlled boat badly. At the Gramercy Pharmacy on First Avenue and Twentieth Street, in the back was a single spinning rack of toys. One day, I saw a little plastic boat; it was orange and white. My mother bought it for me, and my father took me up to Central Park. He had rigged up the boat with a string wrapped around a stick, and told me it was a remote-controlled boat. I set my boat in the pond and let the string out. It was my maiden voyage. I passed the Mayflower, the Santa Maria, and the submarine. There I was, finally a sea captain. After about four minutes my ship took on water. It listed to the left and sank straight to the bottom. The string was tangled; I pulled and pulled, then gave up.

We spread Jules’ ashes on the hill overlooking the pond, under a big old oak tree.

“Rest in peace, tough guy,” were my last words.

I finished the Biltmore Theater. My boss, Josh Gray, gave me a $5,000 bonus.
“Thank you, Darryl. You did a great job,” he said. “I know it was especially hard for you, with your dad dying and all.”

Two months later, he laid me off.

A Death in the Family

Sarah Russell

It was 1963, and at age nineteen, I felt like the original American in Paris—cafés echoing Hemingway and Fitzgerald, dapper Frenchmen to flirt with, and classes at the Sorbonne when I remembered to go. I was living *La Bohème* on the Left Bank in a one bedroom, fifth floor walk-up I found with Helen, another American stray from Redlands, California.

These were not the plush digs of the 16th Arrondissement. The place had no hot water and little heat, but we kept reasonably warm if we wore sweaters now that November winds rattled the windows. We shared a toilet in the hall with seven other people who lived on our floor, and I showered once a week down the street at the public baths. I stepped over winos to visit the corner crêperie at midnight when I studied late and ignored the whispered obscenities of vagrants who followed me home. After I opened the heavy outer doors and crossed the deserted courtyard, I would yell up the stairs and hope someone would turn on the hall light to guide me to the top floor. The light only stayed on for two minutes, so I always arrived breathless, often stumbling up the last flight in the dark.

Helen and I had a quid pro quo with two American guys who lived on our floor. We cooked and cleaned for them; they bought the groceries. We ate dinner together if we didn't have dates, and on the 22nd, Mike from Tucson had just asked me to pass the bread when Peter from Detroit told us to shush as the words "blood on Jackie's clothes" and "Dallas motorcade" came over the radio and into our consciousness. We sat stunned as the BBC announcer said the president had been taken to Parkland Memorial Hospital; they were operating; there had been a sniper. A short time later the sonorous, very proper British voice intoned, "I am sorry to inform the world that president Kennedy is dead." Then, incredibly, he added, "And now, I believe we should all take a moment to compose ourselves." And with that, the BBC went off the air.

Broadcasting resumed twenty minutes later, with moving tributes by members of Parliament and other dignitaries. The four of us stared at one another in grief, anger, denial. It was incomprehensible that this could happen. Not in America. Not to our president.

The next day on my way to the Sorbonne, the flags on government buildings flew at half-staff, and the buses had one French and one American flag in their brackets. I thought I looked like a native after six months in Paris, but apparently that was not the case since total strangers stopped me to say how sorry they were, as if I had lost a member of my family.

And, of course, I had.

Stacey

Louis Gallo

This goes back to the Pleistocene and I'm all of thirteen in the first year of junior high, a hive full of thugs and hoodlums and insane maniacs where I definitely don't belong but my parents don't know any better and say I need experience so you can imagine the everyday terror like when I see one kid pull a .38-revolver from his pocket and brandish it around screaming, it's loaded, but there's bliss too, in band class when I see Stacey who is so far out of my league it's like glimpsing the edge of the universe though in fact she sits right next to me, second chair flute to my first, and she's a fully developed woman at thirteen and everyone agrees queen of the school and head majorette and twirler and dancer and whatever her reasons and against all odds she likes me and I of course adore her and when the band director Mr. Gendarvis taps the podium with his wooden stick to start a Sousa march she presses her thigh firmly against mine and I can hardly stand it and hope Mr. Gendarvis doesn't notice what's happening to me though how could he not? The whole class period, our thighs fused together, imagine, even with that heavy Cor Jesu senior ring glued to her finger with wax, her boyfriend, Tommy, from the Catholic school, rumored the toughest motherfucker in all Gentilly, you don't mess with Tommy for any reason, much less his girlfriend, and yet . . . so this goes on for a few years and I'm finally sixteen with a learner's permit and I borrow my grandfather's golden Imperial with its legendary wings and spend five hours washing it for him and in return I can take Stacey out on a date in it so I rub every smudge from every window with Windex and scrub the white walls with Brillo pads until my fingers bleed, that's how obsessed I am and, by the way, Stacey has broken up with Tommy and has chosen (that's exactly the word, chosen) a new boyfriend, Joey, and Tommy beats the crap out of him right in the school yard with everybody gathered round to watch like some Roman spectacle and Joey returns a few days later with black eyes, a broken jaw and his face swollen like a pumpkin but he doesn't care because now he's got Stacey and he's a hero by default and they walk through the corridors like royalty and I wonder if he will beat the crap out of me because I'm taking her out in my grandfather's Imperial, which is really happening, despite Joey, and either

he knows or doesn't care because I don't care. All I care about is Stacey, my first real love, my goddess . . . and I drive her out to the Point, this meager peninsular at West End that pokes out into Lake Pontchartrain and we pass the ancient light house, where the Point stops, and there's space for about fifty cars where everybody makes out and I've wanted to do this for three torturous years so I slide over on the seat and wrap my arm around her shoulders and she flicks away her Salem and I press my lips onto hers and I love it but know the kiss is no good, not really a kiss, because she keeps her lips to herself, clenched, and just sort of puts up with me messing around with them with my mouth and, oh Jesus, three torturous years, those thighs fused to mine in band, her sweet smile, her everything. But she's just putting up with it because she definitely does like me, I swear to that, but maybe not the way she liked Tommy or likes Joey, which sort of pisses me off because I just don't get it and I pull away and slide down low and rest my head on the seat and sigh really loud though I'm ignited inside and don't know what to do or say and she says nothing but lights up another Salem and asks if I want one but I say no, I don't smoke, and I didn't then, and suddenly I feel nauseous—her lips taste like ashes, and yet I will kiss ashes, lick ashes, eat ashes, smear my face with ashes, vomit ashes for more of her.

Irretrievable Breakdown

Anya Liftig

Yellow piss snow was piled outside the window. Slushy puddles of ice pellets welled up on the corner. We had both given up the idea that there was anything romantic or charming about the layers of snow we trudged through. The weather was something to be endured, just another difficulty we put up with to live in this city, the greatest city in the world.

Inside, the radiator was turned up to broil, shriveling my nasal passages despite finding a formidable foe in the humidifier. Most mornings I woke up on a pillow splotched with flecks of red. My side of the bed was inches from the back window and when it got cold, I could feel the wind blow through the cracks around the frame. I tried any and all methods to seal it up—industrial plastic, caulking, construction foam, duct tape. I stuffed plastic grocery bags in the gaps between the panes, wadded up a years' worth of white and red Target bags into the holes. I fought the cold with thin layers of Saran Wrap stretched taut over the dirty glass.

At least it was better than the last place I lived where, when it rained outside, it rained inside. There I had rigged up a grey plastic tarp over the bed, hoisted with a complex system of pulleys made of rope from the dollar store. Living in this city always meant taking matters into my own hands as far as repairs were concerned. When things went wrong, I fixed the offending article myself or I learned to live with it. This was the same method I used on the leaky pipes under the sink. I removed what looked like the guilty piece and trekked back through the snow to the hardware store. I used three rolls of duct tape to secure its pathetically incongruous fixture. I wrapped the whole thing in cut up towels and then wrapped those in another roll of duct tape. A fool-proof barrier**.** I could always fix things myself, even if they still looked more broken by the time I finished with them.

The apartment was once just his apartment, until he asked me to move in seven years ago. Then it became “our” apartment—all 375 glorious square feet of cozy, adorable basement studio of it. It was supposed to be a temporary nest on our way to a larger and hopefully, jointly owned place. A year packed in there together, tops. It would be an adventure, not unlike living on a sailboat. Every item had to nest neatly into every other item. There was no room for storing anything. At the grocery store, I bought only the smallest amounts—one roll of toilet paper at a time, one tiny bottle of dish soap, just enough for the dishes we washed in the Lilliputian sink. I decorated using miniature figurines—bits of my childhood Barbie collection. In the medicine cabinet, I displayed my tiny collection of thimble-sized porcelain houses. I stationed a few Smurf figurines on the faucet, not far from where Gumby contorted himself around the hand soap. I exploited the fact that our front door was made out of cheap steel alloy and turned it into a magnetic board with magnets made by cutting up misogynist ads in old issues of *Ladies Home Journal*. My sticker soaked love notes hung there, like a toddler’s artwork decorating a refrigerator. Using my sister’s abandoned pull-up bar, I made curtains out of fabric I brought back from Thailand. This was intended to create an illusion of privacy.

This apartment was in a brownstone, the most beautiful brownstone on the most beautiful street in the most beautiful neighborhood in Brooklyn, which, in case you didn’t know, and how could you not know, is just about one of the most beautiful and important places in the whole world. Inevitably, we were surrounded by inordinately beautiful people wearing crisp, tailored clothes, strolling beautiful children with perfect, cherry red pouts; children who thought artisanal thoughts while buried under layers of the softest goose down; children who knew the taste of capers before they knew the taste of failure.

Each week, on the eve of trash day, scavengers would rifle through the neighborhood garbage nabbing a slightly scuffed Eames lounger here, a crooked Knoll bookcase there. In fact, it turned out that there was a whole black market economy funded by our trash. Leave something out on the street and the next day, it would be on Craigslist, spruced up with a slap of paint and new knobs. There also appeared to be a neighborhood syndicate solely devoted to rummaging for cans and plastic bottles that could be returned for

deposit. The tiny, wiry Chinese women were the most aggressive. They would shove you out of the way in front of your own can. And why not? Here were thousands of people who were so rich that they literally threw money out in the trash. It would have been criminal not to capitalize on the distinctly American combination of waste and laziness. It was not unlike living under a swarm of quietly hovering buzzards patiently waiting to softly peck out your eyes.

But even this oddball ecosystem was strangely beautiful and if there was ever any question about its merits, it was ugly in only the most beautiful, most significant way: five dollar cups of licorice-noted pour-over coffee, ice cream made from the milk of cows rocked to sleep every night with Ukrainian folk songs, letter-pressed note cards embossed with the ink of blueberries picked by workers paid a living wage, pimento loaf imported from the most ass-backwards county in Alabama. Everything was sourced, curated and sustainable, each moment a precious opportunity to be more authentic.

We lived below some of these beautiful people; only they were some of the most detestable people anywhere. People who treated us like poorly paid help, people who had omitted the words “thank” and “you” from their vocabulary in favor of Neolithic cave man grunts. People who thought we were serfs and they the lords of the manor. They assumed that because we lived beneath them in their illegal in-law suite, we were untouchables. Our sleep was not as special as their sleep, our migraines paled in comparison to theirs, their mail was far more important than ours. Everything that went wrong in the house was our fault.

Once, the lord of the manor let himself in unannounced with designs on fixing the front window. Since he usually let himself in uninvited to turn down the thermostat, his new chore intrigued me. He removed his hammer from his tool kit and promptly managed to put a 3ft long crack in the glass. It was winter and the wind whistled through. He promised to come back and fix the damage within the week. But three months passed and I decided, once again, to take matters into my own hands. If we couldn’t get him to fix the window, we could at least shame him into submission. I taped bright red duct tape along the crack

and covered the whole thing with newspaper, pointedly not *The New York Times* or even the *Daily News* but rather, *USA Today*, a copy of which I could only obtain by sneaking into the Quality Inn in Gowanus. Anyone passing by would think that yes, the neighborhood was regressing, unbeautiful, that basically illiterate people lived in our building. Even our pot dealer who delivered to us every Friday night pronounced it ghetto. It wasn't long before the lady ordered her lord to fix the eyesore.

Their precociously blockheaded offspring only played with items they could kick or torture. They pegged us first with snowballs and later with rocks when we came or went. They nailed live insects to the back door and lit them on fire. They threw curveballs at cats, howling with laughter when the poor creatures absorbed the thunk. These blockheads squealed with giddy delight when they pissed in the drain outside our bedroom window—the scent of boy stink lingering for weeks. They giggled while they took their blockheaded shits in the backyard. One day in the spring the beautiful but horrible blockheaded mom went out to plant her tulips only to find herself excavating tiny boy turds. A few days later, she demanded her husband cover the whole yard with Astroturf.

Technically, we had no claim on any of the backyard. I knew this wasn't written in the lease because we had no lease, more of a gentleman's agreement that we could live there and pay money. I looked enviously at the blockheads as they tossed basketballs, aiming not for the hoop but for the more important parts of each other's heads. All that lovely space out there, all it off limits. Occasionally, when I thought the horrid people had gone out to a BBQ with their rotten friends, or when I knew they were on vacation making some other place miserable, I would sneak out and lie on the fake grass. I'd stare up into the sky and pretend that I was tripping on mushrooms, watching the leaves morph and swirl like soft serve ice cream into one another. I'd roll up and down the breadth of the yard until I made myself nauseous. I'd look up into trees and imagine what it might be like to live in the curve of a question mark.

Once, in the middle of the winter, when there was almost a foot and a half of snow outside, I left myself out the back gate. It was midnight and I was barefoot, shivering in a t-shirt

and panties. I walked to the far back of the lawn, where the plastic met the flagstone, and stood still, waiting for him to come rescue me. The snow burned my feet with cold. I looked up into the night sky and tried to imagine I was flying away from that place, sailing through the air on a plane to somewhere farther than far. After ten minutes, I couldn't take the pain anymore and I slipped back through the gate and fell into bed. I lay my freezing feet on top of his. Nothing. Finally, I said straight out, "I just went out in the snow in my bare feet and underwear and I looked up at the sky and tried to imagine that I could fly away from here and you didn't even notice I was gone, you didn't even try to find me even though I left the door open so you would know where I was. So you couldn't help but come and rescue me from the cold."

"Are you crazy?" he asked through a haze of sleep.

As if I would know.

This was just one instance in a season of similar celebrations. Another night, unable to sleep again, and done with my insomniac exercises—naming every word starting with the letter S, listing every female author I knew, every store in Herald Square—I got up and slipped through the curtain that we both desperately needed to be a wall. I walked to the kitchenette, opened the utensil drawer where each spoon was nestled carefully inside each other, and pulled out one of the old steak knives that my mom had given us. It had a worn wooden handle with several gouges—evidence of long, dutiful battle with my mother's pork chops. I crawled back into bed and began to softly scrape my forearms with the blade, first on the left side and then on the right. My inner arms were white canvases when I put the blade on my skin. I hung on the threshold of puncture for a while, sawing silently, waiting for him to wake.

The Conflagration

Brent Fisk

In what should have been my future, I'd have turned my small record shop into a giant retailer with a cadre of devoted customers seeking advice on what album to buy next: Which Big Star record is best? Where to turn once the grooves of *Kinks Kronikles* are too worn to play? Who else has a voice as pure as Sandy Denny's? I envisioned a homely couch where like-minded fans could sit and talk music. A cooler in the backroom stocked with Nehi and Warsteiner. A pinball machine beckoning from one corner. Rack after rack of brilliant albums. Reclaimed bookshelves stuffed with tasteful erotica, foreign poetry, the odd Scandinavian police procedural.

Instead I've strolled down a quite different career path. I'm a staid librarian at the local university. The IRS no longer hounds me for financial records so they can discover every small equivocation and the fuzzy math of my desperate record shop self. Those papers turned to ash in the arson that followed the burglary. This current job is easy to leave at day's end. I can forget it like a coat hung on the back of a door. I no longer reek of incense and patchouli. When I wake in the middle of the night it's because I have to pee, not because of the sheer terror of a negative account balance. I know the true meaning of the hoary phrase, a smoldering ruin.

Little I wished for has taken place; not the stacks of pristine vinyl, not the sought after bootlegs of Bowie in Berlin. The closest thing to books I sold was a steady string of *High Times* magazine. There were few acolytes I turned on to Parliament and Funkadelic. To keep the doors open we sold metal one-hitters, water bongs with a markup that staggered the imagination. Every black dude with a neck tattoo wanted to talk about the joys of marijuana. Rednecks in manure-smeared boots wouldn't say two words to get laid, but walked up to the paraphernalia counter and were positively chatty. There were a host of words customers could not say. As the signage said, the pipes were for "tobacco use." Utter some joke about pot, and the customer was out the door. We carded everybody

who looked under thirty. It was part of the unwritten local ordinance. You want to run a head shop, you have to act like Wally Cleaver.

So I had to wonder what it meant that early morning in December when the phone rang in the dark. Some random wrong number, another smash and dash, or the police entering with a warrant? The dispatcher's term for the building: Fully engulfed. My wife and I huddled across the street, feet in the gutter, fire hoses snaking across the blocked-off road. It poured rain though it did nothing to dampen the fire. The eaves of the roof belched clouds of thick black smoke and steam. Orange flames broke through the ridge of the roof. Among the flames, horrors were loosed both long term and short. The ATF agents were saying arson, the three investigators with side arms strapped to their waists noted every red flag as I answered their questions. My wife was a sound sleeper—could she vouch for my whereabouts? Sure I was there when the phone rang, but what about the hour before? The bald investigator asked if I'd raised the coverage on the building and contents. Would it matter that my insurance agent required it? Was I current on all my bills? They scribbled in notebooks as I looked at my feet.

My life was a snarl of insurance claims, follow ups with the fire department, and desperate attempts to salvage business records and inventory. There were levies for unpaid taxes. Insurance payments were delayed "pending the investigation." I let employees go one by one and tried to start over in a florist's basement. The mice shit everywhere and silverfish nested in the posters. I grew to loathe the smell of incense but could not wash it from my clothes.

Then one day the police made an arrest. Some drunk at a bar knew details we'd never released, and after several hours of interrogation, he finally fingered the person responsible. Pretrial dragged on for half the year before the judge ultimately gave the guy probation. As part of the guy's sentencing, I get a $400 money order once a month for twenty years, no interest. I closed my doors and filed for bankruptcy.

Maybe those years are a total loss. The thousand fears I was afraid to tell my wife. The thoughts I choked on like smoky air. That's such an easy phrase to say, "a total loss." But things are gained as well. You are forced to stand stock still and let things pass. You strip away a shallow film and lay things bare. I have settled up with the government. I love my wife, and miracle of miracles, she still loves me. I own a small house near the park. A student loan big enough, let's say that it owns me. Still, I come home to a mess of cats that swerve between my legs. I pull an album off the shelf, listen to Linda Thompson, Nina Simone, the soundtrack to *Grease*. The afternoon light can be caught in a glass of wine.

An envelope with money inside is sent a few days late from Owensboro by that other person marked by my fire. There are days I can almost feel the kind of sweat that must have come when the investigators first knocked on his door. I wonder if he loves his job, if he struggles to make ends meet, if he's come to loathe each stamp he sticks on payments he sends me. Does he own the door he unlocks? Does he have a wife to kiss, cats that mew behind a screen door hungry to move through the world? When he stares into the embers of a fire, does he also think of loss, all the choices we both have made, intermingled and reduced, how they drift away like ash?

Consecrated by Use

Adrienne Pine

When my sisters and I were growing up, my mother collected S&H Green Stamps. She referred to them as her “mad money.” She got them every week at the store as a bonus for the money she spent on groceries. The stamps accumulated until there were so many that it was time for her to cash them in. Then we would hold a Green Stamps party, where my mother, my sisters, and I sat around the dining room table, each equipped with a stack of empty books to paste the stamps in and a bowl with a sponge sitting in a puddle of water.

The stamps came in perforated sheets. We separated the sheets of stamps at the perforations so they were size of the pages in the books—five stamps across and six stamps down. The backs of the stamps were coated with a glue that was activated when wet. The trick was not to wet the stamps too much—just enough to get the adhesive sticky but not enough to soak the stamps through.

It was pleasant work, sitting around the table, wetting the stamps on the sponges, and pasting them in the books, while our hands turned green from the dye, and Mom discussed with us what she was planning to buy. In this way she accumulated a blender, a steam iron, a toaster oven, an automatic “baconer,” and other useful objects. We loved to pore over the Green Stamps catalogue, calculating what she could buy, converting the amounts into what they would cost in dollars, and finding the best deals. One of my favorite items Mom bought was a three-tiered sewing box that cantilevered open. The exterior was white-and-blue wicker, the interior quilted blue satin. I thought it was beautiful, and I enjoyed helping Mom organize the spools of thread in different colors, embroidery scissors, tape measure, pin cushion, and thimble; the flat paper packets of sharp needles with eyes of different sizes; the little plastic boxes holding buttons, snaps, and hooks-and-eyes. Mom had been a home economics major at the University of

Alabama, and she insisted that we all learn how to sew. I learned to sew but not to enjoy it, though I loved the accouterments and supplies.

When I was accepted into college, Mom promised to use her Green Stamps to buy me what I needed. For once, I had permission spend her capital, and I was determined to enjoy it. One hot June day after I'd left high school forever, we drove to the S&H Green Stamps store with two shopping bags of Green Stamps books and a list. I used Green Stamps to buy an electric pot to boil water for tea, a pillow, a mattress pad, a light blanket to start out the year and a heavier one for when it grew colder, two sets of sheets for a twin bed, and bright orange bath towels, so mine wouldn't get confused with anyone else's.

I had ideas about the sheets I wanted, and I wasn't sure I would find them at the S&H Green Stamps store. Its linen selection was from J.C. Penney's. When I expressed my reservations, Mom called me a snob.

"I'm not saying I won't look," I explained, "but I don't want plain white sheets; I want a pattern, with nice colors."

To my surprise I found two sets of sheets I liked right away. Blue was my favorite color in those days, and one set of sheets was blue and white in a geometric design. Its design featured two sets of parallel lines that crossed diagonally, meeting at right angles. A third set of parallel lines intersected the squares at every other row. The lines appeared to be woven through each other where they met; the effect was like an abstract trellis in Grecian blue and white. The fitted bottom sheet was blue on white, and the flat top sheet was white on blue, with a matching pillowcase.

The second set of sheets was in a floral pattern in shades of dusty blue, blue violet, lime green, and yellow green. The flowers appeared to be roses and cosmos. I liked the fact that the colors of the sheets did not correspond to the colors of the flowers in real life; it gave them an abstract quality, and they matched my color palette.

All through college I slept in my two sets of sheets, alternating them with each other, and they grew softer with repeated washings. After I graduated, I moved in with the man I would later marry, and we slept in a full-sized bed. I no longer had a use for the sheets, but I kept them on a closet shelf. They had a second life after our daughter was born, and she used them after she graduated from a crib to a bed.

My sheets became her sheets, though we bought her other sheets as well. And when she went off to college, she couldn't take any of her sheets with her, because the beds provided by her college were longer than standard beds, and we had to purchase special sheets for them. Once she left home, we turned her room into to a guest room, replacing the twin bed with a full-sized bed.

Though I no longer own a twin bed, I have held on to my old college sheets. Now I use them only once a year, when I rent a house at the beach in August. I come to spend time alone, and then my family joins me. Before my family arrives, I sleep in a twin bed in a little room overlooking the sea. When my husband comes, I move to the big room with the larger bed. It is a nice room, but it only looks out to the yard.

I come alone to write, think, dream, and end each day watching the sun slip into the sea. I come when I am sick at heart, for the wide vistas and the silences, the healing sun and birdsong and rustling breeze, the fogs and drenching rains. I come for the moon-and-starlit skies, rolling surf and crashing waves, the sand between my toes, and the piles of rocks worn smooth as eggs by the surf. I come in search of my essential self, the girl that I was before I evolved into who I have become, the person I would still be even had I not followed the paths in my life that beckoned me.

Built by an artist for himself, the house dates from the middle of the last century, which means it is as old as I am. From the first time I saw it more than thirty years ago, it seemed to me that the owner might have been designing it for me. Its setting on a hill sloping down to the sea. Its modest scale. Its grays and blues. The handmade attention to every detail.

The artist's paintings on the walls. The drawings of his friend. Here I have always found everything that I need.

Like my old sheets, I bring old clothes with a talismanic quality—a white cotton smock I use for writing, an ancient gray sweatshirt. Faded beach towels, a white cotton nightgown, old jeans, cut-offs, stretch pants. I bring a needle and thread, and like my mother, I mend what is torn. I wash my sheets and clothes and hang them to dry and bleach in the summer sun, smelling of roses and the sea. And when I leave, I put my old clothes and my old sheets away, and I hope I will return the following year.

Photograph by Martha Clarkson Photograph of a mural on the Sears Building in Astoria, Oregon
Artist: Joanne Lumpkin Brown

Recycling Wasn't Always Fashionable

Martha Clarkson

My mom heard that Libbey-Owens would pay money for old glass at their plant in north Portland. Libbey drinking glasses sold in sets of four in the dime stores in 1972.

To get this money, my mother had to find glass. She drove her little blue Beetle around to restaurants in the area, asking for empty liquor jugs. Bartenders at three lounges were

willing to save their empties for her. The three restaurants were Poor Richard's, the Mandarin, and the tile-faced Pagoda, all within a few blocks of each other in a district called Hollywood. During the day she made her rounds, hefting the bending boxes of jugs into the front trunk of her Beetle and more into the backseat, reached awkwardly in the two-door car.

Sometimes she took me along on her collection route. I didn't like going to the bars. She was only allowed to pick up by day, before opening, so as not to interfere with business. Walking into the dark empty bar to find an employee spooked me.

My father drank in public at places that I assumed were similar, at lunch and after work, making deals with his advertising clients, and sometimes losing them, depending on how drunk he got or how badly he'd estimated how drunk the clients were willing to get.

I didn't like going to the liquor store either, government-run, walls always the same sour green, rows and rows of bottles behind the counter, their gold and black labels calling to the customers. And I never went to the liquor store with my mother because the stance she presented to the world was that alcohol was evil. She never drank at a social dinner out, but ordered a 7-Up in a haughty tone, something I never heard her use any other time, while the other guests gave their directions to the waiter, words like "up" and "with a twist."

But at home in the evenings she drank vodka posing as water from a yellow Tupperware glass on the kitchen counter. The yellow glass's contents came from under the sink, behind the onion bin, a half-gallon jug of Popov, secretly poured.

Our garage was underneath the kitchen, off the basement, a typical design for a house on a steep hill, and after dinner, which was sometimes cooked well and sometimes a disaster, depending on the action seen by the yellow Tupperware glass, she'd head to the workbench and start smashing. She wore glasses anyway, but never any goggles. She'd empty a box except for one jug, and smash that one to bits, because the recycler

would only take broken glass, and on and on this continued until the box was full of fragments. She had to learn what weight she could lift in pieces, versus jugs.

I think in the beginning, my dad wondered if she'd adopted this hobby to pour the last bits from each bottle and keep a liquor stash on her workbench, which really was hers, because my dad was hard pressed to pound a nail, let alone operate a drill or know the purpose of a vice. But that wasn't it, there was plenty of booze upstairs behind the onions. She was not desperate in that way.

The Libbey plant was a mammoth metal structure supporting two large angled sections at the top resembling a claw. I rode to the plant with her, the little Beetle sagging on its tires, wending through security to get to the consumer recycling station. The red-lettered sign by the huge scale read "No color contamination." My mother had diligently sorted brown, green, clear. The burly worker wouldn't even help us unload. At thirteen, I could barely lift the boxes, but my mother hauled them out like they held duck feathers.

We put the boxes on the commercial scale and the man in the blue jumpsuit paid my mother from a wad of bills in his deep pocket, between six and eight dollars. We drove home, the car floating on the road like a piece of plastic.

The money from the recycling was what drove her to do it. She was a Depression child, had grown up poor, with the bad molars from not going to the dentist to prove it. My mother paid cash for everything and used paper money even if she had the change. At night, she'd dump all her coins into a blue ceramic piggy bank by the phone. Twice a month we'd go to the bank, a square glassy building close to her bottle pick-up spots, and deposit the money. She'd show me her passbook with the updated modest total and tell me it was a secret from my dad, her stash. I wondered if she planned to run away.

She didn't run away. She wasn't the type. She was just saving for a rainy day, which she seemed to think could come at any moment from my father's business decisions. The recycling went on for two years. Sometimes I helped her in the garage. I liked it when she

left me alone down there after dinner to smash the glass. The first time she did, I was surprised how satisfying it felt to slam the family hammer down on those jugs. I combined the activity with swearing, which made it all the sweeter. “Break, fucker!” I shouted at the glass. I had loved learning the word “fuck” the year before. When I was done, I found the sweeping up of errant chips peaceful. Then I’d plant the broom on its wall hook because I’d get yelled at if anything was out of place, and walk up the stapled vinyl steps to the first floor. I’d sneak through the back hall to climb the carpeted upper flight, not wanting to see her staggering around the kitchen. My father offered to buy her a dishwasher each year, but she declined on the basis of losing cupboard space. What she really wanted was that time alone in the kitchen after dinner with the yellow glass on the pretense of washing dishes. Most of the them were chipped from the unstable handling. Two or three glasses broke a week. When I grabbed the stair’s handrail, a splinter of glass poked into my palm, but I kept my wits enough to skip over the stair that squeaked.

Lighthouse

Sheila Moeschen

That spring brought a slow thaw and Becca's divorce papers.

"Will you come with me to do something?" Becca asked.

"Of course," I said without hesitation. "What are we doing?"

"A ritual," she said giving her eyebrows a theatrical wiggle. We laughed.

Three years ago, Becca and Neil were married at the lighthouse. In the same way it called ships to harbor, the lighthouse was an irresistible draw for couples. Maybe it represented the idea of a light pricking the darkness, hope housed in a tower of brick, glass, and metal to them. Becca and Neil claimed this site as their own the way so many others had before them, grafting wishes for constancy onto a place where erosion was inevitable.

After the brief ceremony, we posed on the rocks in our mismatched bridesmaid dresses like the oddest collection of mermaids just finding our feet. We shivered as the salt wind lapped at our bare shoulders and ran its sticky fingers through our hair. The April sky was the color of blanched sea glass. High, thin clouds hurried across the horizon; we barely made it to the backyard reception before the first fat rain drops fell.

"Shit," Becca swore as we pulled into the narrow dirt parking lot of the lighthouse grounds. "It's really windy."

"We are on the ocean," I said drily. She rolled her eyes and popped open the trunk. Becca reached for the metal bucket and handed it to me while she fished out a small bottle of lighter fluid, a lighter wand, and a bag of stuff. Photos, a few Birthday and

Christmas cards, the marriage license, a piece of material that looked like it came from a flannel shirt—these were the things of our alchemy.

“That’s it?” I said. I don’t know what I was expecting exactly just that there would be more of it.

“We’re not exactly having a bonfire here. Yeah, that’s all she wrote,” Becca replied giving the trunk a hard slam. We started up the path toward the lighthouse.

The had marriage unspooled the way marriages do when they’re held together with safety pins and fear. He wasn’t mean. She wasn’t reckless. They had unsaid expectations that bloomed like rust on a fender. They experienced frustrations and disappointments, hurt and resentment that slowly grew into the understanding that they had mistaken love and connection for a choking need to outsmart loneliness.

“You know what I said when he proposed?” she asked the day she told me he was gone, that they were done and the marriage had really ended. I shook my head. “I said to him ‘Are you sure?’” Becca sat back in her chair and chewed on the wisps of her cuticles. “I should have known as the words were coming out of my mouth. I should have known.”

The lighthouse is perched high on a grassy, slightly rounded rise. Below it thick fingers of rock jut out to form jetties that you can easily walk on when the tide is out. Behind the lighthouse, the land forms a basin. It drops off in a series of short cliffs to form a wide inlet where people boat and scuba dive sheltered from the ocean.

“There,” said Becca pointing down into a part of the inlet a short way below us that curved slightly away from the main property. “Less chance of someone seeing us and messing up the ritual.” She pronounced the word “ritual” in a terrible, fake British accent. We giggled, suddenly nervous.

Earlier in the day as we drove along the coast, Becca talked about closure and moving on, all the right things you're supposed to reach for even when you're nowhere near them. She needed a way to sever herself from the past, she said. She wanted to be free of the weight of her sadness and what she felt was her biggest failure.

She laid out her vision for how it was supposed to work—a quiet place, a bit of flame, and later scattering the ashes into the sea. Sweet and clean release. She said there were words she would need to recite.

"A prayer," I said helpfully.

"More like an intention," she answered.

"A spell!" I said. A chanted promise, a lyrical beacon. Now it was my turn to give my eyebrows an exaggerated wiggle. We cracked up and stretched our arms outside the windows, palming the wind, letting the sun slide over our skin.

Together we picked our way down over the rocks that were jagged and forked like the scales of a dragon's back. With no flat surface, we made do in a small area that straddled narrow tidal pools. Becca nestled the bucket as far down as she could and still reach it. I gave her the bag, it felt wrong somehow for me to over-handle these meaningful things. The unseasonably warm autumn afternoon meant that plenty of people were roaming the grounds. We could see them wandering around just above us and expected points and shouts any second.

Our attempted ritual proved pathetic. The wind kept snatching away the flame. We huddled closer to form a human shield around the bucket, twisting it this way and that, but the wind was everywhere. We could feel eyes on our backs. We knew we were pressing our luck. A little burned, a lot didn't. We compromised, tipping the bucket toward the ocean to let it fill with salt water, drenching whatever was left. It would have to be enough. It would have to make magic in some way. That was the point all along, wasn't

it? To purify, to cleanse, to ruin what had already been laid to ruins in order to feel like you are walking around with a few less broken pieces.

“We’ll find a trashcan to dump what’s left,” I said. She nodded. “It was a good ritual. It counted, I’m sure it did.” She nodded again, looking more resigned than assured. We could have burned the entire ocean in that bucket and the moon for good measure and it would never ease the uncertainty that lived with her now.

We let the arms of the coast release us back to civilization, driving home in silence. I thought about Becca’s wedding reception and the way the rain ran off the tent in ribbons and forcing people to huddle around small cocktail tables in the center to avoid getting drenched. The flower girl stood at the tent’s edge, palm out to catch the rain, shifting from foot to foot, itching to cause trouble in the puddles. Becca took her tiny hand and danced her outside. I watched the friend I had always known flicker in and out of focus as if she were the subject of a jumpy, Super-8 film and summoned acceptance. The flower girl shrieked and hopped around. Becca twirled the little girl in a dizzying spin, laughing despite the cold and wet, determined to make this the shiny, storied day she was promised it would be.

Anodyne

Sonia Arora

In those days there were no bright digital numbers, blue against black, assuring you had found the right place. You'd turn the dial and find the radio station, sometimes jiggling to avoid static, cobwebs of sound muffling the tune, until you found just the right spot and heard U2, Prince, or some other idol of your liking. You'd hear such artists in the grocery store and at work, and so you imbibed the songs of the 80s, and they stayed in your bloodstream long after, even if you chose not to seek them out at live concerts.

Maybe I was counter-culture; maybe I was queer. This Yonkers girl, having lived in both Punjab and New York, found succor in the devotional music of kirtan, mystic poetry set to a harmonium, like a piano with a pump, and tabla, like bongo drums. Not something I could often find on the airwaves. Devotional music was the hum under my breath as I traversed the world of public high school delving and questioning American Literature, European history, biology, trigonometry, and so much more

Kirtan caught me like unspooled thread. I latched onto Punjabi poetry about finding the beloved. It echoed the language of my grandparents, who were slowly slipping away from my life. My grandfather died when I was sixteen, prompting family members in Ludhiana to quarrel about property and inheritance. My family was disintegrating. The music, the poetry, remained. In them, I found shelter. As I took the 20 bus down Central Avenue to high school, I tapped my knee to the rhythms of kirtan, *dhun dhanakadin dhun*, as if home could be eternal in the wavelength of sound or in the Punjabi hymns of *shabad*. I searched for the outdoor bazaars of Ludhiana pink carrots and mooli (radish), among strip malls and the Yonkers Raceway.

I could not turn the dial to find it. Instead I'd play tapes, worn from use, forwarding and rewinding to find my favorites, like the one about not being able to fall asleep until seeing the beloved. I would also hear it live in the gurudwara, a place of worship for Sikhs. I'd

ride the melodies, slowing decoding each song, knowing some words and figuring out others through context and still others through the lilt of sound. “I have come a long way, seeking shade and sanctuary, beloved. I place my trust in a greater consciousness, losing all my sorrow and pain along the way.” In Punjabi, it sounds so much better, like *laasi* sounds better than yogurt shake, like *gol mol* sounds better than chubby. Still I continue the journey, one of language, one of culture and race, translating sometimes and others times venturing inside the music without translation.

Ultimately, it’s the mystic poetry that hooks me, realizing only when Prince died that he is of a similar tradition. In my middle-aged funk, Prince guides me through the post punk landscape helping me transcend boundaries of cultural identity. Prince sings, “I wanna be your brother/I wanna be your mother and your sister, too/There ain’t no other/That can do the things that I’ll do to you.” There is a spiritual *shabad* or hymn Punjabi, “*Tu mera pita, Tu hai mera mata,*” which translates into “You are my father, you are my mother, my friend and my brother.” Of course, there is no rock star straddling a guitar in a purple outfit singing the hymn. Rather, there are men, sometimes women, with turbans sitting aside a holy book draped in silk playing music. The *shabad* makes me think like a Zen philosopher. In the relations of this world you can find a connection to loving consciousness and loving consciousness is beyond relationships.

Somewhere there is a connection between the fingers on the frets of Prince’s guitar and the palms on the tabla, between the pain of living and the subsequent search for meaning. As I age, I find some relations and lose others. I dream of my grandparents’ home, 698 Gurdev Nagar, for if I were to try to search for the brick and mortar, the veranda with the gecko skittering across the ceiling, the crow my grandmother shoos from the lemon tree, I’d find an altogether different home, reconstructed by another family. Too scared to find the reconfiguration, instead, I awake to find a lost tune vibrating within my body.

Hand-Me-Down Kid

Terril L. Shorb

My childhood included a stretch of living at or below the poverty line. The oldest of six children and head chore-boy on our small, subsistence farm in northwestern Wyoming, I drove tractors rather than sedans right up to my junior year of High School. Not once in all those years did I get a whole can of soda to myself and rarely wore clothes off the rack. It was more like wearing them off the back of someone I knew. This role as "hand-me-down" kid first caused embarrassment, and then later in life, a curious kind of pride.

It is said experience is the best teacher. And I've got to say that living on the edge is a pretty effective teacher's aide. My Mother was a magician of the "can-do" spirit. She was the Queen of re-use, and on our farm little was wasted and most things enjoyed interesting new lives. An Uncle once joked that his Levis, which had served well in his many roles as irrigator, hunter, and back-hoe operator, would finally get an education when I wore them to school.

I wore blue-jeans rolled into cuffs and shirts whose shoulders lines hit me mid-way to my elbows because I wasn't lanky like my older relatives. One of the smart-mouths in English class asked loudly one day how come I kept shrinking. I rode the school bus home that night and announced to my Mother that I wasn't going to wear anymore hand-me-down clothes. Fine, she said, adding with a grin, as long as I completed all my wood-chopping, hog-slopping, egg-gathering, water-lugging, and other chores each day, I was welcome to take on extra projects from neighbors for extra cash. Needless to say, there simply wasn't an extra minute or ounce of energy left at the end of the day. I felt defeated and even ashamed to go to school, where I expected to be the butt of jokes.

One day I was visiting my maternal grandfather, who presented me with several pairs of Levis. They were in good shape, but because Grandpa was huskier, the pants were roomy enough for me-and-a-half. I was about to rudely refuse when he handed me something else: a hand-tooled leather belt with a silver buckle—one of several he won earlier in his life as a champion bronc rider. "This oughta cinch up those britches," he

offered. Suffice it to say I practically paraded my hand-me-down pants and that belt around school and drew admiring glances and comments from a few boys and girls!

From that time on I had a whole different attitude about wearing clothes that had worked for someone else. I realized the shirts or pants or jackets came with stories from a hard-working life: “These pants were worn by a man who helped to dig the big canal from the Buffalo Bill Dam.” Or, “This flannel shirt was there the day my cousin got the eight-point elk up in Sunlight Basin.”

I was hopelessly hooked on clothes that had been out and about in the world. A tiny rip on the back side of one denim shirt from my step-father vividly brought to mind, every time I slipped it on, images of a rangy old Hereford cow who knocked him up against a corral post when he tried to separate her from her calf for vaccination purposes. My imagination was off its leash around those 'here-you-go' clothes because, unlike store-bought versions, they've been tested by life, just like the people who wore them.

Nowadays, I look for hand-me-down clothes in thrift stores because I've grown up and moved on from the people who used to pass their garb onto me. I still enjoy the sense that each time I purchase a new-old piece of clothing, I'm also walking out with a little bit of living history whose next chapter we will write together.

And there's another thing about hand-me-down or thrift-store-pre-owned clothes I appreciate. I was reminded of it the other day when I cruised the aisles of a favorite second-hand store for long sleeve shirts for the coming autumn. Two rows over, in the boy's section, a mother handed her ten-year-old son a twenty dollar bill and told him to find his shirts for the new school term. I watched as the boy prowled the racks, tried on and then selected a half dozen shirts. He paid for the whole fall wardrobe with the single bill. Outside, where he rejoined his Mother, he was fairly vibrating with excitement, eagerly showing her what he had found. They moved off to a saggy old Ford pickup, and the kid still wore a huge grin as they pulled away. I offered up a silent thank you to all the families

who had donated clothes, recalling how important it is in young lives to know people care enough to hand you down—or along—the very shirts off their backs.

Stage Six

Dawn Corrigan

Global Deterioration Scale, Stage 6:
People in Stage 6 require extensive assistance to carry out daily activities. They start to forget names of close family members and have little memory of recent events. Many people can remember only some details of earlier life. They also have difficulty counting down from 10 and finishing tasks.
Incontinence is a problem in this stage. Ability to speak declines. Personality changes, such as delusions, compulsions, or anxiety and agitation may occur.
Average duration: 2.5 years

6/14/09

It's often said that old age is a second childhood, but at eighty-nine, my Nan more resembles a cat. Specifically, a cat washing her face. All day long, every day, she rubs and rubs her face. Sometimes with a tissue, sometimes just with her fingers. And just like a cat, she periodically licks those fingers, or the tissue, then resumes rubbing again.

But unlike the experience of watching a cat giving itself a bath, watching her rub her face all day doesn't fill me with a sense of well-being.

I try not to let it get to me. I try to look away and just listen as she tells me—again—how she *earned* her retirement because she worked as a senior tax compliance agent at the World Trade Center for forty years.

At first, Grandpa and I used to remind her that the Towers only stood for twenty-eight years, not forty, and that her career with the New York State tax division lasted eighteen; but our facts can't compete with the cadences of her imagination. The phrase "senior tax compliance agent" in particular seems to give satisfaction.

6/23/09

Over the weekend my uncle calls to say she's complaining of abdominal pains, so on Tuesday after work I run in to check on her.

"How are you feeling? Is your tummy any better?"

"Yes, I'm feeling a little better today. My stomach was so rumbly, and I kept having to run to the bathroom. I thought I was pregnant."

When I burst out laughing, she rolls her eyes upward. "God forbid!"

8/13/09

In August she's still rubbing. She's also begun to complain that she has something in her eye, which she surely does, a result of the constant rubbing. She puts makeup on, then rubs it off. She covers her face in Vaseline, she rubs it off. Finally, my aunt makes an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist.

I take her to the appointment. On the drive over, she tells me her father came to visit the other day.

"He drives the car and comes to see me," she explains.

In the office I tell the doctor about these hallucinations, and about the rubbing. I try to do so furtively, so she won't know we're talking about her. But of course she does know.

"What are you saying?"

"I was telling him you have these sores by your eye," I say, brushing her temple.

"Oh, that's where my husband punched me," she says, looking straight at the doctor with a deadpan expression. "It's all right, it will heal."

Other things may be deteriorating, but her sense of humor—tough, outrageous, of another era—is still intact.

8/25/2009

Less than two weeks later, she falls and breaks her hip. I wait with her in pre-op.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says. “I would be very lonesome if you weren’t here.”

The surgical nurse stops by to remove her dentures and jewelry.

A minute later, she asks, “Where are my teeth?”

I explain where her teeth are.

“I bet they’re talking about me.”

She says she’s cold, so I ask for some of those warm blankets from the little blanket ovens that are the nicest thing about a hospital. The nurse brings two, tucking one over her and draping a second around her head, forming a kind of halo.

“I look like an angel now. Where are my teeth?”

I tell her.

“They don’t want me to swallow them during the surgery?”

“Right!” I say, happy she remembers something.

“But where are my teeth?”

I tell her.

“They were afraid I’d bite them,” she says.

9/13/2009

After the surgery, she’s moved to a nursing home for four weeks of physical therapy. When I visit a couple weeks later, she’s out in the hall by the nurses’ station. She gets excited when she sees me, and throws her arm around me and gives me a big kiss. Then she says, “People are going to think I’m a lesbian!”

9/20/2009

The four weeks she spends in the nursing home are by far the longest interlude she and Grandpa Dom have been apart since they married in 1966. And because Dom isn’t around and she doesn’t understand why, she imagines the worst, like any jealous lover.

After the first week she starts telling me about all the fun Dom’s been having. “He’s been playing cards—and dancing! I had no idea he could dance so well! You should have seen him doing the Charleston! He was great.”

Part of the problem is she doesn’t know she’s not at the assisted living facility anymore. The corridors, the staff wearing scrubs, the wheelchairs parked in corners—the details of the nursing home are just too similar to the ALF where she and Dom have lived for the past two years. Her fading memory can’t parse the difference The only possible explanation she can fathom for why she doesn’t see Dom is that he’s staying away on purpose—because of his wild new social life.

However, it’s also still important to her that she should appear as a sophisticated, worldly person in my eyes—as she has for my whole life. Therefore, she makes an effort to mitigate her jealousy: “That woman he was dancing with, she was great too.”

When Dom and I visit her together on Sunday, though, the gloves come off.

At first, she keeps it fairly good-natured. Ignoring Dom, she addresses me. “He has a girlfriend, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“It’s okay. He can have a girlfriend. In fact, he can have three girlfriends.”

“No one could argue with that, Nan. That’s very generous.”

My grandfather, however, is not amused by this largess. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he tells her nervously.

“What’s your girlfriend’s name? You know, the tall one.”

“My only girlfriend is Frances.”

Frances is *her* name. She isn’t fooled by this trick.

“No! You know who I mean.”

“Dawn,” he says.

“Hey!” I say. “Leave me out of it.”

“The tall one,” she says again.

All of a sudden I have a terrible feeling I know who she means. Her friend Sara at the ALF is quite tall, a fact she’s commented on frequently.

“The tall one,” she says again, looking at me impatiently.

I shrug. “I don’t know, Nan.”

10/1/2009

On her last night in the nursing home, I arrive to find her telling one of the staff members, a young woman who’s been extremely nice to her, to “Shut up!”

“Nan! I don’t want you to tell people to shut up.”

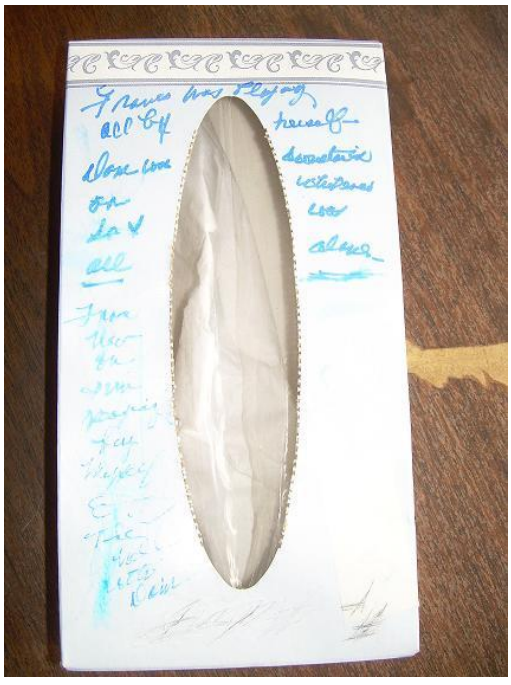
I sit next to her. After a few minutes, she says, “I guess I’m getting older. I get scared. But I’ll try to do better.”

I take her for a walk outside. Back in her room, she starts going through her drawers in preparation for the next day’s departure, about which she’s very excited.

In one drawer there are several boxes of tissues. I notice one is covered with her handwriting, in a narrow column that runs the length of the box.

Frances was playing
all by herself
Dom was downstairs
or upstairs
and I was
<u>all alone</u>

From
now
on
I am
playing
by
myself



The
hell
with
Dom

To the best of my knowledge, it's her first poem.

12/28/2009

A month after returning to the ALF, she breaks her other hip. She's back from the second surgery by Christmas, but she can no longer walk. This time she refuses to participate in physical therapy. And there isn't much you can do to make a person with dementia do something she doesn't want to do.

Even before the dementia, there wasn't much you could do to make her do something she didn't want to do.

When she returns to the little apartment she and Dom share, it doesn't go well. She immediately begins falling a lot. When I stop in a few nights after Christmas, he's agitated.

"Thank goodness you're here! She's trying to get out of the bed."

Dom and I start the lecture: You have to be a good patient, etc.

"You fell TEN TIMES," I tell her, holding up my ten fingers.

"Oh, my."

"You have to do what they say," I continue. "Otherwise you're going to wind up crippled for life, and you'll never get out of that bed."

She nods in agreement with me. "They have to do what," she begins. Then I see she knows she has it wrong.

“They have to ...” she shakes her head. She’s trying, she really is, but dementia and a lifetime of her true temperament are fighting against her.

She tries again. Slowly.

“*I* … have to do ... what *they* say.”

1/10/2010

By the new year it’s clear she isn’t capable of independent living anymore. She’s moved to the ALF’s specialty unit, up on the third floor. Dom remains in the apartment downstairs.

Tonight when I arrive she’s just been served dinner, a hot dog and fries. There isn’t a lot of extra room in the specialty unit dining room, so I tell her I’ll go see Dom and then come back once she’s finished eating.

When I return upstairs, I’m happy to see she’s made a good job of her hot dog, finished the fries, and is working on a serving of pudding.

“Did you see Dom?”

I admit I did.

“I played a trick on him. I pretended I was mad when I wasn’t. That was mean.”

I agree it was mean.

“Mean, but *funny*.”

5/7/2010

In May, she turns ninety. When I arrive on the big day, she's dressed up in a new outfit, hair freshly permed, a corsage on her wrist, and clutching the strings to some balloons in one hand. Dom holds her other hand. She's very excited. While we wait for the other guests, she wraps the string from the balloon around her neck like a noose, pretending to hang herself. Then she looks for my reaction.

My aunt and uncle arrive. We sing and pass out cake.

In her room afterward, she rubs her belly and mumbles. We look at her with concern. Is she complaining about wearing a diaper again? Does she have a tummy ache? She rummages around for a moment, then suddenly produces a package of cookies she snuck out of the goodie basket downstairs and stuffed down her pants.

When I crack up she smiles, pleased she still has an audience for her comedy bits.

10/26/2010

In October, she falls again. The ALF staff takes her to the hospital to be checked out. By the time I get off work, she's already back on the specialty unit.

When I arrive, there she is, sitting in the middle of the hall in her wheelchair, in lavender from head to toe. There's a scratch on her nose, but aside from that she looks fine.

In my hand I hold a notepad, which she regards with great interest.
While I chat with staff, she takes off her left sock and tries to hide my notepad in it.

The staff member excuses herself. “She’s hot shit,” Nan says, after she leaves.

6/13/2011

Shopping in a secondhand store, I find a pink jacket I think she’ll like. Her clothes are always going missing. I think she sneaks into the other residents’ rooms and hides them in the drawers.

The jacket looks like something she would have worn years ago, when she was, yes, a *senior tax compliance agent*, and she looked the way Dom described her to me last night:

> *I used to drive her around, you know, when she had to go see*
> *some of her clients. The ones who were likely to give her trouble.*
> *But I’d just hang back and let her work. Sometimes I’d look up*
> *and see her on the street in front of me, wearing her suit just so,*
> *and the sun gleaming on her blonde hair.*

So I buy the pink jacket, and take it to her, and bundle her into it. She buttons all the buttons, and we play with the sleeves for a while.

“I’ve loved you since the day you were born,” she says.

For Ben on a Sunny Day

Sharon Frame Gay

You're looking away from the camera, off to the side, head tilted back in laughter. A light breeze tosses your hair, curling it, the way it looked when you stepped off a sailboat. In this photograph, you are young. So young. Shoulders strong and straight, not yet weighted with the loss of expectation and the shadow of responsibility. Or the specter of mortality.

I remember your jacket, your plaid shirt, how they felt and how they smelled, like sea salt, coffee, and kindness. Soft from many washings, your shirt kept my head nestled near your ribs, the quiet thud of your heart a lullaby.

Somewhere in the distance, I imagine Emmy Lou singing, notes drawn out like wind chimes on an early autumn evening.

You dance behind the moon now. Quarter notes mingle with the songs of angels. And I miss you so.

I miss you on days like this, when the sky is so heartbreakingly blue that it seems anything is possible, and everything we could ever need is just moments away. The sky goes on forever, unfettered by clouds, straight up to the universe, offering those of us tethered to earth a glimpse of heaven.

If you were here, you might be on the greens. Or sailing before the sun on your way to a safe harbor, Orcas your escort as the boat slips through the waves, leaving a wake soft and billowing, like ancient silk. Perhaps the light would find you in a blue ribbon stream, casting away from the shadows, or wandering the beach in the Low Country, Spanish Moss brushing your shoulders as you pass by.

When the rains come, and the world has slipped indoors, I am calmer, placated, safe and dry eyed, dreaming that you must be somewhere brighter. But when the sun comes out and summer shows once again, I feel the heart tugs, knowing how you would revel in this moment.

I want to give this day to you. Wrap it up in gentle, soft cloth that smells like home, tied with vines from the garden, leave it by my doorstep for you to find when you step down from the stars and walk through the night, smiling as you reach down to cradle it in your hands.

Contributors

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Martha Clarkson manages corporate workplace design in Seattle. Her poetry, photography, and fiction can be found in*monkeybicycle, Clackamas Literary Review, Seattle Review*, *Alimentum*, *Hawaii Pacific Review.* She is a recipient of a Pushcart Nomination and is listed under “Notable Stories,” *Best American Non-Required Reading for 2007 and 2009*. She is recipient of best short story, 2012, *Anderbo/Open City* prize, for “Her Voices, Her Room.” “Recycling Wasn’t Always Fashionable” and cover art.

Dawn Corrigan has published poems and prose in a number of print and online journals. Her debut novel, *Mitigating Circumstances*, an environmental mystery, was published by Five Star/Cengage in January 2014. Currently, she's working on a family saga set in southern Italy, Hell's Kitchen, and South Jersey. She lives in Gulf Breeze, FL. Learn more about her work at www.dawncorrigan.com. “Stage Six”.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, **Eugene Durante** is an NYPD patrol officer and front row observer of the offbeat. City University of New York educated, Durante received his B.A. in Criminology and his Master's in Public Administration. "Gino" is well-known for not stroking others and not getting stroked in the process. “Midnight Stops”.

Brent Fisk is a writer from Bowling Green, Kentucky. His work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Rattle, Fugue, Folio* and other literary journals. “The Conflagration”.

Louis Gallo’s work has appeared or will shortly appear in *Southern Literary Review, Fiction Fix, Glimmer Train, Hollins Critic, Rattle, Southern Quarterly, Litro, New Orleans Review, Xavier Review, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Missouri Review, Mississippi Review, Texas Review, Baltimore Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Ledge, storySouth, Houston Literary Review, Tampa Review, Raving Dove, The Journal (Ohio), Greensboro Review*, *bioStories,* and many others. Chapbooks include *The Truth Change, The Abomination of Fascination, Status Updates and The Ten Most Important Questions*. He

is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Barataria Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review.* He teaches at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. “Stacey”.

Sharon Frame Gay grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road. Her work can be found in several anthologies, as well *as bioStories, Gravel Magazine, Fiction on the Web, Literally Stories, Halcyon Days, Fabula Argentea, Persimmon Tree, Write City, Literally Orphans, Indiana Voice Journal, Luna Luna,* and others. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee. “For Ben on a Sunny Day”.

Darryl Graff is a New York City construction worker and writer. His essays written about life in the city, have been published in *Akashic Books, Heart & Mind Zine, Fat City Review, The Flexible Persona, Hippocampus,* and *Gravel.* “Tough Guy” is an excerpt from his nonfiction narrative *The Local*, about a union construction worker who inadvertently lands in the middle of hostile Union takeover. “Tough Guy”.

Ryan Harper is a visiting assistant professor in New York University’s Religious Studies Program. Some of his recent poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming at *Kestrel*, *Mississippi Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Killing the Buddha*, Urban Farmhouse Press, and elsewhere. Ryan’s ethnography of contemporary southern gospel music will appear via the University Press of Mississippi in late 2016 and his poetry chapbook *Memphis Left at Cairo* is available through Finishing Line Press. He lives in New York City. “Masters of Universes”.

Anya Liftig is a writer and performer. Her work has been featured at TATE Modern, MOMA, CPR, Highways Performance Space, Lapsody4 Finland, Fado Toronto, Performance Art Institute-San Francisco, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, The Kitchen at the Independent Art Fair, Performer Stammtisch Berlin, OVADA, Joyce Soho and many other venues. In “The Anxiety of Influence” she dressed exactly like Marina Abramovic and sat across from her all day during “The Artist is Present” exhibition. Her work has been published and written about in *The New York Times Magazine, BOMB, The Wall Street Journal, Vogue Italia, Next Magazine, Now and Then, Stay Thirsty, New York Magazine, Gothamist, Jezebel, Hyperallergic, Bad at Sports, The Other Journal,* and many others. She is a graduate of Yale University and Georgia State University and has received grant and residency support from The MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Atlantic Center for the Arts, The New Museum, Mertz Gilmore Foundation, Flux Projects, University of Antioquia and Casa Tres Patios-Medellin, Colombia. Visit her at: www.anyaliftig.com. “Irretrievable Breakdown”.

Sage Graduate Fellow of Cornell University (MFA) and Director of Creative Writing and Professor of English at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, **Marjorie Maddox** has published eleven collections of poetry—including True, False, *None of the Above*; *Local*

News from Someplace Else; *Transplant, Transplant, Transubstantiation* (Yellowglen Prize); *Perpendicular As I* (Sandstone Book Award). Another collection, *Wives' Tales,* is forthcoming in 2016, and the short story collection *What She Was Saying* is forthcoming in 2017. She has published over 450 stories, essays, and poems in journals and anthologies. *Co-editor of Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania*, she also has published four children's books. Visit her at: www.marjoriemaddox.com. "Taking Refuge".

Sheila Moeschen is a Boston-based writer and photography enthusiast. She is a frequent contributor to *The Huffington Post* and her work has also been published in *Niche Magazine* and *Red Line Roots*. Sheila is currently at work on a nonfiction book about women and comedy. "Lighthouse".

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Adrienne Pine's creative nonfiction has appeared in *A Tale of Four Cities, The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine, The Write Place at the Write Time, DoveTales—Nature: An International Journal of the Arts,* and *Rebeldes Anthology*. "Consecrated by Use".

Sarah Russell is in metaphor rehab after spending a career teaching, writing, and editing academic prose. Her short fiction and poems have appeared in print and online venues including *Kentucky Review, Red River Review, Misfit Magazine*, *Everyday Fiction,* and *Shot Glass Journal* among many others. Follow her work at www.SarahRussellPoetry.com. "A Death in the Family".

Jan Zlotnik Schmidt is a SUNY Distinguished Professor of English at SUNY New Paltz where she teaches composition, creative writing, American and Women's Literature, creative nonfiction, memoir, and Holocaust literature. Her work has been published in many journals including *The Cream City Review, Kansas Quarterly, The Alaska Quarterly Review, Home Planet News, Phoebe, Black Buzzard Review, The Chiron Review, and Wind.* Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Press Prize. She has had two volumes of poetry published, *We Speak in Tongues* and *She had this memory* in addition to two chapbooks, *The Earth Was Still* and *Hieroglyphs of Father-Daughter Time*. She has co-edited two anthologies of women's memoirs and her literature for composition anthology *Legacies: Fiction Poetry Drama Nonfiction* is now in its fifth edition. "I Met My Mother's Body at Loehmann's".

Shira Sebban is a writer and editor based in Sydney, Australia, who is passionate about exploring the challenges life throws at us through her writing. A former journalist, Shira previously taught French at the University of Queensland and worked in publishing. She has served on the board of her children's school for the past 12 years, including two terms as vice-president. Her work has appeared in online and print publications, including *Eureka Street, Jewish Literary Journal, The Forward, Australian Jewish News, Alzheimer's Reading Room,* and *Online Opinion*. She is currently working on a series of creative nonfiction stories based on her mother's diary, which the family only discovered after her death. You can read more of her work at: shirasebban.wordpress.com. "Fanning the Flames".

Terril L. Shorb believes he was very fortunate to have grown up on a ranch in Southwestern Montana and later to have experienced life both in the urban sphere and on a subsistence farm in northwestern Wyoming. He has been a journalist and most recently a teacher at Prescott College where he founded the Sustainable Community Development program and continues to work with students toward a more sustainable *Homo sapiens*. His writing has appeared recently in *Green Teacher Magazine*, *Whole Life Times*, *Kudzu House*, and *Cargo Literary Magazine*. "Hand-Me-Down-Kid".

Joy Weitzel teaches composition in Cadillac, Michigan. She received her MA in English from Northern Michigan University in 2014 and completed a creative non-fiction thesis that explored the history of her family. A wanna-be genealogist, Joy is currently working on finding her roots and expressing them lyrically. Her work has been previously published in the *Rappahannock Review*. "Taylor's Drain".